ABAC Faculty Member Speaks at Wal-Mart Headquarters on Rural America

TIFTON – New and different are often words that provide the key to success for corporate America. That’s why one of the best known companies in the world reached out to Dr. James Galt-Brown, Associate Professor of History at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College, to speak on Rural America from his expertise as a lecturer in the one-of-a-kind Rural Studies bachelor’s degree at ABAC.

Galt-Brown spoke to employees of Wal-Mart during the corporation’s recent Rural Customer Immersion Symposium at the Wal-Mart headquarters in Bentonville, Ark. He used
background material from one of his classes in the ABAC Rural Studies program, the only degree of its kind in the country.

Wal-Mart Project Manager Shannon Dilday put the entire symposium together. She found Galt-Brown from the ABAC Rural Studies program webpage and selected him because he “looked fun in the classroom.”

“At first, I thought ‘who would be playing this kind of a practical joke,’ but they were serious,” Galt-Brown said.

So serious, in fact, that he was the only speaker from the academic world invited to address the symposium audience.

“What I find most pleasing, gratifying and flattering about this opportunity is that when a Fortune 10 company needed accurate, up-to-date information on Rural America they came to ABAC,” Galt-Brown said. “That says a lot for our Rural Studies program and how relevant rural studies are to the American marketplace.”

Wal-Mart does 75 billion dollars in gross sales annually in Rural America. The corporation wanted to know the reality of rural customers, the challenges they face, the rural population’s concerns, and if the stereotypes of that segment of the population were accurate.

“The company wants to expand markets in rural areas in the United States, and they wanted an academic perspective,” Galt-Brown said. “I did some research and used some materials from my History of Rural America class to put together a presentation.”

The final result of his work, “Understanding Rural Customers – Rural America 101,” was not only seen by the 400 Wal-Mart employees at the corporate office but by many others when it was transmitted to other locations in North America and parts of South America and Europe as well.
“One of Wal-Mart’s executives was traveling during the symposium and requested that it be telecommunicated,” Galt-Brown said.

When the ABAC faculty member arrived at the corporate office, he was impressed with how every employee, whether they had been working for Wal-Mart for a month or 30 years, had a welcome attitude to every outsider and no one seemed to have a bad day.

“I noticed that Wal-Mart had printed out posters promoting the event so the first chance I had I asked if I could have one,” Galt-Brown said. “That was a big deal for me.”

Galt-Brown admitted he was a bit concerned about his speaking engagement because it was his first time doing a presentation in the corporate world.

“The turnout was bigger than I expected but smaller than what it could have been,” Galt-Brown said. “Within the headquarters there were about 400 employees at the symposium, and the venue held around 500.”

Galt-Brown spoke for 40 minutes during the two and a one-half hour symposium. He spent the reminder of his time answering questions long after the event had ended.

“No question surprised me because what I found in doing research for this presentation was that the academic perspective meshed seamlessly with what Wal-Mart’s researchers had concluded,” Galt-Brown said.

But he is still floored that the biggest retail chain in the world contacted him to talk about rural customers as they pertain to the American marketplace.

“It just goes to show that rural environments play a pivotal role not just on a community or local level, but as part of our world view,” Galt-Brown said. “The fact that Wal-Mart recognized that ABAC and its Rural Studies program is trying to broaden that world view is humbling.”
Galt-Brown received his B.A. in History from the University of South Carolina; his M.A. in History from Murray State University; and his Ph.D. in Modern European History from Mississippi State University. He has been a faculty member in the ABAC School of Liberal Arts since 2003.

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