

The Bell Tower

The magazine of the University of Arkansas - Fort Smith

SPRING 2026



Legacy in the Making:

Fanny Wesley Opens Doors and Builds Opportunity Along the Way

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Chukwukere Ekeh:
A Career without Limits

Susan DeWoody:
Built on Belief,
Driven to Lead

Purpose, community
and opportunity found
thanks to university



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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
Spring 2026
Volume 15, Number 1
The University of Arkansas – Fort Smith

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Changing the World, One Student at a Time

When I was younger, I wanted to change the world. I wanted to truly make a difference. I had big dreams of a life filled with big things, things that mattered, things that caused change.

A few months ago, I was lamenting to a friend how I have not done anything spectacular. I have not changed the world. I have not made a difference.

She's a good friend. She reminded me of many things I have done to make a difference. She mentioned the typical ones. Then she said something I have remembered every day since. She said I was making education possible. In that one sentence, she reminded me of so much.

I may not be changing the world by myself, but we, here, are. We are helping to create lives, develop journeys, grow a world.

And the truly exciting thing is the people passing through these halls are changing the world. Sometimes those changes are small. Sometimes they are huge. They are all important.

We have students just starting their journeys with giant dreams and alumni who show us what happens when they dream big and succeed.

In this edition of *The Bell Tower*, you will find the regular mix of students, graduates and programs we think will interest you. More than that, you will find that mix of students, graduates and programs are making a difference. They are changing our community, our region, our world.

Fanny Wesley did not set out to be a catalyst. But she was. Her family was. They changed this city and our state just by living their lives and pursuing their dreams.

Emily Kelly is setting out to be a force of change. She is actively working now to make this world better by saving our earth. Her enthusiasm and passion for this planet on which we live are contagious.

We asked ourselves, with this edition, how are we at UAFS honoring the past? How are we shaping the future? Then we sat for a moment and looked around us. The answers are endless.

All those walking through our halls, crossing our stage and feeling the impact of what we do know the legacy of this place because they are the legacy of this place.

The legacy they are creating and will create leaves me in awe and our world a better place.

These legacies are what this institution is about, and to be a part of that allows me to do what I always dreamed—change the world.



Tina Alvey Dale
Editor of Publications

INTREPID AMBITION

CAMPAIGN *for the* RIVER VALLEY

BY THE NUMBERS

The Intrepid Ambition Campaign is the largest fundraising effort in the University's history.

More than

\$78
MILLION

has been raised,
putting us more than

92%
to our goal.

Gifts have been made by

4,866
total donors.

With more than

14
gifts of over \$1M.

Throughout the campaign,
average annual fundraising has
totalled more than

\$10M
per year.

1,928 Minutes of Opportunity



RACHEL PUTMAN

Each year University of Arkansas – Fort Smith students, faculty, staff, alumni and friends spend 1,928 minutes crowd-funding for causes close to their hearts as part of Day of Giving.

In 2025, 495 donors, supporting nearly 300 campus advocates, raised \$102,605 to support 23 projects.

This year, Day of Giving will run April 28-29, and gifts can be made online, in person, or by mail.

Totals from the 2025 Day of Giving:

- Alumni Legacy Scholarship Endowment \$5,285
- Applause \$1,720
- Baseball \$3,050
- Black Student Alliance \$855
- Boreham Library \$1,870
- Cheer \$2,250
- Cub Camp \$2,965
- Dance \$1,270
- Employee Emergency \$2,475
- First Generation Student Success \$3,628
- Finish Scholarship \$2,905

- General Scholarship \$25,160
- Ideal Women \$1,160
- Little Lions Child Development Center \$3,212
- Media Comm International Summer Class Fund \$800
- Music Department \$4,025
- Read This \$2,630
- ROTC \$3,060
- Student Nurses Association \$2,285
- Student Emergency Assistance Program \$2,960
- Study Abroad \$1,261
- Writing Center \$2,090

Campus Becomes Legacy for Hill Family

For Carol Hill, the University of Arkansas – Fort Smith feels more like home than a workplace.

Hill, an academic program specialist in the provost's office, marked her 20th year at UAFS by receiving the 2024 Lucille Speakman Award, the highest honor for staff excellence on campus. She watched her son, Derek Hill, earn Staff Member of the Year at Homecoming this year.

Carol has served as chair-elect, chair, and past chair of Staff Senate, led the campus United Way committee, and joined the 2024 Lion Leadership class. Derek now serves as Staff Senate chair for 2025-26. He was in the 2023 Lion Leadership class. Her daughter CarolAnn Sturgis works in the athletic department.

"All three of us are here," she said. "Not many people can say they work at the same place as their kids. I feel really blessed."

Carol joined UAFS in August 2004, the same year CarolAnn enrolled as a freshman. CarolAnn earned her associate degree in 2007. She met her husband, Lavelle '14, at a Lions basketball game. He proposed at midcourt during a Valentine's Day game in 2015, and they married at The Blue Lion in 2016.

Derek completed a bachelor's degree in media communication in 2016. He returned to campus as an academic coach in the Academic Success Center in 2021 after earning a master's degree from Arkansas State University.

The allure of the campus has kept it an integral part of the Hill family for more than 20 years.

"I've never felt like I was going to work," Hill said. "It's the relationships. You just don't meet a stranger here. There is a special spirit on this campus."



ON CAMPUS



Emily Kelley Finds Her Path in Conservation

Emily Kelley thought she had her future figured out when she enrolled at the University of Arkansas – Fort Smith as a psychology major, following in her mother’s footsteps. But a required biology class during her freshman year reignited a childhood love of science and changed everything.

“I took a general biology class with James Brandli, and it just reminded me how much I love science. It reminded me of something I was passionate about. The class really sparked my love for that,” Emily said.

She switched her major to biology and began preparing

for medical school.

Then, a Maymester trip to Belize with Dr. Ragupathy Kannan during her sophomore

“Dr. Kannan does such a lovely job. He brings in all these various adults, like real adults, who have

“I was like, ‘**Okay, this is so cool. This is amazing,**’” Emily said. “I’ve never been so overwhelmed with biodiversity – just the number of species. It was breathtaking.”

year opened her eyes to even more possibilities and changed the focus of her future.

Until that trip, she didn’t realize field research could be a career.

forged jobs and careers in wildlife biology,” she said.

When she returned from the trip, Emily began intensely studying ecology and natural sciences. She

spearheaded the reinstatement of the Biology Club (now the Ecology Club) and began serving as club president.

“So many other clubs are focusing on the pre-health side of things,” she said. “This club focuses on how students here can have a future in the plant and animal side of biology. It’s just as important, maybe more so, because if we don’t have an earth to live on, the doctor stuff won’t help.”

Both on and off campus, Emily tries to spread an appreciation for the outdoors, noting it’s something everyone should care about, even if it’s not something they want to make their career.



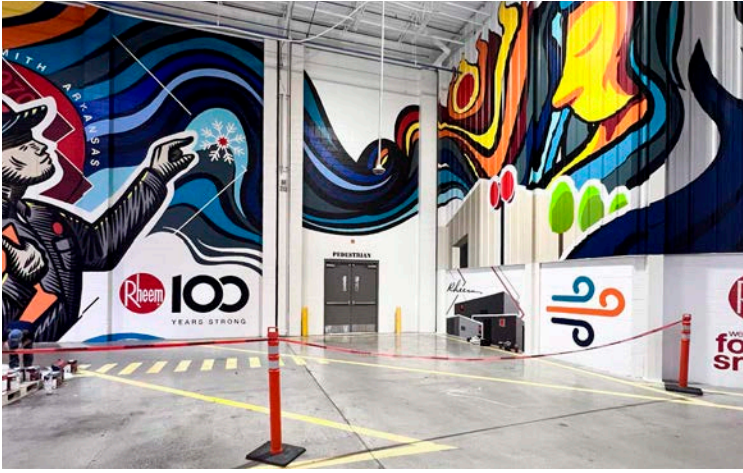
This fall, she presented at the inaugural Research Den community forum, where she led a session on how all citizens can help map Arkansas' alligators, lizards, and turtles. And this spring, she traveled to the Arkansas Capitol to present her research analyzing American Robin nests for microplastics and other man-made materials.

As she looks towards graduation in May, she is working to pin down how she will continue her education and goal of working in conservation.

"I think with everything going on in the world, there is talk about things like climate change and stuff like that. And it's such a scary, scary thing. Maybe people don't care because they don't understand it. I really want to help the organisms that are helpless, like plants, animals and all that, but also bridge that gap in people who are doing science and that aren't because I think that there's such a lack of understanding between the two," Emily said. "We would probably agree that conservation is something that we should all be working towards."



Student Artist Scaling Up at Rheem



BRYAN ALEXIS

During his senior year at UAFS, Alex Dotulong moved between mediums, constructing delicate art books woven with thread and painting striking murals nearly 30 feet in the air.

A graphic design major, Alex has pushed far beyond his original digital work, expanding into a practice shaped by a growing understanding of how his work exists in space.

That shift became most visible inside the Fort Smith

facility of Rheem®, a leader in the HVAC and water heating industry, where Alex and a team of UAFS students painted a large-scale mural as part of the company's centennial celebration. His design, *Embrace, David*, was selected from a pool of student submissions and installed alongside work by UAFS professor and renowned muralist, Bryan Alexis.

Working in the manufacturing facility required a new awareness of envi-

ronment and audience.

"Oh, it's very industrial," he said, recalling the protective eyewear, steel-toed boots, and long days painting while innovative production was occurring nearby. "A lot of people working in the space would walk past and say, 'This is a really cool thing.' It felt important."

As he implemented the final design, he thought about how the mural would be seen from below. Employees stood 10 yards beneath the work, shifting their perspective. He thought about Michelangelo's *David*, whose enlarged head and upper body were designed to appear correctly proportioned when viewed in the sculpture's intended placement on a Florentine piazza. Seen at eye level indoors, those adjustments feel exaggerated, but in context, they resolve.

"I've been enticed to experiment outside of my comfort zone here," he said.


While the mural pushed Alex's work to a public sphere, his studio practice has moved in the opposite direction.

"Last month marked 10 years since I left Indonesia and I have become even more keen to research Indonesian art and explore ways to integrate it with my work."

Working at an intimate scale, his art book *Power Hungry, Human Greed*, combines bookmaking, 3D printing, screen printing, and threadwork to explore the effects of consumption in his home country of Indonesia.

"Humans, even if they don't really think about it much, rely heavily on electricity nowadays," he said, holding up a tangerine orange screen print of powerlines scratched through earth and trees. "That's how colonialism was," he said. "These empires basically carve through the communities and cultures that were originally there."

SURF Grants Have Record Year



A record-breaking five projects were awarded Student Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) Grants this year by the Arkansas Division of Higher Education, the highest number ever received by UAFS in one year and the third-highest total awarded to a university in 2025.

"Student research can be found at the center of the UAFS mission," said Taylor Martinez, director of research and sponsored programs. "These hands-on research opportunities enhance our students' preparation for their future, whether that's

in the workforce or graduate education, through critical thinking, problem solving, and analytical skills."

SURF focuses on continuing the development of undergraduate academic research at Arkansas institutions of higher education and providing funding to encourage students to conduct in-depth research projects in specific fields of study under the direction of a full-time faculty member. Students are also expected to present their research, providing them with additional hands-on experience.

Each student-mentor duo received \$2,750, covering a stipend for the student, travel expenses for the student to present their research, and a small amount for the mentor's research costs.



RACHEL PUTMAN

Those receiving grants were:

Willow McFerran

Senior biology major (STEM)
Impact of bioblitz on “An Individual’s Perception of Community and Nature”

Isaac Teague

Senior biology major (STEM)
“Microplastic Abundance and Variation within Non-Web Building Spiders: Dolomedidae and Lycosidae”

Rawan Yasin

Senior biology major (STEM)
“Aggregation or Segregation: Exploring the Interactions Between Co-Occurring Species of Dictyostelids from Arkansas River Valley”

Shelby Zink

Senior biology major (STEM)
“Investigating Microplastic Pollution Patterns in Web-Using Arachnids (Araneidae and Tetragnathidae)”

Lane Metcalf

Senior history major with teacher licensure (Non-STEM)
“Teacher Perspectives on Effective Interventions and Therapies for Students with Diverse Support Needs”

Research and Mentorship Shape Katie Grace Cavaness' Path



RACHEL PUTMAN

There's a particular moment in college when things start to click. There's a moment when growth begins. Sometimes, that comes when a mentor sees promise and offers the opportunity to grow.

For Katie Grace Cavaness, that moment came when Dr. Bun Song Lee invited

her to join a research project at the University of Arkansas–Fort Smith.

"I first started researching this topic in the fall semester of 2024," she said. "Dr. Lee asked if I would be interested in helping him with research, and, on a whim, I said yes."

Katie Grace was a sophomore

then, newly enrolled in the College of Business and Industry, having changed her major from studio art. She found a genuine pull toward macroeconomics: The way it offers explanations for why communities thrive or struggle, why resources collect in some places and not others,

and how policy decisions show up in ordinary lives.

Dr. Lee saw that momentum and nudged Katie Grace to think bigger.

"He pushed for me to apply for the Arkansas Department of Education's Student Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) grant," Katie Grace said.

That funding allowed an extension of the research over the following two semesters and, with additional support from the UAFS Foundation, a trip to San Francisco to present the project at the Western Economics Association International conference.

“Being able to present our research at an international conference made up of professionals from all around the world has been my biggest accomplishment to date,” she said. “It was a bit intimidating when I went there, but being able to present at the conference instilled a confidence in myself that I had never had before.”

The research focuses on transportation choices among seniors and people with disabilities in small and mid-sized U.S. cities. Places where options can be limited and the margin between independence and isolation can be thin.

“Although I did not pick the research topic initially, I believe it is an important subject to be discussed,” she said. “Through my research, I have found that there can be instances of inaccessible resources for

those who are considered elderly and/or disabled.”

Long term, Katie Grace and her research team hope their work inspires real change.

“I hope that policy implications can be made in the future to help aid real people,” she said. “Everyone deserves a right to an even playing field.”

Back on campus, Katie Grace works with economic data daily as an intern at the Center for Economic Development. There, she supports data analysis for the statewide Compass Report.

“I’ve learned so much about how to apply economics outside of the classroom,” she said. “The CED has taught me how to apply economic theory I have learned to real-world implications.”

Her role involves analyzing Arkansas tax, census, and building permit data—regionally and statewide—to help produce Talk Business & Politics’ signature economic report. What the process reveals about how quickly a chart becomes a story about real communities stands out most to Katie Grace.

“I find it very interesting to see how economic

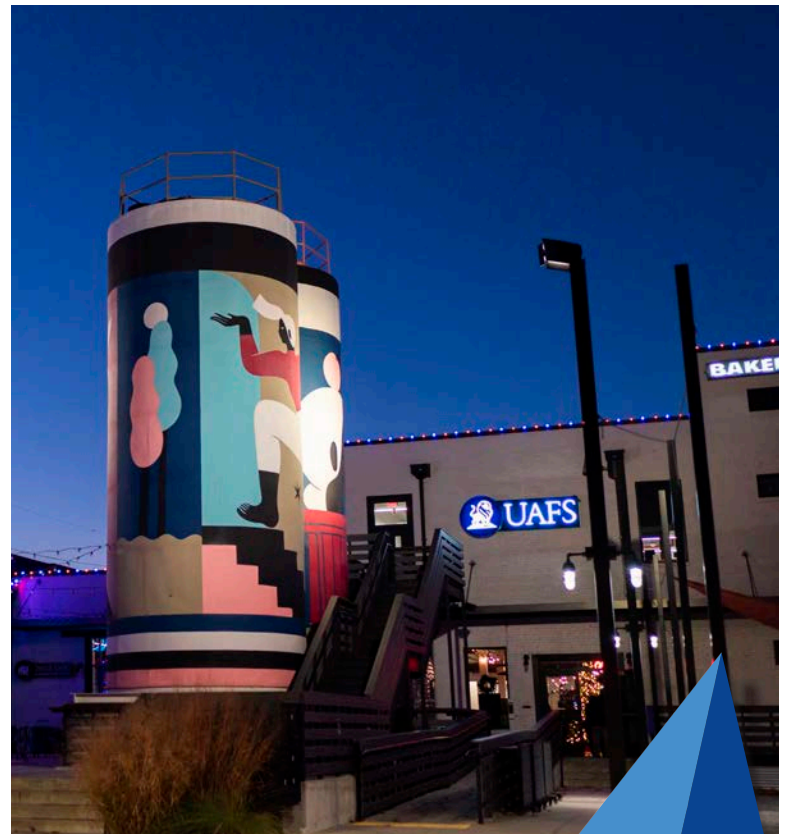
theory applies locally,” she said. “It has changed how I see the field of economics.”

Access is the throughline to Katie Grace’s story. That includes mentorship and experience; funds that make research possible; rooms full of seasoned professionals; and work that makes academic

principles real, not abstract.

She sees that access as a defining part of the UAFS experience, noting that at other campuses, students like her might not get noticed.

“Students here are not just a number,” she said. “UAFS wants to support students and push them to succeed.”



ELLIOT NEMETH

UAFS, Talk Business & Politics partner on Compass Report

The Compass Report, a partnership between the University of Arkansas – Fort Smith and Talk Business & Politics, aims to provide independent analysis of economic conditions in Arkansas’ four largest metro areas, Central Arkansas, Northwest Arkansas, the Fort Smith region and the Jonesboro region, to Arkansas citizens.

It is the only independent economic

analysis of those top metro areas.

Kendall Ross, UAFS associate vice chancellor for Economic and Workforce Development, leads the data collection and analysis, working with Katie Grace Cavaness to assign performance grades to each sector based on four leading and current indicators.

Michael Tilley, co-owner and executive editor of Talk Business & Politics, said the

report offers the business community a clear, data-driven view of the state’s economy.

“We would hear from business owners who said the report was part of what helped them make budgeting and other decisions,” Tilley said. “The work Kendall and Katie Grace do to gather the data and provide concise, quality analysis is of great benefit to not only the Fort Smith area, but to the state.”

Advanced Manufacturing Engineering Degree Debuts

This fall, the University of Arkansas – Fort Smith launched Arkansas’s first Bachelor of Science in Advanced Manufacturing Engineering, a highly anticipated program that will strengthen the workforce pipeline for one of the River Valley’s most important industries.

Manufacturing remains a cornerstone of the regional

economy, but job openings have outpaced hiring at nearly a 2-to-1 margin. To address that challenge, UAFS designed the program in close collaboration with local manufacturers. In 2023, the university convened an Advanced Manufacturing Advisory Board that included leaders from companies such as ABB, Rheem, Hytrol, Walther Arms, and Glatfelter.

Their input helped shape a curriculum that blends mechanical and electrical engineering with business, data science, and logistics.

The bachelor’s program, which also includes a certificate of proficiency in advanced manufacturing, is built around hands-on learning, and the first cohort of AME students is already training with newly installed equipment, including FAS-200 automated assembly systems and ABB Cobot Flex-Trainers that simulate modern production environments.

Alongside the for-credit program, the UAFS Center for Economic Development has launched an innovative Manufacturing Academy that provides rapid workforce training, apprenticeships, and upskilling opportunities for regional employers and workers.

Together, these programs are expanding the pipeline of engineers and skilled technicians needed to support manufacturing growth in the River Valley.

The initiative is supported by a \$1 million gift from ABB and more than \$5.7 million in HIRED grants from the U.S. Department of Commerce and the Arkansas Division of Higher Education, which launched a state-of-the-art Workforce Development Center, funded new equipment, lab upgrades, and workforce training programs.



To read more, scan the QR code.

Dr. Bun Song Lee Turns Economics into Opportunity

For Dr. Bun Song Lee, research has always been central to teaching.

Lee, an associate professor of economics, has spent nearly five decades studying economic and social trends. His scholarship, ranging from fertility patterns in South Korea to transportation access for elderly and disabled residents in American cities, has resulted in more than 60 published papers and over 1,000 academic citations.

But just as important as the research itself, Lee said, is who joins him in his academic work.

“I am very fortunate. Every

year, I have one or two students who work with me,” he said.

Since joining UAFS in 2011, Lee has made research a regular part of his courses, inviting students to collaborate on projects that move beyond classroom exercises. Students, who participate, learn how to collect and analyze data, interpret findings, and contribute to ongoing academic conversations.

“I can teach them how to do research,” Lee said.

Over the years, dozens of students have taken part in those collaborations. Together they have examined demo-

graphic changes in South Korea and transportation behavior in small- and mid-sized U.S. cities, producing work that connects economic theory with practical policy questions.

Lee’s own path to the profession began after he arrived in the United States from South Korea in 1968 and enrolled at UCLA.

“When I took calculus, and the first exam came back, the professor said I got the highest grade in the class,” Lee recalled. “At that moment, I decided to become a professor.”

That decision led to a Ph.D. from Southern

Methodist University and a career that has taken him through multiple universities before arriving at UAFS.

In 2025, Lee was honored with the Excellence in Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity faculty award at UAFS. His nominator described his research as “among the most distinguished within the region and undoubtedly at UAFS.”

Q & A: Chukwukere Ekeh

ALUM AND ATHLETE BUILDS A CAREER WITHOUT LIMITS

At 6-foot-9, Chukwukere Ekeh has always been hard to miss.

On campus, he was a disciplined student-athlete, a dedicated campus leader, and a Dean's List marketing major. Today, he moves between worlds with the same ease he had at UAFS, leading brand strategy for a global crypto company, advising early-stage founders, modeling for major fashion houses – including an international campaign alongside Shaquille O'Neal, and speaking to audiences that range from rural school gyms to executive summits.

We caught up with Ekeh to talk about what it really takes to build a career and a life with range.

When you were running drills at UAFS, did you have any sense you'd end up leading brand for a global tech company or modeling with Shaq?

No idea at all, I had hopes

though. I always aimed to believe great and beautiful things were possible for me, not just others. I asked a lot of questions, took many chances, and gave my best effort. I'm fortunate God blessed some of the results.

You've stood on stages in South Africa talking about hope, pitched strategy to rooms full of executives, and mentored middle schoolers. Which version of you feels most at home?

I'm at my best and in my flow state whenever I can share from my heart on my passion areas. I'm passionate about marketing because it's about unearthing truth and telling stories to the people they're made for. I love connecting with people because it's my life's work to serve them and show them how valuable they are. I still get butterflies in all these situations because they deal with things that matter and impact

people, but I've slowly but surely grown the courage to do them all authentically to me.

Was there one decision or one leap of faith that you feel changed your trajectory?

Funny enough, it's the small moments when I said yes to myself: To try, to go for modeling, to live in a new place with no connections, to reach out to someone I've never met and ask for an opportunity, to take on a job in a new industry.

What's still on your bucket list?

What's up next?

I'm a dreamer, so pushing myself to actually increase the bounds. I would love to speak to over a million people in my lifetime and continually uncover the words and stories that help people know they're valuable, they matter, and they have a reason for being here. I'd like to be a CMO of a company and later found my own to work with remarkable minds of all backgrounds. And one day, once I can finally distill all the wisdom, experiences, and learning I've gathered, I want to pen it into a book with lessons that can outlive me and serve more people.



To read his full story, scan the QR code.





RACHEL PUTMAN

Transforming Mother and Infant Care

This year, UAFS is set to receive \$15 million in federal funding to construct and equip a state-of-the-art Center for Maternal and Infant Healthcare, following congressional approval of key FY2026 appropriations bills.

The appropriation, secured by Sen. John Boozman as part of a broader federal package, will support the development of high-fidelity simulation labs and educational spaces on the

ground floor of a new facility at UAFS, aimed at improving outcomes for mothers and infants in the River Valley.

The center will be the first phase of a larger, nearly \$30 million capital project supporting a comprehensive Center for Health Innovation.

“This facility will provide us with a meaningful place to educate our students and create an informed community of health care providers

in western Arkansas,” said Chancellor Terisa Riley.

The Center for Maternal and Infant Care

The \$15 million allocation will enable UAFS to construct and equip 16,300 square feet on the ground floor of the two-story facility, including leading-edge equipment and high-fidelity simulation laboratories that will allow students and practicing clinicians to gain hands-on

experience managing both routine and complex obstetric and pediatric care scenarios.

These laboratories will allow students to practice managing critical events such as postpartum hemorrhage, neonatal resuscitation, and pediatric emergencies.

“This repeated, hands-on exposure builds clinical judgment, confidence, and rapid decision-making so graduates are

Expanding Nursing **ON CAMPUS**

prepared to act decisively and save the lives of mothers and infants at the bedside,” said Dr. Paula Julian, executive director of the Carolyn McKelvey Moore School of Nursing.

The labs will also offer students the opportunity to work across disciplines, creating training environments where future nurses, physicians, and social workers can collaborate as they would in real hospital settings.

A 250-seat high-tech lecture hall, designed in a theater-style configuration, will support interdisciplinary education for students and the broader healthcare community, while an 80-seat seminar space that can be divided into smaller classrooms or breakout rooms will support smaller classes and gatherings.

Opening Doors, Calming Fears

The center will also open its doors to the expectant parents of the region, with an innovative public-access program designed to help them overcome labor and delivery fears.

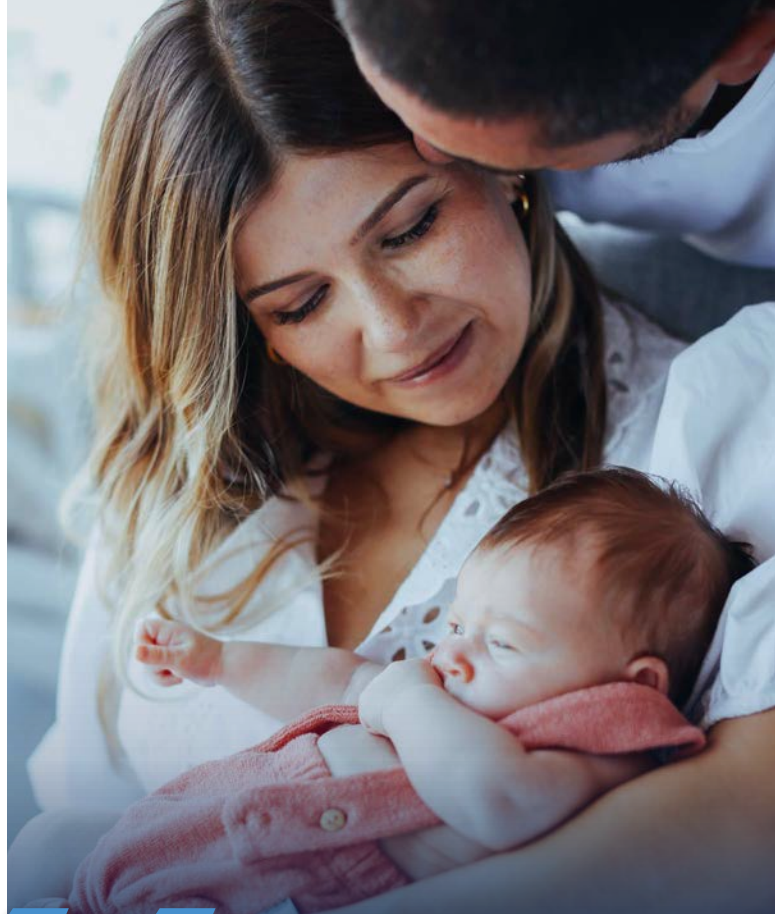
River Valley families will be able to observe simulated birth and postpartum experiences in the learning laboratories, ask healthcare professionals their birthing questions, and become familiar with the procedures they may encounter in the hospital when the time comes.

The need for this facility is urgent. Arkansas has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the United States, with 92.2 pregnancy-associated deaths per 100,000 live births between 2018-2020, according to the Arkansas Maternal Mortality Review Committee’s 2023 Legislative Report.

That same report found that 92% of pregnancy-related deaths in Arkansas were considered preventable.

Arkansas also holds the third-highest infant mortality rate in the country, as reported by the Centers for Disease Control.

The Center for Mother and Infant Healthcare is designed as a direct response to these somber statistics, providing both cutting-edge training for future healthcare professionals and educational opportunities to empower current practitioners to stay on the leading edge of care.



This funding will help make important strides to strengthen critical aspects of maternal and infant care through the development of the Center for Mother and Infant Healthcare at UAFS — an invaluable institution that helps meet significant needs in Fort Smith and across the region. Bolstering the delivery of these services and training in the River Valley will reduce preterm births, save lives and improve health outcomes. I was proud to champion this project and will continue to advocate for the productive use of taxpayer dollars for initiatives that benefit Natural State moms and babies, as well as the communities that care for them. I look forward to our continued partnership.” - Sen. John Boozman



Leading Future Leaders



Growing up, Dr. Cheryl Holden said she always knew she would wind up working as a nurse or an educator. Fast forward a few decades, and she has achieved working in both fields,

imparting more than 40 years of healthcare wisdom to students at the University of Arkansas – Fort Smith.

“My motto has always been that if I didn’t accept what I was asked to do, then if there was ever a job that I wanted, they wouldn’t offer it to me,” she said about her move to UAFS and into her role as executive director of the master’s in healthcare administration program.

In nursing, Holden did it all. She worked her way through being a CNA, LPN, ADN, BSN, MSN, and earned a doctoral degree in health sciences before spending her last few years in the field working for Mercy’s corporate offices in St. Louis, Mo. It was around 10 years ago that she came to UAFS after being asked to

teach, delaying her plans for retirement.

“I loved it and decided to stay,” she said with a smile.

Holden started teaching in 2016, bringing a wealth of real-world knowledge and degrees from the University of Oklahoma (Bachelor of Nursing), the University of Phoenix (Tulsa location, Master of Nursing), and A.T. Still University in Arizona (Doctor of Health Sciences).

By 2018, she was tapped to lead the first master’s program at UAFS. Sticking to her motto, she has been at the forefront of the program’s growth ever since.

“It really makes me happy when I see one of the UAFS students in their community working in a healthcare administrator role,” Holden said.

According to Holden, healthcare administrators were typically out-of-sight individuals in hospitals, public health care organizations, assisted living facilities, and government agencies. They worked behind the scenes, crunching numbers and making financial decisions on the supplies and equipment to purchase.

Now, the job has become more visible, and thanks to programs like the master’s in healthcare administration at UAFS, administrators are approachable and

knowledgeable in budgeting, strategic planning, legislation, and more.

“Healthcare has all sorts of challenges,” she said. “It’s really helpful when you have an effective healthcare administrator or somebody who knows what’s going on with that organization. We read every day that hospitals and healthcare organizations are closing their doors, and we have to be in tune with what’s going on around us. Behind every successful healthcare organization is an effective healthcare administrator diligently working.”

Holden said she believes UAFS has done and continues to do a great job recognizing the needs of communities and preparing healthcare students to make an impact.

“I have peace of mind and a happy heart when that student graduates, and I see them being effective in our communities,” Holden said.

As the program is fully online, Holden said that the impact of UAFS graduates extends beyond Arkansas to Oklahoma, Missouri, Kansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, and Tennessee. In 2021, UAFS intentionally sought to grow the healthcare leadership workforce by being one of the few master-level programs to offer in-state tuition to students in bordering states.



More than 95 UAFS teacher candidates were embedded in River Valley schools last year, with elementary and middle-level majors spending two years in the classroom, and secondary and K-12 majors participating during their internship semesters.

From Night Shift to Life Shift

Amanda McMillin doesn't have time to waste.

By day, she's an Emergency Room technician at Baptist Health in Fort Smith. On drill weekends, she's a medic in the Arkansas Army National Guard. And in the hours in between—weeknights and weekends—she's working toward her Bachelor of Science in Nursing at the University of Arkansas – Fort Smith.

It's a heavy load by any standard. But for Amanda, the pace isn't the point; it's the pathway.

"Being part of the Evening and Weekend Track has truly shaped my success as a nursing student academically, personally, and professionally," she said. "And the flexibility has allowed me to show up fully for every part of my life without sacrificing the quality of my education."

Launched last year, the Evening and Weekend BSN Track was built with students like Amanda in mind - working adults, parents, service members, and people whose lives don't fit inside a traditional college schedule.

Today, more than 20 students are enrolled in the track, part of the university's

ongoing effort to meet the River Valley's growing demand for nurses without asking students to choose between their careers and the classroom.

"I've genuinely enjoyed the instructors who teach in this track; they bring a level of support, patience, and real-world experience that has made learning both engaging and meaningful," Amanda said. "I've also had the opportunity to experience shift changes and practice giving reports to oncoming nurses during clinicals, which has strengthened my communication skills and helped me feel more prepared for real clinical environments."

For Amanda, the program's structure has enabled her to keep her footing, take shifts at work, and stay active in the National Guard.

"As a member of the military, drill weekends can often be demanding, but the structure of this program has made it much more manageable," she said. "It has even given me the consistency I needed to stay competitive in

my CrossFit training and competitions, something that keeps me grounded and balanced."

The program has also helped her stay present in her personal life. Her fiancé, Dakota Amos, is also in the military and works as a firefighter. "His schedule can be unpredictable and demanding," Amanda said. "Despite that, the Evening

while holding her position as class president in the BSN Night Cohort.

"By providing various tracks, students can pursue the level of education that aligns with both their professional ambitions and the evolving health care demands of the community," said Dr. Paula Julian, executive director of the Carolyn McKelvey Moore School of Nursing. "This flexibility allows the nursing program to produce well-rounded professionals capable of safe patient care."

"Overall, UAFS has been a tremendous support system that has allowed me to grow not only as a student but as a future nurse, an athlete, a service member, and a partner," Amanda said. "I'm

grateful for the opportunities, the educators, and the flexibility this program provides."

and Weekend Track has provided enough room in my own schedule for us to make meaningful time together."

"Balancing school, the military, fitness and a relationship is far from easy," she said. "But this track has made it possible in a way that feels sustainable."

She's done all of this



BIG PICTURE

A major winter storm in late January brought more than a foot of snow and sleet to the River Valley, closing campus for nearly a week. On Jan. 27, Fort Smith set a daily record low temperature of 4°, breaking the 1963 record of 6°. Exactly one month prior, Fort Smith saw a new all-time December record high, reaching 84°. Weather here definitely keeps you on your toes!

PHOTOGRAPH BY RACHEL PUTMAN





COMMUNITY

Intrepid Ambition Builds Momentum

On April 2, 2025, the University of Arkansas – Fort Smith announced its boldest vision yet: Intrepid Ambition, an \$85 million comprehensive campaign designed to expand access to education, strengthen academic excellence, and accelerate economic momentum across the River Valley.

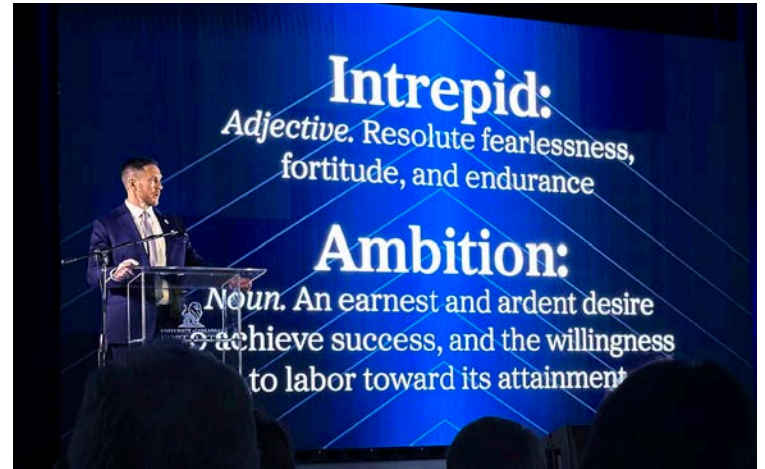
At launch, Blake Rickman, executive vice chancellor for university advancement, announced that \$68.5 million was secured during the campaign’s silent phase, a powerful signal of confidence from more than 6,400 donors. One year later, momentum has intensified. The campaign has surpassed \$78 million, closing in on its historic goal and making a visible impact across our campus and region.

A key milestone is the

Center for Nonprofits, funded by a \$7.5 million gift. Under the direction of Emily Treadaway, the center has earned distinction as the only Arkansas representative in the National Council of Nonprofits. It has hosted roundtables and training sessions, provided data-driven support, and served hundreds of River Valley nonprofits working to support vulnerable communities.

New scholarships established through the campaign are reshaping what access looks like for Arkansas students and, for many local families, making higher education feel possible.

Campaign investments are fueling new research initiatives, upgraded equipment, and expanded academic services, strengthening programs that prepare



graduates to lead in health-care, business, manufacturing, the sciences, and the arts.

Structured around three pillars – our students, our people, and our community – Intrepid Ambition intends to move UAFS and the region it serves forward together.

Though the campaign is

well underway, two years remain before its close in 2028, with important work still ahead: Creating more opportunities for students, strengthening partnerships with business and industry, and setting the stage for the university’s next century.

Why I Give: Ben Shipley

Ben Shipley learned civic responsibility and the power of reinvesting in the community at an early age.

“My father was a strong supporter of the University of Arkansas – Fort Smith. It was Westark College then. I remember him taking me to a dinner for all the scholarship students. He was super enthusiastic about it, seeing what all these students were doing to succeed,” said Shipley, senior attorney and member at Robertson, Beasley & Shipley,

PLLC and a current member of the campaign committee for the future of the university.

Both Shipley and his father understood the importance of scholarships to students who might not otherwise be able to continue their education by attending college.

“My desire to support UAFS really started with my dad. He always believed UAFS was a critically important part of the community,” he said.

Shipley’s grandfather, who started Shipley Baking Co. in

Fort Smith, also taught him the importance of contributing to the community.

A gift from Shipley and his wife, Lane, to UAFS’ Intrepid Ambition campaign established the Shipley Family Collaborative Space at the UAFS Center for Economic Development, housed in The Bakery District, the repurposed 35,000-square-foot facility originally built in 1921 as the Shipley Baking Company.

“Supporting the university is reinvesting in your community.

You are helping educate the people who will then be contributing to the viability of our community,” he said.

UAFS’ work with leading manufacturers, Fort Smith Public Schools and the region at large to help fill needs is making an impact on the River Valley, Shipley said.

“My work on the Foundation Board was inspiring. I believe supporting the university is a vital part of civic responsibility,” he said.



Students traveling to Oaxaca, Mexico, to volunteer at a children's home in summer 2025 experienced a deeply transformative journey of service and study designed to shape their perspectives, values and future paths. For the full story, scan the QR code.



Twins Race Toward Careers

Senior cross-country runners and twin sisters, Rachel and Hailey Malik, have used their time at the University of Arkansas - Fort Smith to blaze their way down trails and spark the curious minds of elementary-aged students across the city.

While setting personal bests, the sisters have each led their respective classrooms and students to do their best.

"I find joy in it," Rachel said, likening training for a race to lesson planning. "It's looking back at lesson plans and student

data—seeing how they did on a test or the lesson that we did—and how I can fix it. It's the same mentality as cross country. You want to be better for yourself. You want the students to do better because it's not about yourself in the classroom, it's about the students."

As sisters, teammates, and fellow teachers-in-the-making, Rachel and Hailey push each other to be the best versions of themselves. Whether it's waking up early for a run or staying up late to lesson plan, the two of

them are always thinking of how to make their team succeed.

"A lot of it is just mentality," Hailey said. "It's constantly wanting to improve yourself and doing whatever it takes."

Rachel and Hailey will graduate in May 2026. Each plan is to teach full-time and hopes to work at schools close to one another. They also plan to enter an online master's program after graduation.



From Lions to the Big Leagues

Many kids dream of playing baseball well enough to get called up to the Major Leagues. For University of Arkansas – Fort Smith alum, Daniel de Mondesert, '20, that dream became reality.

De Mondesert is one of the youngest coaches in the MLB, leading the team that finished the 2025 season with the best overall record in baseball before a playoff exit to the eventual World Series champions.

“He was probably about 10 years ahead of his time,” said Todd Holland, head coach for UAFS Baseball. “As far as baseball, he was doing this differently and smarter than everybody when he was out there.”

The Southside High School graduate suited up as a catcher in 56 games for the Lions from 2017 to 2020.

De Mondesert, who graduated from UAFS with a degree in business administration, was accepted into a master’s program at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, where he became a graduate assistant for the Razorbacks, serving as a bullpen catcher.

“I started firing off applications left and right, talking a lot with the coaches

about what I needed to do—what was going to help, what wasn’t going to help. The (Texas) Rangers offered me, and that’s where my time at Arkansas came to an end (2021),” he said.

Initially hired to assist with data analysis in Arizona at the Rangers’ complex league, de Mondesert quickly pushed for more responsibilities. He became an international player development and scouting apprentice, doing “everything from coaching one of the bases to coaching the catchers.”

De Mondesert stayed on with the Rangers for the season before taking his next step. The Milwaukee Brewers were looking to hire a development coach for their Low-A team out of Raleigh, N.C., and de Mondesert fit the bill.

What came next was the call of every player’s dreams.

“I would say I was hand-picked,” he said. “I think there was certain criteria that was being looked for, and I was fortunate

enough to meet all those criteria.”

De Mondesert became the Brewers’ bullpen catcher and celebrated the call-up in one of the most iconic of ways: Opening Day at Wrigley Field.

“I threw batting practice that day, and I couldn’t feel my legs,” he said.

Soon after, de Mondesert became an assistant coach for the Brewers, a title he held until October when he was officially named Major League Game Preparation Specialist and Spanish Interpreter.



SCOTT PAULUS/MILWAUKEE BREWERS



GRACIE DEAN

Making History on the Hardwood

Men’s basketball returned to a conference tournament for the first time since 2021-22, its first appearance under Zane Gibson’s three years as head coach.

“We had a very good year. We started out 13-0, which tied the school record for best start, and finished with a 20-win season for the first time since 2017-18,” Gibson said. “We were ranked as high as No. 5 in the nation and were ranked in nine consecutive national polls.”

The Lions ended the regular season with their best record in nearly a decade

(20-9), becoming one of the top five squads since becoming a D-II program, and punched their ticket to the Mid-America Intercollegiate Athletics Association (MIAA) tournament, coming up just short of an NCAA Tournament berth.

Gibson said there was a “buzz in the Stubblefield Center” over the final stretch of home games, where more than 1,000 people were in attendance for three of the last four games.



Fredriksen Family Leaves Lasting Mark

Brenda Fredriksen hopes the legacy her family leaves behind is one of service to UAFS.

"I hope that when people look back at our family, they say, 'They've been good stewards of their time helping this campus,'" she said.

For nearly four decades, Brenda's life has revolved around the university she wanted to attend even as a child. The former Greenwood High School basketball star envisioned suiting up for the Westark Lions under late head coach, Louis Whorton, but fate had other plans. Instead, she spent a year at Eastern Oklahoma State College.

Then she was back in Arkansas, attending Westark, thinking she was leaving basketball behind.

Brenda was standing in line for registration when she was spotted by Doc Sadler, an assistant coach, who knew her from Greenwood. He convinced her to meet with Whorton. One thing led to another, and Brenda was offered a walk-on position. By Christmas, she had started every game and was put on scholarship.

"That solidified for me

that my place was here, and I kept working from that point," she said.

That season ended and Brenda continued on to Arkansas State University to complete her bachelor's degree. But even with a diploma from Arkansas State, "I always say I graduated from Westark," she said.

Brenda married another Westark grad, Jerry Fredriksen, and together they

returned to campus to cheer on the Lions at Stubblefield Center. Then came the next generation.

"We were coming before JD was even born," Brenda said. "After he was born, it was just natural that we kept doing the same thing."

The Fredriksen clan became a staple of UAFS basketball and the campus. JD, enthralled by the band at games, brought his own drum and was eventually invited to play with them.

During that time, Brenda was starting a new tradition for the university behind the scenes: UAFS Toy Toss.

The family was part of the Sixth Man Club, a group who worked with former men's basketball head coach, Josh Newman.

"Josh was always trying to get the community involved. That's when John Brown University did their toilet paper throw. Josh said he wanted to do something similar, but not copy them. I said, 'Well, instead of being destructive, why don't we be productive and throw stuffed animals that we'll donate?' That is literally how the Toy Toss started," she said.

As years passed, the bond between the family and the university grew stronger. JD followed in his mom's footsteps as a student athlete. Golf is his sport.

JD visited several universities when he was being recruited, but that was only as a courtesy, Brenda said, noting he always knew where his path would lead.

"UAFS always felt like home," JD said.

JD, now a sophomore honors student studying business administration, is attempting to leave his own stamp in the classroom and on the golf course.

"Athletics-wise, I can put it in two buckets. Being a competitor, I want to be the best golfer that's ever played here. As a teammate, I want to be a leader," JD said. "Academically, I want to succeed as much as I do athletically."

He joked he already has hopes that his love—his family's love—of UAFS will continue with his future children.





“The University of Arkansas - Fort Smith provided me with a sense of community and connection, even as a commuter. I am forever grateful for the people I have met, the programs and organizations I have been a part of, and my professors and other valuable staff who have guided and supported me on my educational and professional journey.”

LISA THAI - Class of '23 & '25

RACHEL PUTMAN



“The University of Arkansas - Fort Smith has given me countless moments of pride and purpose. From teaching in the classroom to mentoring remarkable student-athletes, I’ve witnessed dreams take shape and confidence grow. Now, as a member of the Board of Visitors, I’m honored to help guide the same university that has given so much back to me.”

MAYOR GEORGE MCGILL

RACHEL PUTMAN



RACHEL PUTMAN

“The university has provided a climate in which I’ve been able to express creative ideas and implement the pedagogic tools necessary to build a thriving jazz program. The administrative support has enabled me to enrich the lives of my students through an abundance of real world, life changing experiences. Teaching is my passion, and this institution has helped to make it a wonderful journey.”

DON BAILEY



IAN SILVESTER

“When I started at the University of Arkansas - Fort Smith in 2011 at the service desk, I saw it as just a job. That role taught me patience, communication, and problem-solving while showing me how technology supports education across campus. After being promoted to PC Systems Analyst, I gained confidence handling complex challenges and greater responsibility. Now, as manager of both teams, I reflect on how UAFS invested in my growth and gave me opportunities to lead and shape our technology services. It’s more than a workplace — it’s where I discovered my potential.”

MARY MILLER

“Entering college, I was uncertain of what the future held and had rarely pursued opportunities outside my comfort zone. My involvement at UAFS changed my perspective. Through Gamma Phi Beta and two years on the Executive Council, as well as serving as Director of Marketing for Cub Camp twice, I was able to pursue my skills and build my leadership. These experiences have shaped my personal and professional growth.”

MACI HODGES



RACHEL PUTMAN





“When it comes to being a student at UAFS, my life has been most positively impacted by the guiding hands and supportive figures who have let their love for students be a guiding light for me. My journey as a student has been far from traditional. My story at UAFS would not exist without those people believing in me, cultivating me, and, in some cases, pushing me to be more than I often believed myself capable.”

ASON SMITH

“Attending the University of Arkansas–Fort Smith truly transformed my life. By earning my degree in radiography, I built a strong foundation in patient care and medical imaging that gave me the confidence and skills to continue my education. That experience inspired me to pursue a degree in sonography at UAFS, expanding my knowledge and opening even more career opportunities in healthcare. As a first-generation college student, UAFS provided a clear pathway to a future I once thought was out of reach and helped me realize my full potential.”

LESLEY NÁJERA - Class of '25



“UAFS has impacted my life in many ways with community, friendship and family. UAFS is such a welcoming environment, and you are able to find your people here. That, for me, was what impacted my life the most.”

WARREN WATKINS

Breaking Barriers

by Tina Dale

FANNY WESLEY BROKE BARRIERS THROUGHOUT HER LIFE.

She was the first Black cheerleader at Charleston High School. She became the first Black cheerleader at the University of Arkansas – Fort Smith (then Westark College) and the first Black woman on the homecoming court. She was the first Black woman to work in the accounting department at ABF, and she and her husband, Robert, were the first Black couple to build a home in the Canterbury Cove subdivision in Fort Smith.

She's spent a lifetime being a catalyst in whatever community she calls home. Yet, she never set out to make history, and she rarely realized she was doing so at the time.

"I didn't know that I was doing anything special or first. I didn't know anything different," Fanny said.

Franklin County Roots

Fanny grew up on a 200-acre farm in Charleston, the daughter of a farmer and coal miner. Her family had lived and farmed in the area for generations.

One of 10 children, Fanny was raised to respect education and others.

"I can't say college was expected in my family. But I believe they wanted it for us. They always said, 'Get as much education as you can and do the best you can.' And another rule we had was treat people the way you want to be treated," she said.

Her family was no stranger to progress.

The Charleston School Board unanimously voted in July 1954 to desegregate all 12 grades of its schools following the Brown v. Board of Education U.S. Supreme Court ruling, making it the first school district in the former Confederate states to integrate its schools. That fall, 11 Black students enrolled.

The first Black student to graduate from Charleston High School in 1961 was Barbara Williams (Dodson). She was Fanny's older sister.

"We never met any prejudice or discrimination in Charleston. Everyone knew us. My family had been there for years," Fanny said.

Firsts That Felt Ordinary

When Fanny started high school years later, nothing was thought of it, she said. Her senior year in high school, she was a cheerleader—the first Black cheerleader in Charleston.

"I didn't know there was anything different," she said.

She graduated in 1970 and enrolled that fall at Westark College, now UAFS, studying general studies and accounting.

"I did have a love for cheerlead-

ing. So, I just thought I would try to pursue that and see if I could be a part of the team," Fanny said.

She became the first Black cheerleader on the team, again. Her first year, she was one of five. By her second year, she was named head cheerleader. That same year, she was selected for the homecoming court, making her the first Black member.

Work, Marriage and Making a Life

Wesley married the following year, stepping away from college to focus on work





and family. She met Robert Wesley while both were students at Westark.

Both students also worked at Whirlpool Corp, starting when they were in school. Two years later, Fanny would move to ABF Corporation, where she would work for 45 years in the accounting department.

“I was the first person of color at the office. We had one office under ABF. My office was at Arkansas Best Corporation. They did not have any ladies of color there at the time,” she said.

Building a Future Together

Over the years, the couple raised two daughters, both of whom completed college degrees, and filled a life with all they wanted. People ask us, ‘How did you do it?’ I tell them, ‘Well we just did,’ Robert said.

“We joined forces. We made a plan that we would work five years and then buy a home and get our vehicles and then have children. And the plan worked perfectly.”

The couple was able to build a home in the Canterbury Cove

Continued on page 31

ALUMNI



Borrowing Belief: Leadership by Susan DeWoody

Higher education was not just a personal milestone for Dr. Susan Mastin DeWoody, '00. It was uncharted territory. As a first-generation college student, she navigated admissions, scholarships, and campus life without a family roadmap, but the unwavering support she found at Westark College was something that shaped the trajectory of her life.

"Everywhere I turned there was a friendly face," DeWoody said.

Faculty and staff went beyond answering questions; they helped her understand what the next steps toward success would look like. She began building the confidence that would define her future through work and leadership opportunities, including serving as a student

ambassador and participating in the Student Activities Council.

Sorne Gregory, the admissions counselor who'd walked her step-by-step through processes that felt intimidating, saw her potential and invited her to become a student ambassador. That early leadership role gave DeWoody exposure to professional environments, donor engagement, and public speaking.

In the Student Activities Office, Stacey Jones modeled a leadership style that combined high expectations with exceptional support.

"He challenged me to rise to a higher standard while ensuring I had the tools and encouragement to succeed," DeWoody said.

CHRISTIE MELLOR



Outstanding Alumni Celebrated

During the annual Homecoming Brunch, held on Feb. 28, 12 change-makers were honored for their deep alumni impact. Their professional achievements, entrepreneurial leadership, teaching excellence, and service to the institution and region set these Lions apart.

The Distinguished Alumni Award, the university's highest alumni honor, recognizes graduates who have demonstrated outstanding professional achievement and service. This

year's recipients, Ray Malouf, '05, and Sharon Winn, '60, were recognized for careers marked by executive leadership, educational service and sustained philanthropy. Malouf, a senior leader for global brands, has spent his career empowering young professionals to dream bigger. Winn has made an indelible mark on the university and its students, having spent time as a student, instructor, and administrator at every iteration - from Fort Smith Junior College to UA Fort Smith.

Over time, what began as “borrowed belief” evolved into her own steady self-confidence.

That foundation carried DeWoody into a diverse academic career spanning recruitment, advising, athletics, and academic affairs. She became the first female provost in the 113-year history of Oklahoma Baptist University, a legacy she didn’t initially realize she was leaving. When she learned of the historic significance, it prompted reflection. In a context where senior leadership roles had traditionally been held by men, her presence carried symbolic weight. Female students began sharing how meaningful it was to see a woman in executive leadership.

“For me, on a personal note, I saw a very successful female provost in Dr. Sandi Sanders at Westark, so I knew it was possible,” DeWoody said. “But the context I was working in made it less probable, and that’s not lost on me. Dr. Sanders was the embodiment of a successful, polished leader, who I will always consider a role model.”

Today, DeWoody serves as president of Strata Leadership, a firm dedicated to elevating life at work through leadership development, coaching, and consulting. Her work sits at the intersection of strategy and people. She coaches senior leaders, facilitates executive forums, and guides organizations through growth and change.

“Leadership ultimately revolves around trust, clarity, accountability, and belief in others’ potential,” she said.

She speaks openly about experiencing

imposter syndrome, particularly during seasons when she stepped into roles before she felt fully ready. Preparation, resilience, and trusted mentors helped her move forward.

She often returns to the concept of a growth mindset, popularized by Carol Dweck, especially the power of one small word: “Yet.”

If her life carries a central message, it is that steady effort, courage, and perseverance matter. She also is quick to remind that sometimes believing in oneself begins by borrowing belief from someone else.

For DeWoody, UAFS was not only where she was developed. It was where she first learned how to help develop others. That full-circle legacy continues to shape her work and impact her life today.



CHRISTIE MELLOR

Moka Joe’s, owned by Kyle Speegle ‘02, was named Alumni-Owned Business of the Year for its commitment to community engagement and long-standing support of the university.

Young Alumni Awards were presented to Joshua Sykes, ‘13, Amanda Kennedy, ‘13, Brienne Barron Smith, ‘22, and Alysha Bowen Thomas, ‘16.

Kirk Duboise, director of Harbor Recovery Center,

received the Spirit of Numa Award, which recognizes friends of the university.

Stacey Jones Outstanding Faculty and Staff Awards went to Chelsea Cowan ‘17, Derek Hill ‘16, Don Bailey and Dr. Randall Stone whose nominators said their dedication to student success and to UAFS are remarkable.

UAFS Business Directory

As you consider your 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.



Gerritt Standridge of Fort Smith and Maggie Heppner of Elkins were crowned the 2026 Homecoming King and Queen. Standridge represented Kappa Sigma. Heppner represented Delta Gamma.



RACHEL PUTMAN

Looking for Class Notes?

We've gone digital!

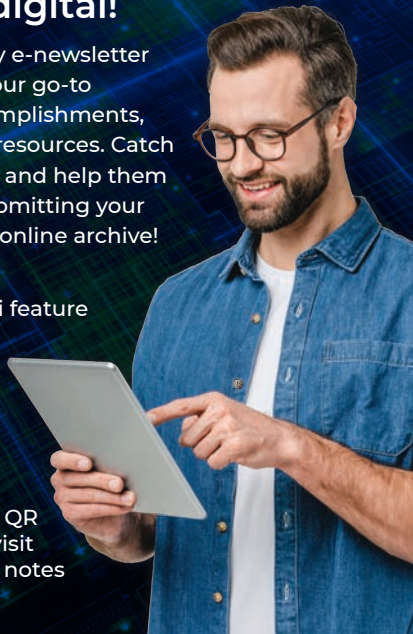
Lion Lines – a quarterly e-newsletter for UAFS alumni – is your go-to source of alumni accomplishments, announcements, and resources. Catch up on your classmates and help them catch up on you by submitting your own Class Note to our online archive!

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



Alumni Council Strengthens Connections

The UAFS Alumni Advisory Council strives to recruit and retain active members to support and advise the Alumni Engagement Office on ways to better serve, connect, and create engaging opportunities to enhance the lifelong experience of UAFS Alumni.

Advisory Council members are selected for a three-year term through an application process each year.

Logan Parks, Chair

Josh Funmaker, Chair-elect

Members: Ashley Hill, Shelli Henehan, Jacqui Lyle, Sam Winterberg, Heather Deere, Laura Schmutz Beltran, Susan DeWoody, Nicholas Ortiz, Karen Barrera-Leon, Lindsey Steinger-Muck, Maddi Stojanovic, Morgan Karsten, Nycole Oliver.

Foundation Forged in Fort Smith

Three months into her Executive MBA program at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Megan Nichols, '15, knew it was time to take a leap. She was market executive for Regions Bank.

"I always get this itch whenever I'm comfortable and complacent," she said. "For my whole career, I knew at some point I was going to be working in Dallas. In terms of exposure, career-wise, the economy there made sense."

When she moved to Texas three years ago, it wasn't to leave the place she'd called home for 30 years. It was to chase an opportunity she couldn't ignore.

"I do not believe that I would be as successful in Dallas as I am today if it weren't for getting my foundation built in Fort Smith," she said.

Nichols climbed the banking ladder. She thrived on overcoming new challenges and gained valuable leadership experience through crisis management during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nearly two years after the move, she's all in on an even greater opportunity: Senior vice president and relationship manager for U.S. Bank's global and industrial services institutional client group.

"Dallas is an expansion market for U.S. Bank," she said. "I came from a legacy market where Regions (Bank) had a meaningful market share in Fort Smith, to an unknown I'd have to create.

Fort Smith, manages accounts for companies with revenues of \$250 million to \$1 billion.

"I have the type of personality where I feel like I can do anything and make my way

the banking career she hoped to build was too good to be true. She didn't always feel like she belonged. As one of the first in her family to graduate from college, that sense of being an imposter was hard to shake.

Even with more than a decade of leadership and experience backing her, Nichols said it's a feeling that persists.

"That's what drives us," she said. "I think that feeling never really goes away, but it's important because as long as you feel it, that means you're growing, and you're learning."

Sometimes, Nichols said, the opportunities worth chasing are personal. She said that to truly be a successful leader, it's important to take time for yourself.

In her spare time, Nichols is looking forward to earning her private pilot's license. She loves to travel, having visited five countries and more than half of the U.S.



I thought, 'How cool is it to be part of creating something and building market share in Texas?'"

Nichols, who started as a teller at First National Bank of Fort Smith while a student at the University of Arkansas -

through it," Nichols said. "It doesn't matter how hard or challenging it is, just roll up your sleeves and get it done."

While at UAFS, Nichols was a full-time student and teller.

Nichols recalled feeling that

Continued from page 27

community in 1988, becoming one of the first Black couples in the subdivision, Fanny said.

Integrity as a Legacy

Along the way, the couple learned important lessons. Robert taught Fanny how the "country mouse" could adjust

to life in the city. And she taught him to treat everyone with love, he said.

These are lessons the two worked to teach their children as well.

"My parents would always say, 'Whatever you do, do the best you can.' And they would

always specify, 'Complete your job and do it right.' You can't just go off and leave it halfway done. It's a part of integrity. Have that in whatever you do. Integrity is that part of what you do when people are not watching," Fanny said.

She passed those lessons

on to her daughters: That if they worked hard, they could accomplish unimaginable things and serve as catalysts for change, just like their parents.

"I think that's what we were—catalysts. We didn't set out to be that, but we were opening doors," Fanny said.

Zoo Documentary Honors Heritage

Josiah Olmstead, University of Arkansas – Fort Smith alum, '13, built his first feature-length documentary on a lesson from his late grandfather: “The best way to start is to start.”

Olmstead’s grandfather, Dick Sweeney, was a former San Diego zookeeper and one of seven founders of the American Association of Zoo Keepers in 1967. What began as a family curiosity about the stories surrounding Sweeney’s career grew into a nearly two-hour film, *My Grandfather: The Zookeeper*.

Olmstead, one of the first students in UAFS’ media communication program, spent two years gathering nearly 400 hours of interviews and footage, much of it captured on his iPhone. He interviewed fellow AAZK founder Ken Willingham and secured behind-the-scenes access to

zoos across the country, from Honolulu to Atlanta, often filming during layovers from his job as a flight attendant.

Along the way, he leaned on former professors to help refine the script and returned to the classroom mindset to relearn editing software. He also used artificial intelligence to restore and recreate his grandfather’s voice from a 1980s VHS recording. This feat allowed Sweeney to narrate part of the film.

The project premiered for zookeepers at the 50th Annual AAZK National Conference, where Olmstead said it was met with a standing ovation — and traditional gibbon calls. Olmstead’s documentary, *My Grandfather: The Zookeeper*, is available to stream on YouTube.



Incoming Freshmen Continue Legacy

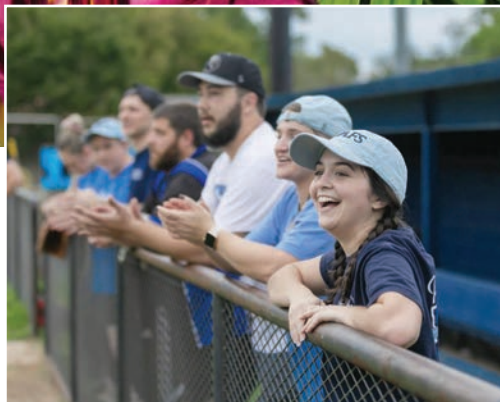
This spring a record 77 first-year legacy students are attending UAFS with the help of the \$1,000 scholarships.

These students may have a little help from “someone on the inside.” To qualify for the scholarship, students must have an immediate family member who previously graduated from UAFS or its predecessors, Westark College, Westark Community College, Westark Junior College, or Fort Smith Junior College.

2025-2026 LEGACY SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS ARE:

Eliana Goude	Mary Harper	Sophie Harrison	Dawson Frizzell
Ethan Myers	Abigail Efurd	Kamryn Snow	Jordyn Baldwin
Addison Johnson	Isabella Atherton	Timberlan Griffith	Nicolette Irwin
Hannah Winchester	Briana Lowery	Makenna Miner	Yasmin Matevia
Julianne Klein	Drake Grimm	Stephanie Villeda-Rosas	Karby Sheets
Jaydy Najera	Aiden Andrews	Brinnley Nelson	Lillian Weeks
Annabelle Greiger	Christian Muck	Loren Eckart	Callie Corbell
Abigial Ocampo	Corbin Lamb	Boston Studdard	Luke Bailey
Jasmine Cabrera	Zoe Tramonte	Allison Christie	Chloe Hale
Zephaniah Sanders	Hayden Fischer	Michaela Kaelin	Taylor Scoggins
Michael Turner	Rylee Floyd	Amelia Roam	Manuel Reyes
Marlee Cedillo	Hannah Hunter	Blake White	Emily Rodriguez
Laurali O'Connor	Kinley Davis	Monica Lopez	Macy Fox
Abigail Boster	Joshua Robertson	Evan Smith	Elizabeth Trehern
Andrew Hulse	Kelton Jones	Grace Cochenour	Caleb Lasiter
Brooklyn Douglas	Michelle Nunez	Kassie Rogers	Addison Peters
Ashley Trotter	Reese Merchka	Eric Lemus	Lucas Hefflin
Parker Dillard	Jewel Cheely	Sawyer Copeland	Laynie Gerred
Winslet Spinass	Cordell Whitfield	Piper Pitts	Isaiah Cox

Save the Date



Special thanks to Mercy
for being the Alumni Event
Presenting Sponsor
in 2026.

- UAFS Night with the NaturalsJune 6
- Bell Tower Pin Day September 20
- Family Weekend.....October 9-10
- Little Lions Meet Santa..... December 5
- Homecoming 2027.....February 22-27

Intramural Seasons open to Alumni:
Softball
Kickball
3 on 3 Basketball
Volleyball



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The Bell Tower

A publication of the University of Arkansas - Fort Smith

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P.O. Box 3649
Fort Smith, AR 72913

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