TIFFON – As Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College celebrates the 50th anniversary of its nursing program and with Valentine’s Day approaching, it’s easy to believe romance was sometimes in the air among the thousands of nursing students who received their associate
degrees from ABAC over the past half century.

Tifton native Preston Thornhill and Kayla Gregory Thornhill from Turner County fit the criteria perfectly. Both were ABAC nursing students who met on Jan. 6, 2011, Kayla’s 19th birthday.

“I thought Preston was cute but we really didn’t speak to each other the night we met,” Kayla said.

“I thought Kayla was pretty,” Preston said. “We are both shy so we really didn’t have an immediate connection.”

But that didn’t stop Preston from asking Kayla out shortly afterward. The next month the couple was officially dating.

“During this time Preston was moving back home from UGA, where he was previously pursuing a pharmacy degree, and I was taking classes at ABAC,” Kayla said. “We dated throughout ABAC nursing school.”

Kayla’s path to a career in nursing was set at a very young age.

“I always knew growing up that I wanted to become a nurse,” Kayla said. “My paternal grandfather had ALS and with his condition he needed assistance with his daily activities. Home Health nurses would come in and assist him and my grandmother with medications and grooming. I was always interested in helping in any way that I could. I saw how important nurses were to my grandfather and knew I wanted to be able to help other people like him when I grew up.”

Preston’s road to the field of nursing took a different path.

“I changed my major several times during my college career,” he said. “I originally planned on pursuing a pharmacy degree at the University of Georgia. After interviewing for the
pharmacy program I realized that I wanted to be able to provide direct hands-on patient care. I then moved back home and started working toward my nursing degree. I chose to become a nurse because I wanted to have a direct impact on patients’ lives.”

The two students chose ABAC’s nursing program because both had heard the program was highly respected throughout the community as well as the state. They knew the NCLEX pass rate was above average for the area.

They agree that being in the same major at ABAC made it easier for them.

“Kayla was a semester ahead of me so that definitely worked out to my advantage,” Preston said with a smile. “We studied together a lot even though we were not in the same classes, and we learned a lot from each other and made great study partners.”

“Preston already had a bachelor’s degree in biology and was able to help me study when I needed a different perspective or further explanation,” Kayla added. “We believe it was much easier to make time for each other simply because we understood what the other person was going through.”

On many occasions, their schedules conflicted while at ABAC, and they didn’t get to see each other much. During those times they had to remind themselves often of their ultimate goal, the attainment of a nursing degree.

During the summer before Kayla’s last semester, Preston proposed. Kayla graduated from ABAC’s nursing program on Dec. 13, 2013 and passed her state boards in January of 2014. Preston graduated from ABAC on May 8, 2014 and passed his state boards a few weeks later.

With ABAC nursing degrees and Registered Nurse (R.N.) certification completed, they got married on June 7, 2014. Another ABAC romance had blossomed.

The Thornhills began their nursing careers at Tift Regional Medical Center working the
night shift. Kayla worked as an emergency department nurse, and Preston was an intensive care nurse. In October of 2015, Kayla moved to Affinity Clinic, where she is currently employed as a triage nurse on the day shift. Preston continues to work in ICU on the night shift, where he recently started working as a charge nurse.

“Since we now have different shifts we try to make the most of our time together,” said Kayla. “We spend time together in the mornings after Preston gets off work and before I go in. We enjoy talking and catching up with each other while I get ready for work. We also try to help each other out keeping up with the daily chores so that when we are both off work we can spend quality time together.”

And it all started in the nursing program classrooms at ABAC.

###