For IMMEDIATE Release

Dean of Students Bernice Hughes (center) talks with ABAC students Kyle Phillips and Noel Valdez beside the ABAC Stallion.

Second Interview Opens Door for Hughes at ABAC
TIFTON—Bernice Hughes knew the job interview with administrators from Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College was not going well. In fact, she felt like it was a complete disaster. But the sun still came up the next morning.

“The next day I got a note that suggested we do a repeat on the interview,” Hughes said with a smile as she remembered that day 18 years ago in Philadelphia. “That second interview went really well. We laughed about it after that. I had honestly never heard of ABAC.”

ABAC hired Hughes as the Assistant Dean of Students in 1998. She has risen through the ranks and is now the Dean of Students, a leadership position which touches on many areas of responsibility including residence life and helping students plan a month-long calendar of activities for Black History Month each February at the college.

“When I drove my car across those railroad tracks in front of ABAC for the first time, it gave me a warm feeling,” Hughes said. “From the moment I stepped on the campus, it felt like home.”

A native of Medina, Tenn., Hughes spent 16 years at Middle Tennessee State University as the Director of Judicial and Student Leadership Programs for Housing and Residential Life. She also held the position of Associate Director for University Housing.

Dr. Tim Wise, then vice president for student affairs at ABAC, suggested that Hughes live in one of the ABAC dormitories during her first year to learn as much as possible about the students. She settled down in a very cramped room in Fulwood Hall.
“That was a shock,” Hughes said. “I had lived in an on-campus apartment before but that place was tiny. I was thinking about leaving. After a year, Dr. Wise fixed me up with a lot better situation in Comer Hall.”

Wise also suggested that Hughes get a pet. She went to the Humane Society and brought a dog named Rusty back to the campus. The rest is history.

“Rusty loved me, and he loved the students,” Hughes said. “Many times I saw a student in a bad mood, and Rusty would brighten them up. He made a difference in my life.”

Hughes became involved in all phases of campus life at ABAC. During his interim presidency in 2004-06, Tom Call named her to the Dean of Students position where she has flourished, adding freshman convocation and Greek life to her long list of duties.

“Bringing Greek life to the campus was an eye-opening experience for a lot of people,” Hughes said. “I had worked with the Greek system at Middle Tennessee State. I really appreciate Alpha Gamma Rho, Kappa Sigma, and Sigma Alpha stepping up. A lot of fraternities and sororities feel like ABAC is not large enough yet but right now we’re going full speed ahead with the four-year degree programs. I think we’ll get some more interest down the road.”

Hughes has been preparing for her ABAC duties her entire life, earning a bachelor’s degree in social work, a master’s degree in education, and a specialist’s degree in educational leadership from Middle Tennessee State. At one time she was president of the Tennessee Association of College and University Housing Officers and on the executive board of the Southeastern Association of Housing Officers.

As is the case with any college, tales of student pranks in dormitories abound.
“One of my house directors called me one time and told me I had to come over and see for myself what the students had done,” Hughes said. “I opened the stall door in one of the bathrooms and found a completely stuffed raccoon sitting on the commode with a cigarette in his hand and a John Deere hat on his head.

“We just hollered and started laughing like crazy. Nobody ever owned up to it. They had set it up for this guy who had a favorite stall in the bathroom. I wish we had taken a picture.”

Student discipline at ABAC falls under the leadership of Hughes as well.

“About three years after I got here, a young man was caught with marijuana,” Hughes said. “We sent him home. Five years later, he came by to see me. He said when we sent him home, he thought his life was over.

“But then he said he gained the strength to overcome that. He went back to school and did well. He applied to law school, was accepted, and now he’s a lawyer in the Atlanta area. Those are the kind of success stories I like to hear.”

Students have changed some in the past 18 years at ABAC. Hughes knows it better than anyone.

“The biggest thing is cell phones,” Hughes said. “These students don’t talk face to face. They text. Everything depends on that little hand-held lifeline. They do talk to their parents more, and that’s a good thing.

“I don’t like the fact that students post things anonymously about each other and about ABAC on social media. If it wasn’t anonymous, they wouldn’t put it on there. It causes a lot of
hurt feelings. Yik Yak is the worst. Now you can video somebody without them knowing and post the video. I want to tell them to just be nice to each other.”

Dormitories are a thing of the past at ABAC since the students live in ultra-modern complexes at ABAC Place and ABAC Lakeside. Those new additions to the ABAC campus during Hughes’ tenure boosted student recruitment.

“Everybody likes new stuff,” Hughes said. “It gave us an opportunity to have state of the art housing on campus. Welcome Week also allows them to make friends before classes begin. I think that helps them know their roommates better.”

Hughes believes government funding cuts to the federal programs at ABAC sent African-American students searching for new venues at the college.

“Students in those programs were very hands on,” Hughes said “Students felt like they had a place to go and talk to people. When those programs went away, student found other ways to get involved. They find other places to share their experiences with each other.”

Hughes never thought she would wind up working at a college. Her early dream career was that of a police officer. She wanted to make a difference as an officer when there wasn’t a real presence of African American officers in her area.

As a student at Middle Tennessee State, she came to realize that most of the classes in the law enforcement area were geared toward careers at prisons. She found another outlet for her energy after graduation by staying in Murfreesboro with the university as a liaison between facilities and housing.
“They needed a female to walk through the halls of the dormitories to check for quality control and also work with the housing department,” Hughes said.

Always quick with a smile, Hughes chuckled at the fact that 10 years from now, she expects to be retired. She plans to move back to Tennessee and undertake a surprising new career.

“Working at a funeral home has always appealed to the nurturing part of me,” Hughes said. “I want to be the person who says ‘thank you for entrusting your loved one with Hughes Funeral Home.’ I don’t want to gouge people in their time of sorrow. I want to give them the best service I can.”

So instead of talking with ABAC students about taking the right path during their college years, one day Hughes will be comforting families about the eternal destination of their loved ones. Either way, she’ll be helping them in the right direction.

###