ABAC President Makes $1 Million Commitment to Veterans

TIFTON—One year ago, Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College President David Bridges pledged to raise $100,000 for a Veterans Enrichment Fund on the ABAC campus. On Thursday, he decided to raise the amount tenfold.
“Last year on this day, I told you that we would raise $100,000 for veterans on the ABAC campus,” Bridges told the audience at the annual reception to honor the recipients of the Harold Bascom “Pinky” Durham, Jr., scholarships in Tift Hall. “My wife, Kim, and I showed our commitment by pledging the first $20,000.

“I am here to tell you today that we have raised that $100,000, and now I want to let you know of a brand new commitment. I want to raise $1,000,000 for a veterans’ endowment fund on the campus of Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College.”

Bridges said the campaign would stretch over several years, and he did not put a time limit on it.

“We are doing this because I want future generations of ABAC students to know that we respect the honor, the integrity, and the valor of those who serve in the armed forces of our country,” Bridges said. “We will continue to invest in those who invested so much in us. We must not forget that some of them invested their lives for our freedom.”

During the past year, ABAC has followed a plan to recognize the accomplishments of veterans on the campus. The Veterans Initiative includes a new Veterans Center in the J. Lamar Branch Student Center, a student veterans’ organization, recognition as a Purple Heart College, recognition as a Military Friendly College, free tutoring for veterans beyond the normal tutoring hours, and advanced preferred registration for veterans.

Bridges thanked Jessica Swords, the director of student accounts and veterans certifying official at ABAC, for her diligence in supporting students who are veterans on campus. In 2015, she was named the Gold Level recipient of the Chancellor’s Service Excellence Award for an
Outstanding Individual for her work by University System of Georgia Chancellor Hank Huckaby.

“My grandfather is a veteran,” Swords said. “I try to make sure we take care of all their campus needs. As civilians, we should show our respect to veterans. It’s the least we can do. I think of the veterans on the ABAC campus as my students.”

In 2015, Bridges announced that a museum will be established on the ABAC campus in honor of Durham, a former Tifton resident and an ABAC alumnus. He said plans are progressing toward bringing memorabilia from Tifton’s only Medal of Honor recipient to Tift Hall.

“We will dedicate that space in October of this year,” Bridges said. “We are proud to have members of the Durham family with us today as we pause to consider what we have accomplished for veterans in the past year and what we hope to accomplish in the year to come.”

Durham gave his life serving his country in the Republic of Vietnam with the 1st Infantry Division on Oct. 17, 1967. He was honored posthumously with the Medal of Honor in a presentation to his mother, Grace Durham Jolley, on Oct. 30, 1969.

“We have accumulated a great deal of memorabilia from Pinky’s life,” Bridges said. “The real Medal of Honor will hang in a place of honor in Tift Hall when we’re finished. We will also honor other former ABAC students who served our country in this space.”

As a culmination to the ceremony, Bridges awarded the 2016 Durham scholarship to Erin Fowler, a senior at Tift County High School. He also announced that Kevin Joachin, the 2015
recipient, would receive the scholarship for another year. Joachin is now a rural studies writing and communications major at ABAC.

Bridges said the reception to honor the Durham scholarship winners will always take place at the annual Carry The Load Step-Off Rally at ABAC. Carry The Load aims to restore the true meaning of Memorial Day by connecting Americans to the sacrifices of our military, law enforcement, firefighters, and rescue personnel.

“I want to personally thank all the students, faculty, staff, and members of the community who came out and supported the Carry The Load effort,” Bridges said. “We had a great day, and our thoughts and prayers will be with the team members who have a long month ahead of them as they travel toward Dallas.”

ABAC has seven students and four nurses participating in the East Coast Carry The Load Relay which began in West Point, N.Y., on May 1 and ends in Dallas, Tex., on Memorial Day. Four other ABAC students are a part of the West Coast Relay which began in Seattle, Wash., on April 27 and also ends in Dallas on Memorial Day.

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