

FOUNDERS DAY

Gardner-Webb Honors Transformational Leaders of the Past and Present on Founders Day

BY OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS ON DECEMBER 7, 2022



Recipients of Founders Medals are Governor O. Max and Fay Webb Gardner and John and Linda Godbold

Gardner-Webb University honored recipients of the Founders Medal (<https://gardner-webb.edu/founders-medal/>) on Dec. 1, a highlight of the revived celebration of Founders Day.

Presented to individuals for significant and distinguished service to the University, two couples were recognized—John and Linda Godbold of Rock Hill, S.C., and the late O. Max and Fay Webb Gardner. Accepting the award for the Gardners was their grandson, O. Max Gardner III, who is carrying on their legacy by serving on the Gardner-Webb Board of Trustees.



▲ O. Max Gardner III, left, with Board of Trustees Chair Gary Smith.

N.C. Governor O. Max and First Lady Fay Webb Gardner

Gardner-Webb President Dr. William Downs praised the Gardner family for being “among those giants of our history on whose shoulders we now stand. Governor Gardner and First Lady Fay Webb Gardner made an indelible impact on one of North Carolina’s greatest institutions of higher education. Their history is part of our identity. It shapes who we are today, how we view our mission, and how we approach our work each day. They are richly deserving of recognition with this year’s Founders Medal.”

O. Max Gardner, governor of North Carolina from 1929 to 1933, devoted his time, financial support, and guidance to Gardner-Webb in the years following the Great Depression. His wife and the first lady, Fay Webb Gardner, was a natural and gregarious leader. Caring deeply about providing educational opportunities for students in the Foothills of North Carolina, the Gardners gave substantially to the college to provide scholarships for students from Cleveland and Rutherford counties. In 1942, Boiling Springs College changed its name to Gardner-Webb College to honor the couple’s support.



Articles from The University’s archives record O. Max as saying, “I am genuinely proud of the splendid contribution this institution has made to the life of this community, and I believe in the future, it is

capable of doing a great deal more than in the past, provided it continues to receive the support and loyalty of our people.”

In addition to serving as the governor of North Carolina, Gardner held public office on the board of the Office of War Mobilization and Reconversion before being appointed as under-secretary of the Treasury. In 1946, he was appointed as the United States Ambassador to Great Britain.

Fay Webb was born in Shelby, N.C., to a family of influential clergy, politicians, and lawyers; her worldview was shaped by a deep sense of dedication to public service. “Mother Fay,” as she was known to her family, leveraged her talents, hospitality, and strategic intuitiveness to lead civic and cultural improvements.

She once said, “Education in the broadest and deepest sense is more than the acquisition of knowledge. It is rather the process by which we learn to understand and think...imbued with a broad feeling of benevolence and the will to serve and sacrifice.”

Often remarked upon as the “sharpest politician” in her family, Mother Fay gave generously of her time, energy, and knowledge. She was active in the American Red Cross, League of Women Voters, and the Historic Shelby Foundation. Elected to the Gardner-Webb Board of Trustees in 1948, Fay Webb led efforts for the building of the O. Max Gardner and Webb Administration buildings.



▲ Linda and John Godbold with GWU President Dr. William Downs

John and Linda Godbold

The Godbolds, who also received the award, were recognized for their ongoing support of Gardner-Webb and their service to communities in Rock Hill, S.C., where they live on Lake Wylie, and in Cleveland County, where they worked for many years.

Downs praised the Godbolds at the University’s Founders Day Dinner, “Dr. and Mrs. Godbold have been generous and authentic friends of Gardner-Webb University for many years. Their devotion to the College of Business, which now bears their name, is unmatched. They care genuinely about student

success and about the good our programs in business can do in the region. I am delighted that we could bestow this well-deserved honor on the Godbolds, and I am grateful for the impact they have made on our institution's development.”



In 2008, John and Linda gave the lead gift to establish the Godbold College of Business and also pledged annual support. In addition to funding enhancements for the school and development opportunities for the faculty, the donation provided four student scholarships presented annually to business majors.

“We know investing our money in a Christ-centered school like Gardner-Webb makes a difference and will multiply and help a lot of people,” John asserted. “This gives us an opportunity to invest in education and it also gives us an opportunity to give back to the community that was so good to us.”

Godbold graduated from the University of South Carolina (Columbia) with a degree in marketing and spent more than five decades of his life in the banking industry, including 17 years in Cleveland County, N.C. He founded Carolina State Bank in 1989 and at that time began his relationship with Gardner-Webb.

“Gardner-Webb assisted us when we were starting Carolina State Bank with the business school providing a survey on the financial climate in Cleveland County,” John reflected. “Due to the success of our bank, Linda and I wanted to give back to the community through a gift to a Christian-centered organization, and Gardner-Webb was that place.”

Throughout their 18-year marriage, John and Linda have continually contributed their time and financial support to invest in educating children and youth, as well as to care for individuals and children in need. Linda is the founder of Steppin’ High, a volunteer organization that provides new shoes for children in York County, S.C. She led the organization for 12 years and still lends her support. Since 2008, the group has given new shoes to over 11,000 children in need.

She currently serves on the Board of Directors for The Life House Women’s Shelter in Rock Hill. The shelter was established and created in 2020 with the intention of offering safe shelter, a warm meal, fellowship, and a starting point on the continuum of care for homeless women.

John has served on the GWU Board of Trustees in the past and is currently a member of the Godbold College of Business Advisory Board. He also continues his interest in college sports by mentoring the coaches and players of the basketball team at Winthrop University in Rock Hill.

Godbold also played an important role in creating the Merry-Go-Round Festival in Shelby, N.C., an annual event that began in 1998 at the City Park to celebrate the restoration of Shelby's antique carousel. Godbold was co-founder with the late Jim Allen and served as co-chairman of the festival and its honor awards program. He is a past chair of the "Come See Me" festival in his hometown of Rock Hill. The event showcases the city and since 1962 has grown from a weekend event to 10 days of food, music, sports and fun.

The Godbolds have three sons: Brian Ritter of Texas, Mark Ritter of Raleigh, and Kevin Ritter of Charlotte, and two daughters: Susan Stuppig of Charlotte and Meg Godbold of Rock Hill. Brian and his wife, Janet, are Gardner-Webb graduates.

Gardner-Webb University is North Carolina's recognized leader in private, Christian higher education. A Carnegie-Classified Doctoral/Professional University, GWU is home to nine colleges and schools, 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.

