First Female Drummer in ABAC Jazz Band Gives Credit to her Family

TIFTON – Jessica Wade literally marches to the beat of her own drum. As the first female drummer in the history of the much acclaimed jazz band at Abraham Baldwin
Agricultural College, the biology major from Douglas gives all the credit to her family for her musical talents.

“It is such an honor to play for this college, in this music department,” Wade said. “And to make history no matter the extent is absolutely a blessing. It’s just awesome to think about.”

Raised in a musically-inclined family of four with her parents, Derick and Peggy, and older brother, Jared, she began playing the drums at the tender age of eight. Wade grew up watching her father play drums in church and at home.

“I guess you could say his rhythmic talent got passed onto me,” Wade said. “It’s in my DNA. My dad had intentions of helping my brother learn how to play the drum set but it kind of switched to me unintentionally. One day I just sat down at his electric drum set and randomly started playing something simple. My dad saw I had some natural rhythmic talent within me.”

With her father’s guidance, Wade began playing drums for the band in her church.

“It is an honorable thing to pick up a talent from a family member, especially from your parents,” said Wade. “My dad gave me advice and understood me as his child for the talent that was placed in my heart. And to do so in worship for God makes it even better.”

At Coffee High School, her percussion talents did not go unnoticed.

“I joined the Coffee High School drumline during marching season and percussion during the concert season,” said Wade. “My sophomore year of high school is where my peers realized that not only did I perform on the drumline and in the percussion section, but that I also played drum set. That’s when I became a drummer for the Coffee High Jazz Ensemble.”
In Wade’s senior year at Coffee High, drumming her way through college became a real possibility when her jazz band attended the 2014 ABAC Jazz Festival. She established a personal goal to play drums for ABAC’s Jazz Ensemble, not realizing she was making ABAC musical history.

Wade credits her success to her family, teachers, and both her church and music families. She gives special thanks to ABAC’s music faculty including Dr. Thomas Heflin, director of ABAC’s Jazz Ensemble, for his knowledge and guidance which has helped her grow as a musician and drummer as well as retired instructor Don Coates for developing her potential.

“When I came to ABAC I was no expert in the area of jazz music, and my drumming proved that,” said Wade. “Dr. Heflin pushed me to keep going. He would take out an hour just about every day to help me get where I needed to be musically and after my first year, I had progressed so much as a drummer, particularly a jazz drummer.

“And Mr. Coates always made me feel like I was doing a great job. Coming from him that meant a lot. If it were not for him, I don’t know if I would have been given the opportunity to play for ABAC’s Jazz Ensemble today.”

Outside of ABAC, Wade plays drums for the Tift County High School show choir. She has also taught percussion for the TCHS Blue Devil Brigade. She currently plays the drums in the orchestra at First United Methodist Church.

Majoring in biology at ABAC seems a far cry from a musical career, but for Wade it makes perfect sense.
“I have always been fascinated with the human body and how it works,” said Wade. “It is another passion of mine. I also love helping people. I wanted to be a physician’s assistant in high school and knew I would need a science degree for that so I chose biology.”

Wade fell in love with the courses and professors in the bachelor’s degree in biology program at ABAC. Dr. Johnny Evans, Dean of the School of Science and Mathematics, sold her on the program.

“My favorite thing about ABAC as a whole is that there is such a personal connection with the professors and students,” said Wade. “That’s a plus in my book because it shows just how genuine this college is, and it’s what I enjoy most about the science department.”

A member of the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) organization and the Phi Theta Kappa honor society, Wade recently decided to take a plunge into deeper water with extra music classes at ABAC.

“I decided to go for my associate’s degree in music,” Wade said. “Music truly brings people together, and ABAC’s music program is family to me. To be out on your own, it’s nice to find a place where you belong. Honestly, if it weren’t for God blessing me with a music family I am not sure I would be this happy where I am. That is why I have decided to pursue my associate’s degree in music as well as my biology degree.”

Focusing on a bachelor’s degree in biology is still her number one goal in life but Wade wouldn’t mind a little extracurricular action as the drummer for a Christian contemporary band.

“Regardless of my decision, God knows the path He has chosen for me,” said Wade.