

*News from*



**ABAC**

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**For IMMEDIATE Release**

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**ABAC Will Honor Alumni April 10 at Homecoming**

**TIFTON**— Former students of Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College will be honored at the annual ABAC Alumni Association awards ceremony as a part of the 2015 Homecoming Week on April 10 at 6 p.m. at Gressette Gymnasium on the campus of ABAC.

The ceremony will recognize ABAC alumni who impacted the college and their communities in significant ways. Advance tickets are \$30 per person. There will be no tickets sold at the event. Tickets can be purchased from the ABAC College Advancement Office at (229) 391-4895. For more information on the 2015 Homecoming Week, interested persons can visit the web site at [www.abac.edu/homecoming](http://www.abac.edu/homecoming).

ABAC Alumni Association award winners this year include **Dr. Beverly Sparks** of Athens, Distinguished Alumnus; **Lauri Jo Bennett** of Norman Park, Helen Brown Sasser Award; **Tyler Harper** from Ocilla, Outstanding Young Alumnus; **Jimmy Grubbs** of Ty Ty, J. Lamar Branch Award; **Dr. Shelley Fandel** from Tifton, Outstanding Educator; **Keri Jones** from Tifton, Outstanding Business Leader; and **Johnny Cochran** from Sylvester, Master Farmer. **Jack Perry** of Tifton was selected as an Honorary Alumnus. **The Marshall Bennett, Sr., Family** from Adel will receive the Family Legacy Award.

**Sparks** resides in Athens where she recently retired as the Associate Dean for the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service. She attended ABAC from 1974-1976, earning her associate degree in agricultural science. As a student she worked at the Coastal Plain Experiment Station. She continued her education at the University of Georgia (UGA), receiving a bachelor's degree in horticulture and a master's degree in entomology. She earned her Ph.D. in entomology from Louisiana State University.

An extension urban entomologist at Texas A&M from 1983-89, Sparks was the first female extension agricultural specialist for the university's agricultural extension service. She was also the first female president of the Southeastern Branch of the Entomological Society of America and the first female Associate Dean for Extension at UGA.

At UGA, Sparks served as an Extension Entomologist from 1989-95 before becoming Extension Program Coordinator for Entomology from 1996-2002. From 2002-2006, she was District Extension Director for the North and Northeast districts. She was Assistant Dean and Interim Associate Dean for Cooperative Extension from 2006-2007 and Associate Dean for Cooperative Extension from 2007 until 2015. She has five other family members who have attended ABAC. Her husband, Allen Lee Tibbetts, is also an ABAC graduate who attended from 1974-76.

**Bennett** attended ABAC from 1987-88, majoring in early childhood education. She went on to earn her bachelor's degree in early childhood education from Brewton Parker College, her master's degree from Grand Canyon University, and a better processing degree from Clemson University.

Bennett's husband, Michael, is a 1988 graduate of ABAC. They have two children, Mikelyn, a graduate of ABAC's nursing program and a registered nurse at Tift Regional Medical Center, and Hal, a sophomore majoring in agricultural business at ABAC. Bennett was a school teacher from 2002-09 before turning her business interests and her hobby of canning food into Lauri Jo's Southern Style Canning, LLC in 2010.

On March 24, 2011 the Georgia Senate and House of Representatives presented the business with a resolution honoring the company's growth. In 2012, the business became an Ag Tourism Destination. She served as the host of the Celebrity Cooking Stage at the 2014 Sunbelt Agricultural Exposition where she did live demonstrations of some of her favorite holiday recipes.

Lauri Jo's jellies, salsas, and other items are now sold in some Kroger, Whole Foods, Fresh Market, Earth Fare, and Harvey's stores, along with specialty stores across the U.S., Naval Bases around the world, and the Food Network Café at the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport. Recently she shot a pilot for a TV show, "Farm to Table with Lauri Jo," which is presently being shopped to all the major television networks.

**Harper** received his associate degree in agriculture from ABAC in 2006 before completing his bachelor's degree in agricultural engineering at UGA. An Ocilla native, Harper serves the Seventh District in the Georgia State Senate. In the Senate, he is Vice Chairman of the Senate Agriculture and Consumer Affairs Committee and serves as Secretary of the Senate Public Safety Committee. He is also a member of the Senate Natural Resources and Environmental and Retirement Committees.

The owner and operator of Tyler Harper Farms in Ocilla, Harper is also involved in several business ventures including serving as vice president of Force3 USA, Inc., a modular building dealer; president of Fortis, USA, Inc., a private security and training company; and secretary of Harper Family Holdings, LLC, that sells and leases apartments and rental property.

Harper is a 2013 graduate of Leadership Georgia, a 2013 graduate of the Georgia Legislative Leadership Institute, and a 2014 graduate of the Georgia Academy for Economic Development. He will serve as president of the Georgia Young Farmers Association in 2015-16.

**Grubbs** received his associate degree in agricultural engineering technology from ABAC in 1965. As a student at ABAC he was a part of the Ag Engineering Technology (AET) Club and was elected to Who's Who at ABAC. He was a staff member at ABAC from 1966-79 and again from 1980-2004 in the School of Agriculture and Natural Resources. Grubbs drove the ABAC pulling tractor, "Cracker Jack," to two national titles.

The ABAC Impact Award winner in 1996, 1999, and 2000, Grubbs served as Staff Forum President from 1989-1990. He received the ABAC Alumni Association Distinguished Alumnus award in 1995. He helps to support a welding scholarship, is a lifetime member of the Alumni Association, served on the Alumni Board for many years, and is a big supporter of the ABAC Foundation. He retired after 40 years of service to the college in 2004.

Grubbs was a member of the committee that created the Sunbelt Agricultural Exposition, an event that began as a series of small equipment shows on the ABAC campus. The Ty Ty resident, along with other AET faculty and students, has contributed thousands of hours to the development of the Expo. Grubbs' wife, Ann, also attended ABAC.

**Fandel** received her associate degree in political science from ABAC in 2001. She then received a bachelor's degree in history and her teaching certificate from Georgia Southwestern State University. Fandel then earned her master's degree in history from Valdosta State University (VSU) and her Doctor of Education in teacher leadership from Walden University. She is currently enrolled in VSU's Educational Leadership Certificate Program.

After graduating from ABAC, Fandel served the college as a part-time admissions counselor. She later returned to the campus as Assistant Professor of Education and Coordinator for the Center for Teaching and Learning from 2007-2011. Fandel is an active spectator and volunteer for various ABAC events including Stallion Day, arts events and concerts, and athletic events. She presently teaches 10<sup>th</sup> grade AP United States History at Tift County High School. Her husband, Gene, is also a 2001 ABAC graduate.

**Jones** attended ABAC from 1997-99, earning her associate degree in business. She received her bachelor of business administration degree in marketing from VSU and her bachelor of business administration degree in accounting from Georgia Southwestern. Jones is a member of the ABAC Alumni Association and the ABAC Business Education Advisory Committee. In 2014, she assisted with the ABAC Alumni Association Seniors' Cookout.

After working as the marketing director for Public Health Home Health from 2002-2007, Jones joined the accounting firm of Allen, Pritchett and Bassett, LLP as a certified public accountant in Tifton. She received the J. Lamar Branch Service Award from the Tifton-Tift County Chamber of Commerce in 2012 and the "40 under 40" designation from "Georgia Trend" magazine in 2014.

Jones has served on the board of directors for the Tifton Rotary Club, the Tift County Foundation for Educational Excellence, the Tifton-Tift County Chamber of Commerce, Ruth's Cottage/Patticake House, Tiftarea Young Professionals, Tiftarea Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Tift County Commission on Children and Youth, the Tiftarea YMCA, the Tifton-Tift County Salvation Army, and the Tiftarea Foundation for Women's Health.

**Cochran** received his associate degree in agriculture from ABAC in 1976. A Sylvester resident, he currently farms 1,200 acres of land focusing on timber, cotton, and peanuts. Cochran's farming career began in 1975 when he share-cropped 35 acres of peanuts with a family friend. He purchased his first 200 acres of farm land in 1986.

Named Young Farmer of the Year at the Georgia Peanut Festival in 1991, Cochran was also selected as the Middle South Georgia Conservationist of the Year in 1999, received the Award of Merit for Conservation Accomplishments at the Goodyear Conservation Awards in 1999, and was named Senior Farmer of the Year at the Georgia Peanut Festival in 2011.

Cochran and his wife of 35 years, Cindy, a retired registered nurse, have two children, Brett and Rebekah. Brett attended ABAC from 2003-2004, and Rebekah attended in 2006. Cochran serves on the board of directors of the Worth County Farm Bureau, the Worth County Board of Equalization, the Sylvester Banking Company Advisory Board, and the Mitchell EMC Board of Directors. He is also the current vice chairman of the Phoebe-Worth Hospital Board of Directors.

**Perry** served as a member of the ABAC Foundation Board of Trustees for 25 years (1989-2014) and was named a Trustee Emeritus in 2014. He is a member of the President's Club

and is a reserved table sponsor for the “An Evening for ABAC” scholarship event. He has also established the Hugh and Norma Erwin Perry Scholarship.

An avid supporter of the ABAC softball program, Perry has also generously donated his house at Lake Blackshear for use by the ABAC Ambassadors for their annual fall retreat. He and his wife, Sue, have three daughters who attended ABAC, one of those on a softball scholarship.

Three generations of the **Marshall Bennett, Sr.** family from Adel have attended ABAC, beginning with Marshall Raymond Bennett, Sr., a 1959 agricultural engineering technology graduate. His sister, Patty Bennett Shaw, received her nursing degree from the college. His three children all attended ABAC. Bennett’s daughters, Angela Bennett Simmons and Kathy Bennett, attended the college in 1979. In 1987, Bennett’s son, Marshall Bennett, Jr., attended as a pre-veterinary medicine major.

Bennett’s niece, Tammy Gaskins Carter, is a graduate of ABAC’s nursing program and currently serves as an instructor in the School of Nursing and Health Sciences. Bennett’s granddaughter, Carrie Simmons Gantt, earned her nursing degree in 2003, followed by granddaughter Alison Harvey in 2004 with a degree in business. Alex Brennan, who became a part of the Bennett family by marriage, received his business degree in 2004.

In 2013, grandson Marshall Raymond “Ben” Bennett, III, received his degree in agricultural education. Ben was a 2011 ABAC Presidential Scholar. Bennett has several more nieces, nephews, and other family members who have attended ABAC. At present, grandson Samuel Joseph Bennett is attending the college, majoring in diversified agriculture.

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