

FACULTY

For Dr. Jonathan Ahearn, Teaching at Gardner-Webb is ‘More Than Just a Job’

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Assistant Professor of Exercise Science is Back at His Alma Mater

Eight months after Assistant Professor of Exercise Science Dr. Jonathan Ahearn fought back tears to write his resignation letter to Gardner-Webb University, he's back at his alma mater. "I came back to Gardner-Webb, because It's more than just a job," Ahearn asserted. "It's always been like that for me and (everyone) in the College of Health Sciences."

He describes the atmosphere in the building as "unapologetically Christian...we care for people; we are compassionate."

Before he left in December 2021, Ahearn helped his colleagues, Dr. David Granniss and Dr. Jeff Hartman start the Master of Science in Strength and Conditioning program at Gardner-Webb, lending his expertise as a physical therapist and strength coach. The thought of leaving GWU hadn't entered his mind, until someone asked him if he would consider going back to Charleston, S.C., where his family lives.

He said God led him to Charleston Southern, where he helped them start a Doctor of Physical Therapy program. "I was like, 'God what are you doing? If this is something you want me to do, you open the door,'" Ahearn shared. "'You run through it, and I am going to run right behind you until you slam it in my face.'"

Even while teaching in Charleston, Ahearn was connected to his friends at Gardner-Webb and his former baseball head coach Rusty Stroupe. His wife and children stayed in Boiling Springs, while he

commuted to Charleston to stay with family during the week. He came home on the weekends and other times when needed, as he serves as an elder at Hope Community church in Shelby.



“There was such a strong pull here (to GWU),” Ahearn reflected. “I stayed in touch and talked all the time to Kat Ayotte, Franki Burch, Granniss and Hartman. We were praying for each other and wanting to know what was going on. I never really disconnected in any way, shape or form.”

His strong bond to Gardner-Webb was developed from 2005 to 2009, when he was a student in the exercise science program. Ahearn believes that God orchestrated events that brought him to GWU as a sophomore, and a few years later, as a faculty member.

Ahearn attended the University of South Carolina (USC) for his freshman year. He was recruited to play football, but suffered an injury, so he was a baseball walk on. That summer, he played for a team in the American Legion World Series in Shelby. Stroupe was there looking at another player, Daniel Cook, but after the game, he also offered Ahearn a spot on the baseball team.

“That was two days before I was supposed to go back to USC,” Ahearn noted. “I came to know Jesus as a freshman at South Carolina, so coming here was a step of faith. I showed up here and had another catastrophic injury in our first practice. Baseball was taken from me.”

However, Burch, Ayotte, Hartman and Stroupe began to mentor him. “They poured into my life and made me feel like I was more than just a student here,” he observed. “I learned a lot about Gardner-Webb and loved it here. I met my wife here. She’s from here...and we live a mile or two from campus.”

After graduating with his Doctor of Physical Therapy from Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC) in 2013, Ahearn went to work for a physical therapy practice in Shelby. Hartman offered him an adjunct position at Gardner-Webb, and he taught part time until joining the faculty full time in 2020.

Ahearn is excited that God brought him back to Gardner-Webb, and the experience he gained teaching in a DPT program will enhance his interactions with students. “My goal is that they are experts in human movement, and they understand how to improve the quality of life in all people,” he affirmed. “We teach them the biomechanics—how do we help people from getting injured?”

However, Ahearn wants his students to take a wholistic approach, considering their clients' mental and spiritual needs. "I do instill in them, the way you approach it, the way you care about them, it's biblical, and you want to share that with them if they are open to it," Ahearn affirmed. "It's OK to start a fitness session with prayer. It's OK to ask them if they have concerns. You can interweave the gospel with what you are doing. It's all a part of serving the individual and taking a spiritual inventory. There's plenty of studies that look at spirituality and the link to health, longevity and fitness."

Ahearn emphasized, "Everything we teach in this building, in our department, is about serving the human being just like the way Jesus called us to serve each other."

Learn more about the Department of Exercise Science.

Gardner-Webb University is North Carolina's recognized leader in private, Christian higher education. A Carnegie-Classified Doctoral/Professional University, GWU is home to six professional schools, 14 academic departments, more than 80 undergraduate and graduate majors, and a world-class faculty. Located on a beautiful 225-acre campus in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb prepares graduates to impact their chosen professions, equips them with the skills to advance the frontiers of knowledge, and inspires them to make a positive and lasting difference in the lives of others. Ignite your future at Gardner-Webb.edu.

