Penny Chesnut enjoys talking with students at the recent spring term orientation at ABAC.

BCM Advisor Enjoys Watching God Change Lives at ABAC

TIFTON - Penny Chesnut said that one of the many joys of her job as the advisor to the Baptist Collegiate Ministries (BCM) at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College is seeing God change the lives of her students. She remembers one young man in particular.
“When this young man entered ABAC he was confused and very lost,” Chesnut said. “We later found out that his mom passed away due to brain cancer during his senior year in high school. His dad had four sons and a dairy to run so there was little time to grieve and help his kids deal with things.

“The students at ABAC literally showed him the love of Christ, and God worked miracles in his life. He had at one time contemplated suicide. He is now happily married, a deacon in his church, and an awesome father. He is one of many that God has changed.”

Chesnut says that reaching students for God is harder today than it was when she started a part time job as the Baptist Student Union (BSU) advisor at ABAC 38 years ago.

“Students have changed quite a bit,” Chesnut said. “Kids today are more technology based and don’t communicate as well. Technology is kind of like a drug addiction. I had one young man who admitted that he spent 1,500 hours one year playing a video game. He sold his Xbox because he realized he was addicted.

“Students today have many more issues than they did when I started. Students deal with divorces, step families, financial stress and serious illnesses. These issues affect their relationship with others and especially their relationship with God.

“Years ago, most people had an idea of who God was. Today, more and more students have heard of God but they don’t really know who He is. We have had kids at BCM who haven’t been to church more than once or twice their entire lives.”
Chesnut welcomes 70 to 80 students to the BCM building every Monday night at ABAC. Local churches take turns providing a meal for the students. After supper, the BCM student band leads singing and then a speaker or student leader presents a message.

“We work hard at BCM to show students how to study the Bible and apply it to their lives,” Chesnut said. “If they are Christians, their faith should be evident in their family life, their school life, and every area of their lives.”

Thursday is Bible study night when 35 to 50 students worship together and then divide up into groups of males and females. During the fall term, the study focused on Ephesians and Galatians. Additional small group time teaches the students how to be disciples.

“Small groups with a student leader can go deeper into the Bible,” Chesnut said. “They focus on topics such as spiritual warfare and the importance of a prayer life. You grow when you have your own personal time with God.”

The ABAC students don’t mind putting their faith to work. They do two mission trips each year and the state BCM program offers mission opportunities all over the world during the summer. Seven students have applied for summer missions this summer. Last year, a total of 21 students served in mission work through BCM, their home church, or a camp.

“They love to do service projects,” Chesnut said. “We do an in-town local mission trip at Christmas, and then we do another mission trip in the spring.

“I told them that they need to learn to be missionaries right here. Be a missionary to your family and friends. You have to learn to feed yourself by getting your own relationship with God right before you can go out.”
Students in BCM begin every week at 7 a.m. on Mondays with a prayer breakfast where they pray for the needs of the campus and then distribute 200 bottles of water to their fellow students at the fountain between the Carlton Center and Conger Hall. On some weekends, the students embark on what she calls “Random Acts of Kindness” at different locations around town.

Weekends mean bonfires, mission projects, funny games, cooking meals, watching movies and just hanging out together. Around 1,400 students live on the ABAC campus so someone is always looking for something to do.

“They love just being together,” Chesnut said. “If you take away the modern technology, they aren’t any different than kids have always been.

“I believe students today are more distracted. Technology takes them away from their personal relationship with God. Satan uses distractions to take them away from a closer walk with Christ.”

During the summer, Chesnut helps to guide 10 college students from across the state who stay in Tifton for Camp Chula at First Baptist Church of Chula and the WinShape camps hosted by Northside Baptist Church. Seven ABAC students will travel this summer to places across the United States and the world in summer mission experiences.

As Chesnut watches these students mature and grow, she sometimes reflects on her incredible journey at ABAC.
“I am from Warner Robins, and my brother went to school at ABAC in the forestry program,” Chesnut said. “I didn’t know where to go to college but I heard the ratio of boys to girls at ABAC was three to one. So I came here.”

Chesnut completed her education degree at ABAC in 1974 and then finished her college career at the University of Georgia with a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree in student personnel and higher education. Monabeth Howard, a friend in Tifton, was the BSU advisor at ABAC. She told Chesnut that it would be a perfect job for her one day.

“It was a God thing,” Chesnut said with a smile. “I got an internship at ABAC in the spring of 1978, and started working here in the fall of ’78 in the career counseling office while I was doing the BSU advisor’s job part time. I really had two full time jobs with part time pay. But I was young and single, and I was having fun.”

Chesnut, then Penny Crawford, married Charles Chesnut in 1982. She was a licensed counselor so she did some contract work with ABAC in orientation. She watched both her children, Ashley and T.J., go through that orientation program, and she still works with the ABAC freshmen today.

“Students communicate differently today than they did then,” Chesnut said. “Back then, most of the students were rural farm kids who were used to hard work. Now you have to deal with a lot of life issues. These kids can tell you off on a computer but not face to face.

“Many of them have trust issues. A lot of them know they need something but they don’t realize what they need is Christ. They look for love everywhere but they are not going to find true acceptance until they find Christ.”
Georgia Baptists own the BCM building and property and pay Chesnut’s salary, which only became full time six years ago. The BCM also welcomes contributions from local churches and individuals. Chesnut loves her relationship with the students and has no plans to retire.

“Why would you retire from something you love so much?” Chesnut said. “I tell these students that if I can keep going, you should be able to keep going. In the past, I was just not able to keep up with them. Now I run circles around them.”

When speaking of Chesnut and the lives she has touched, thousands of ABAC alumni will echo the words of Matthew 25:23, “well done thy good and faithful servant.”

“I feel like God has blessed me and given me the best job ever,” Chesnut said. “I get to go to work every day and just love on people and see God work in their lives. God is definitely not dead. He is very much alive and working on the ABAC campus.”

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