



The Bell Tower

The magazine of the University of Arkansas - Fort Smith

FALL 2024

Igniting their Passions

*Alum Charles Preston
changes the experience of
natural history museums*

INSIDE

Perla Romero's
internships
uncover her
purpose

Chancellor
Terisa Riley
takes us through
a day in her life

Angela Perkins
finds joy in
feeding others



MACI HODGES

WELCOME HOME: UAFS Cub Camp counselors cheer as the first cars pull in during first-year move in. Hundreds of volunteers make the process quick and painless for incoming students and the parents, siblings, and friends who bring them.

features

14 A Future in the Forest

Senior Geoscience major Perla Romero changed majors and found her passion in working to conserve the national forests for generations to come.

16 The Big Picture

Student success starts before the first class with Cub Camp team building.

20 Just Another Great Day

For Chancellor Terisa Riley, Aug. 15 was a day much like any other day: meetings with faculty, students, staff, and regional business leaders, all with a heaping helping of dance.

24 A Feather in His Cap

Dr. Charles Preston, who played Lions baseball in 1972, changed the way planners and visitors alike think about natural science museums all while working to save the golden eagle.



UAFS MISSION

UAFS seeks to empower the social mobility of students and fuel the economic growth of the River Valley through superior educational opportunities and solid community partnerships.

THE BELL TOWER
 Fall 2024
 Volume 14, Number 1
 The University of Arkansas – Fort Smith

CHANCELLOR
 Terisa C. Riley, Ph.D.

CONTRIBUTORS
 Judi Hansen, Rachel Rodemann Putman,
 Ian Silvester

PHOTOGRAPHERS
 Krislyn Andrews, Johnathan Brewer, Maci Hodges,
 Elliot Nemeth, Rachel Putman

ART DIRECTOR
 John Sizing, www.jspublicationdesign.com

The Bell Tower is published annually by the University of Arkansas - Fort Smith, P.O. Box 3649, Fort Smith, AR 72913, for friends, faculty, and alumni of the university. Tel: (877) 303-8237. Email: alumni@uafs.edu. Web.uafs.edu/belltower

Send address changes, requests to receive The Bell Tower, and requests to be removed from the mailing list to alumni@uafs.edu, or UAFS Alumni Association, P.O. Box 3649, Fort Smith, AR 72913.

LETTERS ARE WELCOME, but the publisher reserves the right to edit letters for length and content. Space constraints may prevent publication of all letters. Anonymous letters will not be published. Send letters to alumni@uafs.edu or The Bell Tower, P.O. Box 3649, Fort Smith, AR 72913.

Views and opinions in The Bell Tower do not necessarily reflect those of the magazine staff nor of the University of Arkansas - Fort Smith.

Contents © 2024 by the University of Arkansas - Fort Smith.

- 2 While I Have Your Attention
- 3 Day of Giving: Always More to Do

On Campus

- 4 Trust a Writer
- 5 The Return of Toy Toss
- 6 When the Artist is in Residence
- 7 A Center for Teaching and Learning
- 8 Dean Toni Alexander, CAS

- 9 Sunshine Bartlett, CBI
- 10 New Nursing Degree, CHEHS
- 11 Why We Give

Community

- 12 Dental Hygiene Students Meet Special Olympians
- 13 Preparing High School Students

Athletics

- 18 Cheer Team Takes Top Honors

- 19 Day at the K with MIAA

Alumni

- 28 A Double Dose of Graduation
- 29 Alumni Honors
- 30 Angela Perkins Feeds her Community
- 31 Babb Center Services for Alumni
- 32 Alumni Legacy Scholarships

Igniting Their Passion



PARKS TOUR:
Geoscience students
in the Petrified Forest
National Park, Arizona.

In this edition of The Bell Tower, you will find our regular mix of students, graduates, and programs that we hope will interest and inform you.

However, we especially recommend the story of senior geology major Perla Romero, who embodies nearly everything we could hope for UAFS students.

Perla began her studies in the College of Business and Industry. The discipline appealed to her instinct for logic and order, but it failed to ignite her passion. Instead, unexpectedly, she connected in a geology class where she went from reserved observer to curious and challenging participant.

Skip ahead to the summer of 2024, when she had an internship in the Hiawatha National Forest in Michigan. She had a chance to apply her classroom learning to the field and absorbed information like a sponge. Her hands-on experience with GIS software increased her skill with this essential tool.

She also had one of the two best outcomes of an internship. “I realized this is what I wanted to do as a career,” she said. (The other valuable outcome is some variation of “Whoops, not for me!” Perla had that experience in an accounting internship.)

While at UAFS, Perla traveled to 14 states and seven national parks. She started a research portfolio and will present to an international

audience for a second time this year. She grew confident as a woman in geoscience and worked on gold-level achievements in the Babb Center for Career Services program. She participated in student government and the Geology Club.

In short, as a first-generation student, Perla used all the resources at her disposal to wring every drop out of her college experience to prepare herself for the opportunities and challenges ahead.

Hers is an exemplary UAFS story, but she is not alone in her achievements. This issue is full of students and alumni who turned their time at the university into a ticket for the future.

We ask you to think about these students and graduates: strong, creative, intrepid, courageous, and passionate. They are everything we’re about, and we are proud to have been a part of their journeys.



Dr. Judith Hansen
Advancement Editor



BY THE NUMBERS

**ECONOMIC
IMPACT**

TOTAL EMPLOYEES

854

CRAWFORD COUNTY
FACULTY

59

CRAWFORD COUNTY STAFF

95

SEBASTIAN COUNTY
FACULTY

205

SEBASTIAN COUNTY STAFF

273

ECONOMIC IMPACT PER
ARKANSAS EMPLOYEE

\$98.1k

ECONOMIC IMPACT OF
UAFS EMPLOYMENT

\$84m

SOURCE:

Kendall Ross, UAFS associate
vice chancellor of economic
and workforce development

MAURICE TESTA



Students Break Records

Supporters shattered expectations during the annual Day of Giving in April, charging past their fundraising goals. In just 1,928 minutes (a tribute to the university's founding year), 1,113 donors contributed an incredible \$142,575 to support 18 student-centered projects – and any other cause of their choice. The original goal? \$100,000.

"I am so proud of how our community once again rallied behind our students for Day of Giving!" said Jasmine Smith, director of Alumni Engagement and Annual Giving. "This is a perfect example of what we can accomplish when we work together. We've made a huge impact, and I'm so grateful to each and every person who made this year such a success."

These funds are already making a difference on campus: The Finish Grant is helping students in need make it to graduation by providing crucial financial assistance in their final semesters. The Hispanic Heritage Month project secured support for their October programming, empowering events that celebrate and serve UAFS's growing Hispanic community. The Student Nurses Association raised funds to make national

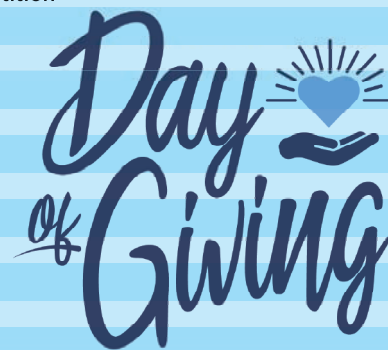
membership free to all their members, opening doors to valuable resources and connections in the global nursing community. Lion Company ROTC cadets successfully raised money to send students to a national

conference in Washington, D.C., inspiring the future leaders of our region.

Mark your calendars! The 2025 Day of Giving is set for April 29-30, and we can't wait to see what next year has in store!

TOTALS FROM THE 2024 DAY OF GIVING

Adult Degree Completion Program	\$3,375
AIGA Student Group for Design	\$2,742
Annual Student Research Paper Competition	\$1,790
Area of Greatest Need	\$175
Baseball	\$6,835
Cheer	\$4,655
Embracing Hispanic Heritage	\$5,169
Employee Emergency Fund	\$1,100
Finish Scholarship	\$10,445
First Gen Student Success	\$6,000
General Scholarship Fund	\$6,070
Men of Excellence	\$1,660
Read This!	\$5,030
School of Education Partnership	\$1,799
SNA Fee-Free Initiative	\$2,050
Study Abroad Scholarship	\$3,757
UAFS ROTC	\$3,378
Volleyball	\$10,195
You Choose	\$54,815



UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS
FORT SMITH

The Writing on the Wall

If there's one thing she could tell students, Dr. Mary Lutze, director of the Writing Center would say: "Anyone's writing can be improved with instruction. Even I use the Writing Center."

The UAFS Writing Center, on the edge of the campus but with the perk of ample parking, is available to all students, staff, and faculty. Since its formal opening in October 2020, it has seen 16,500 visits, suggesting Lutze's advice is finding an audience. Initial funding came from a \$2.5 million federal grant from Title III funds, which aim to increase success, persistence, and retention, especially among students with financial need.

Among those 16,500 visits are nearly 5,000 scheduled tutoring appointments with more than 1,700 unique users. Students can use the space to study or meet even if they aren't working with a writing tutor.

The eye-popping numbers "come from our kiosk system," said Lutze, assistant professor and director of the Writing Center. The kiosk system, which tallies ID card swipes, tracks occupancy, although it misses people on tours, faculty who don't swipe, and students who forget to swipe or forget their cards. Thus, she believes the 16,500 is an undercount.

Students from all three colleges turn to the Writing Center, including high school students enrolled in concurrent credit courses.

"I'd like to see every student



TUTORS: Gabriella Stokes, left, and Isabella Serrano discuss the day's work.

on campus use the Writing Center," Lutze said. "There is a long-standing idea of the Writing Center as providing remedial services, and you won't use the Writing Center unless you are bad at (writing)."

To offset that idea, Lutze and assistant director Jeffrey Warndof visit classes to explain

transitions, citations, and formatting. They help the student determine that the final product meets the assignment requirements and offer guidance with finetuning.

Lutze said that working with the Writing Center from the beginning of a semester can pay off for students in

**If there's one thing she could tell students, Dr. Mary Lutze, director of the Writing Center would say:
"Anyone's writing can be improved with instruction.
Even I use the Writing Center."**

the center's services. They point out that they both use the center and that faculty members, even those with strong publication histories, use it.

Tutors work with students throughout the writing process, from brainstorming, thesis statements, and outlines to

unexpected ways.

"They won't surrender to procrastination; they won't feel the need to use generative AI (artificial intelligence) because they are up against a deadline," she said.

Students use non-directive tutoring strategies, Lutze said.

"We want it to be crystal clear that when a student comes in with a paper and then submits it that it is their work, not the Writing Center's."

Tutor training is an essential part of Lutze's responsibilities. She said she has adapted a semester-long course to a six-week training session, and students must do two observed peer-tutoring sessions and two online sessions before they are scheduled to work.

Lutze adapts training to reflect recent best practices for writing centers. Sessions address how to handle ChatGPT and other AI uses.

She also works with tutors to provide a welcoming attitude to diverse learners, including non-traditional and international students, students from different majors, and students with disabilities. Two bilingual tutors can work with native Spanish speakers who are writing in English and native English speakers who are writing in Spanish. She said she'd like the center to be used more as a literacy source offering conversation practice.

The original Title III grant was for five years, but because the COVID-19 pandemic delayed implementation, the university has requested a sixth year. Under the terms of the grant, the Writing Center is open only to UAFS students, faculty, and staff. In the future, Lutze would like to see the client base expanded to people in the community, including alumni.



Return of the Toys

In 2023, a beloved tradition made its way back to the Stubblefield Center as plush lions, tigers and bears covered the floor of the Gayle Kaundart Arena. The fan-favorite event returned with renewed vigor and, with it, a new date on the 2024 calendar. This year's Toy Toss game, at 6:30 p.m. on Tuesday, Nov. 12, is the Lion's first home game of the season, against University of the Ozarks at the Stubblefield Center.

As a kid, Dyllan Newell, UAFS coordinator for student activities and civic engagement, attended several Toy Toss basketball games at the Stubblefield Center. Since Newell, '22, joined the university as a staff member, bringing back Toy Toss has been a labor of love. Men's basketball coach Zane

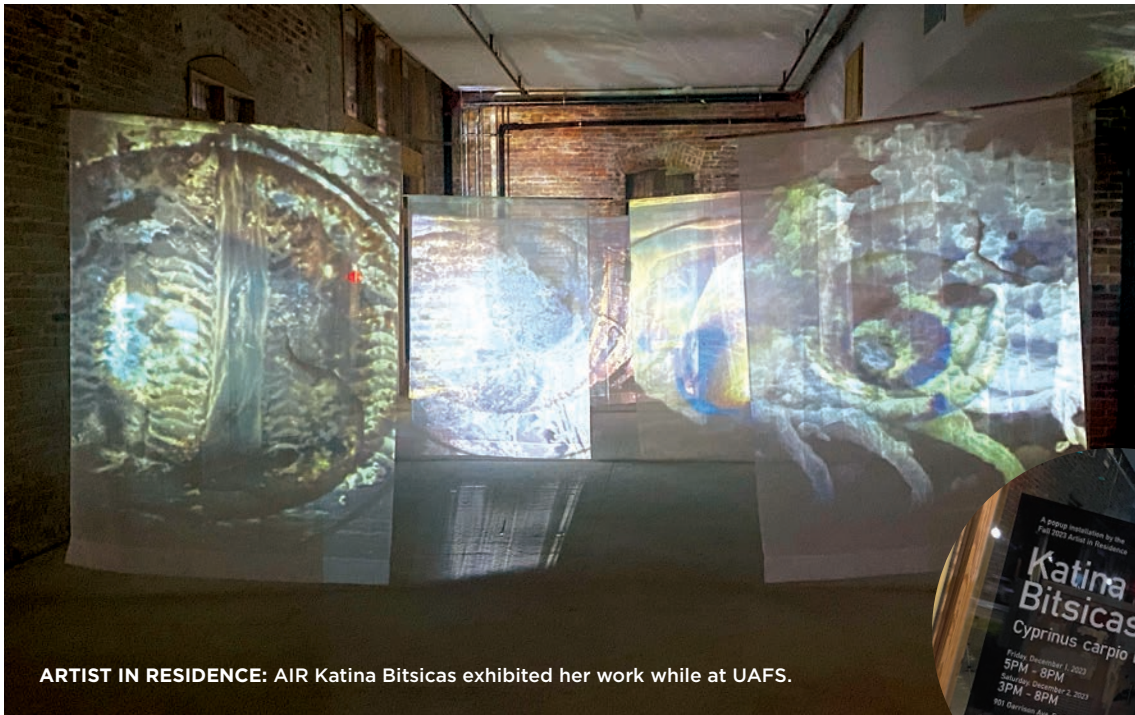
Gibson, who was part of the early days of Toy Toss as an assistant coach, was thrilled to see it through the lens of a head coach.

"It was a neat moment to see the Toy Toss game return to the Stubb last year," Gibson said. "Bringing back a game with such a great tradition and connection with our program and the community after not having the game for a few years was an awesome feeling."

At Toy Toss, patrons bring a new or gently used stuffed animal for free admission to the game. The first time the Lions score, fans throw their stuffed animal onto the court to be collected and donated to the Salvation Army of Fort Smith and the Fort Smith Boys and Girls Club.



PARTY TIME: UAFS fans and students throw stuffed toys on to the court at Stubblefield Center during the return of the Toy Toss.



ARTIST IN RESIDENCE: AIR Katina Bitsicas exhibited her work while at UAFS.

When the Artist Lives Next Door

As part of its commitment to providing students with transformative experiences, the University of Arkansas – Fort Smith offers a level of exposure typically accessible to graduate-level students to undergrad art and design majors.

Through a 2021 \$7.8 million gift from the Windgate Foundation, the UAFS Art & Design program established and created the UAFS Art & Design Artist in Residence (AIR) program. Now in its third year, the program continues to be a pillar for nurturing productive student and community engagement.

Unlike other programs, AIR does not require the artist – selected from an applicant pool through a rigorous application process – to pay any fees or tuition for their semester-long residency. The selected artist

receives a \$20,000 stipend, materials budget, private living accommodations near campus, and workspace and studio access in Windgate Art & Design. Additionally, the artists are not required to teach; their work toward completing and presenting a culminating event is paramount.

While artists are not required to teach, they are integrated within the department, explained Dr. Katie Waugh, department head and associate professor.

“They’re meeting with different courses across the curriculum. They’re not teaching just one class; they’re meeting with multiple classes and getting more contact with more students,” she said.

With an artist in residence, students don’t have to wait until graduate school for a first-hand

connection or mentorship with a professional artist.

“It’s important for our students to immediately see what a version of their future could look like. ... It’s helpful for students to know where they’re headed. If they do not have meaningful contacts with working artists of various backgrounds until graduate school, they may not know it’s possible to take that path. It’s important for students to see that early on,” Waugh said.

The program is also community-oriented.

Artists will conduct workshops, programming, public lectures, and a public exhibition during their residency. Through the various outreach initiatives, art and the community collide.

“It introduces people to new types of art and ways to think about art,” explained Gallery of Art & Design Director Dr. Matt Bailey. “We want to foster a creative community.”

In its three years of

operation, the program has received national and international attention, as evidenced by the artists who have been selected.

Graphic designer Alex Williamson served as the model for the AIR program.

Williamson’s time featured a collaboration of UAFS faculty and staff to “materialize his visions,” Bailey said. It also highlighted a unique connection to the city’s history, featuring an exhibit at the Bakery District when Bill Hanna donated space for the university’s use.

Recently, the program brought in Katina Bitsicas, a professor at the University of Missouri-Columbia, and Katya Grokhovskiy, a native of Ukraine based in New York City.

The program will soon welcome Martin Venezky, who, after retiring from a career as a graphic design professor, went back to school and received his Master of Fine Arts degree in photography.

“I think he’s going to be exciting to have here; ... (he) mirrors the two trajectories where students can choose a studio art or graphic design approach. ... He’ll be able to help students learn from his experience and through mentorship,” said Waugh.

Bitsicas’ work will also return to UAFS in the fall of 2025. Her work will be featured in the Gallery of Art & Design for a solo exhibit featuring the continuation of the work she began while in the AIR program.



New Center for Teaching and Learning

The University of Arkansas - Fort Smith introduced its Center for Teaching and Learning this fall, an initiative that supports two of the university's strategic pillars: investing in academic excellence and student success.

"A center for teaching and learning is something I've hoped we would create on this campus since my arrival," said Chancellor Terisa Riley, who started at the university in 2019. "It's a major component of faculty development and a way we can truly invest in our people."

The center is endowed by a \$500,000 investment by First National Bank of Fort Smith.

"We at First National Bank believe in the capacity of education to advance our region in ways few other initiatives can," said First National Bank President Sam Sicard. "When Chancellor Riley explained the vision for the Center for Teaching and Learning at UAFS, I knew it was a way First National could invest in the future of our community, ensuring that we continue to develop knowledgeable and skilled individuals who want to live, work, and serve our region after graduation."

Why create a Center for Teaching and Learning?

According to Provost Dr. Shadow Robinson, "The mission of the Center for Teaching and Learning is to be sure we provide our faculty with support that will help them take the expertise they have and translate it effectively so that students can learn and master it."

Faculty members spend years learning highly specialized information in their fields, but they may not receive teacher training. "And being able to do something well and being able to teach it well are not always the same thing," Robinson said.

What are some specific challenges faculty at UAFS face today?

At UAFS, nearly 60% of students are the first in their families to attend college. Students whose parents and grandparents are college graduates know how to be college students before they arrive. First-generation students often need specialized support.

Today's faculty also face students whose academic and social development was impacted by COVID-19.

"All of our students faced it, but it's different if you were a senior in high school, ... or in seventh grade, (or) in third grade," Robinson said. "Our faculty are going to face this problem over the next 15 years with different challenges depending in part on when those students went home."

The provost also noted that the explosion of Artificial Intelligence applications like ChatGPT will impact higher education although no one knows precisely how.

"All of us are worried about it, but how many of us have time in our daily lives to track the latest updates and best practices?" Robinson asked.

"How would I, as a faculty member with a full teaching load and a full research load who is busy with my own work, figure out the best way to ad-

dress those needs? A Center for Teaching and Learning can help," Robinson said.

What will the Center for Teaching and Learning do?

To begin, a faculty fellow will lead the center. Robinson said that person might spend some time researching a question like "What is the best way to use AI in the classroom?" and present the findings to interested faculty and staff.

Eventually, the center might offer monthly presentations, some directed to novice faculty and some to a general audience.

Or a faculty member might take a classroom issue to the center's leader: "I'm trying something new in class, and I'd like an independent set of eyes watching me. ... Would you come in and watch and give me your reaction?"



HEART OF THE CAMPUS: The Center for Teaching and Learning will be housed in the Boreham Library.

COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCES

New Dean Returns to Academic Roots

Dr. Toni Alexander has a clear vision about what college should be.

“This is where you learn to learn,” Alexander told students and their parents at Mane Event, UAFS’s one-day orientation session, this summer. “It is our job is to push you. ... If you haven’t been pushed, we haven’t done our job.”

As the new dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Alexander said, “We will not push you to think a certain way but to think critically about things. We want to make you resilient and adaptable.”

Alexander’s vision of a college education is tied to her experiences as a student and as professor and administrator in a variety of university settings.

As a high school graduate, after living one year in Finland, Alexander attended California State University at Stanislaus, a commuter college with about 5,000 students. Although she had been accepted by the University of Southern California, she chose the state college because, with a variety of scholarships and awards, she could graduate without debt. Going to the far more expensive university didn’t make sense for someone who didn’t really know what she wanted to do when she grew up.

Looking back, she recognizes what a good choice it was: “Every one of my professors knew me.” That personal relationship with her professors meant she could learn more than



MANE EVENT: Dr. Toni Alexander helped welcome students to campus while reassuring parents that their students would have plenty of support while learning to think independently.

class facts from them.

She started taking social science classes thinking she’d go into high school teaching. Then an advisor asked her if she’d considered graduate school. She began taking physical and human geography classes and discovered: “This is everything I like and everything I see around me.”

“If I had gone to USC, I wouldn’t have found my discipline because I wouldn’t have had professors who knew me.”

From Stanislaus, she went to Louisiana State University for her master’s and doctoral degrees. After holding a visiting professor position at Kansas State University, she zeroed in on two job offers, one from Minot State University in North Dakota and the other from Au-

burn University in Alabama.

She spent nine years at Auburn, gaining tenure and taking on some administrative roles. It was perhaps predictable that she chose Auburn, but it was not a choice without regret. Some part of her wondered what would have happened if she’d chosen the smaller state college with faculty who knew their students by name.

She eventually realized that although Auburn is a public land-grant university, it had wealthy students who were nothing like her. When she started at Auburn, the largest general education classes had 100-150 students. By the time she left, those sections had 300 students. There’s no way to know students by name in classes that big.

When a chance to join Southeast Missouri State as a department head arose 10 years ago, she took it. While she was there, university enrollment decreased from about 14,000 to 9,000 as colleges nationally saw declining numbers. A reorganization on campus left her restless.

The opportunity at UAFS was well-timed.

“Being able to return to a College of Arts & Sciences

at a student-centered institution like the University of Arkansas - Fort Smith feels like returning to my academic roots after many years away,” she said when her appointment was announced. “Not only does this opportunity allow me that chance to support, collaborate with, and learn from students, faculty, and staff across the heart of the institution, but also contribute to the larger region.”

Leading a college whose classes, faculty, and students are spread across the campus encourages Alexander to look for formal and informal ways to connect. “I get my big old candy bag and roam the halls,” she said.

She intends to continue reaching out until connections are second nature. “We are one college,” she said.

COLLEGE OF BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY

CBI Grad Shares Wisdom to Make a Difference

Sunshine Bartlett, UAFS class of 2011, stays busy. She is a senior vice president and human resources manager at Arvest Bank in Fort Smith. She graduated – Summa Cum Laude – from a three-year program at Barret School of Banking in Memphis. She also is the board president for the Single Parent Scholarship Fund in Arkansas for 2024-2025.

She's proud of all her work but has a special shine when discussing Single Parent scholarships.

"I came from a single-parent household, and I saw how my mom struggled to do things," she said. "I am invested in the single-parent cause, especially in Arkansas."

The Single Parent Scholarship Fund website notes that 35% of Arkansas single-parent families live below the poverty level. Bartlett believes there is a solution.

"Education and poverty are directly linked," Bartlett said. "Money makes a difference."

Bartlett, who has been on the Single Parent Scholarship board since 2019, said she was especially proud of the organization during the COVID-19 pandemic. The organization freed up money to help some of its many rural students who lacked internet or laptops. The fund was able to help.

Bartlett supports the services Single Parent offers

students beyond cash awards.

"It's not just 'Here's 16 hundred dollars,'" she said. "It's about the wrap-around services." Those services might include a class about car maintenance or banking literacy. Mentoring, advising, and listening are always in the mix.

UAFS provides a 25% match for students who receive Single Parent scholarships and attend the university. In sup-

porting these students, UAFS demonstrates its mission to empower the social mobility of its students and, through their movement, promote the River Valley's economic growth.

As a first-generation, non-traditional student who was over 30 when she graduated, Bartlett said, she has a unique perspective. Working full-time while she went to college full-time forced her to find a way to

balance responsibilities. Taking night classes helped.

"I developed the perseverance to stick with it and graduate," she said. "And as an employer, I look at that. 'You had all these other responsibilities, but you persevered and graduated.'"

Bartlett didn't take shortcuts when building relationships on campus and in the community.

She became a member of the Collegiate Ambassador Board. This prestigious position gave her access to some of the most prominent business leaders in town, including First National Bank President and CEO Sam Sicard. First National partnered with the university to provide monthly education about various bank departments.

Bartlett encourages current students to find a way to get involved on campus despite their responsibilities.

"Look for as many resources as you can. Use your advisor. Get to know people who can help. And don't ever give up; don't take no for an answer; keep trying."

Bartlett remains active in the Fort Smith region, where she is known as a UAFS graduate.

"Sunshine Bartlett is an excellent example of the College of Business and Industry's proven ability to produce the next generation of business professionals and community leaders," said Dr. Latisha Settlage, dean of the College of Business and Industry. "Sunshine's leadership as a human resources professional is a tremendous asset to Arvest and the Fort Smith region. We are proud of her professional success."



ALUMNA:
Sunshine Bartlett
and husband
Corey Bartlett, '10,
enjoy time on
the water.

COLLEGE OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND HUMAN SCIENCES

New Program Boosts Nurse Numbers

With a critical shortage of nurses in the River Valley, UAFS is again offering a two-year associate degree in nursing.

“Knowing the nursing shortage is growing, we want to address that problem in our community to improve outcomes for our loved ones and support local agencies while improving the health of the total population of this area,” said Brooke Gray, a senior nursing instructor and director of

Windgate Foundation, whose 2022 \$18.7 million gift to the university included \$9.9 million for nursing.

“This gift has created a new beginning for nursing at UAFS by affording us the opportunity to address one of the greatest challenges of our lifetime, access to health care, by educating and training the registered nurses

programs, with most nurses graduating with Bachelor of Science in Nursing degrees. That movement pushed out many two-year programs, including UAFS’s.

course prerequisites, but program applicants must take the TEAS Exam (Test of Essential Academic Skills), earning a minimum score of 60%, maintain a cumulative GPA of 2.5 or higher, and pass all math and science classes on the degree plan in 2 or fewer attempts to progress through the program.

The associate degree of nursing and bachelor of science in nursing programs are separate, Gray said. Each program has its own faculty and classes. However, students in the two degrees are preparing for the same licensure program.

The first cohort of ADN students started classes in August. A new cohort will begin in January. For now, the maximum is 30 new students per semester. However, Gray said, if interest in the program increases and community need grows as expected, that number can be raised.

The Pendergraff Health Sciences building is big enough for both programs now. Gray and one new faculty member are teaching this fall. At least two additional faculty members will be hired in the future.

At the Peak Innovation Center, area high school students can take courses taught by UAFS faculty leading to Licensed Practical Nurse certification. Gray said instructors are letting students know how they can enter the ADN program if they want to pursue a registered nursing program after they graduate from high school.



NURSING: UAFS nursing students participate in a comprehensive exercise at the Arkansas Colleges for Health Education.

the university’s new associate degree in nursing program. It is a full circle moment, as Gray is a 2004 graduate of UAFS’s previous two-year nursing degree.

Launching the ADN program is part of the immediate and long-term nursing program expansion made possible by the

our community and our region so desperately need,” said Dr. Paula Julian, executive director of the UAFS Carolyn McKelvey Moore School of Nursing, when the gift was announced.

Gray explained that in the 2010s, a national initiative emphasized four-year nursing

However, 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the need for more nurses at every level nationwide. The need is more critical because current nursing staffs are shrinking as Baby Boomer generation nurses retire.

That said, Gray noted that the nursing shortage has been a challenge for as long as she’s been a nurse, at least 20 years.

“The shortage continues to grow,” she said. The associate degree in nursing “is our answer for our community.”

The ADN degree has no



In 2014, the Hadley family endowed a scholarship for employees who have worked at their McDonald's restaurants for six months or longer. Since that time, 34 students have received more than \$25,000 in scholarships. Michael Hadley, right, seen with his father Jim Hadley, explains why this philanthropy means so much to his family:

The University of Arkansas - Fort Smith is vital to the community. Having staff, students, and graduates living in the area helps with our economy and workforce. The campus is beautiful, and the administration works to ensure costs remain reasonable. Small class size is an added value for students and faculty. We gladly make gifts to the university because we know that is an investment in our community; as UAFS grows, so does our local economy. We feel great pride when we are able to help some of our employees with the cost of transformative education.

JOHNATHAN BREWER

CORPORATE GIVING:

To learn more about how your business can become involved in activities at UAFS, contact Christy Williams, Director of Corporate and Foundation Relations, at Christy.Williams@uafs.edu.

COMMUNITY

Winning Smiles and Gold

The Special Olympics athlete oath states, “Let me win. But if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt.” But before any athlete can make an attempt, health must come first.

In February, 26 students and five faculty from the University of Arkansas – Fort Smith dental hygiene program spent the day in Fayetteville, helping ensure athlete health was a priority. The day was Feb. 2: the Special Olympics Arkansas Winter Games. Members from UAFS’s dental hygiene program were on hand, providing care and information to keep athletes’ smiles healthy and bright.

“The overall atmosphere was fun,” exclaimed Alissa Owens, ’24. “It was fun to be there. It was fun to volunteer. It was fun working with these athletes, who were so happy to be there.”

As part of the Special Olympics’ commitment to well-being, the organization began offering free health screenings and education to athletes as part of the Special Olympics Healthy Athletes program, created in 1997. For the better part of a decade, UAFS has gone to the spring games, providing oral health screenings for Special Smiles.

The UAFS contingent provided fluoride treatments, made mouthguards, and informed athletes about oral hygiene and health. According to the Special Olympics website, four out of every 10 athletes have untreated tooth decay, and one to two need



Dr. Virginia Hardgraves, associate professor and executive director of the dental hygiene program, front left, is with Amy Price, Special Olympics athlete; Jennifer Garner, dental hygiene instructor; Jennifer Avery, coordinator of wellness and advancement coach for Special Olympics Arkansas; and dental hygiene students. Avery formerly taught dental hygiene courses at UAFS.

urgent dental care.

“It starts with dental literacy and how much you know the importance of dental care and applying it,” said Erica Mimbs, a 2025 dental hygiene grad. “Your dental health has a direct link to your whole body’s health.”

Erica’s was one of the first faces athletes saw when they came to the Special Smiles area. She screened athletes,

gathering their names, reviewed medical histories, and determined whether they would be receiving a fluoride treatment or getting a mouthguard for the games.

Erica would hand them off to Makenzie McBride, ’24, who would screen the athletes with a faculty member and assess whether they needed dental care or attention. From



McBride, athletes visited Owens, who assisted in making mouthguards and explained the benefits of wearing one.

Like dental patients everywhere, athletes left with a new toothbrush, toothpaste, and floss.

“We got a lot of thank yous, smiles, and laughs,” said Owens. “The athletes weren’t the only ones rewarded.”

Jennifer Avery, the coordinator of wellness and advancement coach for Special Olympics Arkansas and a former UAFS dental hygiene instructor, says close to 90% of athletes received care at the games. She credits volunteers, like the students, alumni, and faculty of UAFS, for such a high turnout.

“Compared to other programs across the nation, our completion rate is very good. We couldn’t do it if we didn’t have volunteers and folks willing and able to do this,” Avery said.

COURTESY

Starting College on the Best Footing

At the University of Arkansas - Fort Smith, leaders know that first-generation college students, especially those who face economic hardship, must prepare for college long before they are eligible for Cub Camp. So the university offers an array of opportunities that help pre-college students start their journey at no financial cost to themselves.

Upward Bound

The future of student success begins as early as 9th grade. At UAFS, the Upward Bound Classic and Upward Bound Math/Science programs work with high school students with financial need who would become the first in their families to attend college. This federal TRIO Program began in the 1960s to help students progress from high school to college and beyond to break the cycle of poverty.

“We help students be as successful in high school as they can be so that post-secondary education leads to jobs,” said

Christin Staats, executive director of Upward Bound Programs at UAFS.

Staats and her team set objectives that “are both ambitious and attainable” for their students each year as part of their Annual Performance Report to the U.S. Department of Education to prove that both programs are doing the job. Upward Bound Classic and Upward Bound Math/Science have repeatedly achieved their benchmarks and exceeded expectations.

After the 2022-2023 academic year, more than 100 high schoolers, grades 9-12, continued school during the 2023-2024 school year at the next grade level or graduated with their diploma. Almost every student maintained a GPA of 2.5 or better; more than half enrolled in college or were accepted; and over two-thirds of the Upward Bound Math/Science students scored proficient or better on state assessments in reading, language arts, and math.

Summer Academy

Some high school students attend the five-week Summer Academy at UAFS, where they continue to build upon skills to prepare them for the classroom in the fall. During these few weeks, students live on the UAFS campus and take courses taught by professors designed to introduce concepts they will see during the next academic year.

WATC

UAFS also offers two concurrent programs, the Western Arkansas Technical Center and Smart Start, allowing high school juniors and seniors to earn both high school and college credit. Some will complete high school with a diploma and a certificate of proficiency or associate degree. Others will have college credits to start their programs.

“It’s an opportunity for the student to gain credit without having to pay out of pocket,” said Amanda Seidenzahl, director of early college programs.

“It’s really a scholarship back to that student if they look at it from that perspective.”

While the programs are similar – allowing students to earn university credit before officially attending college – there are slight differences between WATC and Smart Start. But the ultimate goal is to get students prepared for whatever comes next.

Those enrolled in WATC can learn what it takes to become welders, nurses, or advanced industry professionals in robotics, computer-integrated machining, electrical technology, or network engineering. Many go straight into careers, while others use WATC to save money before pursuing a degree.

Through **Smart Start**, students complete general education courses like Composition I and II, U.S. History, and college algebra. All classes are taught by UAFS faculty and can be attended online or in person throughout a traditional semester.



WATC: At Western Arkansas Technical Center classes students earn both high school and college credit as they progress toward a career.

Finding A Future in the Forest

Dr. Maurice Testa, associate professor of geoscience, knows natural talent when he sees it. And when he looked at Perla Romero three years ago, he saw it.

Perla, then a student in the College of Business and Industry planning to become a certified public accountant, was fulfilling a general education requirement in a physical geology class.

Here's what Testa remembers from that class: "At first, I would see her mumble the answers very quietly and not raise her hand, though she always had the correct answer. I started calling on her to answer questions, and once she built up some confidence, she volunteered an answer to nearly every question."

By the time Perla turned up in an Earth science course the next semester, she was a different person.



GEOSCIENCE: Junior and senior geoscience students are in Yellowstone National Park as part of the Geology of the National Parks course, which also includes visits to Petrified Forest and Grand Teton National parks.

COURTESY

Perla Romero: In Her Words

In the summer of 2024, senior geology major Perla Romero had an internship at the Hiawatha National Forest in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. She said she learned about Michigan geology, soils, ecology, and timber sales. She is especially proud that she increased her expertise in ArcGIS software.

What did you do? (Geology for Dummies style, please)

I used LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) data to find karst features in the forest. Karst features are made from breaking down carbonate rocks like limestone over time. The main features I helped map were sinkholes. A sinkhole is a depression in the carbonate-rich bedrock due to acidic rainfall eroding the limestone deep within. As acidic rain travels through limestone it will eventually create a void that will grow until it causes a collapse of the topmost layer.

Finding sinkholes is important because they are a direct passage

for our groundwater. If sinkholes are not monitored and protected, the groundwater could be contaminated.

After I found features using LiDAR and other satellite imagery data, I needed to verify in person they were true karst features. I made a database for all karst features that included depth, size, a photo of the feature, and other key information. This helped keep track of verified karst features and areas that needed to be checked.

What will you take with you from this experience? Do you know what comes next?

During my internship with the Forest Service, I realized this is what I want to do as a career. I fell in love with working outside and collaborating with different specialties within the organization focused on conserving our National Forest for the future generations.

After I graduate with my bachelors in May, I plan on pursuing a master's degree in hydrology with a concentration in karst hydrology. It would be



GRAND TETON: Students explore geology in a stream.

“This time, she was not shy and went beyond just answering questions,” Testa said. “She would ask more in-depth questions back at me. ... Her scientific curiosity about the subjects and obvious interest in geoscience made her a natural fit.”

Perla began to see herself in the field.

“I thought, ‘You know what? This is what I want to do. This is

what I feel is my purpose,’” she said.

“Perla is a detail-oriented student,” Testa said. “She is extremely organized and always has her next two or three steps planned out. (She) has transferred many of the organizational and analytical skills from her time in business courses into her geoscience work.”

Now a senior geology major,

Perla has completed a second internship with the National Forest Service in Michigan. She had a chance to use GIS (Geographic Information System) software to map underground features and confirm them with “ground truthing” – going into the forest to see if the real world matches the features of the GIS map.

Testa explained the connection between Fort Smith

students and the Hiawatha National Forest in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

“I have been working with the National Forest Service since 2018. My students and I have been working in the Hiawatha National Forest every summer for the last four years,” he said. “Originally, our project was investigating a 400-million-year-old coral reef system. We have since expanded to other projects, including mapping, groundwater dye tracing, and even quantifying microplastics.”

Perla’s internship allowed her to work on “groundwater, soil science, and GIS mapping projects (that) will enhance her skill set and make her a more competitive candidate for graduate school and in the job market.”

That is the critical role of internships.

amazing if I could collaborate with others on research abroad. My dream is to become a forest hydrologist at some point in my career. However, I am open to other career opportunities that allow me to work outside.

How did UAFS prepare you for this experience?

I am a Fort Smith native that truly never thought about leaving Arkansas. It wasn’t until I joined the UAFS Geoscience program that I realized there were opportunities everywhere! During my three years at UAFS I have travelled to 14 states and seven national parks. I was fortunate to start a research portfolio as an undergraduate geology student. This year will be my second national conference where I present my research to geologists from all over the world. Opportunities like these have elevated my confidence as a woman in geosciences.

I feel grateful to have passionate professors who prepared me well. Beyond geology material, UAFS has helped me develop professionalism

and strong leadership skills. Being a writing tutor on campus has given me hands-on teaching experience. As for professionalism, I am close to completing the gold level professional development program from Career Services.

I credit my leadership and problem-solving skills from my time in Student Government and leading registered student organizations like the Geology Club. As a first-generation student I made it my goal to use school resources to build up a good foundation that made me well equipped for opportunities like the one at the Forest Service.



MAURICE TESTA

COURTESY





Walking on Sunshine

These first-year students are headed to the showcase dance competition that is an annual part of Cub Camp, UAFS's three-day student-led orientation program. Combining fun activities with information about the university and the insights of upperclass students, the camp offers new students the chance to start the semester with a list of student resources, a knowledge of where the classroom buildings – and the Starbucks – are located, and, most of all, friends.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RACHEL PUTMAN

From the Sidelines to the Main Stage

In the first game of the fall athletic calendar – a volleyball home and conference opener on Sept. 27 – spectators had a chance to see the national championship UAFS cheer team.

Last year, the cheer team performed at nearly 40 volleyball and basketball home stands. The team was there to celebrate big plays, rev up the energy when it was low, and entertain fans with their acrobatic prowess. Then, the hours of practice and cheering at games all came down to less than five minutes on the year’s biggest stage, the NCAA Collegiate National Championships in Daytona, Florida.

Head cheer coach Branden Gregory described the event as a time where “you don’t get a redo; there’s no starting over.” But this is a team built on tradition, and the moment isn’t too big for the athletes who finally got their chance to shine.

The trip to close the 2024 season was the Lions’ 14th consecutive appearance. It concluded with UAFS returning to Fort Smith as National Champions, their fifth title since 2015.

“The feeling is indescribable,” said senior captain Alexis Gibson.

“You go through the whole year putting your body through so much, and then at the end to win, you just feel like it’s so worth it,” seconded senior captain Alexis Davis.

Both women were part of



CHAMPS: A trip to Daytona is always fun, but earning a national championship elevates the experience.

the 2022 national championship team and felt the sting of coming in second place in 2023. Fellow captain Abby Barker, a

junior, was competing for a national title for the first time. She described coming home with another banner and trophy to

add to the case in the Stubblefield Center as “amazing.”

“We wanted it. We didn’t want to make any mistakes,” Abby said.

The three captains described the moment UAFS was crowned as surreal, each reliving the moment before sharing the experience. It was as if time stood still before UAFS was called, they said; then the team stormed the mat – sharing tears of joy, shouting in happiness, and embracing as a family. The hours of dedication, dancing, stunting, and tumbling had all paid off.

With five titles and more than a dozen straight appearances in Daytona, UAFS has established itself as one of the best Division II squads in the nation. It is also one of only a few in the country supported by their institution’s athletic department, said Gregory, adding another measure of setting the standard.

The 2024 championship team will once again celebrate their victory during the basketball season.

Watch a recap video of the Cheer team’s journey to Daytona.





MASCOTS: Schools in the MIAA gathered for a day of Royals baseball in July.

Day at the K Brings Old Friends and New

The beginning of fall athletics marked the start of the inaugural season for the University of Arkansas – Fort Smith in the Mid-America Intercollegiate Athletic Association. The Lions officially joined the MIAA on June 26, becoming the first member from Arkansas to join the association full-time. UAFS staff quickly rubbed elbows with their new athletic opponents. UAFS joined fellow schools in Kansas City, Missouri, on July 21 for the MIAA Day at The K. Universities, their teams, and fans were invited to an afternoon Major League Baseball game between the Kansas City Royals and Chicago White Sox.

For one Lion, the MIAA Day at The K was as much of a

celebration of what she’s done since graduation as a reunion with those she considers family. Ana Demmer graduated from UAFS in 2020 with a degree in media communication. The volleyball standout played four seasons at UAFS before



SUPERSTAR: Ana Demmer.

continuing her education and playing at the University of Louisiana-Monroe, where she earned her master’s degree in public administration with an emphasis on sports management. After graduation, Demmer began working for the Royals’ social media team before accepting a social media strategist position at Garmin.

When she heard UAFS joined the MIAA and would attend the Day at The K, Demmer knew she had to be there.

“It was an overwhelming moment of gratitude,” she said. “I felt like it was a state of completion, like something had come full circle, and it was so good to get reconnected with people.”

That afternoon, Demmer connected with people who had influenced her as a student and athlete at UAFS. Thanks to her affiliation with the Royals, Demmer was joined on the field by UAFS Athletic Director Curtis Janz, Senior Associate Athletic Director Katie Beineke, Campus and Community Engagement Director Ashley Goodson, and others from UAFS Athletics.



Read about Ana’s lasting impact on campus and beyond.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
RACHEL PUTMAN



Just Anno

Chancellor Terisa Riley needs her running, dancing, and boardroom shoes to connect with her community, but on August 15, she flies through the day in heels.



PROPERTY
ORANGE
CAMP

CAMP
FOR SMITH

Great ther Day

FORT SMITH.

Chancellor's Update: Fall 2024



To keep up with UAFS Chancellor Terisa Riley, you'll need to train for a sprint - and a marathon. On August 15, she checks in with nearly every facet of her community ahead of the new semester. Using her iPhone's voice-to-text feature to answer questions and keep pace, she welcomes faculty and new students, checks in with the Fort Smith Regional Chamber of Commerce, makes plans with Staff Senate, and tells the UAFS story to area journalists. Finally, she heads back to her office and ensures everything is ready for tomorrow's race.





The Life and Career of Dr. Charles Preston

A Feather in His Cap

BY IAN SILVESTER

University of Arkansas – Fort Smith alum Dr. Charles “Chuck” Preston, 40 years into his biology career with no signs of slowing, has educated millions of people and up-ended the way visitors experience natural history museums.

Born at Fort Chaffee in 1952, Preston grew up in the area and had two passions in life: wildlife and baseball. The 1970 Northside High School grad leveraged his prowess on the baseball diamond to attend Westark Junior College.

Preston attended Westark in the early 1970s. He was part of the 1972 Lions baseball team that, under the direction of coach Bill Crowder, racked up a 31-18 season and secured an NJCAA Region II Sub-Regional Championship.

Preston always found solace in nature. A hunting trip with his dad at Fort Chaffee changed his life and laid the foundation for his education and career.

“I was about 7 or 8 years old, and my dad and I were driving through the Chaffee reservation when my dad pulled off the road,” Preston recalled. “He said, ‘Look up there,’ and I have these little hand-me-down binoculars, and I was looking up. Sure enough, I finally saw it. It was silhouetted first, and just a little beam of light came through, and I could see this huge, great-horned owl, and his big yellow eyes were looking at me. ...

We watched it fly off into the darkness, and it made a real impression on me.”

Preston carried this encounter with him to Arkansas Tech University,



COURTESY



CHARLES PRESTON
Infielder, Sophomore letterman from
Fort Smith.

WESTARK: Preston was part of the 1972 championship baseball team.



RAPTORS: Preston's research on golden eagles showed their importance in their ecosystem.

“They told me I’d create from the ground floor and lead the design and development. How many people have the opportunity to do that?” – Charles Preston, biologist and museum creator



RESEARCH: Museum administration didn’t dull Preston’s passion for wildlife.

where he continued playing baseball and earned a bachelor’s degree in biology and wildlife management.

Preston landed his first museum job at the Arkansas Museum of Science and History in Little Rock. There wasn’t a job available, but his charismatic personality won over the museum director. Preston started his career in museums by cleaning animal cages. While it wasn’t glorious, it did afford him the opportunity to learn how to curate scientific collections and exhibits and gave him the “fuel to go to grad school.”

He completed his master’s degree and Ph.D. in zoology with an emphasis in ecology, both from the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. After earning his Ph.D., Preston followed wife Penny, an award-winning broadcast reporter, to Little Rock. There, he started as a visiting assistant professor of biology at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and later became a tenured professor. At UALR, Preston helped create the wildlife curriculum and curated the university’s small museum.

“It’s one of the first times I was in the position to be on the ground floor of something,” he said. “I fit very nicely.”

Heading West

Preston’s UALR tenure concluded in 1989 when he was recruited by the Denver Museum of Natural History, now the Denver

Museum of Nature & Science. Leaving his tenured professorship was difficult, but the opportunity to work at a renowned institution in the Rockies was exciting, Preston said.

By December 1989, Preston moved to the Mile High City as curator of ornithology and chairman of the Department of Zoology.

Preston continued working at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science until the summer of 1998. He joked that he could have stayed longer if he hadn’t answered the call of a lifetime.

“When I got the call, I was leading a field trip in southern Colorado, and this guy said, ‘We’re creating a brand-new natural history museum, and we’d like for you to come interview.’ I asked, ‘Who is this?’ and he said the Buffalo Bill Historical Center like I should have known it, and I did not,” Preston said with a laugh.



SOUTHWARD: While teaching at UALR, Preston traveled to Belize.

Near Yellowstone National Park, the center comprised a world-class art museum, a Plains Indian museum, a firearms museum, and a history museum about Buffalo Bill. However, the center was rebranding to become the Buffalo Bill Center of the West and was searching for someone to create and direct a new addition: a natural history museum.

Former Wyoming Sen. Alan Simpson was serving as the center’s board chairman and wouldn’t take no for an answer from Preston.

“Simpson and the center’s executive

COURTESY



Unflappable Passion for Ornithology

Being hired to create and curate the Draper Natural History Museum, a part of the Buffalo Bill Center of the West, not only gave UAFA alum Dr. Charles Preston international fame in the world of museums, but it also provided him access to the pristine Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. There, he rediscovered his love of birds, especially raptors.

Preston is one of the world's best-known researchers of golden eagles. So what led him to these birds? Preston said he came along at the right time with the right ideas.

"Golden eagles became a big concern in the West because of wind turbines and lead poisoning from ammunition. It was coming to the forefront in the fact that some of those populations in the West were declining," he explained.

After Preston retired from the Draper in 2018, he was named senior curator emeritus and research associate at the Teton Raptor Center. Today, he is in his 16th year of researching golden eagles and has banded over 100 of them throughout his time in the field.

Dr. Anant Deshwal is an assistant professor of biology at Bradley University at Peoria, Illinois. Shortly after studying under Preston at the University of Arkansas, Deshwal joined him to study golden eagles. He explained that his dream as a student was to work with Preston in the field.

"For Preston, conservation and creating awareness is not a job description; it's his way of life," Deshwal said. "I think he's the only person I know who has the unique ability to conduct research to the highest standards while being able to connect with non-research folks at whatever level they are most comfortable with. ... After a feature display, I saw people come up and ask what they needed to do to help. They're not conservation biologists, but that's the impact he has."

Preston's research studies the eagles through their the harmonious balance with their prey, cottontail rabbits. The equilibrium between the two species populations was apparent, but what he found beyond the surface has proved critical for both animals' survival.

"We monitored nesting success and reproductive rate, assuming that we would get a baseline after a couple of years. But we discovered that it fluctuated a lot from year to year. We found that as the cottontail cycle goes up and down, so does the golden eagle's reproduction. ... That cycle worked beautifully, and then all of a sudden, when we expected the eagles to come up after a low, neither rabbits nor eagles came up," Preston explained.

A virus native to Europe had found its way to the Bighorn Basin, hurting both the cottontails and golden eagles. Preston's research showed that in 2020, the population cycle should have rebounded, but it didn't.

"Rabbit hemorrhagic disease emerged," Preston stated. "It really hit our population hard, especially in the Bighorn Basin. ... That's one of the reasons I'm still doing all this - because there are more questions to answer."

Although Preston has eased up in his daily activities, he doesn't think he will be packing it in anytime soon, even at 72.

"I feel like I could live forever," Preston joked.

He and wife Penny have been together for nearly 50 years and currently split their time between Mountainburg, Arkansas, and the Greater Yellowstone area.

"I give myself one day at a time. I have visions of what I want to do in the future, but I enjoy every day. I don't take it for granted," Preston said.

director, Byron Price, called me directly after that and said, 'We would really like you to come up,' and he explained a little bit more about what was going on," Preston said. "They told me I'd create from the ground floor and lead the design and development. How many people have the opportunity to do that?"

Preston arrived in Cody, Wyoming, with a blank slate and \$20 million backing from Nancy-Carroll Draper, a Center trustee who championed the addition of a natural history museum. For four years, from 1998 until 2002, Preston worked with architects from Denver and exhibit designers from New York City, to design, create, and fill 50,000 square feet of museum space. According to the center's website, the result is an "innovative, informative, and inspiring exhibit experience."

The Draper Natural History Museum opened on June 4, 2002, drawing a crowd that included prominent figures like paleoanthropologist Richard Leaky, a Kenyan conservationist, and actor and director Clint Eastwood. As visitors travel through the museum, they are treated to sights, sounds, and smells that match the area of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem they are touring, from mountains to the plains basin.

"(It's) considered a model for a whole new genre of natural history museums," Preston said proudly.

Hired by Preston in 2017 as the assistant curator of the Draper, Corey Anco detailed how Preston "took a risk on a not-yet-built natural history museum."

"It takes a rare combination of ambition, risk calculation, perseverance, work ethic, and gumption to achieve what he did with the Draper," Anco wrote in an email. "It was (Preston's) drive to share his knowledge with others in engaging and immersive ways that make the Draper a special, first-of-its-kind natural history museum."

Anco's sentiment was seconded by Dr. D. Tim White, a retired Air Force General and former member of the Center's advisory board who now works as a professor at the University of Maryland.

"The Draper is as experiential as the Guggenheim is immersive. ... That was (Preston's) idea. He pulled it off, not just better than anybody else, but before anybody else."

Preston retired from the Draper in 2018 and was named senior curator emeritus and research associate at the Teton Raptor Center.

Chuck and Penny Preston spend summers in the Greater Yellowstone area, where he continues his research, and she reports as a Yellowstone correspondent. They spend winters in Mountainburg.

Read more
about alum
Dr. Charles
Preston



ALUMNI

FAMILY TRADITION

Double Dose of Graduation

It wasn't a clerical error when Joshua Merritt's name was listed twice as a graduate during the 2024 spring commencement at the University of Arkansas - Fort Smith. The 19-year-old college grad - that's not a typo - celebrated the completion of not one but two bachelor's degrees while walking across the stage in separate ceremonies.

Merritt shook the hand of Chancellor Terisa Riley when he received his degree in electrical engineering technology in the College of Business and Industry. Earlier in the day, he accepted his degree in mechanical engineering at UAFS through the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville's College of Engineering, during the College of Arts and Sciences ceremony. So, how did he accomplish this? Well, it all started before Merritt was even a teenager.

When most 12-year-olds prepare for what's next in middle school, Merritt was busy prepping for the ACCUPLACER, a series of tests to evaluate his math, reading, and writing skill levels. He was homeschooled and found that he quickly grasped topics and succeeded in working ahead.

"It was definitely a lot of work," he acknowledged. "I wasn't taking shortcuts or given grades. I was going through grades faster. It was two math lessons a day instead of one, that sort of thing. ... My parents were very dedicated to helping me get through all the required courses so that I would be ready for college."

Merritt's hard work paid off. He passed the ACCUPLACER and



DOUBLE DEGREES: Joshua Merritt, seen here with his father Jason Merritt, celebrated at two commencement ceremonies in May.

was admitted to UAFS, where his dad, Jason, is a senior instructor in the College of Business and Industry.

At 13, Merritt attended his first course at UAFS as he embarked on completing his bachelor's degree. The university limited him to only two classes during his first semester to ensure his success. Merritt proved he was up to the task.

By 15, he was about halfway through the program, but he joked that because he was still too young to work, he had time to spare for another degree path.

"I decided that instead of pushing through and getting done with my bachelor's at 17 and having to wait a year before I can be employed in a goal-congruent role somewhere that can use my skills, I decided I would like to do another degree," he explained.

After meeting with professors and mentors, Merritt was sold on

the idea of pursuing mechanical engineering to get "both sides of the coin."

Merritt said his journey wasn't without challenges - inside and outside the classroom.

"As I moved toward my first day of actual classes, I don't know how to describe it - somewhere between super nervous and just terrified," Merritt said. "At the time, being 13, I was so much smaller than everybody else. It was definitely challenging for the first few weeks to talk with people a whole lot because I just didn't have the depth to be able to communicate with my peers."

As time passed, he began to connect with classmates and professors. He made detailed schedules for when he was in class, studying, working on assignments, or taking a break to reduce stress. Despite proactive steps, obstacles still arose.

He remembers a specific day

during a 21-credit-hour semester, a day he remembers as the lowest point in his college career.

"I got some really bad, bad news from several of my classes, and it was just going really, really awful that day," Merritt said. "I was talking with my dad in the engineering lab, and I was able to hold myself together through quite a lot of difficulties, but that was one of the only times that I actually cried because there was just so much weight from so many different directions."

Having accomplished so much so early in life, Merritt was determined not to let this define the outcome for the remainder of his time at UAFS.

"I took the approach of saying, 'Whatever I'm facing right now isn't too big, and it's just one more step.' ... I wasn't afraid to do things awfully the first time, ... and I would come back and work through it again and make it better," he explained.

As Merritt recounted his worst day at UAFS, he detailed how that day had a silver lining: meeting his future employer. Mars Petcare attended a career fair held by the Babb Center for Career Services, and Merritt landed a job.

"I was working as a junior controls technician," he said. "They created that role for me so that I would go to a controls technician role after graduation."

Merritt credits his accomplishments to his professors, parents, and peers. Reflecting on his years at UAFS, graduation stood alone as his favorite memory, and not because he got to shake Riley's hand twice.

"It was an honor to clap for every single person in both of those ceremonies," he said with a smile. "It was awesome every time."

AWARD WINNERS

Outstanding Alumni Celebrated

Homecoming 2024 saw five graduates and friends of the university recognized at the alumni brunch.

The **Distinguished Alumni Award**, the highest honor bestowed by Alumni Engagement, was presented to **Stephanie London**, assistant dean of students at UAFS. Nominations described London as “an intentional and meaningful leader. ... Stephanie has definitely shown outstanding, consistent, and persistent leadership in her professional life.”

Young Alumni Awards were presented to **Dr. Daniel Fudge, '12**, and **Jaime Vargas, '18 and '23**. A nominator said Fudge “represents the best example of the opportunities and educational foundation UAFS provides its graduates.” Fudge is an assistant professor of political science at the University of the Ozarks.

Vargas completed a bachelor’s degree in psychology in 2018 and served six years as a combat engineer in the U.S. Army. In the fall of 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, he returned to UAFS for a master’s degree in healthcare administration. He oversees three pediatric clinics and 20 providers in Northwest Arkansas.

Adjunct faculty member **Sara Putman** received the **Spirit of Numa Award**, which recognizes non-alumni friends of the university. She was nominated as “a constant and passionate supporter of UAFS ... and a warm and friendly neighbor to the UAFS Center for Economic Development.”

Dr. Nicki Stancil, associate professor of English, Rhetoric and Writing, and Media Communication, received the **Stacey Jones Outstanding Faculty and Staff Award** for her consistent effort to set students up for success as learners, young professionals, and people.

Homecoming 2025 will be the week of Feb. 10, with the Alumni Brunch on Feb. 15. Watch your email for details.

ALUMNI ADVISORY COUNCIL

LOGAN PARKS, CHAIR

Secretary - Ashley Hill
Engagement Chair - Sam Winterberg
Membership Chair - Jacqui Lyle
Fundraising Chair - Lindsey Steiger Muck

Jennifer Kelly, Jeremy Wann, Kevin Farrell, Heather Deere,
Josh Funmaker, Shelli Henehan, Laura Schmutz Beltran,
Maddie Stojanovic, Morgan Karsten

UAFS Business Directory

As you consider your holiday shopping decision, we ask you to consider alumni-owned businesses as listed in the Alumni Business Directory.

The directory highlights businesses in the hopes that graduates will support other graduates for the items and services they need. But even if you aren't in the market for anything special right now, we want to celebrate fellow Lions' entrepreneurial spirit.

Business categories include food and beverage, retail, and services, with more to be added as businesses are added.

Scan the QR code below to see the directory or to submit your business for inclusion.



Looking for Class Notes?

We've gone digital!

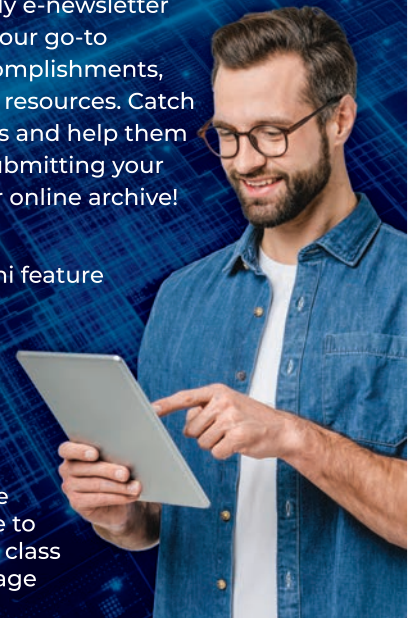
Lion Lines – a quarterly e-newsletter for UAFS alumni – is your go-to source of alumni accomplishments, announcements, and resources. Catch up on your classmates and help them catch up on you by submitting your own Class Note to our online archive!

You'll also find:

- University and alumni feature stories and news
- Upcoming events for alumni and their families



Scan the QR code to visit the class notes page



RENAISSANCE WOMAN

Former Nurse Followed Winding Road to Feeding Her Community

Angela Perkins describes the route from Westark Community College in the 1970s to her current life as a rollercoaster. It's that and more.

Since attending Westark, now the University of Arkansas - Fort Smith, Perkins has been a cardiovascular ICU nurse, a neonatal ICU nurse, a landman in the oil and gas industry, a culinary student, a competitive chef, and the executive chef and proprietor of a bed and breakfast in North Canton, Ohio.

But the part of her life she likes to talk most about starts with coffee in the morning and

a quick review of the pantry to answer the question, "What can I make to share with my community today?"

Perkins is the owner and chef of Poggio Amorelli, a bed and breakfast inn in Ohio. The B&B has connections to Poggio Amorelli winery in Tuscany, Italy. The building was once her husband's family home, and the B&B opened officially in 2014, according to a recent story in the Canton Repository.

After 27 years in nursing, including stints at Sparks (now Baptist Hospital) and St. Edward Mercy (now Mercy Hospital),

Perkins looked for something different, and she became a landman. After moving to Ohio, she spent seven years traveling the country doing title work for gas companies.

"Then I just got an idea about having a bed and breakfast," she said. At the same time, she wanted to share her lifelong love of baking.

So, she said, "I just jumped feet-first into the culinary industry."

Perkins attended the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York, and the Culinary Vegetable Institute in Milan,

Ohio. She studied pastry making at the French Institute at Chicago and traveled the world, learning from chefs in France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and the Canary Islands. She sometimes makes food for the Princess cruise line.

"I love cooking," she said. "I'm still learning because there is always something new to learn."

She was a Top 80 finisher for MasterChef 7. A follower on LinkedIn, who urged viewers to vote for Perkins, wrote, "I am a big supporter of Angela ... because of the love she pours into communities and through the delectable food she gives to those (in) need."

When Perkins talks about "food to share with my community," she isn't just talking about food for guests in the B&B or the frequent giveaways on her Facebook page. She is speaking about the mission to which she and her husband feel bound: feeding the hungry and unhoused, especially veterans, and extra-especially those with children.

Angela Perkins, 66, said she and her husband, 71, bought a 40-foot RV a few years ago.

"We fill it up with fruits and breads and pasties and cookies, all homemade, and we find these people, humbly and respectfully approach them, and try to help. We've been blessed to be able to do this for the last few years. And it's just a goal for me: How can I make someone



SHARING: Alum Angela Perkins offers cooking and baking classes for children and adults at her B&B.

COURTESY

else's life better?" she said.

"I LOVE making cookies and cupcakes because those things bring a smile to people. So I'll get up and make a couple of dozen batches of cookies, get them decorated and cured, and the next day go out and hand cookies out to people."

She does more traditional B&B things, too. She holds cooking classes for children 5-18 and for couples and small groups of people. She holds date-night dinners in the Poggio Amorelli dining room.

In the winter, Perkins and her husband will go to Europe, and "I'll meet more chefs and learn more things, and bring them back, and teach more people. It's an adventure," she said.

Perkins, who attended City Heights Elementary and Van Buren High School, remembers her time at Westark as a crazy time.

"I was going to school, and working two jobs, and trying to balance time and family, and trying to find time for myself," she said. "If I could talk to someone in school today, I would tell them to turn around and take a deep breath and find some time to be good to (themselves). If you get wrapped up in different things, you end up losing yourself. The key is to find that balance. Do what you need to do, but take time to be still, take a deep breath, and find time to love yourself so you can do that for others."

"And if I had to do it all over, I'd - You know what? If I had it to do all over, I wouldn't change anything because that's what made me who I am today."



Help is Here

SUIT UP STUDIO: Junior Natalie Chuong shows career-appropriate apparel available for students and alumni.

The Babb Center for Career Services at UAFS is known for the many services it offers undergraduates. Now, Executive Director Susan Krafft wants you to know those services are also available to alumni. Services include everything from career interest testing to resume reviews to career fairs. And it's all free.

Lions' Chance to Connect

Perhaps the most popular service is Lions CareerLink, a site students can use to post resumes and employers can use to post openings. Unlike similar services used by some universities, Lions CareerLink is very hands-on.

Before a student's resume is posted, someone from the Babb Center staff will review it and, if appropriate, "make corrections and suggestions," Krafft said. "We're not trying to be judge-y; we just want to make sure you are posting something you're proud of, something that will get you the interview."

Jobs, too, are vetted.

"We weed through the jobs, so only postings that would be appropriate for students and grads in our majors and programs make it to the site," Krafft said. She recently rejected a job posting looking for a second-year law student because that wouldn't be useful for UAFS students.

"Local companies have jobs and internships they want to fill with college students or grads with specific majors. If they use Lions CareerLink, they don't have to go to Indeed or LinkedIn. It's an easy, fast way to get to the exact audience they want," she said, adding that national corporations also post openings.

What Do I Do Now?

For alumni who may feel restless in their first jobs, the Babb Center can recommend interest testing. The university pays for every student to use the Focus 2 service. Looking at students' answers to various questions, Focus 2 helps them discover the

most fulfilling majors and careers. Alumni still have access to their profiles. Babb Center staff may also recommend mynextmove.org, a free site hosted by the U.S. Department of Labor.

Even college grads can benefit from this testing, Krafft said. "Alumni may look at their job and wonder what else they can do with their major and training."

As they zero in on a new job path, alumni can connect with the Babb Center to schedule some interview prep or even a practice interview.

Looking the Part

Students and alumni want to put their best foot forward when they're on the hunt for a job, and the Babb Center has a couple of ways to help. In March and October, students and alumni can participate in SuitUp, a special buying opportunity at JCPenney in Central Mall. Participants check in when they arrive at JCPenney and receive a coupon to take 20-30 percent off their purchases. SuitUp events each semester are on the Sunday before the All-Majors Career Fair on campus.

The Babb Center offers the Suit Up Studio with gently worn business apparel available at no cost that alumni may use.

Come to the Fairs

Alumni are also welcome at networking and other career events on campus - as either a job searcher or a corporate representative.

"We love for alumni to let us know they are planning to attend and send us their resumes," Krafft said. "That way, we can print up copies to give them when they arrive. And if we see anything that could be improved, we can make that recommendation."

Some corporate recruiters, like J.B. Hunt, ArcBest, and Brown-Hiller-Clark, make a point to bring UAFS alumni when they come to campus. "That way the students can talk to alumni and get a better sense of what their career path could look like," Krafft said.



Where Legacy Is Revered

Sixty-three first-year legacy students received \$1,000 scholarships for the 2024-2025 academic year. You could say these 63 students received the award because they “know someone on the inside” – specifically, they have an immediate family member who previously attended UAFS.

“We are so proud of our legacies,” said Jasmine Smith, director of Alumni Engagement and Annual Giving. “These families value a UAFS education enough to keep the tradition alive from generation to generation. This year, we have a

historic number of awards, and we plan to continue extending more offers each year.”

First-time entering students with an immediate family member who graduated from UAFS (or its predecessors: Westark College, Westark Community College, Westark Junior College, or Fort Smith Junior College) can apply for the scholarship.

This year’s scholarships were awarded from the Alumni Legacy Scholarship Endowment, the Daniels Endowment, and other unrestricted funds.



Legacy Scholarship Recipients

Dakota Langford
JD Frederiksen
Wesley Scroggins
Natalee Lomeli
Alexis McCall
Karaol Sanchez
Emerson Schaefer
Yuridia Arista
Burklee Burris
Sloane Sweeney
Brett Woolsey
Abigail Webb
Hadleigh Hickman
Hannah Hinton
Jackson Austin
Eden Cline
Billie Murray
Annabelle Gordon
Cody Schmalz
Michael Colby
Gambrell Weeks
Sabra Vann
Warren Watkins
Addison Williams
Mason Williams
Bailee Bise
Lizette Lira
Averi Abbott
Grace Johnson
Summer Flippin
Elizabeth Morrow
Holly Dingman
Parker Reed
Jacob DeSanto
Ethan Rogers
Emily Foster
Kimberly Pacheco
Alexa Matlock
Bryleigh Edmondson
Evan Cartet
Mia Moore
Arturo Diaz Aguilar
Brenden Chick
Heather Beckman
Cielo Donaghue
Lillie Sophia Peoples
Carlee Marie Reeves
Taylor Lauren Horn
Nathan Matthew Gibson
Noah Lee Dieter
Miranda Gibson
Rebekah Faith Konkler
Benjamin S. Cowen
Jacob W. Geren
Hunter Elbert Jones
Joshua Kendall Moore
Zane Kennigseder
Jackson Thomas Myers
Gary Keith Vaughan



2024-2025 Alumni Event
Presenting Sponsor

Little Lions Meet Santa Saturday, Dec. 7
 Homecoming Mini Reunion Thursday, Feb.13
 Homecoming Alumni Reunion Brunch.....Saturday, Feb. 15
 Day of Giving..... Tuesday and Wednesday, April 29 & 30
 Arvest Ball Park TBD



Scan the QR code
to visit us online



@uafsalumni



@uafsalumni



ALUMNI
UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS - FORT SMITH

The Bell Tower

A publication of the University of Arkansas - Fort Smith

UAFS Alumni Association
P.O. Box 3649
Fort Smith, AR 72913

NONPROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
PERMIT NO. 479
FORT SMITH,
ARK



JOHNATHAN BREWER

CUB CAMP: The Donald W. Reynolds Bell Tower rings in the start of fall with the annual group photo of campers who are ready to start their journeys at UAFS.