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College of Education, Georgia Southern University

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Serianni helps students reach for the stars at Isle of Hope K-8 School

April 9, 2018

College of Education professor Barbara Serianni (back row, 2nd from the right), Ph.D., traveled with the Isle of Hope Astronaut Club to compete in the 2018 Student Astronaut Challenge National Finals at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Florida.

Georgia Southern University College of Education (COE) professor Barbara Serianni, Ph.D., is partnering with Isle of Hope K-8 School in Savannah, Georgia, to help their students reach for the stars.

Serianni has contributed her education expertise, assisting students with science and mathematics skills, since the creation of the Isle of Hope Astronaut Club in 2016. She also served as a coach for the Astronaut Challenge alongside Isle of Hope’s Carolyn Rethwisch, science teacher and creator of the Astronaut Club, and Wade Smith, Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Mathematics teacher, during the 2017-18 competition year.

“After assisting with the program the first year, I realized what an impact the Astronaut Club was having on these students, and I wanted to do more,” she said.

Students prepare for the regional Astronaut Challenge, and qualifying teams are invited to participate in the Student Astronaut Challenge National Finals at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Florida.

This year, both teams from Isle of Hope qualified as two of the six Georgia teams going to the national competition, and in February, Serianni, Rethwisch and Smith took 18 middle school students to the Space Center to compete.
The annual competition includes four tasks: the shuttle simulator challenge; the landing challenge; a lab challenge; and an engineering challenge.

The students walked away with two second place awards for both the shuttle simulator and the landing challenges—with only one point separating the Isle of Hope team from first place award in the landing challenge. The Isle of Hope students also received the first-ever Apollo 13 Flight Team Award.

Outside of competition, the students recruit their peers.

“It’s really cool to see these middle school students in the club going to talk about their experiences with the elementary school students,” she said. “They are recruiting not only for a Junior Astronaut Club but also working to get their own classmates involved as well. The really great thing to watch is how they interact with the younger students. You can see the ‘teacher’ in them as they share their experiences, read and teach them to fly.”

In just two years, students in the club have shown growth and their participation helps spur healthy competition and reflection among the students, noted Serianni.

“Students realize their strengths and weaknesses while preparing to tryout for the competition teams, as well as during the regional and national challenges,” she said. “They are encouraged by this club to try harder so they can come back to compete the following year.”

Serianni plans to continue as an Astronaut Club coach and aims to help students sharpen their skills.

“I hope to make a difference for the students there,” Serianni said.

An assistant professor in the COE’s Department of Elementary and Special Education, Serianni has over 20 years of varied experience in the education field. She has served as a mathematics teacher, principal, co-founder and co-director of a educational grant consulting firm, online instructor, instructional technology consultant, learning coach and college professor. Her years of experience have provided her a unique perspective on her primary research interests including inclusive practices, student engagement and positive behavior support.
As director of scientific research at Effingham College and Career Academy (ECCA), Georgia Southern University alumna Michelle Thompson, Ed.D., ('00,'05,'11) is constantly looking for ways to challenge and encourage the creative growth of her students and has found that her alma mater can help.

ECCA is a ninth through 12th grade charter program school that serves Effingham County high schools. Students from both Effingham and South Effingham high schools attend classes and earn professional certifications and credentials in nursing, allied health, sports medicine, engineering, robotics, web design, computer science, culinary arts, automatic technology and maintenance and logistics.

Thompson works with students completing the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) research program, a four-course sequence that requires students to conduct both individual and group interdisciplinary research assignments.

“What is neat about what I get to do is that it really takes someone who has had experience in multiple science disciplines to be able to run an interdisciplinary research course,” said Thompson.

After teaching science in the classroom for more than 15 years, Thompson has a multitude of educational experience. She completed a bachelor’s in kinesiology from Georgia Southern, with intentions to pursue a career in sports medicine or cardiac rehabilitation. Thompson worked at a cardiology office running stress tests and conducting patient education, until a patient suggested she should be a educator.

“She told me I had what it took to be a teacher,” Thompson remembered. “It kind of stuck with me, and the more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea.”
At 23, Thompson landed her first teaching job at a private school in her hometown of Savannah, Georgia. “Being at a small private school, I had to teach a variety of science classes,” she explained. “I taught everything—biology, chemistry, physical science, and I even taught a medicinal magnet class. It made me very well rounded in content.”

During that time, she also earned a master’s in broadfield science education from Armstrong State University to gain professional certification. Thompson then moved to Jenkins High School in Savannah where she taught Advanced Placement Chemistry for eight years. It was there that she met and collaborated with Georgia Southern College of Education’s (COE) Kania Greer, Ed.D., and Bob Mayes, Ph.D.

Greer, the coordinator of the College’s Institute for Interdisciplinary STEM Education (i²STEM®) and Mayes, former director of the Institute and current COE faculty member, partner with schools in the region that assist with STEM education resources and curriculum.

“Dr. Thompson is someone who is willing to challenge herself as a teacher and get out of her comfort zone in STEM education,” said Greer. “We have worked with her on a multitude of projects from classroom support, to providing faculty expertise or helping to make connections with other STEM industries or professionals.”

From those experiences, Thompson realized what a vital asset Georgia Southern could be—not just for furthering her education, but also partnering with her to provide unique learning opportunities to her students.

Faculty from various colleges and departments of Georgia Southern have provided assistance to Thompson’s students, who look to find solutions to some of the world’s biggest energy, water and infrastructure crises. Once their projects are completed, students have been invited to present their research at the University’s Interdisciplinary STEM Teaching and Learning Conference and other venues.

“This partnership is mutually beneficial for i²STEM®,” said Greer. “When Dr. Thompson has a question or wants to see if there is something we can help with, she picks up the phone and asks. She also brings her students to participate in our STEM Experiences each semester. We support each other.”

The partnership with Georgia Southern, she believes, gave her an edge over other candidates for her current directorship at ECCA.

“What set me apart from other candidates was my connection with Georgia Southern,” she explained. “By showcasing my collaboration, it helped me solidify this job. I have not only an academic connection to the University, but also a professional connection with the STEM Institute and the College of Education as well.”

Tags: Kania Greer, Michelle Thompson
COE’s Janina Jones receives University Merit Award

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College of Education’s (COE) Janina Jones was recognized as an Award of Merit recipient during the Georgia Southern University Staff Years of Service and Merit Awards of Excellence Ceremony held on March 22 at the Performing Arts Center (PAC) on the Statesboro Campus.

Jones, an administrative assistant in the COE Office of the Dean, was one of eight to be named a Merit Award of Excellence winner for the 2017 calendar year. Thirty-three University staff members were nominated for the award.

A long-standing staff member of the University, Jones was a student worker and part-time employee at both Chick-fil-A and University Housing. She began her full-time career at Georgia Southern in 2005 as a secretary for the Department of Mathematical Sciences. She has also served in medical records for the University’s Health Services division.

Jones joined the COE in 2014 and often serves as the primary public contact for the College.

“Janina has a kind word for everyone walking through the office and assists willingly and joyfully. She serves as an informal mentor to student workers, encouraging them to keep up with their school work and providing a shoulder when one is needed. Whatever the need, Janina is there to respond,” a nominator wrote.

Another wrote, “It’s critical to have the first individual one encounters in any office to be upbeat and welcoming. Janina fits that role perfectly. Her positive attitude toward everyone who walks in the door has contributed significantly to the camaraderie in the College and, from what I have heard from visitors, has made them feel like they are her number one focus during their brief time in the office. This has been particularly obvious and helpful this semester as guests from Armstrong State University have visited for consolidation work and have been made to feel that they already are a part of the College family. What a tremendous asset!”

Jones completed a bachelor’s in interdisciplinary studies from Georgia Southern while working full time in her position with the COE. She plans to pursue a master’s in professional communication and leadership starting summer 2018.

“I am so grateful to have my efforts recognized,” Jones said. “My work environment, while busy, is always welcoming and that is something that truly makes a difference in my job. I am happy to be a part of the College of Education.”

The Merit Award of Excellence is awarded annually by the University. Recipients receive an engraved medallion, $1,000 cash prize and are recognized by the University’s Staff Council.
Amanda Glaze, Ph.D., an assistant professor in the Georgia Southern University College of Education, will be the featured speaker during the Smithsonian Institution’s Broader Social Impacts Committee’s annual meeting on April 29 in Washington, D.C.

Glaze’s presentation, “Laboring for Science, Laboring for Souls: Obstacles and Approaches to Teaching Evolution in the Southeastern United States,” will be broadcast live from Q?ruis Theater, which is located in the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History.

“It is such a huge honor to me because of what the Smithsonian Institution represents,” Glaze, who teaches middle grades and secondary education, said. “My grandmother was a science teacher, and I remember from childhood looking through her books and collections and feeling like the Smithsonian was something special and represented to the world a collection of our nation’s history in so many areas.”

The presentation will examine Glaze’s research into evolution education, specifically in the Southeastern United States where there is perceived tension between religious worldviews and science. She focuses much of her research on student teachers and in-service teachers, who are on the “front line” when it comes to teaching scientific worldviews, according to Glaze.

“I hope to share the stories of people like myself who have grown up with misperceptions about science and beliefs as a result of conflict that can be easily mitigated through outreach and understanding,” she explained. “The South represents an area that has even greater conflict when it comes to topics in science like evolution, yet it is rarely studied because the culture can be difficult to understand if you are looking in from the outside. I hope to provide a lens for understanding and growth around the country by studying this conflict in the Southeast and the actions we are taking to mitigate conflict while respecting and including worldviews of all students.”

Glaze taught five years as a middle grades and high school science teacher in her home state of Alabama and Georgia before beginning her career in higher education. Her years in both the secondary and college classroom have given her firsthand experience of the perceptions and knowledge students have of evolution and the place it has in the field of science.

“As someone who grew up in a deeply religious family and who has navigated the conflict that can arise when science and beliefs are not always in agreement, I recognized the need to have conversations that bring everyone to the table rather than making assumptions or excluding people because of differences,” Glaze said. “The goal of science education is for all people to be scientifically literate. In order to reach that end, we have to first be willing to listen and learn, then we can build bridges that make science accessible and welcoming to all as a part of their worldview, rather than something that conflicts with their worldview.”

The public presentation will include a 40-minute lecture by Glaze. Afterward, the Broader Social Impacts Committee will provide feedback and open up the floor to the attendees for discussion. To view the live webcast of the event, visit http://humanorigins.si.edu/about/events.

The Broader Social Impacts Committee was established by the Human Origins Program of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History. It is made up of professionals representing a variety of religious traditions, as well as science educators and religious studies scholars. The committee serves to assist the museum in developing resources that complement its education and outreach efforts and reach audiences affected by potential challenges at the intersection of scientific findings and religious reflection. Each year the Broader Social Impacts Committee hosts public events that serve to answer inquiries about human evolution.
Recipients of College awards named at Honors Day Convocation

April 9, 2018

College of Education (COE) majors were recognized during the Georgia Southern University Honors Day Convocation held April 4 in the Nessmith-Lane Conference Center on the Statesboro Campus.

“Each of the COE award recipients demonstrated superior academic performance in their course work as well as exemplary performance in their field and clinical experiences,” said Deborah Thomas, Ph.D., associate dean for initial educator preparation and assessment. “These highly competitive and selective awards allow us to recognize the students who have exceeded the high expectations we have for our teacher candidates in demonstrating the knowledge, skills and dispositions required of effective beginning teachers.”

Six COE students were named recipients of College-specific awards that were created and awarded for the first time in 2017.

Additionally, a new award was presented during the 2018 convocation. Kalyee Deleon, a senior middle grades education major, was named the first-ever recipient of the College of Education Excellence in Writing Award to recognize academic merit in undergraduate writing in the COE’s initial certification process.

Brooke Bressler received the Early Childhood Education Eagle Teacher Award for outstanding performance in the teacher education program including academic achievement, superior teaching performance and exceptional professional dispositions.

The Ronnie Sheppard Excellence in Middle Level Education Award was presented to Amanda Cleveland. The award is presented annually to a student teacher or recent graduate who has demonstrated excellence in the middle grades program. Cleveland was also recognized as an Outstanding Scholar Graduating Senior, a distinction presented to graduating seniors with a grade point average of 3.9 or higher at Georgia Southern.
Bailey Crosby was named the recipient of the Special Education Eagle Teacher Award as an acknowledgement of her success both academically and in classroom teaching performance. She was also recognized as an Outstanding Scholar Graduating Senior.

Acknowledging an exceptional health and physical education major, the William R. Spieth Outstanding Health and Physical Education Major of the Year Award was given to junior Hayley Dobson.

Harmony Wallace was presented the Early Childhood/Special Education Eagle Teacher Award for her outstanding performance academically and in student teaching within the dual certification program. She was also recognized as an Outstanding Scholar Graduating Senior.

The Marti Schriver Middle Level Advocacy Award was presented to Kamaren Walthour for her dedication to the improvement of middle level students within and beyond the classroom.

Additionally, COE students receiving an Outstanding Scholar Graduating Senior acknowledgement included: Sarah Cannington, Haley Chandler, Bethany Durrence, Hannah Grandin, Kellya Guajardo, Emily Heath, Matthew Herndon, Rebecca Hinrichs, Allyn Jones, Laura McCarter, Katie Mitchell, Katelyn Reeves, Amy Rustine, Abigail Slattery, Katherine Tatum, Shannon Wagenbrenner, Molly Welch and Emily Woodall.