An Evening for ABAC Continues Dollars for Scholars Tradition

Melvin Merrill looked at the proposed contract and couldn’t believe his eyes.

The manager for Engelbert Humperdinck wanted Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College to provide security for the English pop singer so that women in the front row wouldn’t throw their undergarments on the stage during the annual Dollars for Scholars fundraising event.

“Needless to say, we decided not to employ Mr. Humperdinck so we didn’t have to hire extra security,” Merrill said with a chuckle.

When it comes to tradition, there is not an event in ABAC’s 107-year history that has shaped the scholarship fundraising program like Dollars for Scholars. It began in 1972 when Anita Bryant was the performer and continues today in a different format titled An Evening for ABAC.

Arts Connection Director Wayne Jones said tickets are now available for An Evening for ABAC on March 4, 2016 at the University of Georgia Tifton Campus Conference Center.
“This will be a transformational year for this event,” Jones said. “We’re moving it to the Conference Center so we’ll have more space, and we’re adding a lot of additional activities for the evening.

“We are going from an event where we featured a big name artist to one where patrons trust they are in for a really great evening and great entertainment. Our whole purpose is to benefit student scholarships. That’s what folks are spending their money for, to help students go to college.”

Jones said the 2016 event will feature The Fabulous Equinox Jazz Orchestra which will play a variety of music ranging from Frank Sinatra to Elvis to Johnny Cash. The evening will include a cocktail hour, a silent auction, and a live auction. An indoor garden party atmosphere highlighted by 2,000 feet of twinkling lights will complement the Cajun-themed meal.

“Every guest at this event will be treated like a genuine VIP,” Jones said. “Starting with the valet parking and the red carpet and continuing through the dance floors on each side of the stage, this will truly be a night that people will not want to miss.”

ABAC President Clyde Driggers and Director of Public Relations Tyron Spearman felt the same way at the very first Dollars for Scholars in 1972.

“At that time, we were trying to find a way to pay for the Chapel of All Faiths,” Spearman, who now heads up the Spearman Agency marketing firm, said. “Dr. Driggers had a contact through Dr. George Conger down in Miami with Anita Bryant, and we hired her to come to Tifton.”
Spearman said that Bryant was best known at that time as the spokesperson for the Florida Citrus Commission. The talented singer was a former Miss Oklahoma and second runner-up in the 1958 Miss America contest.

“She was a fun person to be around,” Spearman said. “We filled up the dining hall at $50 a plate. We brought her back in 1975 because everybody loved her so much.”

Eddy Arnold was the second Dollars for Scholars performer in 1973 followed by Pat Boone in 1974.

“Eddy was a people person who visited back in the kitchen with all the dining hall staff,” Spearman said. “He loved George and Aliene Graul’s cooking. He said it was the best meal he ever had. Pat Boone was so smooth. The audience really liked him.”

When Merrill was hired as the Director of Development in 1978 he was charged by ABAC President Stanley Anderson with continuing the great tradition of Dollars for Scholars. He came through in a big way by bringing Barbara Mandrell to the dining hall stage in 1979.

“We hired her for less than $7,000 in the fall of 1978,” Merrill remembered. “Then she was named entertainer of the year, and all her contracts after that went to $25,000. She was very cordial and interacted well with the audience.”

The ABAC Foundation board of directors was so impressed with Mandrell that they contracted her sister, Louise, for the 1982 show. She was also well received. Merrill said the ABAC Foundation always looked for stars who appealed to the audience in a personal and professional way.
“We wanted someone who would sign autographs and make pictures with our guests,” Merrill said. “Some did better at that than others. Some wouldn’t agree to it at all.”

When Jim Stafford had to drop out of a scheduled appearance in 1987, Merrill hired Mel Tillis.

“Mel did a good show but he stayed on his tour bus in front of the dining hall until the show started,” Merrill said. “Then he went back on his bus immediately after the show was over.”

Merrill made it a point to closely examine all the riders to the performer’s contract.

“There were a lot of demands on some of these contract riders that I always paid attention to because you just never knew what an entertainer might require,” Merrill said. “One of them wanted a specific kind of bourbon and a woman in his room. We didn’t hire that one.”

Longtime Dollars for Scholars patrons have their favorite performers. For Merrill, the nights that stand out featured the talents of Roger Williams, Debbie Reynolds, Ray Stevens, Roy Clark, and Lorrie Morgan.

“Ray Stevens was probably the most entertaining performer we had,” Merrill said. “He made people laugh. If he missed a note, no one cared. For good all round entertainment, he might have been the best.”

Sellouts have been common at Dollars for Scholars. They include Williams in 1980, Gloria Loring in 1985, Stevens in 1986, Ronnie Milsap in 2001, and Morgan in 2002.
Loring not only sold out the show but packed Howard Auditorium for the press conference on the afternoon of the event. Fans turned out to see the singer and star of the television soap opera, “Days of Our Lives.”


Betty McCorvey joined the ABAC staff as the assistant director of development in 1997. She began handling much of the Dollars for Scholars coordination beginning with the Jack Jones’ show in 1998. But it’s the Trisha Yearwood event in 2006 that she will never forget.

“Trisha really connected with the audience, the community, and the school,” McCorvey said. “She acknowledged her ties to ABAC since her father was an ABAC alumnus, and her sister, Beth, lived in Tifton. I know the audience loved it when she brought Beth on stage.”

Anticipating a record crowd, McCorvey moved the Yearwood performance to the UGA Conference Center. The event attracted an all-time Dollars for Scholars record of over 1,800 patrons and raised a record $90,000 for the ABAC Foundation student scholarship program.

After Amy Grant performed in 2007, the ABAC Foundation decided to go in a different direction with the event then called Dollars for ABAC Scholars, since another organization had copyrighted the Dollars for Scholars name.

“Our success was also our downfall,” Merrill said. “It was considered the social event of the year in Tifton. It gave people a chance to dress up, come out, and be with their friends. But contracting these performers reached a level we just couldn’t afford. To hire the caliber of
people that we had then in today’s market would be at least $100,000, and that does not include lights, sound, or production costs.

“We couldn’t do Dollars for Scholars just for the heck of it. Another thing was that in the early years, we earned nine dollars in federal funding for every dollar that we raised through Dollars for Scholars. That maxed out in the 90s but that program was responsible for millions of dollars in scholarship monies because of the matching piece.”

In recent years, An Evening for ABAC has filled up Gressette Gymnasium on the ABAC campus, selling all 400 seats available in 2015 with Katie Deal as the performer.

Jones promises that An Evening for ABAC in 2016 will be a night to remember not only as the social event of the year in Tifton but in all of South Georgia. And ABAC students will reap the rewards.

“We raised $62,000 for student scholarships last year,” Jones said. “Our intent is to raise $100,000 for the students. Since we are a four-year institution now, we have twice the amount of need. Once we started graduating students with bachelor’s degrees, we instantly increased the need for more scholarship funds. I believe the 2016 event will take us to an entirely new level.”

An Evening for ABAC tickets are $125 for singles, $225 for couples, and $1,250 for a reserved table which seats eight persons. A portion of the ticket price is tax deductible. For tickets, call (229) 391-4895 or visit the web site at www.abac.edu/aneveningforabac.

Sponsorship levels include Gold for $2,500 which sponsors one scholarship, Platinum for $5,000 which sponsors two scholarships, Titanium for $7,500 which sponsors three scholarships, and President’s Club for $10,000 which sponsors four scholarships.
Jones said sponsors already on board for 2016 include Sodexo at the Titanium level; First Community Bank of Tifton and Southeastern Federal Credit Union at the Platinum level, and Hilton Garden Inn of Tifton, Mauldin and Jenkins, Chick-Fil-A of Tifton, Dr. and Mrs. Joseph Day, a Foundation Trustee, Montgomery Family Foundation, Mr. and Mrs. Bob McLendon, and South Georgia Banking Company at the Gold level.

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