Georgia Southern University is expanding opportunities for its students by entering another educational partnership to address regional workforce needs. The University has partnered with Hyundai Motor Group Metaplant America (HMGMA) and Ogeechee Technical College to develop more programs and curricula related to the growing electric vehicle (EV) market.

The presidents of Georgia Southern University, Ogeechee Technical College and HMGMA signed agreements that formalize the schools’ commitments to educate engineers and skilled maintenance and production workers for the electric vehicle manufacturing complex under construction in Bryan County near Statesboro and Savannah. The plant is expected to create more than 8,000 jobs after it opens in 2025. The Georgia Southern agreement focuses on key areas of collaboration that include recruitment services, academic collaboration, professional development and research partnerships.

A new Eagle Nation on Parade sculpture is on display in Statesboro. Called “The City That Soars,” the eagle is perched outside the Main Street Farmer’s Market near the Convention and Visitors Bureau building. It marks the community’s first introduction to an Eagle Nation on Parade sculpture since 2016.

The artwork on the six-foot-plus tall sculpture is the work of Jeff Garland, who chairs the Betty Foy Sanders Department of Art (BFSDoArt) at Georgia Southern University. Garland used the authentic colors of a bald eagle in his painting process.

As he expressed his enthusiasm for the project, Garland stated, “It was exciting to have an opportunity to contribute to this ongoing tradition in the Betty Foy Sanders Department of Art. For me, these eagles represent the spirit of Mrs. Sanders and her unwavering commitment to this community and our students. All proceeds from these eagles support student travel and scholarship, two areas Mrs. Sanders felt very passionate about.”

This latest addition represents the tenth sculpture in the Eagle Nation on Parade collection currently exhibited throughout Statesboro. All share a consistent design — a poised eagle landing gracefully on a meticulously carved rock. Professor Marc Moulton and former student Daniel Todd developed the initial concept. However, each chosen artist can transform the blank sculpture into an original work by adding their designs, logos, images, and colors.

Eagle Nation on Parade is a public art project initiated by the BFSDoArt in 2011. The primary objectives include honoring the University’s traditions, fostering a sense of unity between the campus and the local community, contributing to the economic vitality and overall quality of life in Statesboro, and supporting student scholarships and research initiatives.

The votes are in, and the official airport of Eagle Nation is the best one in the United States, according to readers of Conde Nast Traveler. Savannah/Hilton Head International may not be one of the world’s busiest or largest airports, but who says an airport has to be stressful? Readers of the luxury and lifestyle publication vote for the calmness and charm of the small airport. They find the town square-inspired layout intimate and inviting, and many travelers can envision being transported back in time to a historic Southern street, complete with benches and a large clock on the square. More than 500,000 responded to the annual Readers’ Choice Awards survey by Conde Nast Traveler.

Photo courtesy of Savannah/Hilton Head International Airport
NEW MERCHANDISE LINE TO BENEFIT ‘FREEDOM’ AND THE WILDLIFE CENTER

Georgia Southern has something special for fans of Freedom, the live bald eagle mascot that flies before each home game in what many call the “most exciting 30 seconds in college football.” The University is launching a new brand and merchandise line that will benefit and honor the beloved mascot. Unable to survive on his own because of injury to his beak as a newborn, Freedom came to Georgia Southern in 2004 and now lives at the University’s Center for Wildlife Education in Statesboro alongside other eagles, raptors, reptiles and waterfowl. He will celebrate his 20th birthday in January.

The merchandise is designed to be both inspirational and stylish. The initial offerings include hats, T-shirts, hoodies, posters and postcards. One shirt includes “Freedom’s Ride,” and depicts the eagle perched in the back of a 1977 International Scout often seen around town as it’s owned and driven by handler and Wildlife Center Executive Director Steve Hein.

“Freedom belongs to Georgia Southern students, faculty, the Statesboro community and all those he encounters,” Hein said. “It’s natural to want to express a unique relationship spanning 20 years and what better way to do this than by making his image available for people to wear and promote. I’m excited about this program, honored to be his plus-one, and greatly appreciate everyone’s support for Freedom, his care and his future.”

As an ambassador for Georgia Southern and symbol of our nation, Freedom has inspired thousands annually at the Center for Wildlife Education, Georgia Southern football games, the St. Patrick’s Day parade in Savannah, commencements, community events and other appearances, such as at the Charles Sahak Classic PGA tour last year in Texas. Freedom merchandise is now available for purchase at Southern Exchange in Statesboro, the University Store on the University’s Armstrong and Statesboro campuses and in the gift shop at the Center for Wildlife Education on the Statesboro Campus. The proceeds will benefit the Wildlife Center and Freedom’s care.

BIG SAVINGS ON COLLEGE TEXTBOOKS

Georgia Southern students are saving money through the University’s Day1Access program. Instead of buying traditional textbooks, the program offers students digital course materials at a reduced cost. Last school year, the program helped students save more than $1.7 million. They have saved more than $4.2 million in required course materials costs since the program’s inception in 2019.

“The cost of higher education is a major concern for all students and their families, and this is just one way Georgia Southern is trying to lower the financial burden for them,” said Provost and Executive Vice President of Academic Affairs Carl Reiber, Ph.D. The University Store partners with Wills Lake to provide the digital course materials.

“University Store’s focus is always on providing students with guaranteed service and ensuring they have what they need to be successful at Georgia Southern,” said Derrick Robertson, director of Georgia Southern’s Retail Services. “Our Day1Access program is growing with over 418 courses using the program and over 17,800 students participating in spring 2023.”

UP FRONT

TRUE BLUE SPOTLIGHT

Alumnus Turns Passion for Sports Memorabilia into a True Blue Career

In the heart of Statesboro, Georgia, there’s a little-known treasure trove that captures the essence of Georgia Southern University’s storied history. Joseph Stuckey IV (’21), a proud alumnus, has transformed his lifelong passion for Georgia Southern memorabilia into a thriving tribute to the University’s rich heritage.

Stuckey grew up in Portal, Georgia, about 15 miles from Georgia Southern. His fascination with sports memorabilia started early. “I would go and get autographs from minor league games, Braves games, things like that,” he said.

Georgia Southern was a natural choice for Stuckey. The vibrant culture, the strong sports tradition and the opportunity to study sport management and coaching made it the perfect fit. Two aspects of his education at Georgia Southern significantly impacted his journey. “I really liked Dr. Hannah’s brand management course,” Stuckey recalled. This course allowed him to understand the significance of brand and image — knowledge he now applies in his career.

The second influential experience was a golf tournament organized by Professor Greg Rich, Ph.D., in support of the Willie J. Burden Memorial Scholarship. “We hosted the golf tournament here in Statesboro. It was a silent auction with it,” Stuckey explained. “So we went around and collected sports memorabilia to sell and set the record for money raised.” Stuckey explained. That endeavor — combining sports, fundraising and memorabilia, ultimately played a pivotal role in shaping the business venture. After graduation, he began working with Roosevelt Cone Jr., as the marketing director for Cone’s packing and moving company. The job gave Stuckey an opportunity to open Cone’s Statesboro Sports Memorabilia.

“Cone’s, a notable figure in the community, is the driving force behind the Roosevelt Cone Jr. Scholarship, a community charitable endeavor that offers scholarships to underserved kids, enabling them to participate in local recreation department sports programs. The profits from Statesboro Sports Memorabilia play a crucial role in funding this initiative.”

In the store, Stuckey proudly displays unique and rare collectibles. Among them, from his personal collection, can sometimes be seen his prized Erk Russell autograph with the famous “GATA” inscription taking center stage. Beyond Erk Russell, Stuckey’s collection includes memorabilia related to Georgia Southern football players who have gone on to play professionally. These unique pieces, often with low production numbers, recount the athletes’ accomplishments and their connection to Georgia Southern’s legacy.

Through his collaboration with Cone, Stuckey is making a meaningful impact on Georgia Southern’s traditions, history and its students, but more than that, it’s a place where he can promote Georgia Southern to every visitor who walks through the door. “I view that as one of my life’s goals,” said Stuckey.

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Georgia Southern University has always been an institution known for its commitment, tenacity and devotion, not only to the students it serves but also to the alumni, friends and communities transformed by its impact.

In a concerted effort to expand its reach and influence in southeast Georgia and beyond, the University has embarked on a historic fundraising campaign titled “Together We Soar: The Campaign for Georgia Southern University.” The comprehensive campaign has set a formidable goal of $125 million by 2026 to broaden the academic, research and athletic programs and capabilities of the institution and its colleges.

In a display of early success and community commitment, the campaign has already secured more than $87 million, with 14,211 donors heeding the call to support the University’s future. This substantial figure represents more than two-thirds of the target amount and reinforces the campaign’s momentum.

At the campaign launch on Oct. 20, 2023, at the Performing Arts Center on the Statesboro Campus, Georgia Southern President Kyle Marrero emphasized the significance of the initiative.

“The ‘Together We Soar’ campaign is about harnessing the power of community and innovation to take Georgia Southern to new heights,” he said. “This is a clarion call to our alumni, partners and friends to join us in a transformative journey that will not only enhance our University’s stature but also catalyze economic growth across southeast Georgia.”

TRUE BLUE ALUMNI LEAD THE WAY

Campaign co-chairs and Georgia Southern alumni Mike Sanders (’81) and Leonard Bevill (’93) are passionate advocates for the University and believe it is in a crucial position for growth. For years, Georgia Southern has been a University with “potential,” but Bevill says the time for what “could be” is over.

“We want this University to become what everybody says it can be and get away from the word ‘potential,’” said Bevill, a retired healthcare CEO who now serves as the executive director of the Eagle Nation Collective. “The time of potential is over with. Now is the time to grow the University, and the only way to grow the University is by increasing its financial capacity.”

Sanders said the University has always been known for doing more with less, especially on the athletics side. Whether using yellow school buses to transport players to football games during Erk Russell’s era or trying to compete in the Sun Belt against schools with vastly larger resources, Sanders said it’s time to stop thinking in terms of scarcity for all facets of the University.

“I’m tired of doing more with less,” said Sanders, a financial advisor with UBS Financial Services. “Why don’t we do more with more? That’s exactly what this campaign is about. We’re about to turn the corner with donors and an amount of money that’s never been raised before by Georgia Southern as a University. And we’re going to do more with more going forward. Finally — whether it is about athletics, whether it’s about Wexford, whether it’s about research — here is our opportunity.”
Four Pivotal Priorities

The campaign focuses on four strategic priorities, each underpinning the University’s mission to provide a comprehensive educational experience, foster community engagement and build innovative partnerships with area businesses and industries.

EMULATE ATHLETICS
Recognizing the unifying spirit, excitement and power of sports, the campaign seeks to attract elite student-athletes, upgrade athletic facilities and support the Competitive Excellence Fund — all of which will solidify Georgia Southern’s reputation for athletic prowess.

ADVANCE TEACHING AND PUBLIC IMPACT RESEARCH
This pillar emphasizes the University’s commitment to cultivating faculty expertise and enhancing research infrastructure, addressing critical regional economic needs and promoting public impact research.

EMPOWER STUDENT SUCCESS
The campaign prioritizes recruiting high-achieving students, increasing student access and promoting inclusive excellence and career readiness. With an eye on student success, the University will also support their academic and professional growth through scholarships and career-readiness programs.

ENRICH CAMPUSES AND COMMUNITY VIBRANCY
The final pillar aims to enhance local campuses and communities by fostering partnerships with organizations and businesses, supporting wildlife education through the Center for Wildlife Education and the Lamar Q Ball, Jr. Raptor Center, and improving campus infrastructure through combined state and philanthropic support.

AS GOES THE UNIVERSITY, SO GOES SOUTHEAST GEORGIA
The economic impact of Georgia Southern is a significant narrative thread in the campaign, with the University contributing $1.1 billion in regional economic impact in 2022. This financial footprint is a cornerstone of the campaign’s message, highlighting the University’s role as a key driver of economic prosperity and transformation.

“When we talk about economic impact, it’s not just numbers,” said Marrero. “It’s jobs, it’s lives improved, it’s a region uplifted.”

As a regional partner, Georgia Southern is not only one of southeast Georgia’s largest employers, but it is also the region’s greatest catalyst for growth and innovation. In the last year, the University has penned agreements with Hyundai Motor Group Metaplant America (HMGMA), a new facility that will employ some 8,500 people from the region, to address workforce needs while advancing academic excellence and technological innovation; created a Tactical Athlete Program for Fort Stewart to reduce injuries for soldiers; created logistics programs to support the Port of Savannah, the fastest-growing port in the nation; and created an international partnership between Savannah and Wexford, Ireland, where the University now has a permanent education center.

In addition, Georgia Southern has created research centers in Statesboro and Savannah that will directly impact public health, environmental health and wellness in southeast Georgia. Plans to increase faculty research grants and develop state-of-the-art facilities are in place to support the university’s ascent as a research hub.

“Our faculty’s research endeavors are crucial in addressing the challenges our region faces, from healthcare to environmental sustainability,” said Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Carl Reiber.
Today, Eagle Nation, and its Pirate brethren, are stronger than ever. With more than 146,000 alumni from Georgia Southern and Armstrong, the University faithful occupy a wide range of professions around the world, elevating the reputation of their alma maters. Despite this sprawling network of University graduates, however, Bevill says only about 5,000 of them give. And to see Georgia Southern become the University it can be, Bevill says we need everyone involved — not just because of what the University did for its alumni, but also because of the legacy they can leave for others.

“That’s what excites us, to be honest with you, is the opportunity to change Georgia Southern for generations to come,” said Bevill. “We have the ability for our grandkids or our great-grandkids to see a legacy at Georgia Southern where you can look back to 2023 and say, ‘We had a vision and look where we are now.’

“When you contribute to Georgia Southern, you’re not just giving to an institution,” he added. “You’re giving to the next generation of leaders, innovators and citizens who will go on to shape our world.”

Sanders also emphasized that giving is all about passion, and there are several programs and initiatives in need of funding that he hopes will inspire a specific passion in each giver.

“Im tired of doing more with less. Why don’t we do more with more? That’s exactly what this campaign is about.”

— Mike Sanders, Campaign Co-chair

“Whether you want to give to athletics as the front porch of the University, you want to give to the music program like the Gretsch family has already done or you care about the Center for Addiction and Recovery — those are all things that can be supported through this campaign,” he said. “What we want to do is in front of our constituents, whether it’s our alumni or our friends of the University that care about Georgia Southern, and share some of our passion with them.”

Together We Soar is nearing 70% of its fundraising goal, but there is still so much more to do. The University hopes to excite its alumni and friends, build momentum and reach that historic goal to secure its future. When asked how he believes the University will reach this lofty financial goal, Sanders says the answer is simple: they won’t.

“We’re not planning on reaching this goal,” he said. “We’re planning on exceeding this goal. We think $125 million as the campaign goal is too low, and we intend to exceed it by a fairly large amount in the next few years.”

For more information on Together We Soar or to give to the campaign online, visit GeorgiaSouthern.edu/TogetherWeSoar.
Georgia Southern Interior Design Program Produces Leading Professionals

Interior designers are passionate about their profession. They enjoy creating living and working environments that are functional, comfortable and pleasing to the eye. But pursuing a career in this complex field takes more than creativity; it requires specialized skills.

In Georgia Southern’s interior design program, students are taught the fundamentals of design in order to satisfy the wants and needs of their clients. “Students have been studying interior design at Georgia Southern for a very long time,” noted Beth Myers, chair of the School of Human Development and Family Sciences. “Our interior design program is the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences’ largest. Our students have an emphasis in home furnishings and interior design. In 1990, the degree became a Bachelor of Science in Family and Consumer Sciences. It’s been a very long time,” noted Beth Myers, chair of the School of Human Development and Family Sciences. “These are the needs of the Council for Interior Design Accreditation. The program’s high-impact teaching and learning strategies emphasis on well-being and sustainability,” said Beth McGee, assistant professor of interior design. “These are applied to progressively more complex problems through the design process with an emphasis on integrity, openness, diversity and inclusion.”

When students graduate from Georgia Southern, they are prepared for internships and career opportunities in commercial and residential design. “We have alumni in fields like yacht and aviation design, as well as small business owners to others working at companies like Google,” said McGee. “This field is all about serving others and making people’s lives better through the built environment. There are a wealth of diverse career paths that are customizable to individual needs and interests are vast, that can flex during changes in the market.” — Sandra Bennett

Suarez was sure she didn’t want to follow her father’s footsteps in multichannel marketing, but through her dad’s introductions at McDonald’s, she secured an internship there. She worked at McDonald’s Chicago headquarters, helping them roll out their McCafe concept restaurants. From that moment, Suarez knew that majoring in design was the right decision.

Suarez graduated just in time for the Great Recession of 2008 and struggled to find a job. She actually took on substitute teaching roles before landing her first full-time job as project manager at a countertop company, demonstrating her resilience and resourcefulness.

From there, she held various design positions and finally got a chance to go back to McDonald’s, designing front-of-house, custom seating and decor elements for their restaurants. After a reduction in force at McDonald’s, Suarez held design positions at an architecture firm, Fodos Branding group and then a Canadian franchise. Then, she plied her design skills at International Hotel Group, where she was a design manager for some of their brands such as Staybridge Suites and Crowne Plaza.

“One day, a recruiter for Google reached out to me on LinkedIn,” said Suarez. “They asked me if I was interested in a design position. I actually thought they had read my LinkedIn profile wrong. We kept communicating back and forth because I wanted to make sure they understood my background was interior design, not graphic design or user experience. They said yeah, they hired people like me all of the time. They flew me out to California. I had five interviews in a day and by the end of the week, I found out I had the job. I thought, ‘I guess I’m moving to California.’”

Despite initial doubts, Suarez embraced the opportunity. She started as the food program design manager at Google, responsible for developing design guidelines and cafe concepts worldwide. Once proven successful with the food team, her role continued to expand to support health and performance spaces, event spaces, music and art rooms, maker spaces and digital experiences.

Suarez’s role at Google has expanded considerably over the years, moving from design roles to more chief-of-staff position within her team.

“My career evolved from being primarily design-focused to taking on a leadership role with a strong emphasis on operational strategy and efficiency,” she said. “I lead efforts to manage budgets, set organization-wide goals, enhance communication, optimize processes and foster team culture.”

Her career has brought her back to the Atlanta area, too. After working remotely in Atlanta during the pandemic, Google offered the chance to relocate to their department’s hub in Atlanta, and she jumped at the chance.

“I wanted to take full advantage of moving back because my family and friends are here,” explained Suarez. “I love working on the East Coast, I am very productive in the morning while California is still sleeping. And I connect with a lot of people around the world, so the East Coast is perfect for that. But it’s more of a personal reason of wanting to be closer to my family.”

Suarez’s story encourages current and future students to make the most of their educational experiences, learn from their professional challenges and embrace the opportunities that come their way.

She also emphasized the practical aspects of her education, saying, “My time at Georgia Southern taught me valuable skills like building a portfolio, crafting resumes and mastering the art of networking.”

“When reflecting on her own experiences, Suarez said, ‘Education is a stepping stone, but personal drive and determination are the key to career success.’” — Liz Walker
Jana Newsome Valdez
Principal Interior Designer
Haven Design and Construction

In 2000, Jana Newsome Valdez was just two credits shy of a public relations degree from Georgia Southern University when she made an impromptu and giant leap, dropping her major to enter the Interior Design Program. The switch would require three more years of classes. 

“My academic advisor was like, ‘You can’t even consider quitting. You’re almost done,’” recalled Valdez. “And I said, ‘No, this isn’t my Design Program. The switch would require three more years of classes.’” 

It was a move to her grandfather’s 1940s cottage in Statesboro that ignited the hunch. 

The small home needed a lot of work, and Valdez’s dad wasn’t sure that she would want to live there. But Valdez immediately saw what it could be. She used what minimal resources she had to bring it up to date: painting, hanging window treatments that she crafted out of tablecloths, and purchasing cut-and-kept stick tiles, which she applied as a new kitchen floor. Her hands were blistered, but she was happy and flooded with inspiration. Friends and relatives took note. “Everybody who came to the house was like, ‘Oh my god, you should have been an interior designer,’” she recalled. “And I was like, ‘No, no, no, it’s too late. I’m about to graduate.’ And they were like, ‘No, you’re really good at this.’” 

Valdez tried her best to avoid any interruption, but her intuition wouldn’t shake loose. “I kind of had a little meltdown moment in the middle of my living room floor with the course catalog and literally lay it on the floor and cried because I knew that’s what I wanted to do,” she said. “I was like, ‘why did I figure this out now?’” 

Valdez made an appointment with Diane Phillips, who was the interior design program coordinator at the time. Phillips asked her if she was sure she wanted to move forward, citing the new time commitment. “This is what I need to do,” Valdez told her. “This is what I am meant to do. I know now. And it did take me three more years to finish, but it’s the best decision that I ever made.” 

Today, Valdez is the principal interior designer for Haven Design and Construction in San Antonio, Texas, a celebrated company that she co-owns with her husband and general contractor, Armando. Together, their firm has accrued multiple honors from the American Society of Interior Designers (ASID), including the Legacy of Design Award — ASID Texas Chapter Best in Show Award in the categories of Black and White Kitchen Design in 2018 and the Forest Creek Kitchen Design in 2019. The firm also earned accolades from Luxe RED, Residential Excellence in Design and the National Association of the Remodeling Industry among many others. 

“I’m very fortunate because when I first started going to school, I had no idea what I wanted to do,” said Valdez. “Now I realize after all of my years of experiences in design what a great program that Georgia Southern has. I’m really happy that I went through that program because I feel like it prepared me for any and everything that I have faced in the many different places I’ve worked before I started my own business.” 

The Interior Design Program was rigorous. “We had really amazing professors and we worked really hard,” remembered Valdez. “We were up there until 3:00 in the morning with our bedroom slippers on, and some of us kept a toothbrush in the bathroom.” 

“People don’t realize how much is involved with being an interior designer. All the drawings and AutoCAD and building codes — it’s way more than pillow stuffing.” 

At the intersection of art and science, Valdez fully embraced her studies in residential and commercial design. “I realized that second year of the program, she secured a job as a tour guide in Savannah. Showcasing the beauty of the downtown district’s architecture, landscapes and history gave me great direction on the work that she continues today.” 

Upon graduation, Valdez worked with fellow Georgia Southern interior design graduate Natalie Howard (’90) at her company, Bright Ideas, in Statesboro for three years. “In the new residential construction sector, she put cohesive lighting packages together for builders and homeowners in Statesboro and Savannah.” 

Over the next several years, Valdez followed job opportunities in Atlanta, South Carolina and across Texas. Along the way, she gained experience in her design and detail, kitchen and bathroom design, flooring functionality and beauty, and stone and tile, creating custom fireplaces and exterior stone facades as she sourced directly from quarries. A two-year stint with giant Ethan Allen allowed her to assist clients with various elements of home design, from furniture and window treatments to rugs and art. Finally, in San Antonio, she was wooed by the artistry of a custom cabinetry company. 

Soon, however, she met Armando, and they ventured off on their own in 2016 to co-create a design-build firm that allows her to draw on the breadth of her career. “It’s kind of incredible how everything worked out,” said Valdez. “I’m grateful that I got to specialize in cabinetry and furniture and tile and lighting because it really prepared me for where I am now.” 

In 2018, the business radically changed after the award-winning, black-and-white kitchen that they created went viral. Requests from out-of-state began pouring in from homeowners, including executives and NFL players in Nebraska, Colorado, Massachusetts, Georgia and Texas, seeking their services. 

Each project requires months of conversations and engagements with clients that involve architectural function, design, layout and material approvals. The entire project can take anywhere from eight months to two years to complete, resulting in a build-out that transforms personal spaces and lives. 

While the scale of her work has grown, Valdez is still moved by the same inspired creativity that bloomed in her grandfather’s cottage more than 20 years ago. “It’s kind of incredible how everything worked out,” said Valdez. “I mean, it’s the best feeling in the world, really. It’s very rewarding, especially when the clients are really happy.” 

As the company shifts to exclusively focus on new construction projects, Valdez is proud to continue honoring her Georgia Southern roots, as their company employs alumni Jennifer Long Price, a senior designer based in Marietta, Georgia, who graduated in 2003 with Valdez, as well numerous Georgia Southern interns since opening the firm. “I love what I do and I still have a huge affinity for Georgia Southern,” said Valdez — Melani Simón
Quintel Gwinn
Principal Designer
Quintel Gwinn Studio

In high school, a field trip to the High Museum of Art in Atlanta had a profound impact on Quintel Gwinn’s (07) life. The exhibition of decorative arts and design, especially the modern furniture of the 1940s and ’50s, captivated her. Seeing the artistry in everyday objects designed by visionary architect Frank Lloyd Wright ignited Gwinn’s interest in architecture, furniture design and interiors. “The knowledge that there was a person and creative process behind the design of everyday objects and household items really intrigued me,” Gwinn said. “Then, at the early age of 16, I knew then, at the early age of 16, that I wanted to be a designer. I wanted to explore color, form and art in ways that made everyday life interesting. I wanted to create new experiences in places that were familiar to me and through thoughtful design, make them more enjoyable.”

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Javoris Hollingsworth’s (’07) story of internet stardom began in Jeffersonville, Georgia, about 20 miles from Macon.

“Jeffersonville is a very small town where everybody knows everybody else,” Hollingsworth said as he reminisced about growing up there, and the Sundays he spent in church with his grandmother. Those days in church inspired him to take piano and drum lessons, and later score rap music playing in local churches. This early musical foundation would later play a pivotal role in his life. But before that, his academic journey led him to Georgia Southern University, where he majored in chemistry.

“Coming from Jeffersonville and moving to Statesboro was a jump up for me,” Hollingsworth said. “No one from my family had gone to college, but I was very blessed to get the Bill Gates Scholarship, and it funded all of my schooling from undergraduate at Georgia Southern, all the way to graduate school for my master’s and Ph.D. in chemistry.”

His initial plan was to become a research professor, but that changed when he spent a year as a visiting professor at a Florida college.

“That’s when it hit me that teaching a lot of fun,” said Hollingsworth. “Seeing students come in on day one not knowing a thing about the subject matter to be almost professionals by the end of the semester is cool.”

He added, “Having a hand in that development is amazing. That’s where I knew teaching was a great avenue and I stuck with it from there.”

For nearly a decade, the scientist taught organic and environmental chemistry at the University of St. Thomas in Houston. However, life is full of unexpected turns. In 2020, Hollingsworth said the connections he made and the things he learned in Statesboro still apply — critical thinking and turning concepts into reality. Many people struggle to move from ideas to execution, but his academic background made these tasks easier for him.

“Gracie’s Corner” videos cover a wide array of subjects. They range from fundamental topics like the ABCs, numbers, counting and colors to broad subjects such as African American history. Hollingsworth draws on his musical background to generate content that he believes is not only engaging but also “culturally relevant.”

“I wanted to make music that adults would want to listen to with their kids, and that’s been the secret sauce for our success,” he emphasized. “It’s like a breath of fresh air for many to see children of color at the forefront. It’s a big piece of our success, too — families have been yearning for this representation.”

As a professor, Hollingsworth said he learned the significance of connecting with students and understanding diverse learning styles, including auditory and visual preferences. By combining music with compelling content, he found that crafting catchy songs and employing repetition helped to ingrain and convey information and concepts to his target audience.

“When we first started, we targeted preschoolers and ages up to 8 or 9, but we’ve managed to capture the whole spectrum from parents, grandparents and entire families dancing alongside their kids,” he noted. To highlight the universal appeal of the platform’s content, the Georgia native produces music that pulls in genres ranging from hip-hop to Afrobeat, go-go, and more. While Hollingsworth writes and produces the script for each production, his young daughter, Graceyn, is the singer.

“She enjoys singing,” he shared. “Even when we’re not recording, she’s walking around the house, singing.”

With the channel making a global impact, Hollingsworth is considering ways to expand its reach. Under consideration — everything from retail collaborations to live tours. But to achieve the next goals, the tenured professor made a tough decision in May 2023.

“May of this year was my last year teaching at the University of St. Thomas,” he commented. “I reached a point where I had to decide whether to continue juggling the demanding role of a professor — exams, grading, emails, recommendations — alongside the looming channel, or let go of something. The channel’s growth made it almost impossible to juggle both. It was a tough call, as I enjoyed teaching and see the impact that I had in the classroom.”

Still, the alumni remains a teacher at heart because the content he creates is educational.

“In a sense,” he said, “I’m still teaching, but now my classroom looks completely different. I’m getting into the homes of families around the world now.”

Leaving his university job to concentrate on “Gracie’s Corner” has given Hollingsworth more time to engage in family events, and financially, it has been beneficial, too.

“It has helped us to climb out of debt and set aside funds for our kids to go college,” he said. “We’re blessed and in a position to bless others.”

Looking back at his undergraduate days, Hollingsworth says his Georgia Southern experience was almost like the right move for him.

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Hollingsworth said the connections he made and the things he learned in both Statesboro and Jeffersonville show how life can bring big surprises. He’s an alumnus who has gone from a small town to a big worldwide stage.

“It feels great to represent a small town because a lot of times we’re overlooked,” he said. “People might think much doesn’t come from small places. But it’s been awesome to show that good things can come from a small place like my hometown.” — ZANDRA BICKERT

From Georgia Southern’s Chemistry Labs to YouTube’s Global Stage

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Javoris Hollingsworth with his daughter Graceyn
While Chicago is a beautiful city, with towering skyscrapers and magnificent waterways, it also has a long history of violent crime and corruption. Many of America’s most notorious criminals — from gangsters like Al Capone and John Dillinger to serial killers like H.H. Holmes, John Wayne Gacy and the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski — and a springer spaniel named Tex, he cherishes the support of his family, which has been pivotal in his career. “Being a good husband and father while being the agent I want to be has been my biggest challenge,” he admits.

When asked if he would recommend the job to graduates from Georgia Southern, he answered without hesitation. “Yeah, I do recommend it,” he said. “We need people. We need good people who see willing to do a hard job for the right reasons. And we’re fortunate to have that. And that’s what it takes. What I appreciate most about our people is their willingness to do the mission no matter what. And there’s a lot of job satisfaction that goes along with doing that.”

Wheeler fondly remembers his days at Georgia Southern and Statesboro, with its familiar, small-town feel that he enjoyed. A member of Sigma Chi fraternity, he says he made lifelong friendships and connections. “My political science professor, Professor Emeritus Archibald’s, and his political science professor, Professor Emeritus Lane Van Tassel, Ph.D., who instilled in him an appreciation for public service. What he is not familiar with, however, is the weather in Chicago, which is famously awful. “Well, I’m not totally built for it,” he said with a laugh. “I do suffer with it. I got here in January and everybody said that this winter was not that bad and I believe them, but I still suffered a little bit.”

“I think our people operate in difficult circumstances, and they have a very challenging job. I think it’s been that way for the 115-year history of the Bureau.”

It’s been challenging, and I don’t see that changing.

But we’re very fortunate to have people willing to do it — dedicated people willing to be in that fight to do the mission. And our folks will continue to do that no matter what. — WES WHEELER
Barbara Melvin Breaks the Glass Ceiling to Become First Female CEO of South Carolina Ports

As the first female CEO of the South Carolina Port Authority, Barbara Melvin (’92) has navigated a compelling journey from the peach orchards of Fort Valley, Georgia, to the bustling docks of Charleston. Her story of success is a tale of ambition, education, and the courage to navigate uncharted waters.

As early as her formative years at Peach County High School, Melvin was interested in leadership and service. With a passion for politics ignited early on, she set her sights on Georgia Southern University, which boasted an excellent reputation for its political science program.

“I applied to some other schools, but Georgia Southern was the choice I wanted,” said Melvin. “As soon as I got accepted, that was the end of it. I don’t even think I opened up any other letters.”

For Melvin, Georgia Southern was more than a university; it was a launchpad. As the institution transitioned from college to university status, Melvin, too, was transforming, and her political science studies fueled her aspirations. The University’s blend of academic rigor and a vibrant social scene taught her the art of balancing life’s priorities, a skill that would prove invaluable in the high-stakes world of port management.

“Georgia Southern struck an ideal balance between academic rigor and vibrant campus life,” said Melvin. “It’s probably one of the early examples of rapid growth at a university due to success in athletics, primarily football. Yet, it kept its smaller family feel. It was an environment that encouraged students to seek academically while cherishing the broader college experience. So, I would have to say that Georgia Southern was very successful in balancing life’s priorities, a skill that would prove invaluable in the high-stakes world of port management.”

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After graduating in 1992, Melvin’s career took an exciting turn. She served as a policy analyst in the Georgia Secretary of State’s Office and later the Governor’s Office of Planning and Budget — positions that expanded her political acumen. But it was her role in government relations at the Charleston Metro Chamber of Commerce that caught the eye of the South Carolina Ports Authority, who in 1998 recognized her potential and brought her aboard as their first in-house lobbyist.

Melvin’s ascent through the ranks was a testament to her adaptability and vision. From government relations to operations, she embraced each new challenge. Her unconventional journey from political science to logistics underscores a central tenet of her philosophy: embrace every opportunity, even those that seem beyond your horizon.

“I have lived my life never on the side of being safe, but truly on the side of taking those intelligent risks, really trying to better myself, accepting all opportunities that might even sound scary or think that I don’t have the time to do,” she said.

As CEO, Melvin’s responsibilities are vast and varied. “It changes on a daily basis,” she said, detailing activities from board meetings to international travel. Under her leadership, the port has focused on operational excellence, infrastructure development and expanding its cargo base.

“Melvin emphasizes the importance of her team, saying, ‘I’m privileged to lead a team of a thousand people... and have truly the best team of port operators and professionals that work here.’

“It’s the honor of a lifetime to get to do the job that I’m doing today.”

One of the most significant projects under Melvin’s leadership was the Charleston Harbor deepening project, a nearly $600 million initiative. “It involved every aspect of customers, federal agencies, resource agencies, every level of government,” she recounts, highlighting the complexity and scale of the project.

Barbara Melvin’s story is more than a personal triumph; it’s a narrative that inspires. It speaks to the power of education, the importance of seizing every opportunity, and the impact one individual can have on the global stage. As she continues to steer South Carolina Ports toward new horizons, Melvin carries with her the spirit of Georgia Southern — a spirit of resilience, joy and boundless potential.

In her own words, Melvin’s advice rings clear: “Always have a plan and goals. Take intelligent risks. Accept every opportunity to better yourself.” It’s a mantra for success that has not only elevated her to the pinnacle of her profession but also serves as a guiding force for the next generation of leaders.

“As I look back, I am profoundly grateful for the opportunities and support I received at Georgia Southern,” she said. “The University’s unique blend of academic excellence, supportive community, and the wisdom of mentors, shaped not only my career but also my perspective on life. Georgia Southern will always hold a special place in my heart.”

— Liz Walker
The Holiday Helper Tree is a shining example of Georgia Southern University’s commitment to giving back to the community. This cherished tradition, which began in the fall of 1994, has touched thousands of lives across Bulloch and Chatham counties. And it started simply with two staff members who wanted to make a difference.

Eileen Sconyers-Smith, former senior administrative assistant for the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, and Victoria Du Ree, director of the Office of Volunteer Services, founded the program — initially named “Georgia Southern Holiday Helpers” — with 250 tags representing Christmas wishes from individuals in need, identified by five social service agencies in Statesboro. Members of the Georgia Southern campus community would pull tags and purchase gifts for children and adults to enjoy on Christmas morning.

Former organizers say it was always one of the highlights of their year.

“The joy began with the little ones who came to sing for everyone at the annual lighting ceremony,” said Todd Deal, Ph.D., former director of the Office of Leadership and Community Engagement. “They were always giddy with anticipation! Then, the students who wheeled new bikes or brought baby dolls or toy trucks — the joy of the season simply shone from their faces. That joy and those bridges are the legacy of the Holiday Helper Tree for me.”

Over its first 12 years, the program grew from five to 17 partner agencies in Bulloch County. The Department of Sociology and Anthropology joined the former Office of Student Leadership and Civic Engagement to support this growth. In 2010, the Holiday Helper Tree found a new home in the Russell Student Union, where there was a public unveiling of the tree decorated with tags every November.

By the time Sconyers-Smith retired in 2018, she had overseen 24 seasons of the Holiday Helper Tree, and the program was working with 22 agencies in Bulloch County.

Global pandemic in 2020 posed unprecedented challenges for the Holiday Helper Tree. While the country was closed to most in-person gatherings, Jordan Wilburn, community engagement coordinator for the Office of Leadership and Community Engagement, spearheaded the transition to a virtual Holiday Helper Tree.

As Georgia Southern celebrates 30 years of the Holiday Helper Tree, organizers and participants are reminded of the power of community, the joy of giving and the True Blue commitment to service the program has fostered.

In 2021, the virtual tree continued, accessible even to those outside the Georgia Southern community. This expansion allowed alumni, local business owners and other stakeholders to join in this tradition of giving. In 2022, the program extended to Chatham County for the first time, with 791 tags from 24 partner agencies in 2022. The items, mostly priced at $30 or less, ensured that giving back remained accessible and affordable. Today, the generous tradition has grown to meet the needs of more than 800 individuals each Christmas.

“The holiday season for a child in foster care is difficult, but with Georgia Southern University’s support, we have fulfilled 100% of our wish lists,” said Kristin Kramer, director of business operations at Child Advocacy Services, SEGA, Inc. “We are excited to celebrate the 30th Anniversary of the Holiday Helper Tree! When students and faculty pull a tag, they are about to shine a glimmer of hope into the lives of strangers.”

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And while it has served as a means of hope for its recipients, those who give say it’s an even greater Christmas blessing.

“The Holiday Helper Tree has been an integral part of our team for many years and provides us an opportunity to come together for a common cause to make a difference,” said Gene Sherry, executive director for Campus Recreation and Intramurals. “For me personally, it provides real meaning for the season and reflection of how blessed I am.”
UNIVERSITY NEWS

BOTANIC GARDEN DIRECTOR RETIRES

Carolyn Altman Reflects on her Georgia Southern Journey

Carolyn Altman, the longtime director of the Botanic Garden at Georgia Southern, has retired after 18 years of service to the University. She leaves a legacy of growth, transformation and a profound impact on the local community.

“Leaving the Garden is bittersweet,” Altman said. “I have loved every moment of my time here, from working with the Garden staff and students to creating such a special place, to getting other people excited about future projects, to solving all sorts of challenges.”

In her role as director, the Garden flourished with significant improvements. The construction of the Heritage Pavilion and Courtyard, the expansion of native plant landscape gardens, the renovation of Blount Cottage and Outdoor Classroom, and the addition of the Grow Zone and Orchard breathed new life into the space. The historic One-Room Schoolhouse also found a home on land that was the 20th-century farmstead of Dan and Catherine Bland.

A MUST-SEE DESTINATION AND COMMUNITY HUB

Altman’s impact extended beyond the Garden’s border, as her leadership transformed it into a must-see destination in the region. She oversaw the development of a facility rental program drawing hundreds of people annually for special events, festivals and concerts. She’s a founding member of the Main Street Farmers Market, which took root in the Botanic Garden’s fields. She remains confident that the Garden will continue to thrive in the hands of the staff she described as “fabulous, hardworking, loving and incredible.”

“Everyone is passionate about the Garden and serving others,” Altman said, “and I’m excited to see what new ideas bloom at the Botanic Garden.”

Her journey at the Garden began as an education coordinator, where she connected young learners to the wonders of coastal plain science and history. Altman established teacher training programs and with the addition of the Botanic Garden education team, started initiatives like Project Eagle, which brings first- through fifth-graders to the University’s outreach units. The schoolchildren experience science and social studies in a living, breathing, outdoor classroom.

“They love living outside, exploring the world, and love coming to campus,” Altman said. “We tell them our future students and encourage them to think that college could be a part of their futures, which is critical for so many, especially first-generation students.”

NURTURING THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

The Garden also enriches the lives of the University community. It is a hub where students from diverse majors — scientists, art students, filmmakers and historians — can find real-world applications.

“Our college students fulfill class requirements here,” Altman explained. “Many of our student-workers are engineers and have built bridges, fences and other structures. Students and staff love being at the Garden, alumni come back to marry here, and donors love to see beautiful things grow in this space. Perhaps most importantly, the Garden is a place where students, staff, faculty and the community can escape the stress of daily life and restore their spirits.”

As for her future, Altman is enjoying more time for traveling, cycling and spending time with her grandchildren. She is looking forward to her next adventure.

“Retirement for us was never about stopping,” she said. “It was about starting something new and exciting. We couldn’t stop creating because it’s in our blood.”

SCULPTING A LEGACY

John and Linda Jensen Find Lifelong Creativity, Connection and Community Through Armstrong’s Art Department

“In those early days at Armstrong State University, we felt like we were on an adventure,” said John Jensen. “It was the beginning of a mentoring relationship between a professor and student. John and Linda Jensen was serendipitous. They didn’t know it at the time, but they were among more than 125 applicants vying for the two positions at Armstrong. John, a graduate of the University of Arizona, and Linda, with degrees from the University of Memphis, had a lifelong calling for creating and teaching art.”

Robert Burnett, then president of Armstrong State, envisioned an art department with John and Linda leading the way. They began their journey in August 1983, with John teaching ceramics and Linda teaching photography and art education.

The Jensens met on the first day of orientation. It wasn’t long before they found in each other not just professional synergy but also an enduring personal connection.

“Linda took one look at me and she’s like, ‘This is the man for me,’” reminisced John. “Yes I did,” laughed Linda. “Neither one of us had ever been married and our careers and our art were our lives. So we always say that Bob Burnett was responsible for our children.”

By 1987, the Jensens had secured two full-time teaching faculty positions for John and Linda. The following year, the Jensens and their first two full-time students incorporated Armstrong’s Ceramic Art Program. The Jensens have invested their time and energy into the Ceramic Art Program, expanding the Ceramics undergraduate program and expanding the program to include the Master of Fine Arts degree.

Today, the art department at Armstrong prides itself on providing students with a creative environment where they can thrive, develop their skills and pursue their passions. The program offers a wide range of courses, including drawing, painting, sculpture, ceramics and photography, and students have the opportunity to work with professional artists and educators from around the world.

“The art department is a place where students can develop their creative skills and explore their artistic passions,” said John. “We are committed to providing students with a supportive and challenging environment where they can achieve their goals and realize their potential.”

Linda continues her artistic journey through vibrant mixed-media creations. She explained, “My art is an expression of my soul. I love incorporating vivid beads and photographs into my pieces.” She infuses her work with a deeply personal touch, often crafting pieces that are a reflection of her former students.

John and Linda Jensen have contributed to the Armstrong College of Arts and Sciences in a variety of ways. They have served on numerous committees and were instrumental in the establishment of the Armstrong College of Arts and Sciences’ first endowed chair, the John and Linda Jensen Endowed Chair in the Ceramic Arts.

Linda finds joy in gifting her creations to friends, family, former students and the wider community. “For me, art is meant to be shared,” she said.

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“Our story is far from over,” John said. “Art will always be a part of who we are.” — Liz Walker

— Sandra Bennett

Photos by Jonathan Chick

— Liz Walker

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Photos by Jonathan Chick

— Liz Walker
Chemistry lecturer Beulah Narendrapurapu, Ph.D., is a recipient of the 2023 Felton Jenkins Jr. Hall of Fame Faculty Award presented by the University System of Georgia (USG). The prestigious award recognizes faculty for their contributions to their institutions and fields of study along with their commitment to teaching and student success. Narendrapurapu was one of six faculty members from across the state honored with the Hall of Fame Faculty Award at the annual Regents’ Scholarship Gala hosted by the USG Foundation. “I felt honored to have been present with other accomplished award recipients and distinguished guests to receive the award,” Narendrapurapu said. “Personally, it is a great encouragement to see my efforts being recognized. I want to thank God, all my family, friends, colleagues, the Faculty Center, and library professionals at Georgia Southern University for their support.”

Narendrapurapu has been teaching chemistry at Georgia Southern since 2013. Along with those classes, she has concentrated on STEM education research. Her focus is on designing animations for chemistry concepts and designing affordable textbook materials and resources for increasing success in chemistry courses. The USG Scholarship and Award Gala celebrates public higher education. More than 525 guests came from all corners of Georgia to support deserving students with need-based scholarships and recognize the awardees at the 2023 gala.

Georgia Southern has launched a new collaborative effort to help service members stationed at Fort Stewart and Hunter Army Airfield pursue advanced higher education degrees. The University is offering four master’s degree programs courtesy of a new partnership with the U.S. Army. Representatives from Georgia Southern and Fort Stewart announced the partnership after signing the official memorandum of understanding this past summer.

The agreement allows military members to earn master’s degrees in business administration, health administration, information technology and professional communication and leadership. Two graduate-level certificates are also being offered — one in cybercrime and one in professional communication and leadership.

The courses are being offered on base in face-to-face classes and in shorter terms at the Fort Stewart education center. Dr. Kyle Marrero, president of Georgia Southern University, said the programs are designed to allow soldiers and their families to pursue higher education without disrupting their duties or relocating. This allows them to strike a healthier work-life balance while investing in their personal growth.

This collaborative effort is the latest example of the University’s commitment to the military, which has led to Georgia Southern being named a “Military-Friendly” school for six years in a row and a “Gold School” for 2023-2024 by Victory Media, publisher of G.I. Jobs, STEM Jobs, and Military Spouse magazine.
Georgia Southern University Secures Millions in Grants for Cutting-Edge Research and Critical Initiatives

In recent months, Georgia Southern University has been the proud recipient of an array of substantial grants. These awards underscore the institution’s commitment to excellence and its proactive approach to addressing pressing needs. The grants highlight the remarkable work carried out by the University’s dedicated faculty and research teams across various disciplines.

Georgia Southern University’s Institute for Health Logistics and Analytics (IHLLA) and the Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH) have renewed their collaboration to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in confinement facilities. Under the direction of Jessica Schwind, Ph.D., the IHLLA has been awarded a $10 million contract by DPH for a second year of work. The project will assist confinement facilities across the state by improving air quality and streamlining COVID-19 mitigation efforts.

The Center for Public Health Practice and Research at the Jinn Ping Hsu College of Public Health (JPHCOPH) is the beneficiary of a substantial $4 million grant from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) Health Policy Professor Bettye Apensteg, Ph.D., and Charles Owens, MSA, are the co-principal investigators for this grant. The cooperative agreement will see them collaborate closely with HRSA and rural health stakeholders to provide much-needed technical assistance to financially distressed rural hospitals nationwide. Additionally, Stuart Tedders, Ph.D., the dean of JPHCOPH, stated his pride in the center’s dedication to improving the quality of life for rural and underserved populations.

The National Science Foundation has allocated nearly $3 million to Georgia Southern University to inaugurate the Research and Mentoring for Postbaccalaureates (RaMP) program. This ambitious initiative, led by principal investigator Cinco Colvin-Gaul, Ph.D., aims to benefit underrepresented minority students by providing them with research experience, mentoring and professional networking opportunities in the STEM fields. This program is expected to commence in August 2024, following meticulous planning. Colón-Gaud, is joined by three additional faculty members as co-principal investigators: Biology Professor John Carroll, Ph.D., Lacey Huffling, Ph.D., associate professor of middle grades, and Asli Aslan, Ph.D., director of the Institute for Water and Health.

The Georgia Southern University Soldier Performance and Readiness (SPAR) program received a $1.5 million, two-year grant from the U.S. Army Medical Research and Development Command (USAMRDC). This grant, under the guidance of Professor Cuntrice Henderson, Ph.D., in the Doctor of Physical Therapy program, will expand the University’s research and programming capacity in injury prevention techniques, benefiting both soldiers and doctoral students.

Two professors from Georgia Southern University’s College of Education, Sam Rhodes, Ph.D., and Antonio Gutierrez de Blume, Ed.D., are part of a collaborative effort funded by a $3 million National Science Foundation (NSF) grant, aimed at improving numeracy skills in the U.S. Georgia Southern University was awarded almost $400,000 of the overall sum to support this initiative.

A pair of Georgia Southern University professors and their research team are working to develop new options to help the estimated two million new cases of cancer that are expected to be diagnosed in the U.S. this year. Karelle Tedders, Ph.D., and first responders. This three-year study will focus on injury mitigation, work outcomes and financial burden reduction in the firefighting industry.

An interdisciplinary team from Georgia Southern University, led by Professor Lacey Huffling, Ph.D., is the recipient of an award of more than $465,000 from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine. This grant is part of an initiative with the Gulf Research Program (GRP) that engages children and youth in place-based educational activities.

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The University’s dedication to supporting student-parents is evident with a $1.6 million grant through the Child Care Access Means Parents In School (CCAMPIS) program. The grant, written by the director of TRIO Student Support Services, Corine Ackerson-Jones, Ed.D., is designed to provide childcare subsidies for eligible student-parents, ensuring access to affordable childcare.

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Every year, Georgia Southern graduate students are called upon to teach, grade assignments, run laboratories, conduct research, and write and publish complex papers. But too often their academic achievements are overlooked. Meet the four graduate students who won this year’s Averitt Award, which is the highest honor presented to students within the Georgia Southern University Jack N. Averitt College of Graduate Studies. The award recognizes excellence in two separate categories — research and instruction.

SPENCER ERICK RINER
Master of Science Graduate Student
College of Behavioral and Social Sciences
Hometown: Guyton, Georgia
Major: Criminology

What did you teach? Criminal Law, investigations and criminal procedure
What did you enjoy about teaching? My career in law enforcement spans 27 years and has provided me with extensive practical knowledge and experience to pass along to students. As such, I am passionate about student success and providing them with real-world instruction. I use techniques and lessons from cases I have investigated to enhance classroom instruction.
What did you appreciate most about the program in the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences? I truly appreciate the people who work within the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences. The faculty and staff within the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology are dedicated to the success of the students. Everyone within the department has a passion for research and instruction. They have supported and encouraged me throughout my time in the master’s program.
What are your career plans? I am currently the director of emergency management for Georgia Southern and I plan to continue working in that capacity. My next academic goal is to be accepted into a Ph.D. program. It would be an honor to become an associate professor within the criminal justice and criminology department in the future. I would like to continue to research criminological issues and teach those who will be working within the criminal justice system.
What did it mean to you to be a recipient of the Averitt Award? It was extremely special to receive a nomination. I was surprised and honored to receive the award because I was one of many deserving candidates. What is an intriguing or little-known fact about you? I enjoy running. I completed my first marathon in 2019.

IVY COLLINS
Master of Science Graduate Student
College of Science and Mathematics
Hometown: Mineral Bluff, Georgia
Major: Mathematics

What did you teach? College algebra
What did you enjoy about teaching? I most enjoyed watching students grow and thrive in my class. I taught many students; several were not math majors or STEM majors, so math was hard for them. I saw many students struggle with hard topics, but they lit up when they finally understood the topic or applied it to a problem. It is one of the best things to witness.
Please describe your Georgia Southern experience. When I started at Georgia Southern in the fall of 2021, I was worried about the experiences I would receive during my graduate degree. I went to a small private college as an undergrad, so Georgia Southern was intimidating. I quickly realized that just because Georgia Southern is a bigger university, the math department was very small. In no time, I was forming close relationships with my professors, the staff, the undergrads and other graduate students in the department. Georgia Southern truly made me feel at home.
What did it mean to you to be a recipient of the Averitt Award? I am honored and humbled to have this honor bestowed upon me. Through my years here at Georgia Southern, I have met and worked with many other graduate students who are just as deserving of this award. I truly feel that I was just a model of all the professors I have had throughout my academic career, and I just wanted to provide my students with the educational experiences I had received.
What will you miss most about Georgia Southern? I will miss all of the mentorships I received throughout my time here. I will also miss all of the relationships I created with the faculty and other graduate students.
What are your career plans? My ultimate career goal is to be a professor. That is why I will be continuing my education to pursue my Ph.D. to help prepare me.
What is an intriguing or little-known fact about you? I am a beekeeper. In high school, I developed an interest in protecting the honeybee population and I started my own hives. I am also a volunteer at the Georgia Aquarium.
KATHERINE FALLON
Doctor of Psychology Graduate Student
College of Behavioral and Social Sciences
Hometown: Louisville, Kentucky
Majors: Clinical Psychology
What is the focus of your research?
My primary research agenda focuses on a transdisciplinary approach to better understand problems of practice around youth advocacy, resiliency and equity.
What did you learn through conducting your research?
Specifically, my research team currently has one active research project as a continuation in evaluating educator perceptions of preparedness in responding to various crises (e.g., gun violence, suicide, bullying, assault, natural disaster) and evaluating current school-wide safety plans. Additionally, my dissertation work was aimed at developing a comprehensive assessment of parental perceptions of risk factors for adolescent behavioral and sexual aggression.
I believe research encompasses much more than data collection, analysis and reporting of findings. Throughout my research experience at GS, I have grown a strong appreciation for the utility of research to make public impacts. Through a better understanding of the unique or shared challenges our communities face, we can inform implications for practice (e.g., community partnerships, training) to incite change and growth in the way we lead, educate and support our community. Further, as a student in clinical psychology and current training divorce, I feel my research closely aligns with my mission as a mental health provider of improving access to resources and quality of well-being (i.e., physical, emotional, psychological, social, developmental) for under-represented communities.
What did it mean to you to be a recipient of the Averitt Award?
Being the recipient of the Averitt Award was very exciting and unexpected. I am very honored to have been nominated and even more so to have received this award, as this is incredibly monumental for the field in which my research and academic pursuits are held. I am very thankful to have a team of individuals who have always believed in the work I have done and continually strive to better the community around us.
What will you miss most about Georgia Southern?
During my time at GS, I have had many academic and research mentors whom I have been incredibly thankful for. Dr. Jeff Kilbert, Dr. Theresa Yance and Dr. Dorthie Cross have guided me through my dissertation work and I am very thankful for. Dr. Jeff Kilbert, Dr. Theresa Yance and Dr. Dorthie Cross have guided me in understanding trials and celebrations in research activity. While I plan to continue to work closely alongside each of these individuals in my future endeavors, I also hope I can provide mentorship to future students or trainees in the same way they have graciously supported me.

JOSEPH VONDRASEK
Master of Science in Sports Medicine Graduate
Waters College of Health Professions
Hometown: Owosso, Michigan
Major: Health Science and Kinesiology
What is the focus of your research?
My research focuses on autonomic nervous system function and cardiovascular health, looking at ways to improve the health of these systems via everyday tools that people can use.
What did you learn through conducting your research?
In one research project, I evaluated the accuracy and effectiveness of a cost-free smartphone application for improving heart rate variability—a very important marker of cardiovascular health—during slow-paced breathing by comparing the app to the gold-standard electrocardiogram. I gained valuable skills in measuring fitness, strength, autonomic nervous system status, body composition and blood markers by drawing blood from the study participants. One thing I learned is that the value of research is not just in the theory of how to do something, but in actually doing it. I learned that through blood draws. I felt like I didn’t know enough to do it in the beginning, but, as cliché as it sounds, I soon realized you just have to go for it.
Please describe your Georgia Southern experience.
I learned how to be an adult at Georgia Southern. I had experiences like paying rent, building up my credit score, booking a flight and arranging parking tickets. I also learned the value of friendship and how fortunate I am to have amazing friends in and out of the lab. It was a challenging and rewarding journey and I especially appreciated the close-knit community and supportive faculty. I felt my time at Georgia Southern prepared me for my future studies and career in exercise physiology.
What did it mean to you to be a recipient of the Averitt Award?
I am very grateful to receive such a prestigious distinction from the College of Graduate Studies. Being recognized for the research that I have done while at Georgia Southern was a great honor.
What will you miss most about Georgia Southern?
I cherish my time in the Biodynamics and Human Performance Centre. I was very fortunate to work closely with all three faculty members who advise students of the lab, and especially my primary advisor, Dr. Adam Flatt. Dr. Adam Flatt taught me a tremendous amount about the science and latest research on autonomic nervous system health, but he also showed me what it takes to be a respected and successful researcher in this field.
What are your career plans?
I plan to continue my studies by pursuing a Ph.D. in exercise physiology at Florida State University in the cardiovascular and applied physiology lab. After completion of my doctoral studies, I hope to apply for a faculty position and continue conducting research and teaching.
What is an interesting or little-known fact about you?
During my undergraduate studies, I wrestled for the Alma College Scots.
In professional basketball, referees have a split second to make
final decisions. With a whistle, they can alter the course of a
game or the results of a world championship. They can incite
enormous amounts of frustration or propel the fans into a
state of buoyant joy. Every decision they make is consequential;
distractions and be totally engaged, locked in and focused.

“Even the largest error a game, the smallest mistake in
judgment can impact the outcome to a degree,” said Scott. “You
have to have the mental acumen and the mental toughness to get
to that place in your mind where you can just get to work and
everything falls into place.”

Nick Cochran (L) and Gene Sherry (R) stand with Kevin Scott (C) at
Game 3 of the 2023 NBA Finals in Miami. Cochran and Sherry played a
large role in Scott choosing to become a referee.

Photo provided by Gene Sherry.

“Obviously, it’s a big deal for the students to meet an NBA referee,”
said Sherry. “I don’t even know if they understand the value of
what they’re getting. There are a lot of great referees, but they
couldn’t teach refereeing. But Kevin has that skill as well.”

For Scott, giving back is part of his character. People invested in him,
as he wants to invest in people, especially people at Georgia
Southern. And every time he walks back into the RAC in Statesboro,
it feels like home again.

Influential, impactful individuals have helped me at some point
over the last 24 years,” he said. “When you talk about giving back,
especially to Georgia Southern University, to the intramural
program, to the intramural officials and officials at every level —
well, there’s no greater feeling.” — DOV CAVE

Making the Call

Alumnus and NBA Referee
Kevin Scott Fails Forward
into an Exciting Career

In professional basketball, referees have a split second to make
decisions. With a whistle, they can alter the course of a

Game. It was an emotional few days around that
time, not only being able to cherish that with my family, but also just
reflecting and thinking about all the people who went out of their way
to help me,” he said.

In the stands were Scott’s mother and father, his wife, Sarah, and the
friends who helped him discover his passion.

“You know, just having both my parents there, Gene and Nick, two
individuals who got me started, and our family, it’s just something I’ll
never forget,” said Scott. “I’ll be able to cherish that.

“I get emotional just thinking about it,” said Sherry. “It was real
special for him to include Nick and me along with his family.”

Despite his busy NBA schedule, Scott regularly returns to Georgia
Southern to give back to the place where his passion began. Sherry,
who is also president of the Southern Eagles Officials Association, hosts
training camps for referees for the Georgia High School Association
each year. The camp is a requirement for referees wanting to work
the postseason. Scott comes down each year to teach and spend time with
the aspiring referees.

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HISTORIC SPIKE FOR VOLLEYBALL

Eagles Close Out an Unprecedented Season

Photos by AJ Henderson

ATHLETICS

To call the Eagles’ volleyball season historic is an understatement. It was a season of unprecedented firsts and a foundation for seasons to come. Their remarkable run ended on Thursday, Dec. 7, during Round 3 of the National Invitational Volleyball Championship (NIVC) against the University of South Florida, hosted in Hanner Fieldhouse for the first time and attended by more than 1,000 Eagles fans.

The match saw Georgia Southern briefly leading 21-19, only for South Florida to make a comeback. The Bulls continued their dominance in the second set with a 9-0 run and an impressive .514 batting percentage, winning 25-12. The third set was a nail-biter, with the Eagles tying at 24 before the Bulls clinched the next two points, resulting in a sweep.

While the loss was disappointing, Head Coach Chad Willis beamed with pride at his team’s performance.

“I’m so proud of this team. It was an unbelievable year,” he said. “I’m sad because we don’t get to wake up tomorrow and come back and do it again. I think that’s just a testament to this group and who they are and how they come in every single day. They do what we ask and then some. I’m really proud of them.”

It was the Eagles’ first-ever appearance in the NIVC, and the first post-season win in program history. Their historic run to the Great Eight round began with victories over Winthrop and East Carolina in Greenville, North Carolina. They finished the season with a record of 25-9 overall and 10-6 in the Sun Belt — their first 20-win season since 2013, just before they entered the conference.

Coach Willis and his staff are now looking forward to building on this year’s momentum in the upcoming spring season and beyond. And with their young standouts, they’ll have a firm foundation.

Key players on the Eagles leaderboard will return next year. Freshman and First-Team All-Sun Belt outside hitter Reagan Barth, sophomore setter Kirsten Barrett, sophomore middle blocker Ailie Hair, junior right side Jordan Christy, junior defensive specialist Ashlynn Lovett, who broke the program record for digs in a single game against Winthrop, and junior outside hitter Jillian Gray will play key roles for Georgia Southern next year.

The Eagles will lose middle blocker and 5th-year senior Ally Barnhart, setter Callaway Cason, defensive specialist Anksley Clifford and Rebekah Farthing, and outside hitter Chambles Russell.
As Paul Johnson Enters the College Football Hall of Fame, Georgia Southern GA TAs for Erk Russell’s Induction

There are few truly legendary coaches in Georgia Southern’s history, but former head coach Erk Russell and Paul Johnson are at the top of the list.

On Oct. 26, Johnson returned to Georgia Southern to be honored for his selection into the College Football Hall of Fame. During an on-field ceremony at the Eagles’ convincing 44-27 win against Georgia State, Johnson was accompanied by athletics staff and fellow Georgia Southern hall-of-famers Tracy Ham and Adrian Peterson, both of whom he coached and mentored.

“We had some great games here and some great wins,” said Johnson before kickoff. “I think we actually won 28 or 29 games in a row here at home during that span — a lot of great players and a lot of great memories. It’s great to be back.”

An architect of the Eagles’ famed “triple option” I-back offense, Johnson was instrumental in securing the program’s first two FCS/SIAA national championships in 1985-86 as an offensive coordinator under Russell. After stints at the University of Hawaii and the U.S. Naval Academy, Johnson returned to Statesboro in 1996 as head coach, embarking on a five-year run that included five consecutive Southern Conference (SoCon) championships and two more national championships. In just five years with the Eagles, he boasted a 62-10 record and was named SoCon Coach of the Year in 1997 and 1998.

After leaving Georgia Southern, Johnson experienced success at both Navy and Georgia Tech, finishing his career with a 199-98 win-loss record. He was officially inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in December at the 65th National Football Foundation Awards Dinner in Las Vegas.

“There are a lot of great memories here,” Johnson told the Statesboro Herald. “A lot of the players came back and it was great to see those guys. We had tremendous fun here and a lot of success.”

ONE MORE TIME FOR ERK

Johnson is the first Georgia Southern head coach to enter the College Football Hall of Fame, though hopefully not the last.

As Georgia Southern celebrates 40 years since the return of football, its students, alumni, campus community fans — and pretty much anyone who loves college football in Georgia — are asking one question: “Why aren’t Erk in the College Football Hall of Fame?”

Georgia Southern Athletics Director Jared Benko asked the same question early in his tenure. He found only one requirement keeping Russell from induction: the Hall of Fame requires 10 years of full-time head coaching experience. Russell was head coach for eight years.

“We’ve been trying to look into the process and understand what the players have, but no one has been able to explain why 10 years,” said Benko. “It seems like an arbitrary term. But the whole reason this came up is because we’re trying to do right like Coach Russell always said. And we’re trying to do right by him.”

On Aug. 5, 2022, Benko and Georgia Southern President Kyle Marrero penned a letter to Steve Hatchell, president and CEO of the National Football Foundation and College Hall of Fame, Inc., arguing that Russell’s achievements, particularly in light of the fledgling state of the football program when he arrived, merit special consideration.

Hatchell’s response in a nutshell: the rule is 10 years, buddy.

Regardless of his response, however, the push for Russell’s induction has garnered widespread support from Georgia Southern faithful, as well as bloggers, sports columnists and reporters from websites, newspapers and television stations throughout the state. Even Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp has expressed his support on social media, saying Russell, “certainly meets the high standards for induction into the College Football Hall of Fame.”

Recounting Russell’s coaching history is like preaching to the choir; but to see it all on paper is enlightening.

In 1982, Erk Russell arrived in Statesboro to resurrect a Georgia Southern football program that lay dormant for more than 40 years. Despite the obvious challenges of creating a college football program from thin air, Russell and the Eagles ran roughshod over the Southern Conference for the next eight years. He amassed an astounding 83-22-1 record — a winning percentage of almost 80% — including three national championships.

In 1989, Russell guided the Eagles to a perfect 15-0 season and retired that year as the winningest coach in America. He was named Coach of the Year a staggering 19 times and has been inducted into the Georgia Sports Hall of Fame (1987) and into the Alabama Sports Hall of Fame (1990) as well as being named Georgia Coach of the Decade by USA Today in 1989.

In addition to the overdue recognition, Benko says the heart of this campaign is the Russell family. “I want Jay and Rusty and the Russells to have that opportunity to be at the Hall of Fame induction and recognize that dream.”

Benko continues to lobby for Russell’s induction behind the scenes, reaching out to friends, influencers and others who can help “right the wrong” of his omission. He believes persistence will win in the end.

“I think we actually won 28 or 29 games in a row here and a lot of great success.” — Doy Cave

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Veterinarian and Owner  
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Warner Robins, GA

Jay Canady  
BBA, Management, 2010  
Realtor  
Keller Williams  
Charleston, SC

Patrick Barker  
B.S., Construction Management, 2014  
BBA, Logistics, 2014  
CEO  
Glenn Layton Homes  
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Korey Castleberry  
BBA, Finance, 2008  
Sr. Stock Plan Administrator  
Spotify  
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Kelsey Cline  
B.S., Public Relations, 2009  
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Kelsey Cline State Farm  
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Jessica Ash  
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TD SYNNEX  
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Kacey Biddy  
B.S., Multimedia Communication, 2013  
Producer  
Apple Music  
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Brooklyn Cartwright  
B.S., Sports Management, 2016  
Sr. Director, Basketball Operations  
Atlanta Dream WNBA  
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ALUMNI
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Cecilia Russo Marketing  
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BBA, Management, 2011  
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Blake Nation  
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M.S., Kinesiology, 2014  
Player Development Coach  
Milwaukee Brewers  
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Michael Johnson  
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B.A., History, 2015  
Founder  
Flint and Port Hat Company  
Bainbridge, GA

Michael Johnson  
B.M., Music, 2014  
M.Ed., Curriculum & Instruction, Accomplished Teaching, 2017  
Assistant Principal/PBIS District Coordinator  
Vidalia City Schools  
Vidalia, GA

Joshua Kerr  
B.A., English, 2009  
Master Planner  
Georgia Department of Defense  
Newark, GA

Alumni
Chukwuka Okafor  
B.S., Biology, 2012  
Dentist  
Zona Dental  
Atlanta, GA

Trevor Readrick  
B.S., Construction Management, 2011  
CEO  
Readrick Construction  
St. Marys, GA

Jenna Wiese  
BBA, Accounting, 2007  
MAcc, 2008  
Vice Chancellor of Internal Audit, Ethics & Compliance  
University System of Georgia  
Cumming, GA

Christopher Wiggins  
B.S., General Studies, 2016  
MBA, 2023  
Retail Market Manager  
Sympolus  
Statesboro, GA

Jenna Wiese  
BBA, Accounting, 2007  
MAcc, 2008  
Vice Chancellor of Internal Audit, Ethics & Compliance  
University System of Georgia  
Cumming, GA

Lucero Rodriguez  
M.A., Professional Communication and Leadership, 2015  
Director of Employee and Patient Experience  
Emory Healthcare  
Kennesaw, GA

Ellen Wooditch  
B.S., Interior Design, 2011  
Director of Interior Design  
Hussey Gay Bell  
Savannah, GA

Cameron Windham  
CFP®, CLTC®  
BBA, Finance, 2013  
Managing Director  
Baldwin, Windham & Jones  
Northeastern Mutual Wealth Management Group  
Macon, GA

Hannah Wolf  
BBA, Marketing, 2017  
Aircraft Sales & Acquisitions  
JetHQ  
Bluffton, SC

Tanielle Smith  
B.S., Biology, 2019  
CEO, Brew Wellness Collective  
Assistant Clinical Professor, UF  
Jacksonville, FL

Ellen Wooditch  
B.S., Interior Design, 2011  
Director of Interior Design  
Hussey Gay Bell  
Savannah, GA

The Honorable Casey Woolsey  
B.A., Writing and Linguistics, 2007  
County Court Judge  
State of Florida  
Ponte Vedra, FL

Brittany Standifer  
B.A., Political Science, 2014  
Community Engagement Manager  
University of Georgia  
Athens, GA

Ellen Wooditch  
B.S., Interior Design, 2011  
Director of Interior Design  
Hussey Gay Bell  
Savannah, GA

Candace Young  
B.S., Sports Management, 2005  
MBA, 2009  
Brand Growth Strategist  
Piedmont Healthcare  
Mableton, GA

Tanielle Smith  
B.S., Biology, 2019  
CEO, Brew Wellness Collective  
Assistant Clinical Professor, UF  
Jacksonville, FL

Trevor Readrick  
B.S., Construction Management, 2011  
CEO  
Readrick Construction  
St. Marys, GA

Jordan Yakoby  
BSN, Nursing, 2012  
MSN, Nursing, 2015  
Director and Chief Nurse Administrator, Associate Professor  
Touro University  
New York, NY

Tirrany Thurmond  
Founder  
Idaltu Counseling & Consulting  
Decatur, GA

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CEO  
Readrick Construction  
St. Marys, GA

Jenna Wiese  
BBA, Accounting, 2007  
MAcc, 2008  
Vice Chancellor of Internal Audit, Ethics & Compliance  
University System of Georgia  
Cumming, GA
Just months after Jennifer Abshire ('87) graduated from Georgia Southern University with a bachelor’s in public relations, she followed her college sweetheart from Statesboro to Savannah, where she entered the nonprofit sector.

Her nonprofit jobs barely paid the rent, but she gained valuable experience, enabling her to obtain fundraising skills while working for the American Red Cross and then Parent and Child, where, at 23 years old she was responsible for securing more than $3 million per year in donations. Abshire made vital inroads into the community that continues to work with today.

“I didn’t realize at the time how connections and receiving diverse experiences at such a young age would help me,” said Abshire. “It’s amazing what you learn when sitting in numerous board and committee meetings, raising money and seeking volunteers as one of your first jobs. You really get to wear lots of hats.”

In 1992, Abshire accepted a new, four-year role as executive director of the Savannah Olympic Support Council, the local arm for the Atlanta Committee for the 1996 Olympic Games.

“I reported to a 55-person board here locally, as well as to senior Olympic officials, which was really an unbelievable career opportunity at age 28,” Abshire remembered. “We worked daily with over 3,000 local volunteers who ran all of the community and educational Olympic legacy programs, and hosted more than 500 international guests who came to visit and experience Savannah. Every day was an adventure.”

It was a pivotal time for Savannah, on the precipice of major change as the city engaged on an international platform as the host of the Olympic Yachting Competition and its accompanying events. It was also a noteworthy moment for Abshire, whose trajectory was rising with the city’s.

“It was really one of the first times Savannah had to work together as a community with a large goal in mind,” said Abshire. “This wasn’t the only time Abshire had been in the midst of transformational change, buoyed by bubbling excitement from the community. During her studies on the Statesboro Campus from 1983 to 1987, the student body grew from roughly 6,000 to 10,000. The football team, which had just been resuscitated by Erk Russell after more than 40 years, won two national championships with a gale-force response to people, which had just been resuscitated by Erk Russell after more than 40 years, won two national championships with a gale-force response.

Abshire, a Marietta, Georgia, transplant who didn’t know anyone on campus when she toured the school, chose Georgia Southern for its transformational change, buoyed by bubbling excitement from the community. During her studies on the Statesboro Campus from 1983 to 1987, the student body grew from roughly 6,000 to 10,000. The football team, which had just been resuscitated by Erk Russell after more than 40 years, won two national championships with a gale-force response from Statesboro and beyond.

Abshire, a Marietta, Georgia, transplant who didn’t know anyone on campus when she toured the school, chose Georgia Southern for its atmosphere of openness and synergy.

“What was cool about Georgia Southern was I met a lot of people from different states and my best friends were from different parts of Georgia,” said Abshire. “I never had the friendships and the comradeship on campus. It felt really small, but it didn’t feel cliplary. Students and faculty really knew each other. I still feel like Southern is very similar to that today.”

Like in Savannah, the relationships and experience she gained in Statesboro would support her throughout her life, in both professional and personal ways unknown to her at the time.

After the Olympics concluded, Abshire leaned on the connections she had established in both cities to work as a consultant from home while she raised young children. The growth of her business was slow and intentional.

“It was an organic, flexible business model,” said Abshire. “As a consultant you only have so many hours in a day you can work, but I also needed to make time in my weekday to be there for my two children,” she said. “Those five-hour goals set the foundation of where we are today. We were working virtually before it was the norm. It was a tremendous blessing.”

In 2000, Abshire officially launched Abshire Public Relations, a traditional PR firm. Three years later, alumnus Susan Hancox ('82) joined as president. In time, their business plan shifted to a new media framework, merging storytelling and technology across multiple outlets, providing counsel and strategy for more than 200 regional companies and municipalities, as of today.

“As traditional PR faded out, multiplatform media became the norm,” Abshire said. “Of course, every year we had to pivot and adjust to what was working to tell people’s stories. Our first decade focused on lots of copywriting, then when we realized video was going to overtake the written word for corporate storytelling, we hired a young University of Georgia alumnus who was a former television producer to help us gain strength in this area.

“You have to learn to remain nimble and stay open to new ideas, tools and strategies. Just because you tell somebody’s story one way today doesn’t mean it’s going to work tomorrow.”

In its second decade, the firm, which now provides services to clients throughout Georgia, South Carolina and Florida, offers content creation, media relations, crisis management, training and facilitation, video, social media, executive counsel, community relations and philanthropic consulting.

“We have a great team,” Abshire shared. “We’ve really been a mix of creative content and executive strategy since we have had multiple decades working with so many different types of people and companies.”

Abshire is deeply embedded in the local and regional community, serving on the board of the Georgia Chamber of Commerce Board of Governors, the Savannah Community Foundation and Georgia Southern’s Parker College of Business. She is a graduate of Leadership Georgia, Leadership Southeast Georgia and Leadership Savannah.

For her efforts, she has been honored with Georgia Trends’ 40 Under 40 Leadership Award and as Georgia Southern’s College of Liberal Arts (now Arts and Humanities) Alumnus of the Year. Throughout her career, Georgia Southern has provided a solid undercurrent.

“It’s been fascinating how many projects we have been able to be a part of that are connected to Georgia Southern,” said Abshire. “We’ve also had more than 50 interns from Georgia Southern. They’re fantastic. They’re driven and enthusiastic, and are ready to hit the ground running for real life.”

She’s equally as enthusiastic about the area’s regional growth and how Georgia Southern plays into that.

“I’ve lived in Coastal Georgia for more than 30 years, and we are about to see some of the largest growth in our region,” Abshire stated. “We’ve never experienced that level of growth. It’s a landmark opportunity for anybody who wants to make their mark in any type of career. Every aspect of Georgia Southern is going to play a major role in creating tomorrow’s coastal Georgia, which is really exciting.”

With the 25th anniversary of her business in plain view, Abshire is reflective on how she’s come, and with whom. Community for her is more than a host to professional growth; it’s been a source of love and support. In late 2021, Abshire’s husband, John Davis, died unexpectedly. “We’ve also had more than 50 interns from Georgia Southern. They’re fantastic. They’re driven and enthusiastic, and are ready to hit the ground running for real life.”

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In the months following, many community leaders offered multiple levels of support, giving her the space to be still, but then inspiring her to move forward both personally and professionally. But it was her children and her close friends — many she has known since she was 18 as a freshman at Georgia Southern — who really rallied around her.

Abshire offered a wide smile that quickly gave way to a nostalgic pause.

“It’s funny how you gravitate to the ones that you know best and it, you know, the people you meet in college,” she said. “They kind of mold and shape you, and stay with you for the rest of your life.”

— Melanie Simon
Cesar Perez
Overcomes Near Fatal Car Wreck to Illuminate the Silver Screen

Cesar Perez (’18), an immigrant from El Salvador and a first-generation college student, knows what it means to persevere. He was three years old when his family emigrated to the U.S., moving to Arkansas, to Musical Theatre to Richmond Hill, Georgia, where he spent most of his life. He now calls Atlanta home.

“When we first moved to Richmond Hill, there were not many Latinos there,” he said. “But it was interesting because everybody thought I was intriguing because I was from a different place.”

While in high school, Perez said he made the most of his time, both because of his interest and because his parents expected a lot from him and his siblings. By his senior year, he was senior class president, he’d taken years of guitar, bass and trumpet, and learned French and American Sign Language.

Everybody expected really big things from me just because my parents always made sure to instill in us that we were adopted by this country,” he said. “So we had to be outstanding citizens and take advantage of all the opportunities.”

His biggest opportunity came when he applied to Georgia Southern and received the 1906 Scholarship which paid his tuition in full. He attended the University with his two older sisters who were also his roommates, keeping the close-knit family bond that still plays an important part in his life.

While many students might have focused on a single passion, Perez embraced a diverse range of interests. Pursuing his love for the classical bass, Perez first majored in music. In his sophomore year, he kept music as his minor and changed his major to multimedia communications.

“I’ve always considered myself a storyteller, whether it be through graphics, video or audio,” he said. “As a student, I always wanted to bring a story to life, and so that just seemed like the best route for me.”

His love for storytelling and his drive to seize every opportunity led him to become Georgia Southern’s first digital media correspondent for the Sun Belt Conference. He was involved in intramural sports and spent much of his free time at the Recreation Activity Center, lifting weights and keeping in shape.

After graduating, he embarked on a fascinating journey into the world of film and multimedia, eventually landing a job with Morgan River Studios in Savannah. It was an exciting opportunity that allowed him to combine his passion for digital media with the magic of cinema. It was a pivotal moment in his life, setting the stage for a potential career of exciting adventures.

Initially starting in digital design, he quickly transitioned into acting roles in the movies he was helping to create. When the credits rolled, you saw Perez’s name twice — as an actor and the digital artist. His performances led to more opportunities starring opposite major artists and improving his acting skills.

Soon followed a full-time job with Cox Media Group in Atlanta as a video producer and editor for their sports vertical.

Just as Perez’s star began to rise, however, fate brought his plans to a startling halt.

In 2018, Perez was hit head-on by a drunk driver, propelling his car into an 18-wheeler, crushing it beyond recognition. He nearly died several times. Every bone in his face was broken. He also suffered a traumatic brain injury, leaving him with a long and uncertain road to recovery.

“My femur was protruding out of my leg,” he said. “I had a brachial plexus injury to my left shoulder, which left my arm paralyzed for two years. I’m a classical bass player. I play the guitar. I play the piano and everything. All that changed as I still don’t have full mobility.”

“Georgia Southern University holds a very special place in Perez’s heart, not just for the education he received but for the deep connections he made. That profound connection became evident in the wake of his accident. When tragedy struck, the Georgia Southern community rallied behind him in a way that was both awe-inspiring and deeply touching.

As he lay unconscious in the hospital, his family documented the outpouring of love and encouragement through pictures and videos. Perez’s friends conveyed heartfelt messages like, “We wish you the best, dude. You have so much ahead of you. Just fight through this.”

He said the empathy and care demonstrated by his fellow students and the University community kept him going.

Despite the challenges he faced learning to walk and talk again, Perez’s spirit remained unbroken. He viewed the accident as a challenge he was determined to overcome. Determined to share his remarkable journey and inspire others facing adversity, Perez penned a best-selling book titled “Chase The Light.”

“Georgia Southern gave me so many opportunities, they opened so many doors for me and I took advantage of them,” he said. “You have so much ahead of you. Just fight through this.”

“My mom is the one that told me to start writing everything down, to vent all my feelings,” said Perez. “At the end, as my brain injury started healing, I saw that there was a message I wanted to get across to everybody. Like not giving up and at least holding on for one more day. I wanted them to know that they weren’t alone.”

Not content with just a written account of his journey, Perez is now turning “Chase the Light” into a documentary. The film will take audiences through his journey, from the first day in the hospital through the countless surgeries and the arduous rehabilitation process. Thanks to his family’s documentation of what he went through, the project will visually reflect his unyielding spirit.

Today, Perez is still pursuing his dreams, still taking advantage of every opportunity presented to him.

“Georgia Southern gave me so many opportunities, they opened so many doors for me and I took advantage of them,” he said. “You have to see them and leverage them to get where you want to be. I know that if I stick with it, I’ll get there.”

“I’m alive. I’m walking. I’m working. So, I couldn’t ask for anything else.”

— Cesar Perez

Editor: Liz Walker

GEORGIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY
5150 GEORGIA SOUTHERN FALL 2023
GEORGIASOUTHERN.EDU/MAGAZINE
Georgia Southern University’s Alumni Association celebrated the achievements and dedicated service of outstanding alumni at the 2023 Alumni Awards ceremony. Georgia Southern President Kyle Marrero highlighted their remarkable service, business acumen and overall excellence. He also emphasized the growing network of more than 146,000 Georgia Southern and Armstrong alumni, whose success stories enhance the University’s reputation as a center for excellence. During the ceremony at the Statesboro Convention & Visitors Bureau, Director of Alumni Relations Ava Edwards expressed gratitude for the alumni who led with distinction in their respective fields.

The 2023 award winners include:

- **Ronny Just (’84)**
  - MARVIN PITTMAN AWARD
  - Recognizes Georgia Southern alumni/alumni who exemplifies the University’s “core values as expressed through collaboration, academic excellence, discovery and innovation, integrity, openness and inclusion and sustainability.”

- **Georg Lewis, Ed.D. (’07)**
  - TALON AWARD
  - Recognizes excellence in career, alma mater service and community service.

- **Cecilia Arango (’02)**
  - GEORGE & LUCY ARMSTRONG AWARD
  - Recognizes an Armstrong alumni/alumna who exemplifies the University’s “core values as expressed through collaboration, academic excellence, discovery and innovation, integrity, openness and inclusion and sustainability.”

- **Comissioner Russell McMurry (’92) and Michelle McMurry (’91)**
  - THE SWEETHEART AWARD
  - Recognizes a couple who are both alumni and who, together or separately, have supported the University through philanthropy, service or professional work.

- **Matt Wise (’08)**
  - ALUMNI SERVICE AWARD
  - Recognizes the alumni/alumna, who through volunteerism and/or philanthropy, has made the greatest contribution to the advancement of the University.

- **John Havenar (’22)**
  - OUTSTANDING SENIOR AWARD
  - Recognizes the graduating senior who has earned the highest GPA while completing all academic hours at the University.

- **Lisa N. Herring, Ed.D. (’07)**
  - PROFESSIONAL ACHIEVEMENT AWARD
  - Recognizes the alumni/alumna who has made the greatest achievement in his/her career.

- **Georj Lewis, Ed.D. (’07)**
  - TALON AWARD
  - Recognizes excellence in career, alma mater service and community service.

- **Commissioner Russell McMurry (’92) and Michelle McMurry (’91)**
  - THE SWEETHEART AWARD
  - Recognizes a couple who are both alumni and who, together or separately, have supported the University through philanthropy, service or professional work.

- **Retired Maj. Gen. Randall V. Simmons, Jr. (’95)**
  - COMMUNITY HERO AWARD
  - Recognizes Georgia Southern alumni/alumna who exemplifies the University’s “core values as expressed through collaboration, academic excellence, discovery and innovation, integrity, openness and inclusion and sustainability.”

- **Cecilia Arango (’02)**
  - GEORGE & LUCY ARMSTRONG AWARD
  - Recognizes an Armstrong alumni/alumna who exemplifies the University’s “core values as expressed through collaboration, academic excellence, discovery and innovation, integrity, openness and inclusion and sustainability.”

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  - Recognizes an Armstrong alumni/alumna who exemplifies the University’s “core values as expressed through collaboration, academic excellence, discovery and innovation, integrity, openness and inclusion and sustainability.”

Additionally, Alumni-Owned Business Awards were presented to the top alumni-owned businesses:

- **Mary Githens (’08)**
  - Latin Chicks Restaurant and Mint To Be Mojito Bar

- **Paul Newman (’95)**
  - Statesboro Real Estate

- **Mark Clayton, DDS (’17)**
  - Coastal Oral & Maxillofacial
Eagle alumni were “ALL IN” for the Southern Royale alumni event, hosted by Georgia Southern at the historic Fox Theatre in Atlanta on Feb. 4, 2023. This spectacular affair, held in the opulent surroundings of the Egyptian Ballroom, Grand Salon and Terrace, combined the thrill of casino gaming with the warmth of a community reunion. Aptly themed “Go ALL IN,” the event saw alumni and friends dressed in their finest cocktail attire, ready to enjoy a night of entertainment and True Blue pride.

The evening’s highlights included a variety of casino games such as Craps, Black Jack, Roulette and Texas Hold ‘em, where guests used their casino vouchers to engage in friendly competition. The excitement of the games was matched by the opportunity to win an array of prize baskets, adding an element of suspense and delight to the night. Adding to the experience was the culinary excellence of Affairs to Remember, who provided an array of delicious gourmet bites. The Southern Royale was more than just a night of entertainment; it was a celebration of the Georgia Southern community. The presence of University VIPs, including the President, athletics staff and deans, added a layer of prestige and provided a unique opportunity for networking and reconnecting.

For those who missed this unforgettable evening, the good news is that the Southern Royale will be back in 2024. Mark your calendars and prepare to “Go ALL IN” once again for a night of fun, fellowship and celebration. Stay tuned for more details on this must-attend event, and don’t miss the chance to be part of this extraordinary gathering!

Victoria Foster (’97) has been voted president of the Georgia Association for Nursing Education (GANE), the group’s first African American president. She is a faculty member at Clayton State University.

Jaclyn Donovan (’00), a certified athletic trainer with more than 20 years of experience, has been named the Warren Morris Sports Medicine Person of the Year by the Georgia Athletic Trainers’ Association. She is the athletic training services coordinator at the Vereen Center in Moultrie, Georgia, and the head athletic trainer for the Moss Farms Diving Tigers. The award is named after Warren Morris, a longtime athletic trainer at the University of Georgia and a staunch advocate for athletic training in the state.

Victoria R. Nease (’16) has joined the litigation group of HunterMaclean, a business law firm with offices in Savannah and St. Simons Island, Georgia. Her practice focuses on admiralty and maritime law, general litigation, medical malpractice and product liability.

John Shuman (’91) of Shuman Farms in Reidsville, Georgia, has been named one of three regional winners of the 2023 Grower Achievement Award by American Vegetable Grower. The family-owned business is a leading grower and shipper in the Vidalia onion industry.

Lt. Col. William Hitchens (’94) has been appointed commissioner of the Georgia Department of Public Safety and Colonel of the Georgia State Patrol. Before this appointment, he served as the deputy commissioner for the public safety department.

Jenni Sasser McDonough (’91) has joined Alloy as the chief people officer. The Atlanta advertising and public relations veteran has more than 20 years of human resources experience.
GEORGIA SOUTHERN CELEBRATES AMAZING DONORS AT THE 2023 GRATITUDE GALA

Every year, Georgia Southern University hosts a spectacular black-tie event to honor its exceptional donors. The latest Gratitude Gala took place at JW Marriott Plant Riverside in Savannah. The elegant evening of celebration recognized key people who have gone above and beyond in supporting the University’s mission and initiatives.

Trip Addison, vice president for University Advancement, didn’t hold back in acknowledging the incredible folks in the room. “The people in this room represent Georgia Southern’s most loyal alumni, friends, faculty, staff, corporations, and foundations, who’ve each given $25,000 or more to the University, equipping our mission of helping students reach their academic and career goals,” Addison told the crowd. “Because of supporters like you, more than $3 million in scholarships were awarded this year.”

Here’s a look at the stars of the evening:

2023 PRESIDENT’S VISIONARY HONOREE: DON AND CINDY WATERS

This dynamic duo met back in their Armstrong State University days. Don, a 1975 graduate in accounting, attended law school and later became the CEO of Braswell USA. He retired in 2018. Cindy, a 1976 graduate in management and finance, had a career in logistics. In 2013, Georgia Gov. Nathan Deal appointed Don to serve on the Georgia Board of Regents, where he advocated on behalf of Armstrong State and Georgia Southern. The couple’s vision for advancing health education led them to generously fund the University’s Waters College of Health Professions, the largest college at Georgia Southern. Through their naming of the Waters College, endowments were established which allow the institution to create scholarship opportunities for students and professional development opportunities for faculty.

The Waters College of Health Professions allows students to pursue majors in two departments and the School of Nursing. Home to two doctoral programs, one in physical therapy and one in nursing, students hone their skills in state-of-the-art academic settings. Don’s leadership at the state level helped secure the funding for the Health Professions Academic Building on the Armstrong Campus in Savannah. With the joint vision of Don and Cindy, the University is changing the face of health care in the South as the largest provider of health professionals in the state.

For all their unwavering support and transformational giving, it’s no wonder Georgia Southern honored the Waters with the President’s Visionary Award.

2023 PRESIDENT’S INNOVATOR AWARD: DAVID AND FAYEBETH BALL

David, a former restaurateur, and his brothers, Warren and Lamar, saw the visionaries behind the University’s Center for Wildlife Education and Lamar’s Ball, Jr. Raptor Center. It was created in 1997 through their vision and generous gifts. The site is home to Georgia Southern’s feathered friends, including the University’s live bald eagle mascot, Freedom. It’s also a top-notch environmental education facility in Georgia. Since its opening, David and his wife, Fayebeth, have put their money where their heart is, giving significantly to help create funding opportunities for their wide network of friends and acquaintances.

The Balls have further dedicated themselves to projects like Georgia Southern’s new Jack and Ruth Ann Hill Convocation Center. For their dedication to the University, Georgia Southern gave them the President’s Innovator Award for keeping their True Blue spirit.

2023 PRESIDENT’S AMBASSADOR AWARD: JULIAN AND FRANCES DEAL

The Deals are the real deal when it comes to love for the University, its athletes and watching students succeed. They have been loyal supporters and ambassadors of Georgia Southern for 40 years. Julian, a 1970 graduate in business education, and Frances is a 1976 graduate in business. Julian became a member of the Georgia Southern University Foundation in the 1970s and was named chair in 1985.

Over the years, Frances and Julian have generously supported a number of important projects such as the Parker College of Business, School of Accountancy and the Erk Russell Training Facility with a gift of $50,000. Their love for the University is truly commendable and for all their unwavering support and transformational giving, it’s no wonder Georgia Southern honored the Deals with the President’s Ambassador Award.

2023 LEGACY SOCIETY AWARD: BRIAN AND BILLIE SNELL, M.D.

Brian and Billie met at Georgia Southern in the late 1970s. Brian graduated in 1978 with an accounting degree and Billie earned a degree in biology in 1979. They moved to Augusta for Brian’s MBA and Billie’s enrollment at the Medical College of Georgia. Their careers took them to Gadsden, Alabama, where Billie joined the Gadsden Pediatric Clinic and Brian’s career in pharmacists was flourished. Yet, they remained true to Georgia Southern University, supporting many departments on campus.

Recently, they announced a legacy gift of $750,000 to benefit the Department of Biology and its students. Georgia Southern honored the Snells with the 2023 Legacy Award for their years of giving and generosity.

In a nutshell, the 2023 Gratitude Gala was a night to remember. It’s not just an event; it’s a tribute to the incredible community supporting Georgia Southern’s mission and helping students achieve their dreams. Here’s to the donors – the real MVP!
SUPPORT

SOARING FOR STUDENTS

CENTENE, PEACH STATE HEALTH PLAN INVEST $2.2 MILLION IN RURAL HEALTHCARE

With its proud history and strong future, Georgia Southern University continues to build on its success. The University is partnering with Peach State Health Plan (PSHP) to provide education and training for healthcare professionals needed in underserved areas of rural Georgia. PSHP, a subsidiary of Centene Corporation, offers a range of health insurance solutions to Georgians. Centene’s philanthropic arm, Centene Foundation, and PSHP will invest $2.2 million to expand a workforce development program designed to support rural healthcare through enhancement to Georgia Southern’s nursing, physicians’ assistants and addiction recovery specialists programs.

“We have a history of developing public-private partnerships that bridge the gaps in health care access and coverage throughout Georgia,” said Centene’s Chief Growth Officer and Plan President Marty Fallon, vice president, PSHP Office of Rural Health and Strategic Initiatives, and Trip Addison, vice president for University Advancement.

Rural Georgia is facing a significant shortage of nurses, mental health specialists and addiction counselors. To address this critical need, it is imperative that we streamline the educational pathways for students pursuing these fields.

The University’s Waters College of Health Professions will expand enrollment, recruitment, retention and graduation of Bachelor in Science Nursing (BSN) students, with a focus on students in rural Georgia. Funds will be used to develop and implement a Certified Nursing Assistant Program (CNAP) that will serve as an early pipeline for the BSN program. In the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences, funding will be used to expand the addiction recovery program. This expanded program will allow Georgia Southern to provide more staff and supervised post-graduate training opportunities in rural Georgia to increase the overall number of Certified Level II Addiction Counselors in Georgia.

Georgia Southern University President Kyle Marrero stated, “Georgia Southern is delighted to partner with PSHP on a project aimed at enhancing our capacity to bring a greater number of high-quality healthcare professionals to the rural regions of Georgia. Rural Georgia is facing a significant shortage of nurses, mental health specialists and addiction counselors. To address this critical need, it is imperative that we streamline the educational pathways for students pursuing these fields.”

BETTY FOY SANDERS ESTATE GIFTS $1 MILLION TO GEORGIA SOUTHERN

Georgia Southern University has received a $1 million gift from the estate of the late Betty Foy Sanders. It will support student scholarships, student travel, guest lectures and new art acquisitions to grow the Betty Foy Sanders Georgia Artists Collection at the University.

The former first lady of Georgia designated $75,000 to be used for the University’s art acquisition. In 1967, Sanders established the Betty Foy Sanders Georgia Artists Collection, which features the works of various accomplished Georgia artists and is on permanent display at the Center for Art & Theatre on Georgia Southern’s Statesboro Campus.

The balance of the gift bequest will be divided with 54 percent to be used for the Betty Foy Sanders Scholarship Fund. Another 33 percent will support the Betty Foy Sanders Art Student Travel Fund and the other 33 percent will fund the Visiting Artist Endowment named in her honor.

A self-described “homegrown” Statesboro, Georgia, native, Sanders’ paintings are found in museums, corporations and private collections around the South, including the Georgia Governor’s Mansion. Though Sanders is certainly well known for her accomplishments, she is equally recognized for her devotion to the advancement of the arts and set education.

When her husband was in the governor’s office, Sanders dedicated her efforts toward the construction of several fine arts buildings in the University System of Georgia. One of those was the Foy Fine Arts Building on Georgia Southern’s Statesboro Campus, named for her father, J.P. Foy.

G4 CHARITABLE FOUNDATION CREATES 20 FULL-RIDE SCHOLARSHIPS

The G4 Charitable Foundation has pledged support to benefit 20 first-generation students with four-year, full-ride scholarships. G4 Charitable Foundation president Hemant Goel and Vice President Barbara W. Goel created the foundation with a mission to identify and reward first-generation high school seniors with scholarships for tuition, books, and room and board at the University. “Our goal within the foundation is to create a community of individuals who love to learn and mentor others, and who would otherwise not have the means to attend college,” said President Goel.

The gift will establish “G4 Scholars” within the Honor College and provide funding for a minimum of five recipients per class, renewable for four years. In addition to Georgia students, the scholarship will also be available to students in border states — South Carolina, North Carolina, Florida, Tennessee or Alabama.

G4 Scholars will not only meet the academic requirements for the Honor College but also demonstrate leadership abilities in their school or community.

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IN MEMORIAM

Mattie Lanier Bishop (50) of Statesboro died in a car accident Oct. 17, 2023. She taught at Bulloch County High School for 40 years before retiring from Statesboro. She was a teacher in Savannah and later began a marriage and family therapy practice.

Donna Milligan Cline (64) of Columbus, Georgia, died Aug. 20, 2023, from injuries suffered in a car accident on her way home from Columbus. A former Bulloch County resident, she worked for several real estate companies as an administrative assistant.

Larry Jack Sammons (56) of Savannah died Sept. 10, 2023, in a bicycle accident near the Savannah Mall. A native of Georgia, he was known in the community for his local music, regardless of genre or style. He was an active member of The Seeds and Weeds group, a writer, editor and sports editor for the Statesboro Herald and Claxton Enterprise. He retired from the Statesboro Herald in 2009.

Laura Birch (44) of Statesboro, Georgia, died Nov. 1, 2023. She was a retired banker and operated a timber farm in Bulloch County. She served on the Board of Education and was a member of the Seeds and Weeds group. She was active in the community and enjoyed reading, history, genealogy and spending time with her husband and grandchildren.

Er(permission data missing)
A teacher, administrator and coach in Wren public schools.

Dawn Williams Oliver (72) of Statesboro passed away Oct. 9, 2023, two years after undergoing surgery for cancer. She was employed with Georgia Southern University’s 2013-2015 major gift campaign and was a part-time member of the Department of Marketing within the College of Business Administration.

Christina Copeland Steinbichl (90) of Statesboro, Georgia, died on Feb. 3, 2023.

Patricia Bell Baxa Moore Parker (81) passed away Oct. 20, 2023, in her home near Sylvanias, Georgia. She had a long career in health care, serving as an elementary school teacher and then as an assistant principal and principal. She retired most recently as the continuing education director of Statesboro Technical College until her retirement this year.

Melinda Alkina Benton (85) of Statesboro passed away on Oct. 12, 2023, several days after undergoing surgery for appendiceal cancer. She was a gifted seamstress and a special education teacher at Southeast Bulloch High where she was adored by the community, including her students.

Tammy Lane Cunningham (82) of Laurel Hill, North Carolina, passed away at home on Oct. 15, 2023, after a brief illness. She began her career as a medical technologist at St. Joseph’s Hospital in Atlanta and ended her career as a consultant to clinical laboratories.

Eston Eliee Price Jr. (61) of Claxton, Georgia, passed away in a Savannah hospital on Oct. 15, 2023, after a brief illness. He was the interim head of the School of Technology.

Dana Lane Sanders (88) of Decatur, Georgia, passed away at home on Oct. 29, 2023, after a journey with breast cancer. Her interest in public health and nutrition led to a career with the Georgia Department of Human Services as a food disease investigator.

Virginia Cannon Highsmith (94) of Waycross, Georgia, died Aug. 11, 2023, at her home in Statesboro. She had a long career as a nurse before returning to school and entering interior designing business for many years.

Jennifer Davis Watts Patterson (97) of Statesboro, South Carolina, died Aug. 22, 2023. She worked as a training program coordinator with the South Carolina Community College System as superintendent.

Brenda Williams (83) of Statesboro passed away Nov. 11, 2023. The registered nurse worked several years at Bulloch Memorial Hospital and later as director of a nursing home. She faced many health challenges after a tragic accident in 1998.

James “Jim” Miller (99) of Brunswick, Georgia, died June 7, 2023, at a hospice home. He spent several years working in the business of horse racing before returning to education as a teacher and assistant principal.

Wanda Miller Walker (98) of Wilmington, Delaware, passed away Jan. 18, 2023, following an extended cancer battle. Her husband, Bob, was a lifelong educator.

Gil Basilio (74) of Statesboro, Georgia, died Jan. 21, 2023, after experiencing apparent cardiac arrest.

Lisa Mosley Browning (72) of Valdosta, Georgia, died May 20, 2023, at home in Statesboro. She was a former instructor at Georgia Southern.

Jerry McGuire (94) of Sylvanias, Georgia, passed away Oct. 5, 2023, at a hospital in Atlanta after an extended illness. The U.S. Army Vietnam War veteran spent many years as a paramedic in the Augusta area. He spent peacefully Sept. 22, 2023. She devoted many years to teaching and loved her work alongside her husband at various United Methodist churches.

Teresa Joyce Hurtman (92) of Ringgold, Georgia, passed away at home May 20, 2023. She was a librarian and teacher before starting her own interior decorating business for many years.

Janice Smith Guyton (77) of Glennville, Georgia, passed away Jan. 2, 2023. She was a pilot and worked many years at Winny Arnett Hospital and 14 years at Liberty Memorial.

Paul Bradley Jr. (71) of Statesboro died as a result of an auto accident in Statesboro in 2023. He left behind a legacy of more than 10 years of service to higher education. Bradley was the assistant director of student activities at Georgia Southern University - Armstrong Campus at the time of his death.

Mark Wulff (79) of Fort Mill, South Carolina, died Sept. 12, 2023, after being diagnosed with brain cancer. He had a long career in the hardscape industry with customized projects throughout the United States.

James “Jim” Druy (99) of Brunswick, Georgia, died July 22, 2023, at a hospice facility surrounded by family and friends. He had been a member of the Statesboro High School Class of 1961.

Noel Wheeler (72) of Statesboro passed away Sept. 18, 2023. The native of Trinad worked in purchasing at Georgia Southern and later for the City of Statesboro. He was passionate about saving the environment and operated the Caribbean Fasit Restaurant in Florida, where he and his family enjoyed many meals.

Robert Balhart Hagan (103) of Warner Robins, Georgia, passed away peacefully Sept. 22, 2023. He served many years as a minister and parson along various United Methodist churches.

Company and Smith Supply Company and a founder and supporter of Statesboro’s Circle of Hope until she was diagnosed with oligodendroglioma brain cancer in 2017. She began her career as a staff nurse but in 1979, she began working in the Ware County School System. She faced many health challenges and eventually faced right after her retirement.

The history professor was a Georgia Southern faculty member for some years before retiring as he was, and she continued to love music, particularly the American frontier and the music of the Georgia frontier.

Christina Copeland passed away at home in Savannah, Georgia, on Feb. 1, 2023. In early 2023, she was a music educator but after earning several degrees in education, she joined the Georgia Southern University College of Education to teach and supervise special education student teachers.

Professor Emerita Martha Ardina Coleman (81) of Statesboro died March 1, 2023. She had been a professor at Armstrong in 1979 and was instrumental in establishing the RN-BSN program. She was a part-time instructor and member of the nursing faculty at Armstrong College of Health Sciences in Statesboro.

After moving to Savannah in 2006, she embraced a new career as an administrative assistant to a lecture of finance at Georgia Southern. She was a member of the university’s Department of Construction and was the director of the Savannah Foundation, the Southern University and Woodrow Wilson College of Law. She was also a member of the University of Georgia College of Law, the American Bar Association, and the Southern Bar Association. She received many honors and awards during her lifetime including the Distinguished Alumni Award from Georgia Southern University.

Kelly Berr, a lifelong member of Statesboro, died Jan. 30, 2023. She was a musician and a special administrator, and was the director of the arts at Georgia Southern. She was an animal lover, and was a musical and civil war enthusiast. She was the president of the past two years. She was a music teacher for many years at Armstrong High School.

Professor Emerita Nancy James Larter (67) of Statesboro died March 9, 2023. She was a music educator and became a special administrator, and was the director of the arts at Georgia Southern. She was an animal lover, and was a musical and civil war enthusiast. She was a music teacher for many years at Armstrong High School.

Professor Emerita V. Adams, Ph.D., of Savannah died June 13, 2023. She was a psychology professor and was instrumental in the founding of the Savannah psychology department in 2023. He served as a special administrator, and was the director of the arts at Georgia Southern. She was an animal lover, and was a musical and civil war enthusiast. She was a music teacher for many years at Armstrong High School.

Edward Sibbald (78) of Statesboro died May 13, 2023. He had a long and distinguished career in the banking industry. After moving to Armstrong in 2006, he embraced a new career as an administrative assistant to a lecture of finance at Georgia Southern. He was a member of the university’s Department of Construction and was the director of the Savannah Foundation, the Southern University and Woodrow Wilson College of Law. She was also a member of the University of Georgia College of Law, the American Bar Association, and the Southern Bar Association. She received many honors and awards during her lifetime including the Distinguished Alumni Award from Georgia Southern University.

Professor Emeritus Todd Hinix, Ph.D., of Savannah died at home on Oct. 8, 2023, after a brief illness. He was a chemistry professor and was instrumental in the foundation of Armstrong College of Science in 1986. He served as a special administrator, and was the director of the arts at Georgia Southern. He was an animal lover, and was a musical and civil war enthusiast. He was a music teacher for many years at Armstrong High School.

Professor Emerita Natalia de Rora of Statesburg died Aug. 10, 2023. She was a professor of Spanish and was a renowned musicologist. She was a leading shapewear technical designer for intimate apparel. She passed away July 8, 2023. She is survived by her second husband, Joseph Donaldson, and three children, Sarah, Tim, and Erica Buskey. Her husband, Todd, said of his wife, “To my family, there is no one like her. She was the love of my life.”

George Shriver Jr., of Savannah passed away in hospice care Oct. 10, 2023. He was the interim head of the Department of Business Administration at Georgia Southern University until his death. He was an educator and became the director of a Savannah firm.

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TWO DECADES OF EAGLE SPIRIT: GEORGIA SOUTHERN MASCOT FREEDOM TURNS 20

This month, Georgia Southern University is proudly celebrating the 20th birthday of Freedom, our esteemed bald eagle mascot. Found injured and unable to survive in the wild, Freedom was rescued and brought to our university in 2004 and is now an irreplaceable member of Eagle Nation, inspiring Georgia Southern fans from around the world.

In December, as part of the birthday celebration, the University raised thousands of dollars in gifts for the Center for Wildlife Education in his honor. While final amounts weren’t available at press time, an anonymous donor matched gifts up to $20,000, making a significant investment in Freedom and the other eagles, raptors, reptiles and waterfowl that live at the Center. In addition, Georgia Southern created a line of special Freedom merchandise featuring limited, unique designs, the sales of which will benefit Freedom and the Center for Wildlife Education.

As he continues to majestically take flight before each home football game, creating what many still consider the “most exciting 30 seconds in college football,” be sure to say Happy Birthday to Freedom. His presence at Georgia Southern athletic events, community gatherings and educational programs underscores the University’s commitment to wildlife conservation and education and continues to inspire us all.

Photos by AJ Henderson and Jonathan Chick

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CLASS CHRONICLES and alumni updates may be sent to Office of Alumni Relations P.O. Box 8055 Statesboro, GA 30460-8055 magazine@georgiasouthern.edu

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