ABAC Comptroller Spends a Lot of Time Thinking About a Clean Audit

TIFTON—When most people think of keeping something clean, they refer to their house or their car. When Deidra Jackson thinks of clean, her immediate thoughts turn to a clean audit of the $45.3 million she helps to keep in the proper column on a daily basis at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College.
“That’s my number one goal, having a clean audit every year,” Jackson, the 33-year-old comptroller in the business office at ABAC, said. “There are always a few nerves on edge when the auditors are on campus. But that’s just the nature of the position.”

The 2000 graduate of Tift County High School certainly knows of which she speaks. Before joining the ABAC staff in 2010, she was a senior auditor for the Georgia Department of Audits in Douglas. The daughter of Dwight and Joni Dunn from Tifton spent almost six years in Douglas before coming home to ABAC.

“I never dreamed I would ever work at ABAC,” Jackson said. “I knew I wanted to be in accounting and have some type of management role. When this job became available, I felt like God opened a door. This is where I am supposed to be.”

Jackson prepared for the monumental task by taking three semesters worth of classes at ABAC before transferring to Auburn University to complete her undergraduate degree in accounting. She then received her master’s degree in business from Valdosta State University.

At ABAC, she oversees the daily business operations of the college. From March through September, she has very few moments to rest her eyes from the numbers, charts, and projections which light up the face of her computer.

“Deidra has to wear many hats,” Paul Willis, vice president for finance and operations at ABAC, said. “She has to think quickly and make good decisions. She is pivotal to the successful operation of the college.”

From preparing the budget for the upcoming year which begins on July 1, closing out the budget of the existing year on June 30 and getting ready for the influx of students on the first day of fall semester classes on Aug. 10, her schedule is jam-packed with dollar signs.
“I have learned a lot about ABAC and have certainly learned a lot about leadership and managing a department,” Jackson said. “Organizational leadership was one of my favorite classes at Valdosta State.

“I can tell you that our office would not be successful without the quality employees I get to work with every day. We are a team, and I think we have a really great team. Without the people that work with me, we would not be where we are today.”

Ten ABAC employees report directly to Jackson. All of them are well versed in the challenges which face the comptroller’s office on a daily basis.

“We have plenty of challenges, but some years are easier than others,” Jackson said. “Utilities, inflation, increases in health insurance, all these things we have to find a way to cover. Above all, we want to make sure we are fiscally responsible for every dollar of state funds that we receive.”

Willis likes the way Jackson meets obstacles in her path.

“Deidra manages people well and meets every challenge head on with the determination to solve any problem that may arise,” Willis said. “She always has the best interest of the college in mind in every situation and has an incredible work ethic.”

ABAC President David Bridges reminds civic club audiences every year that ABAC continues to be state assisted but is far from being totally state funded. The $45.3 million overall budget comes from a variety of sources including $15.2 million from the state.
“Our auxiliary enterprises provide us with a lot of dollars that allow us to undertake projects that state funds can’t cover,” Jackson said. “Turning Thrash Gym into a wellness center is a good example of that.

“It’s really crazy how the physical face of the campus has changed just since I came five years ago. The front campus project, the new lab sciences building, and Thrash Gym make the look of ABAC quite different.”

Jackson loves some quiet time on the weekends when she and her husband, Rollins, ride slowly around the campus with their four-year-old daughter, Madeline.

“Things have changed quite a bit under Dr. Bridges’ leadership,” she said. “Everything has been updated and upgraded, all for the benefit of the students.”

When Jackson does have some free time, she loves going to the seashore in the summer and Auburn football games in the fall. But most of all, she loves quality time with her husband and daughter.

“Madeline has turned our life upside down for the good,” Jackson said. “It’s all for the best. I can’t imagine life without her.”

The annual spring commencement ceremony at ABAC is scheduled for May 5. As faculty members see students achieve their dream of a college diploma by walking across the Gressette Gymnasium stage, they will remember the struggles some of those students overcame while writing an essay or perhaps with a project in the biology laboratory.

Jackson has another completely different thought.
“Seeing a student graduate is the thing that makes me most proud to be at ABAC,” Jackson said. “That’s particularly true when I see one walk across that stage that struggled financially.

“A lot of people see the trouble students overcome because of their grades. I see the financial hardships they overcome. I feel like I should be cheering for them and just shouting out, ‘you made it, you made it.’ It’s a different perspective.”