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DECEMBER 11, 2014

Two Students Win Top Awards at ABAC Commencement

TIFTON – For the first time in the history of Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College, two academic awards were presented to the most outstanding graduates during Thursday’s fall commencement ceremony.

Retha Martin, a business major from Moultrie, received the George P. Donaldson award for associate degree graduates, and Andrea Smith, a biology major from Fitzgerald, was named the recipient of the first ever ABAC Alumni Association Award for bachelor’s degree graduates.

Each recipient was selected through an application and interview process conducted by the ABAC Alumni Association. Both recipients received a plaque and a check for $500 from the ABAC Alumni Association.

ABAC Alumni Director Lynda Fisher said the Donaldson Award has been a part of the commencement ceremony for many years, and the Alumni Association decided to add the additional award for bachelor’s degree graduates since over 1,100 students now major in bachelor’s degree programs at the institution.

Jim Hall, Chief of Law Enforcement with the National Wildlife System through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, was the featured speaker at the ceremony. A 1983 ABAC graduate,
Hall told the graduates that “the world will continue to change in years to come, and you will be a part of that change. Always seek improvement in yourself.

“I challenge you to find that special niche. Find your vocation in life that is more than just a job.”

Martin began her ABAC career by taking classes at ABAC on the Square in Moultrie. ABAC faculty members had high words of praise for her in their recommendation letters.

“Two words that best describe Ms. Martin are conscientious and tenacious,” Kathy Moreno, who teaches in the Stafford School of Business, said.

A self-described multi-tasker, Martin worked at a full-time job in Moultrie while taking time to complete her classes at the Tifton campus of ABAC. She was one of the founding members of Enactus, a business organization that was formed this fall. Between her work, commuting to class each day, and her academic course load, she maintained a grade point average of 3.47 on a 4.0 scale.

The daughter of Teretha Bailey and Trevino Martin, Martin was also active in her community by volunteering with the American Heart Association, Culbertson Head Start program, Special Olympics and various food and blood drives. She also participated in the Veteran’s Unmet Needs program and served as a helper at the Moultrie Chamber of Commerce.

“I have always enjoyed lending service and meeting new people,” Martin said. “I also enjoy seeing and being a part of opportunities for other people so that they can have a better life and resources at their side to get to their goals.”

Martin plans to continue her ABAC education by studying for her bachelor’s degree in business and economic development. She says her ideal career will be with the Chamber of Commerce or the marketing department at Colquitt Regional Medical Center.
Smith started taking ABAC classes when she was a senior at Fitzgerald High School through the ACCEL program which allows high school students to enroll in selected college classes. Her goal was to attain her bachelor’s degree in biology. That goal was accomplished Thursday morning when she walked across the stage at Gressette Gymnasium.

“The time I have spent here has shaped me and made me a better person, all while getting a top-notch education to help fulfill my dream of becoming a dentist,” Smith, daughter of Andy and Dell Smith, said.

Smith has worked as a dental assistant with Colony Dental Care in Fitzgerald since 2010. Between her studies and her job she also found time to be an assistant coach for the Fitzgerald Fins Swim Team for one season and spent two summers as a life guard at the ABAC swimming pool.

A Distinguished Honor Student at ABAC with a grade point average of 3.78, Smith received numerous scholarships and has been a member of the Phi Theta Kappa honor society where she served as vice president for community service. For her exemplary on-campus service, Smith received a Pacesetter Award from ABAC’s student newspaper.

Dr. Johnny Evans, Dean of the School of Science and Mathematics at ABAC, said, “Andrea paid her own way through school. Yes, she had scholarships but she was responsible for her own bills and expenses beyond her scholarships. There are few students who can carry such responsibility, pay for school and expenses without their grades suffering or without taking out many loans. Andrea has done this successfully. It speaks volumes to her work ethic.”

At ABAC, Smith took the opportunity to be involved in many different activities including playing intramural soccer, serving as vice-president of the STEM Affiliates Club, traveling to Belize on an international studies program, and serving as a team captain with
Stafford Hall. She also tutored in science and math through the Academic Achievement Center, was a chemistry teaching assistant, and served as a regional science fair judge.

“When I decided to make ABAC my home for the duration of my bachelor’s degree, I aspired to be fully dedicated to my program and my college,” Smith said. “ABAC gave me the opportunity to pursue my dreams through scholarships. I was determined to make my college proud and prove I was worth the investment.”

A total of 211 graduates participated in the ceremony. ABAC will close for the holidays on Dec. 23 and reopen on Jan. 5, 2015. Classes begin for the spring semester on Jan. 8, 2015.

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