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Georgia Southern students change the world through volunteering

NOVEMBER 12, 2018

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Tajae Francis, Nipuna Ambanpola and Tyler D'Alto are connecting people to volunteer opportunities around the world through their nonprofit organization IVolunteer International Inc.

Three Georgia Southern University students with a passion to serve others are connecting people to volunteer opportunities around the world through their nonprofit organization IVolunteer International Inc.

“Our vision is creating a volunteer inside every human being,” said Nipuna Ambanpola, co-founder and executive director. “It’s in everybody, but we need to bring it out in them.”

Ambanpola is joined on the board of directors by Tajae Francis and Tyler D’Alto. Together, they have taken on strategic roles to further the vision and have now connected more than 2,000 people to volunteer projects around the world.

Ambanpola’s vision is based in his Sri Lankan roots. In his culture, volunteering is a way of life, so he developed a passion for helping others early on.

However, he noted, around the world, most volunteer opportunities require a paid membership to an organization, which isn’t always feasible for those who wish to volunteer.

“I thought, ‘What if there’s a way that volunteering could be free, accessible to everybody and people can volunteer for causes they’re most passionate about,’” said Ambanpola. “I think it will unite the world and connect communities.”

Ambanpola understands the importance of connecting. In 2015, he eagerly began at Armstrong State University on a Georgia Rotary Student Scholarship but found himself feeling out of place because he struggled to connect with students on campus. Consequently, he was struck with the idea of a free volunteerism service and pitched it to several people who had strengths he knew would help the organization succeed.

Francis, a native of Kingston, Jamaica, already had a passion for helping others and saw IVolunteer International as a way to expand his volunteerism.

"I was happy that I found an organization that essentially does the same thing when I was the (former) president of my Rotaract Club," noted Francis, who served in the Savannah area Rotaract Club as president. Rotaract Clubs bring together people ages 18-30 in communities worldwide to develop leadership and professional skills and have fun through service.

In his role with IVolunteer International, Francis serves as the U.S. representative and is responsible for the group's outreach and communications, speaking frequently to different organizations to rally support.

D'Alto, from Richmond Hill, Georgia, joined the team as the chief financial officer. He is responsible for finances, budgets and other transactions including investments and commitments to fundraising.

"I got involved because I wanted to empower people and help them build networks," he said.

To date, one of the organization's favorite efforts has been Project *Senehasa*, in which they collected and delivered clothing and stationary to a primary school in the rural Uva province of Sri Lanka.

Other important projects have included organizing a hair-donation campaign in Sri Lanka, volunteering at the National Youth Model United Nations, collecting rations for 2017 flood victims in Sri Lanka and partnering with Without Borders to connect volunteer teachers.

Another vital global initiative is Birthday Deed, which encourages individuals to give back on their birthdays by doing something good in the world.

In 2019, IVolunteer International will launch a mobile app that will geotag the user's location and show volunteer opportunities nearby. The app will provide the location, date, time and information about the host organization. It will also allow volunteers to sign up and see who else has volunteered for the project. Users will be able to track volunteer hours and share projects with their friends.

"My hope is volunteers around the world will make great impacts in their communities," said Nipuna. "In years to come, I'll be able to look back and know that our mobile app played a role in connecting them to volunteer projects that changed lives. That's the legacy I look forward to leaving behind. The legacy that we built an app that helped make the world a better place."

For more information on IVolunteer International, to post a project, volunteer for a project or to donate to this organization please visit <https://www.ivint.org/2018-campaign/>.

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Department of Biology researchers use DNA to monitor endangered species

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Roberts and Cox researching imperiled freshwater mussels

GeorgiaSouthern University researchers in the Department of Biology are using cutting-edge genetic technology to help better monitor endangered species.

Biology professors Jamie Roberts, Ph.D. and Christian Cox, Ph.D., were awarded three years of funding by the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission. The funding will be used to develop the techniques necessary for a comprehensive genetic monitoring program for eight imperiled freshwater mussel species in that state.

The highest diversity of freshwater mussels in the world can be found in the rivers of the southeastern United States. These mussels are ecologically important because they help maintain water quality by filtering vast amounts of water as they feed.

However, their numbers have declined dramatically due to dams, pollution and other forms of habitat degradation. As a result, mussel species tend to occur in small populations that are geographically isolated from other populations. Small, isolated populations tend to lose genetic diversity and their ability to adapt to changing conditions, putting these populations at high risk of extinction.

The first step in preventing these extinctions is to quantify genetic relationships among mussel populations and to identify possible "hotspots" of genetic diversity. Roberts and Cox are leading the research to help the state of North Carolina take this first step.

"Equipped with this information, state biologists can direct their resources toward actions with the greatest potential for successful species recovery," said Roberts.

Roberts and Cox will use genetic sequencing to scan the DNA code of hundreds of mussels, representing each of the imperiled species collected from dozens of different rivers. These DNA sequences will then be examined to find single-nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs), or points in the DNA code where genetic differences can be found among individuals or populations. SNPs serve as "genetic markers" to identify rivers with genetically distinct populations or populations with low-genetic variation that may be at high risk of extinction.

"Traditionally, developing genetic markers was an expensive, time-consuming process performed on a species-by-species basis," says Cox. "By applying the technology of high-throughput genomics, however, we can simultaneously develop hundreds or thousands of SNPs for multiple species at a time."

The research by Roberts and Cox will ultimately provide the basis for a cost-effective genetic monitoring program that will ensure that conservation funds are spent effectively.

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Georgia Southern ranked in most affordable online master's in national elementary education list

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Georgia Southern University was recently named to the list of 25 most affordable online options for a master's in elementary education by SR Education Group. Ranked No. 19, the College of Education's M.Ed. in Elementary Education is the only higher education institution in the state of Georgia to be included in the top 25 ranking.

"We are extremely proud of our program," said Katie Brkich, Ph.D., M.Ed. Elementary Education program director. "We get amazing teachers from all over the state who want to take their teaching to the next level or become teacher leaders in their schools, and we are proud to support them through their growth."

The M.Ed. in Elementary Education is a fully online program for current teachers or educational professionals looking to advance their career. The 36-credit hour program offers coursework in instructional technology, advanced content methods, teaching diverse student populations and electives that can be used to complete endorsement programs in English as a Second Language, Online Teaching and Learning, Reading, Special Education Transition Specialist or Teacher Leadership. The curriculum is approved by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission and meets their standards for a teaching certificate upgrade.

The methodology for the ranking provided by SR Education employs median mid-career salary data, as well as manually researched tuition rates. Since salaries differ by degree level and program, SR Education Group utilizes bachelor's, master's and program-specific salary data for the rankings. Manually collected tuition rates are also specific to degree level and program. The Best Online Colleges rankings include 100 program pages and 41 by-state rankings.

For more information about the M.Ed. in Elementary Education, visit <https://coe.georgiasouthern.edu/eed/med/>.

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Georgia Southern school psychology students sweep awards at state conference

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Georgia Southern school of psychology graduate students Shanice Murphy, Courtney Smith and Jessica Martin (l-r) swept the awards at the 48th annual Georgia Association of School Psychologists fall conference, held on Jekyll Island in October.

Three psychology graduate students in Georgia Southern University's College of Education (COE) claimed all student awards during the 48th annual Georgia Association of School Psychologists (GASP) fall conference, held on Jekyll Island in October.

Ed.S. School Psychology program candidates Jessica Martin, Shanice Murphy and Courtney Smith received recognition for their strong academic performances as well as dedicated service in GASP or the school psychology field.

In addition, Martin and Murphy both received the GASP's Christine Daley School Psychologist Student Scholarship. Given to students majoring in school psychology in a Georgia program, the \$1,000 scholarship is awarded to two graduate students annually. Recipients of the award were selected based on academic success in their graduate program, leadership experience, strong recommendations from professors and a desire to contribute to the school psychology field in the state of Georgia.

Martin, who earned a bachelor's in psychology from Georgia Southern, is a member of GASP as well as the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). She is in her first semester of internship at Bulloch County Schools and is expected to graduate in May 2019.

"I was so honored to receive this scholarship and be recognized for my achievements," Martin said. "These funds will make it possible to continue the pursuit of my educational and professional goals. I am looking forward to using the knowledge and skills I have gained in the program to serve students."

Murphy earned a bachelor's in psychology from Columbus State University prior to coming to Georgia Southern to pursue a specialist's degree in school psychology. In January, Murphy will begin her service as the University's student representative for GASP, helping to bridge the gap between students and the professional field.

"For me, winning this award means that my hard work has not been overlooked and has provided me the opportunity to continue pursuing my education without any additional stress," said Murphy. "As a recipient of this scholarship, I will be able to work in Georgia where there has been a state shortage of school psychologists and continue to serve on the board at the state and national levels."

Smith was named GASP's School Psychology Student of the Year. In her last semester of the program, Smith is expected to graduate in December after completing an internship with Bulloch County Schools.

"Winning the School Psychology Student of the Year award was a tremendous honor," Smith said. "Knowing that those in my field at the University, in our community and at the state level felt my efforts over the last three years were outstanding was truly humbling."

Prior to beginning the school psychology program, Smith earned a bachelor's in early childhood education from Georgia Southern and taught kindergarten in the Savannah-Chatham County Public School System. During graduate school, she has served as a graduate assistant for the former Office of Career Services and the school psychology program. She is an active member of NASP

and GASP, where she served as Georgia Southern's Student Representative on the organization's executive board. Smith also previously won scholarships at the state and national level.

"I hope that my receipt of the award inspired students to continue to strive for excellence, and believe in themselves as they balance many roles and tasks in their pursuit of becoming a school psychologist," Smith added.

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Georgia Southern team awarded more than \$750,000 for teacher development grant

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A team of Georgia Southern University professors led by College of Education's (COE) Lacey Huffling, Ph.D., has been awarded a \$763,897 grant from the Gulf Research Program (GRP) of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (under award number 2000009821).

The grant will fund the first two years of Okefenokee — Understanding Real-world Relevance through Suwannee Watershed Assessment and Monitoring Project (OUR2 SWAMP). Created by Huffling and her colleagues, the project will offer a summer on-site learning experience at the Okefenokee Swamp in Georgia as well as continued professional development for both in-service and pre-service teachers.

The project aims to increase Georgia middle and high school students' understanding of the impact their local watersheds have on larger bodies of water. The project will focus on the causal relationships between the Okefenokee Swamp and the Gulf of Mexico, allowing teachers to integrate what they learn into their classrooms and promote community awareness of local waterways.

"The Okefenokee is a very unique ecosystem," said middle grades and secondary education science faculty Heather Scott, Ed.D. "It is a great place to talk about freshwater quality and how that impacts not just all the creatures and organisms that are present in the swamp, but as it drains from there the impact it has as well."

Other Georgia Southern grant team members include Checo Colon-Gaud, Ph.D., biology faculty; Shainaz Landge, Ph.D., chemistry faculty; and the Institute of Interdisciplinary STEM Education Coordinator Kania Greer, Ed.D., who serves as the grant evaluator.

In summer 2019, up to 20 teachers and 10 current Georgia Southern education majors will have the opportunity to visit and study the Okefenokee Swamp. The following summer, up to 30 teachers and 10 students will partake, including some participants from year one to help serve as facilitators and guides for the new participants.

"Our goal for the summer development is for the teachers to determine what they would like to study in their own schoolyards, something in their local ecosystem that they want to focus on," Huffling said. "If they are not near a stream, they may look at birds, pollinators, plants or insects. There are so many different citizen science projects they can do, and we want the teachers to help us design and develop what the week will look like. We want it to be something they need and can envision using in their classrooms."

After completing a week of hands-on activities and developing curriculum in the summer, Huffling and Scott will continue to support the educators by conducting site visits at their schools, hosting web conferencing and encouraging collaborative engagement on a blog-style website for the next year.

"A key component to this project is the follow-up," Huffling said. "It is hard to develop a project like this if they do not have some form of support. The team plans to be that support throughout the year, but the teachers will network and support each other as well."

The idea for OUR2 SWAMP grew out of a previous Teacher Quality Grant program that Scott and Missy Bennett, Ed.D., emeritus professor of science education, coordinated for several years. The project began in the Okefenokee Swamp but moved to the

coast after the swamp burned in 2011. Scott and Bennett, who will serve as a consultant on the grant, saw a positive impact on teachers over several successful years of studying the swamp and coastal ecology.

"I had one teacher who told me that the experience she had that summer saved her teaching career," Scott said. "She was considering leaving. This project is a neat way to build connections with other teachers and professionals and continue to grow and rejuvenate yourself in your teaching career."

Participating teachers will receive a stipend and classroom supplies, and students will attend the weeklong development at no charge. Both the North Georgia and Okefenokee Regional Educational Service Agencies wrote letters of support for the grant and will be loaning classroom supply kits for teachers as well.

"I love that the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine are honoring the fact that teachers deserve compensation for getting more professional development and the classroom supplies to implement it," Huffling said. "If we are going to grow teachers and advance, we need to realize that teachers are professionals and they should be compensated, and that was one of the vital components in writing this grant."

Huffling says work on the project has already begun, and they are already speaking to teachers and recruiting participants for next summer.

"We dreamed big," she said. "We have a big vision, but we have a good team to do it, and we are excited to partner with teachers to help that vision come true."

This content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the Gulf Research Program or the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine.

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