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Georgia Education Advancement Council Awards Committee Chair Jeff Boggan (l) and ABAC President David Bridges (r) presented the GEAC Lifetime Achievement Award to Melvin Merrill on Nov. 17, 2011. Merrill will retire from ABAC on April 1. A reception in his honor will be held on March 30 from 3:30-5 p.m. in the Tift Hall first floor lobby at ABAC.

Merrill to Retire from ABAC on April 1

TIFTON—Picking green beans out in the field was Melvin Merrill’s first job when he was a freshman at Berry College in 1960. In a 37-year career in the fundraising field at Abraham
Baldwin Agricultural College, he hasn’t picked any beans but he has helped ABAC harvest a lot of green.

Merrill will retire from ABAC on April 1. His work at the college as Director of Development, Chief Development Officer, President of the ABAC Foundation, and Director of Capital Planning will serve generations of ABAC students in the future. A reception in his honor is open to the public on March 30 from 3:30-5 p.m. on the first floor of Tift Hall at ABAC.

“I have always liked what I was doing,” Merrill said. “It wasn’t necessarily like a job. I enjoyed doing it.”

Honored in 2011 by the Georgia Education Advancement Council with its Lifetime Achievement Award, Merrill was recognized at that time for over 8,600 ABAC constituents contributing in excess of $23,540,000 in support of ABAC programs. He began his ABAC career as Director of Development on July 1, 1978 and later became the Chief Development Officer. During that time, he served as president of the ABAC Foundation for 30 years.

In 2011, ABAC President David Bridges pointed Merrill in another direction as Director of Capital Planning. He flourished in the position, leading the charge on capital projects valued at almost $80,000,000. Those projects included the Historic Front Campus Renovation which changed the entire look of the “front door” of the campus when it was completed on March 1, 2013.

“We had lost all our curb appeal,” Merrill said. “Lewis Hall and Herring Hall had not been used since 1985. It was originally scheduled to be one project for $15.5 million but it wound up taking five years and five bond issues because of the ‘Great Recession’ of 2008.”
The project revitalized the original three buildings on campus, Tift Hall, Lewis Hall, and Herring Hall. The mammoth undertaking also involved a re-design of the front lawn and the area directly behind the three buildings.

“It has been great,” Merrill said. “It has done so much for ABAC.”

Merrill has been a key player in all the ABAC building projects in recent history but two of them completely changed the western skyline of the college. ABAC Place opened in 2004, and ABAC Lakeside opened in 2007. Both projects were initiated by the ABAC Foundation, and the college now accommodates over 1,300 students in modern housing facilities as a result.

“Mike Vollmer was president of the college at the time,” Merrill said. “He and I worked with Dale Pflug, Pait Willis, Butch Davis and several others. There were a lot of studies and a lot of planning, and the Foundation decided to take on the responsibility for campus housing.

“Our first bond issue of $31.5 million was funded in 2003. We filled up ABAC Place immediately so we knew we needed more housing. The bond funding for Lakeside was issued in 2006 for $17.5 million.”

For many ABAC alumni and supporters, Merrill cemented his reputation with ABAC with his coordination of the immensely popular Dollars for Scholars Benefit Banquet and Show. The event actually began in 1972 when Anita Bryant performed on the campus. Merrill picked up the reins in 1979 when Barbara Mandrell came to town.

Dollars for Scholars attracted big name stars to Tifton in the spring time of each year in an effort to raise scholarship funds for ABAC students. Merrill said that due to a nine-to-one
federal matching program, the onetime “social event of the year in Tifton” generated in excess of $100 million.

“Dollars for Scholars took a long time to put together and put a lot of demands on a very small staff,” Merrill said. “It was challenging and interesting at the same time.”

Debbie Reynolds. Roy Clark. Marie Osmond. Ray Stevens. Helen Reddy. Merrill remembers them all. His favorite performer at Dollars for Scholars was pianist Roger Williams.

“He was one of the few performers that we brought back for a second year,” Merrill said. “He was easy to work with, and he spent a lot of time with our students. One year he arrived several days early and asked me to bring my boys to dinner. He spent the entire meal talking to them.”

Those two sons, Chris and Mark, are now all grown up with families of their own including five grandchildren for Merrill and his wife, Anita. Married for 48 years, they met at Berry College. She was born in Cairo, and he was raised in the Transylvania County hills of North Carolina.

After high school, Merrill had originally intended to go to Berea College in Kentucky but the financial aid office there said his dad made too much money. What the Berea officials failed to take note of was that Merrill had four younger brothers.

So he went to Rome to attend Berry College and picked green beans.

“Everybody had to work at Berry,” Merrill said. “That’s how you paid your tuition. I also worked on the grounds crew and for the beef cattle department. You went to class four days, worked two days and went to church on Sunday.”
When he graduated from Berry in 1964, he wanted to be a county extension agent back home in North Carolina. The United States Army had other plans. Merrill served six months of active duty and then committed to the Army Reserve program for 29 years until his retirement.

When his active duty at Fort Jackson, S.C., ended, he returned to Berry to work in the development office for 14 years, winding up as Assistant Director of Development. In the meantime, he had completed his MBA degree at Berry.

“I was looking around,” Merrill said of the 1978 job offer as Director of Development at ABAC. “The money was better. I came here for the interview and met everybody from the bank presidents to the ministers at First Methodist and First Baptist. It was a community thing. They grilled me for two days.”

Merrill accepted what was then a brand new position from ABAC President Stanley Anderson and began an association with ABAC that he will never forget.

“I have had tremendous people to work with,” Merrill said. “They are the ones who made it possible for ABAC to move forward. My real mentors were Bob Reinhardt and Ray Jensen. Both had integrity, talent, and experience. Anytime I had an issue, they were available. That happened from day one until the time they passed away. Both of them were real movers and shakers for ABAC.

“There were many others like Lamar Branch and Bill Bowen. Both of them were excellent ABAC Foundation Board members and really cared about ABAC.”

When Merrill arrived at ABAC in 1978, he said the ABAC Foundation’s value was about $12,000. In 2014, Merrill said the Foundation’s value was $73 million. That’s quite a change.
Merrill knows all about being flexible and adapting to change. After all, he has worked for five different ABAC presidents. He really likes the direction ABAC is heading in right now.

“The biggest changes have occurred in David Bridges’ presidency,” Merrill said. “We were building up for change before he came when Tom Call was interim president. There has been a lot of strategic planning in the last ten years. The plan has been supported and implemented, and that has moved ABAC to next level. We’re not a junior college anymore.

“President Bridges has increased the academic level at the institution, and we expect more from our students. We’re putting these students out there in intern programs that are really paying off. They work for some large and very recognizable corporations around the country.”

Merrill’s first visit to ABAC occurred in 1964 when he was president of the college chorus at Berry. The group made one stop in Tifton on its spring tour.

“We stood on the front steps of Tift Hall and sang two numbers for President Clyde Driggers,” Merrill said. “I never had another thought about ABAC until I returned for the interview in 1978.”

And that’s when Merrill began to carve his name in the ABAC history book.

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