

BEREA COLLEGE

MAGAZINE



SHAPING *New Futures*

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■ In April the College dedicated its newest Communication, Media and Information Technology building (CMIT). The day included building tours for alumni and friends whose generosity made this state-of-the-art space a reality. One tour stop was a short interview where visitors were invited to share about their support and the new building's importance. Broadcast students handled the filming in the building's new studio set.

Photo by Brooklynn Kenney

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About the cover: Recognizing first-generation students during commencement is a long-standing tradition at Berea. The emotional and inspiring moment never translates in photos. So, we created these pennants for first-gen students to proudly announce their accomplishment in their joyous moment in front of all those who helped make that moment possible.

Cover photo by Sonam Tsering '27

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Photo by Brooklyn Kenney



LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Berea Alumni and Friends,

This August marks 26 years since I stepped foot on Berea's campus as a first-year student. We pulled up to Talcott Hall in a truck borrowed from my aunt and uncle, just before temperatures became scorching. I walked into my quaint quarters, filled with excitement and battling back the overwhelm and uncertainty tickling the edges of my mind. I didn't bring much, and the room wouldn't hold much. After a hearty thank you to the students and staff who helped move my things, a grocery store run and a three-hour traffic jam, I waved goodbye to my mom.

And then I just stood there. Alone for one of the first times in my life.

It wasn't the new place that made me nervous—as a military brat, I had moved many times. But I'd always had my brother there with me to hold my hand when I was little and to give me a reassuring nod as we grew older. This time, I knew no one and nothing about this new place. Yet, my brother and I were still embarking on a journey together. Two years before, he had been the first in our family to go to college—and now it was my turn to follow suit.

We were both first-generation students. We were on different campuses, more than 100 miles apart, but we were both proving to our mom, each other and ourselves that we could create a new legacy in our family.

It only took a couple of hours, one night of silly ice-breaker games and a Student Life staff full of warm and inviting people to help me settle into my new home—and one of the greatest challenges I would conquer in my young life.

And the rest is history. I've written many times about meeting my husband, the incredible teachers and mentors I encountered and the immense support I received at Berea. But one of the most intangible gifts Berea gave me, as I maneuvered classes and scheduling, residence hall assignments and work opportunities, was the reassurance I felt being surrounded by other students like me who financially thought college was out of reach and didn't have that adult at home who could tell them what to expect.

Being first is a heavy crown. Berea helped lessen the weight and heighten the sparkle of that crown. I felt supported at every turn, reassured in every challenge. As a first-gen student, I questioned myself a lot. But my professors, supervisor, coach and understanding peers helped me thrive despite my insecurities.

Walking across that stage in May 2003 was one of the proudest days of my life.

And I'll let you all in on a (not-so-secret) secret—I'm doing it again. Last fall, I restarted a master's program, picking up where I left off in 2005. I am the very first in my family to pursue an advanced degree. And all these years later, I still feel challenged and uncertain, but I've been here before, and I know I can do it again.

Join me in this issue as we celebrate the stories of alumni, students, faculty and staff sharing the tears and triumphs of their first-generation journeys—their firsts and futures.

Abbie Tanyhill Darst [03

Editor

Interim Associate Vice President for Marketing and Communications

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Photo taken by Tyler Rocquemore [22. Tyler was a student photographer in the Marketing and Communications department as her work assignment in Berea College's Labor Program.

BEREA COLLEGE

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By Jake Miller

Nay Kaw '23 and his brother Ekhu '26 were born into a country that had been at war with itself for 70 years. And they were born into a minority. In 2010, when the boys were 7 and 4, respectively, they fled Burma with their mother. Their new home was a refugee camp in Thailand.

The young men remember very little from this time in their lives when they were very little. Ekhu remembers only running through the camp naked on laundry day. Nay remembers more.

"You don't have anything," he said, from Cincinnati, where he works as an auditor now. "No shoes, no fashionable clothes, just basic. You don't have a home, and you're just waiting on a place to go."

The place to go turned out to be Louisville, Ky., home to Kentucky Refugee Ministries. Their mother, Poe, now disabled, raised Nay, Ekhu and their oldest brother, Monday, alone on public assistance. The older boys took turns at being father figures for each other.

Nay enrolled at West End School, a scholarship-based boarding school in Louisville, and later landed a scholarship to Louisville Collegiate, a prestigious prep school. Because of his success, he had options for higher education and good guidance. He chose Berea because of its affordability, diversity and mission. He majored in business and finance, worked in the College marketing department and interned with LouCity & Racing Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to helping underprivileged kids afford to play soccer.

Nay became the first in his family to earn a college degree. "I feel blessed," he said. "It was hard to go through it and not have any example or people that did it before me, but I feel proud, successful. My mom's proud. She brags."



Nay said, because he grew up with her never having anything, he always wanted to be a provider. Nay didn't talk about his role as father figure to his younger brother, but Ekhu did. It was Nay who had to give consent for Ekhu to have part of his skull removed to relieve pressure on his brain after a car accident. Ekhu had been ejected from the car and faced 90 days in recovery.

"Every day I woke up grateful to be alive," Ekhu said.

He says Nay permitting the surgery brought them closer.

"Nay's a great role model," Ekhu said. "He's always confident. But I never was until after the accident. For 90 days, my junior year, it was wake up, eat, take your pills, go to therapy until late in the day. It makes you realize just how grateful you're got to be. I became more confident because now I wanted to be successful. You have to be the role model you wish you had."

Ekhu is now a marketing major at Berea and, like his brother, manages the student photography team in the Marketing and Communications department. He just finished his own internship at LouCity & Racing Foundation.

"I hate to admit it, but I followed Nay's every step."

He hopes to be a role model for others, too, and Berea is helping him become one. "I can't think of another school that provides the opportunities Berea does. They treat students as investments and teach you to invest in yourself. But it's not an easy way out. Berea makes you earn it."

Leading by Example

The Legacy of Two Brothers



■ Ekhu '26 (left) and his brother, Nay Kaw '23 take a break together during a photography experiential learning trip in Cincinnati, Ohio, with other student photographers and videographers in Berea's Marketing and Communications office. As Burmese refugees, these first-generation brothers came to Berea from Louisville and found success in the classroom, the workplace and now, for Kaw, a promising career at an advising firm in Cincinnati.

Photos by Crystal Wylie '05



Scan the QR code or follow the link bit.ly/4mLdBSY to learn more about Kentucky Refugee Ministries through the eyes of another Berea alumna, in an article featuring photos by Nay.



The Broom that Changed a Nation

By Jake Miller

On a service trip to Ghana in 2003, Denessa Baters McPherson '05, upon meeting the village chief, asked about acquiring a Ghanaian broom to take home. "Why do you want a Ghanaian broom?" he asked her. "They fall apart."

McPherson, who had been working in a village for people with disabilities, explained she wanted to take one to her father, a broom maker.

The chief was astonished. "Two years ago," he told her, "I had a dream that an American broom maker would come and teach us."

In his office, he showed her the illustrations of the brooms from his dream. "Have you ever seen anything like this?" he asked.

"They were Appalachian turkeywing brooms," McPherson related. "Absolutely," I said. "I've made these before. My dad makes these all the time."

"Will he come?" the chief inquired. "Will he teach us how to make brooms so we can sell them and so the people can find value and worth in what they do?"

THE BROOM MAKER'S DAUGHTER

"Dad, I know how to make brooms,"

Denessa told her father, Dennis Baters, after he pointed out the Berea College tag attached to the latest broom in his antique collection. He was encouraging her to apply to the college, but following in her father's sweeping footsteps was not appealing to her.

Nevertheless, she became intrigued by Berea's mission and reputation. McPherson was eager to leave the off-grid homestead where she had lived the past five years. In a previous life, she was an Oklahoma City suburbanite, a mainstreamer. Her parents yearned for a more bucolic existence and put the house up for sale.

But the deal went bad, and the family ended up living in their truck. For about six months, fifth-grade Denessa slept in the cab, her parents under the capper in the back. Dennis earned his money in junk sales, traveling to flea markets and antique shops. Eventually, atop a rocky ridge, the family found an unfinished cabin. The Baters became homesteaders.

"We grew more rocks than potatoes," McPherson said. "The goats ran away because the fence didn't hold. We ate government peanut butter, donated by friends because Dad would not sign up for government assistance. I was homeschooled. I had no friends. I lived on a mountaintop and read books."

By the time she was 16, life off the grid improved. The family moved to



Denessa Baters McPherson '05 found her way to Berea from a tag on a Student Craft broom acquired by her broom maker father. Now the assistant director of Admissions overseeing campus visits and events, McPherson gets to introduce hundreds of prospective and often first-generation students to the opportunities Berea offers.

Photo by Jasmine Straub '25
Broom photo by Justin Skeens

a 20-acre homestead on Bear Creek in the Kiamichi Mountains in southeastern Oklahoma. The goats stuck around. They had chickens, a garden, a wood stove. McPherson's bedroom was a 12-foot Shasta travel trailer. She immersed herself in history, becoming interested especially in the Civil War.

McPherson enjoyed learning, but when she discovered how expensive her homeschool curriculum was, she dropped out and looked for work instead. Before turning 18, she decided to join family members in Indiana to explore the restaurant business during a gap year.

"My mother said I wasn't allowed to leave the house until I got my GED, took the ACT and applied to at least one college," she recounted.

She took her tests and applied to Berea College and nowhere else.

"The letter from Berea came in the mail," she said. "I couldn't even open it. Someone else had to read it to me. I knew that if I was in, I was supposed to do it; I was meant to."

THE IMPOSTER

The first semester at a prestigious college known for academic rigor can be tough on a homeschool dropout. Though excited and buoyed by apparent providential destiny, McPherson had never written an essay in her life. Worse, all her new classmates seemed like naturals at it.

That was almost reason enough to quit and head back to Indiana, where she could continue the career she began the year before. She approached Dr. Jill Bouma, the sociology professor who assigned the essay.

"I don't know what I'm doing here," McPherson told her. "If I can't write something that everybody else thinks is the simplest thing in the world, then I don't belong here. I'm not as smart as these kids. I don't know what these kids know. I can't do it."

Dr. Bouma wasn't interested in feeding the young student's imposter syndrome.

"She took me aside and said, 'Nope, that's not who you are,'" McPherson recalled. "We're going to learn how to write this essay." Because of her, I was able to finish that class.

If she could finish that class, she could finish college, she thought. She declared a major in communication, which was offered for the first time beginning her sophomore year.

SWEEPING CHANGE

In Ghana, not long after McPherson decided to stick with it, she told the chief she would ask her father about teaching them to make brooms, but he was 50 and had never been on a plane before.

When shown the Ghanaian broom and told about the chief's invitation, Dennis said, simply, "Let's see what the Lord does with it."

He went right to work on the idea, understanding that if he were to do this, he would need to create a broom machine that the disabled people of the village could use. A standard machine requires the use of hands and feet simultaneously.

"Some in the village had use of their hands," McPherson explained. "Some had use of their feet, but not both hands and feet. Some were blind. Some were deaf."

In Texas, Dennis set up his broom machine at an event to demonstrate. He posted a sign that read, "Ask me about Africa." A man named Bert Seale happened by and asked him about it. Dennis explained he was trying to create a broom machine that could be worked by two people, with one using their hands while the other used their feet, and of a certain raw material indigenous to the region. He needed a specific kind of part that no one made.

Bert, an engineer, bought a broom and wished him well. The next day, he came back with a piece he had fabricated. "Will this work?" he asked. Dennis said it would and asked if he could make five more. Soon, Dennis and Bert became best friends, and Denessa had a new uncle.

The new broom machines, and the broom corn and seed to go with them, hitched a ride in a shipping container used by Wheelchairs for the World, which was already going that way. For the next three years, Dennis spent months at a time in Ghana, teaching people to make brooms and how to grow broom corn. He taught a deaf man to make brooms, who taught a blind man how, and so on.

At that time in Ghana, being disabled carried a stigma. It was widely assumed that a person or their parents had sinned, and their disability was punishment. Because of that, the broom making quickly drew attention. One day, the queen mother of the Asante Kingdom, Nana Afiya Kobi Serwaa Ampem II, got word of what was happening and went to see for herself.

Dennis wore a shirt that read, "Jesus swept," which she complimented. Someone ran up to say that her compliment meant he had to give her the shirt. So, Dennis took it right off his back and gave it to her. A short time later, the queen mother pushed for legislation that would recognize the value of the disabled and what they could contribute.

"In a way," Denessa said, "a broom changed a nation."

THE FINISHING LINE

McPherson finished college, the first in her family. Her mom, Jackie, made graduation invitations by hand for "literally everyone she'd ever met." McPherson, too, was excited and filled with sudden pride in her accomplishment and confidence for the future, understanding that she had dug deeply within herself to make it happen despite difficulty.

The next year, Denessa married Chad McPherson '06, the day before he graduated. Chad and Denessa gave Jackie and Dennis three grandchildren who are bound for college, for a new family tradition of educational attainment and for their own fateful journeys. ■



■ On Nov. 8, 2023, Berea celebrated its first national First-Gen Day by honoring first-generation staff and faculty. Matching t-shirts showed students how many in their support network once shared their journey. The date marks the anniversary of the 1965 Higher Education Act.

Top photo by Crystal Wylie '05
Bottom photo by Brooklynn Kenney

The First to Finish

By Chad Berry

Although my parents were both schoolteachers, when I began my undergraduate journey, I encountered aspects of a world very different from high school. I could, though, rely on my parents to tell me what a registrar was or what a bursar did whenever higher education language was befuddling. I also attended a university where many students came from the highest quintile of family income, which was another aspect of college with which I had to come to terms. Even though I wasn't a first-generation college student (my father was), the world of college was often new and sometimes unsettling.

Berea College enrolls many students who are the first in their families to complete a four-year degree. The percentage of first-generation students is a metric point we follow closely because it reflects our mission. And we take serving first-gen students very seriously. I recall a story when our ninth president arrived and encountered an employee on the quad. The president asked this Berean what his job was. Although he then worked in facilities management, his response was, "I think my job is pretty much like other employees here: to ensure that students get across the commencement platform successfully." What a great response.

All college students have both assets and challenges. College students from high-wealth families, though, have many advantages. In the 18 years prior to entering higher ed, wealthy students have had the benefit of family income to help them transcend a challenge. I think, for example, of a young swimmer who has difficulty with lane turns, so parents hire a swim coach to help the swimmer get the hang of that complex maneuver. By summer's end, the swimmer has shaved seconds off a time and gained a dose of confidence in the water and beyond.

Social science has examined how scarcity impacts families with low household incomes, discovering that so much bandwidth is dedicated to financial matters that it can lead to worse outcomes in other areas. For such students, Berea College is a unique opportunity in higher education. Not charging tuition since 1892, the College covers all expenses for students, beyond what the FAFSA form indicates must be paid by the student, without packaging loans. Such support helps students dedicate significantly more of their bandwidth to academic pursuits instead of financial. It is why *U.S. News and World Report* describes Berea students as graduating with the lowest educational debt in the nation.

For four short and often intense years, Berea can invest in each

student in ways wealthy families do for their children. Berea's investment comes in human as well as in material examples. Within hours of arriving on campus, a new student meets a caring and committed faculty advisor who will guide that student through the first year. That new student will receive on the same day a brand-new laptop to remove the technology barrier, and in 48 hours, the student will meet a caring mentor in a labor supervisor who can complement academic and work learning.

That student can get free dental care, free counseling or even free professional clothing for a summer internship that is also funded by the College. The student can study abroad at minimal cost and receive preparation funding for post-graduate education tests, like the GRE, MCAT or GMAT. And at graduation, a student can get a minimum of \$500 to relocate to another place for a job or graduate school, or to afford a security deposit on an apartment. Most of these supports are made possible by alumni and friends who believe deeply in Berea's mission to change a student's trajectory forever.

Three key ingredients are found in Berea's success recipe with students: a place that welcomes all peoples of the earth, a place that provides unparalleled support for each student to succeed, and a counterintuitive ingredient based on the homogeneity of socioeconomic background. No Berea student arrives on a Greyhound bus only to meet a roommate flown in on the family's private jet. No one at Berea has less or more than another. It is why Berea is No. 1 in economic access to higher education, according to a 2023 *New York Times* ranking.

The outcome of such support, particularly for students whose families are unfamiliar with higher education, is striking. Except for dependents of Berea employees and a handful of exchange students, all students must prove they are eligible for a Pell grant or would be if they were U.S. citizens.

Berea's work then ensures that the federal government's support through Pell grants and the Work College appropriation are good investments in trajectory change. Berea graduates Pell students at twice the national average.

While Berea serves students from all 50 states, 65 percent of our students are from Kentucky and Appalachia, and three-quarters of Berea's graduates remain in Kentucky and Appalachia, ensuring its high-talent graduates will provide necessary leadership in the region.

Berea College is the very model of higher education many in this country want. We accept only those of high promise, focusing on those least able to afford college and we graduate them with the least debt in the country at double the national average for Pell recipients. As the oldest Work College, our students work all four years so they graduate with relevant work experience and skills that prepare them for a career beyond Berea. Finally, for more than 130 years, we have served a region that needs skilled workers in healthcare, technology, education, agriculture, business and more.

Recalling the Berea employee who said his job was to ensure every student gets across the commencement platform, each commencement is a moving and inspiring day, and especially so when graduates who are the first in their families to earn a four-year college degree are asked to stand for everyone to see and applaud. One cannot help but tear up looking at the many students who proudly rise. This past May was even more powerful when first-gen students held up a pennant that proclaimed, "I'M FIRST!"

They are indeed, and the world awaits their hard work and commitment. Alumni and friends can be grateful for the role they have played with on-campus Bereans to get graduates like these to such a great finish line, ready to begin their next journey. 🎓



Not your Appalachian Stereotype

By Kim Kobersmith

■ Born the sixth of seven children to a Kentucky coal miner and homemaker, Dr. Bobby Starnes' first generation journey earned her three degrees, a wealth of scholarship in place-based research and a full-circle route to Berea College, where she serves as the chair of the Appalachian Studies Department.

Photo by Ehku Say '26

When Bobby Starnes was 7 years old, while driving through Berea from her home in Dayton, Ohio, to family-owned land in Knott County, Ky., her father pulled over in front of Boone Tavern. He rolled down his car window, pointed a finger at one of the buildings on the Berea College campus, and said, "That is Berea College. They help people there."

Whenever her normally taciturn dad said something, Starnes listened. This was no exception. Her strong memory of that moment planted a seed of connection that didn't fully blossom until decades later, when the now Dr. Bobby Starnes became a professor at Berea College. As a first-generation high school graduate from Appalachia, she offers wisdom and empathy to many Berea students from similar backgrounds and experiences.

Born in Knott County on Caney Creek at the mouth of Holly Bush, Starnes was the sixth child of seven born to a coal miner and a homemaker. Her father entered the mines at age 11 to support his family after his father died of Black Lung complications. Her mother was educated through sixth grade.

During Starnes' first five years, she lived on the mountain that her family had owned since just after the Revolutionary War. That's when outside factors, primarily the mechanization of mining, forced the family to move to Dayton. Her father ran a freight elevator there; her mother worked at a factory, then as a nurse's aide. Making a living was a struggle for the family of nine.

The city was a hard place for Starnes to grow up. The family lived in a cultural enclave of fellow displaced Appalachians, but their accents, culture and values were not in line with other city residents beyond their small group. She did not feel welcome or able to be herself at school. The only time she truly felt at home was when her clan would pile into their old Buick and head to the Kentucky

homestead for the weekend.

"As we drove and the mountains grew closer together, I felt swaddled and safe," Starnes said. "I could feel my body relaxing."

Though neither of her parents graduated from high school, the importance of education was a theme in their lives. Her family was key to welcoming Alice Lloyd to the community, and her uncle donated the land to establish her namesake college. Her parents made sacrifices; all their offspring have successful careers in business, higher education and nursing.

By the time she was 17, Starnes knew she wanted to be a teacher. Winning a scholarship contest through the hospital where her mother worked made it possible to complete her first two years of college at Bowling Green State University. There, she was encouraged to take typing classes and become a secretary or a beautician. Many other students were from similar working-class backgrounds, and she said, "Nobody thought any of us would go very far." After a short hiatus, Starnes completed her degree at Wright College while working three jobs to support herself. Fortunately, she secured a position at a rural public school before she graduated. That began a career teaching in and empowering underserved communities. She soon moved back to the Dayton school, where she was an alumna, and forged trusting relationships with students and families, many of whom also had Appalachian roots.

"I could so clearly see myself in these kids," she said. "I knew they grew up with a history that didn't include them, so I created ways of teaching that tied in Appalachia. I helped them understand they don't have to pretend to be what they are not."

Before moving to Berea, Starnes was engaged in place-based work in Montana, developing a curriculum to teach about the culture and heritage of the Indian tribes residing in the state. A call from a colleague invited

her back home to Appalachia, and she agreed to give Berea College a try for a year.

"By October, I knew I was never leaving here alive," she said. "I fell in love with teaching students who were just like me."

A BEREA WELCOME

Born from her experiences, Starnes is uniquely qualified to generously welcome and sensitively anticipate the needs of Berea's first-generation and Appalachian students. In her classes, students from Appalachian Regional Commission-identified, economically at-risk and distressed counties foster a safe and supportive community through shared meals and activities.

Starnes is an advocate for culture, language and history, and against assimilation. She infuses regional history and cultural elements, like democratic values and egalitarianism, into the class.

"They realize there's a lot to be proud of," she said. "To lose language is to lose culture, and I have bitterness and anger about how it was forced on me. That's why I fight so hard for students at Berea to not give that up."

Starnes talks with all of her students about mindsets that are holding them back. One is impostor syndrome and persistent doubt that they should even be in college. She explained that too many students have internalized false Appalachian stereotypes about their intellect. To give students a voice to speak back, she helped create buttons that say, "I am not your Appalachian stereotype."

Starnes' words and life reflect that different message. "Our classes uplift where they are from and who they are, and tell them they are exactly where they belong," she said. "We invite serious thinking about opening their world a bit more and expanding what they perceive as their life choices. We help all students see they can be what they can't even dream about now."



Many of Berea's faculty members were once first-generation students. As the first in his family to graduate from college, Julian Viera Jr. started out like many of the students he teaches today. His Ph.D. in Education: Teaching, Learning and Culture from the University of Texas, El Paso, enables Viera to instruct Berea's students in math education, online education, biliteracy and digital literacies, while demonstrating what a first-gen success story looks like. Scan the QR code or follow the link to view a video and learn more about Viera's story.

<https://bit.ly/DrVieraFirstGen>

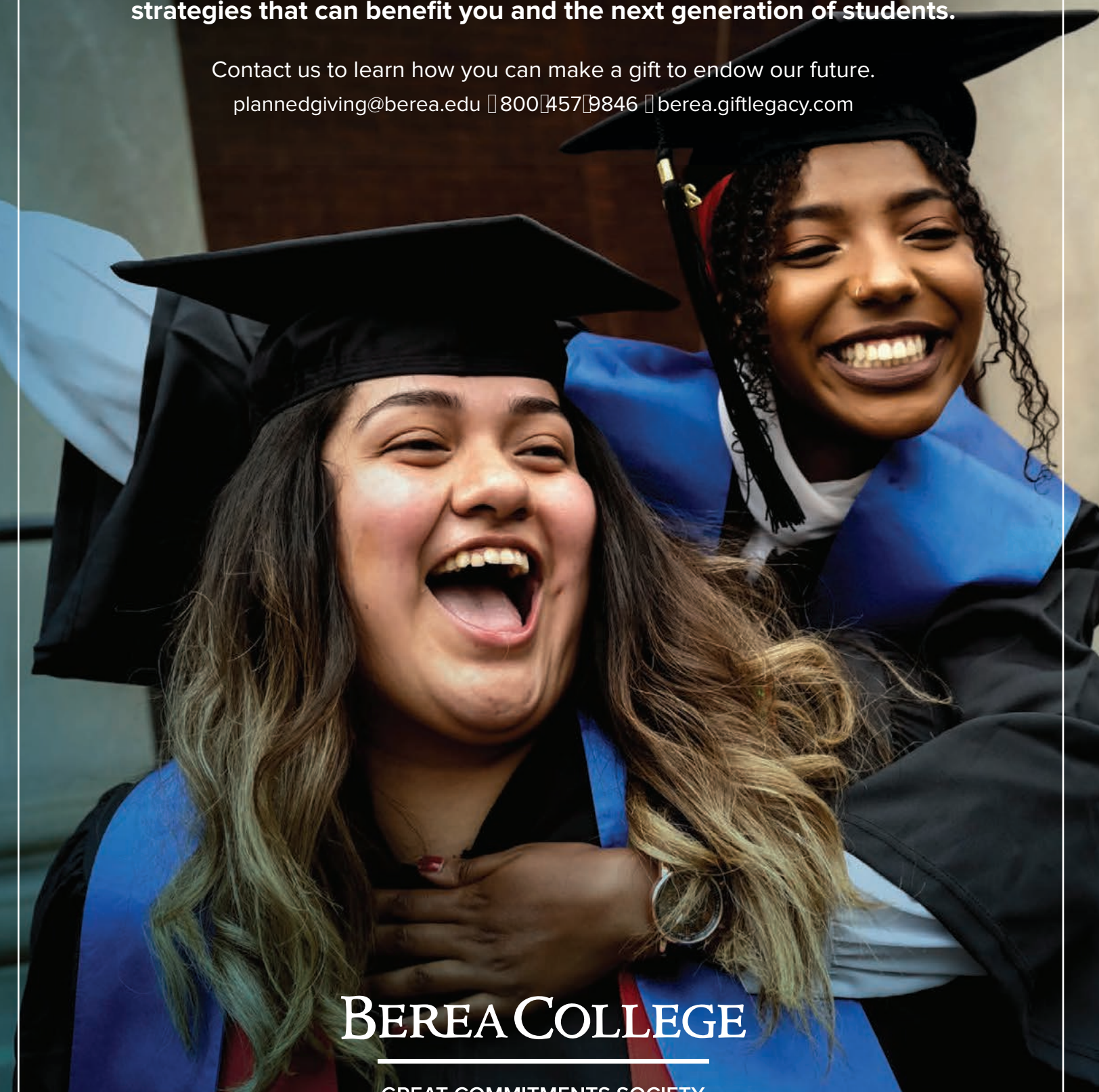


Photo by Brooklynn Kenney

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At Berea College, we offer a number of charitable gift and estate planning strategies that can benefit you and the next generation of students.

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BEREA COLLEGE

GREAT COMMITMENTS SOCIETY

Photo by Crystal Wylie '05

First Gen Fueling the Future

By Hannah Hisle '23

Deep in the quiet hills of Jackson County, Kentucky, a young Talina Mathews '89 held dreams of being a math teacher. In a place where middle school dropout rates were high and mountainous roads made education inaccessible in the winter, she rode to school every day on a bus driven by her grandfather.

“He wanted to make sure I got there safely, and despite our circumstances, he always pushed for me to get an education.”

In a home without running water, Talina lived a certain kind of richness—one steeped in love, family and an invisible string of Berea alums who guided her along her path in education. “I had two people who weren’t distracted by work and loved me endlessly. I didn’t know we were poor because we had plenty to eat, but from the land,” Mathews recalls. “We had a garden and were always canning and freezing. When my grandmother became disabled, our cousins and aunt would come and help out.”

Mathews describes the difference between Madison County, where Berea College is located, and Jackson County as quite stark. Jackson County, she says, is not that far in distance, but it is very far in culture. In fact, the counties are adjacent to one another.

Given the culture of her community, college wasn’t something Mathews seriously considered. That is, until high school, when two Berea alumni saw something in her and stepped in to help. Because her school didn’t offer the ACT (a consequence of the county’s sky-high dropout rate), they drove her to Eastern Kentucky University to take the test. That small act of belief changed her life.

Soon, she found herself at Berea.

“Jackson County is homogenous,” she said. “At Berea, I made friends with people from all over the world. I took my friend from New York City to a farm and showed her a cow for the first time—she was terrified. And I thought, if I’d gone home with her, I would’ve been just as scared in her world. We both learned something that day.”

Mathews emphasizes the importance of recognizing that everyone comes to Berea with a similar experience. Whether it be from another part of the world or a place that looks like Jackson County, everybody has a common denominator of need and potential.

“Those Berea serves are exactly what makes it work,” Mathews said. “You learn the academic side, which is rigorous and amazing, but everything else is where your true education is. It’s exposure to folks and lives you would have never had exposure to.”

Starting out as a math education major, Mathews switched to economics after a professor helped her see her strengths. To her surprise, she applied to grad school based on recommendations from her mentors, eventually earning both her master’s and Ph.D. in economics while teaching to support herself.

“I wouldn’t have even known to apply,” as college applications, the ACT and FAFSA processes are all part of a secret language first-generation students aren’t taught, she says. “But people helped me. I had angels on my shoulder.”

Mathews’ first job out of grad school was at a premier engineering school in rural Michigan. She jokingly reminisced on how familiar it felt. “Same culture as home, really. Extractive economy. Someone had taken the timber and coal and left people with nothing. The resources were depleted, and people were left without jobs. It felt a lot like home.”

From there, her path led her into public service. She became a commissioner on Kentucky’s Public Service Commission, where she helped set utility rates for the entire state. Mathews now serves as the chief financial officer of an electric co-op based in Owensboro, Ky., where she carries her Berea values through the work she does for Kentuckians.

“I think about the people we serve,” she said. “I know how hard they work for their money. Somebody out there is deciding between electricity and medicine. Every dollar I spend is a dollar that came from them.”

A strong sense of responsibility and empathy is something Mathews credits to her time at Berea. She remembers the moment during her first summer at college when her grandmother died. It was a faculty

member of the college who drove her back to Jackson County so she could be home for the funeral.

“Berea is full of people like that,” she said. “People who help you carry your burdens.”

Mathews still carries Berea’s mission in every room she walks into, especially when the atmosphere is tense or she feels out of place.

“I’ve been in rooms where Kentucky wasn’t exactly welcome in conversations about greenhouse gases,” she said. “But I spoke up. I showed them how Kentucky powers the manufacturing that keeps fuel costs low. The aluminum that makes your Toyota efficient? It comes from us. Somebody has to make the things. And to make the things, you need electricity.”

Mathews’ passion for Berea and how educational access changed her life shines through her work. She jokingly recalls all the times someone on an airplane has asked where she’s from, or how she got to where she is now. “God bless those people,” she says. “They’re going to hear an earful about Berea.”

Now, she gets to tell that story not just as a proud alumna, but as a trustee.

“It’s an accounting of an immense debt I’ll never be able to repay,” she says. “But it’s an honor. A privilege. I could’ve taken the same math classes anywhere. I could have the same degree from anywhere. But I would not be the same person.”

Mathews boasts endless gratitude for her Berea family’s interest in her as not just a student, but as a whole person with responsibilities, struggles and nuances that extended beyond the classroom. To Mathews, Berea was more than just the classes.

“I came to Berea, and they said, ‘We’re going to help you carry your baggage,’” she says, “and then we’re going to help you unpack it.”

■ Sitting in her office overlooking downtown Owensboro and the Ohio River, Dr. Talina Mathews '89 has come a long way from her roots in Jackson County, Ky. With support from her grandparents and the guidance of teachers who were Berea alumni, Berea allowed Mathews to find her place and path to public service.

Photo by Crystal Wylie '05

Dream Ladder

By Jake Miller

It may seem that Cory Schlesinger '09 is living the dream, but he longs for 50 acres and some chickens.

For now, he is leaning into his position as executive director of Basketball Performance for the Detroit Pistons. He's a long, long way from Hillsville, Va., a one-to plight town amid the Blue Ridge Mountains.

He grew up there with his mom, Kandy Schlesinger, a U.S. Air Force veteran turned product designer, molding clay figurines to send to Kurt S. Adler, Inc. to be approved for mass production.

"My mom was a starving artist who got lucky and had a couple of projects that struck really well. She designed figurines you see at Christmastime."

Her biggest claim to fame might be the 1991 "Holiday Pockets" leaflet from Leisure Arts that inspired a generation of do-it-yourself Christmas sweaters.

While his mom made Christmas, Schlesinger was trying to figure out how to live up to his brother's athletic accomplishments. Warren Schlesinger landed scholarships to Emory & Henry College to play football and baseball.

"My brother was my only male role model," Schlesinger said. "He pushed me to find something I was better at than him. That's how I found basketball."

Schlesinger's success at point guard led to an unexpected offer to play for Berea College. "College was not a part of my plan in any stretch of the imagination," Schlesinger said, "and going to Kentucky definitely wasn't on the Bingo card. At least, I didn't think so, but here we are."

He didn't know what to expect but felt he fit in immediately on a small campus that seemed an extension of high school. His class was bigger than his graduating class of 50, but not so large that the young man weathered the kinds of stressors that come with large universities.

"I don't think I would have done well in a larger state school, mainly because of the distractions," he said. "The cool part about Berea is that it is intimate. Within half a year, you're going to know the whole campus."

That whole campus pretty much couldn't go anywhere back then. "The policy was you had to live more than eight hours away to have a vehicle," Schlesinger said. "No one had a vehicle, so you and your peers had to make fun out of nothing."

When Schlesinger wasn't at basketball practice or inventing new fun with friends, he was a sports medicine major whose campus job was vacuuming in the Special Collections and Archives at Hutchins Library. The next year, he transitioned to working as an athletic trainer, overseeing sports practices. Eventually, he was able to create his own personal trainer position.





■ Cory Schlesinger '09 helps get Detroit Pistons players to perform at their peak. His curiosity and drive to seize opportunities at Berea propelled him to the top of his field in the NBA.

Photo by Amanda J. Cain

And now, he gets to do that for the Pistons. The biggest difference between the NBA rung of the ladder and lower ones, he said, is that "the eyes are much, much more upon you."

"I have, unfortunately, a large social media following," he wryly added, before explaining that these days he is also touring the world to speak on human performance topics. Providing educational content online has led Schlesinger to speaking engagements in China, Brazil and, this year, London.

They say success begets success, and these successes are leading to other ventures. Recently, Schlesinger founded NOT DONE YET Performance with his wife, Dr. Shirine Gharib, a sports medicine chiropractor.

"None of this was planned," he said. "It happened because I stayed curious and took advantage of what Berea offered. Berea allowed me to be curious. It gave the space to explore what was possible. Opportunities are there only if you're curious."

At just 38 years old, Schlesinger is, as the all-caps proclamation in his company name suggests, not done yet. There is still much for the point guard from Hillsville to accomplish, perhaps more rungs on the ladder. But the ultimate goal is to reconnect to where it all began. Somewhere is a patch of land where Schlesinger, his wife and their daughter, Mila, can exist outside the heat of the limelight. The dream ladder is perhaps circular.

"I want chickens," he said, "and cows. The dream now is how do you get to 50 acres, to where you can raise your family the way you want to? Growing up, I wanted to get as far away from Hillsville as possible and see the world. But now I want to get back to that. That's the dream."

Sandy Williams, associate professor of Health and Human Performance, put him on a career path that is still in motion.

"Sandy was crucial throughout my time at Berea," Schlesinger remembered. "Working as an athletic trainer got me working with team sports outside of basketball."

Soon, Schlesinger took on paid internships at Wake Forest University, where he worked with the men's basketball and football teams, and the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, where he worked with national title winners.

"By the time I was 21 years old, I'd already worked with two Division I teams," he said. "I got to develop as an athlete because I got to practice with those guys, to play pickup games. I could walk into [UNC Men's Basketball Coach] Roy Williams' office, practice with elite players and develop professional connections. It was unbelievable."

After getting the chance to shoot over seven-footer Tyler Zeller, Schlesinger graduated and aimed for graduate school. While pursuing a master's degree in Exercise Physiology at Campbell University in Buies Creek, N.C., he took a graduate assistant position. Schlesinger was now responsible for the health and performance of six Division I athletic programs, including soccer, volleyball and tennis.

Two years later, at age 23, Schlesinger climbed the next rung

by accepting the position of director of Strength and Conditioning at Santa Clara University in California. He was by far the youngest director of a Division I program.

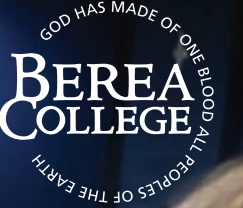
"So you got this kid out of a one-stoplight town, who has never been to a big city, managing personnel and balancing the budgets of 13 Division I teams in the Bay Area, one of the most expensive zip codes in the world."

Though it would be intimidating for just about any recent graduate not yet old enough to rent a car, Schlesinger said he was ready because of the head start he got at Berea.

"I got so much experience early that taking that job wasn't overwhelming," he related. "It was just another rung on the ladder and the best possible position for me to be in."

The next rungs on the ladder included stints at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and Stanford University. In 2019, the former point guard was finally drafted to the NBA as the head strength and conditioning coach and director of performance for the Phoenix Suns.

They were the worst team in the league. In 2020, though, Schlesinger helped players like Devon Booker, Deandre Ayton and Frank Kaminsky go 80 in the NBA COVID bubble. In 2021, the Suns went to the finals.



Have an even greater impact on students.

As a teacher and Berea alumnus in your community, share your Berea story with your students and introduce them to the opportunity for transformative education.

Pictured is Jeremy Grant '00. He teaches English and Theatre at Madison Southern High School, Berea, Ky.

Photo by Crystal Wylie '05

NOMINATE
STUDENTS TO BEREA COLLEGE



Do you know high school students you'd like to nominate?

We want them to have a chance at Berea College, but we need your nomination today.



Jeremiah the First

■ Jeremiah is an incoming first-year Mountaineer. Yet this first-generation student has already made a mark on his Montgomery, Ala., hometown. After experiencing the tragic death of his cousin, Jeremiah launched a clothing brand at only 14 years old and decided to pursue an education at Berea, focused on earning a law degree.

Photo by Malori Butler

In fifth grade, Jeremiah had just celebrated Christmas with his cousin, Jarvis Lykes, right before he was killed by police. Because he was unarmed, Lykes became an early symbol of the Black Lives Matter movement; his image appears on multiple murals in the Columbus, Ga., area, and other places.

“There was no bodycam footage, no neighborhood cameras, no evidence,” Jeremiah recounted. “Jarvis became a symbol.”

Jeremiah was a theater kid, an actor and singer. He held the privilege of performing in “Ruby Bridges” at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, with Ruby Bridges herself in the audience. But the circumstances around his cousin’s death were moving him toward activism and an interest in law. These interests only intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, when adversity struck hardest and even closer to home.

His mother, Japonica Dennis, describes a period of intense struggle beginning in 2020. She was out of work, and the pandemic made things worse. Jeremiah, at 13 and on lockdown with the rest of the country, scrolled through social media as tensions peaked around the death of George Floyd and resurfaced feelings about what had happened to Jarvis.

“I was soaking up all the protest footage, seeing everything on the

By Jake Miller

news,” Jeremiah said. “You couldn’t open your phone without seeing what was happening. I immediately wanted to go out and protest” but I was too young.”

“I saw where it took a toll on him mentally,” his mother added. “I didn’t want him to just sit on social media and get consumed by anger. So, I encouraged him to get active, get creative, to stay positive.”

That is when Jeremiah learned to sew. Communities around the country needed masks, and a family friend showed Jeremiah how to make them. He sewed the likeness of his cousin onto them, spending most of his COVID free time in his room producing the protection his community needed. Soon, he moved on to shirts, hats and other items.

Suddenly, Jeremiah had become a 14-year-old area fashion mogul, launching a clothing brand called JayFYE (Fresh Young Entrepreneurs).

“People started noticing,” Jeremiah said. “Local rappers, pop shops, malls. Suddenly, I needed help, so my mom got us a business license and learned how to help make everything.”

“We started traveling and selling his clothes,” Dennis added. “Concerts, events, this little 14-year-old kid with his own brand. He made his struggle look cool. He turned what we were going through into something inspiring.”

During this period in Jeremiah’s life, his interest shifted from theater to law. His magnet high school offered programs in both, so he had to make a choice.

“I’ve always had an interest in law because of what happened to my cousin,” he said. “I didn’t want to be on stage; I wanted to be in a courtroom. So, I picked law.”

But immediately, life threw the family another curveball. Late into a pregnancy, Dennis suffered a heart attack, which resulted in an

immediate cesarean section. Baby Josiah was rushed to a children’s hospital in Birmingham, Ala., while Dennis stayed in Montgomery.

“I was in one hospital,” Dennis said, “Josiah was in another, and Jeremiah was bouncing between home, school and hospitals.”

Jeremiah moved in with his grandmother, juggling classwork, taking care of his mom and little brother and learning to be an adult in the ninth grade. He missed weeks of school.

“The other students would clap if I made it to school five days in a row, but nobody knew what I was going through,” Jeremiah said. “I didn’t get a single A in ninth or tenth grade, except for Law. No matter what, I never missed Law.”

During this time, Dennis focused on ensuring Jeremiah felt loved and stable. “I feel like the best thing you can do for someone you love is show them that love” especially in the hardest times,” she said.

The second half of high school went better. His mom was healing. She found a new job. He fell in love with mock trial competitions and landed an internship at the Montgomery Circuit Court.

“Mock trial took it for me,” he said. “We prepared our own cases. We went to state. I was hooked. And when the judge offered me an internship, I got to see the courtroom for real.”

Because of the rough start in high school, Jeremiah’s GPA wasn’t considered competitive, but his test scores were decent, and his interview skills were on point. Though he didn’t know anything about getting into college, he was determined to go and to find a way not to take on significant debt.

His first thought on accomplishing this was to join the Air Force, but during an admissions interview at Georgetown University, the

counselor told Jeremiah he’d be a great fit for Berea College.

“I wrote a list of what I wanted in a college,” Jeremiah said. “Berea checked all the boxes. It’s one of the first integrated colleges. I’m from Montgomery, once the capital of the Confederacy. That history means something to me.”

Jeremiah and Dennis told this story just a few days before Jeremiah graduated from high school. Dennis beamed with joy and pride.

“Watching him walk across that stage,” she said, “it’s overwhelming. It could have gone a whole different way.”

Jeremiah beamed as well, happy, confident, excited about the future, already sounding like a Berean. He plans to major in English and African and African American Studies and to study abroad in Africa. He’s a Bonner Scholar, which means he will devote himself to community service while at Berea.

“I want to give back, not just learn,” he said. “I want to be part of the communities that need change. We talk about making change all day, but until you put your hands and feet in, it won’t happen.”

He’ll spend his summer preparing to move and honing his advocacy skills at the YMCA Youth Conference on National Affairs.

“Jeremiah is a remarkable young man,” his mother said. “He’s very driven. He keeps God first. He is going to break some generational curses. He already has.”

Jeremiah sees being the first in the family to attend college as an opportunity to lift up the whole family.

“It’s going to open so many doors,” he predicted. “Now I’ll be able to help my little brother, my cousins, my other siblings get an education. They will have the information I didn’t have.”

The Journey Continues

By Penelope Wong

August 1, 2025, will mark my one-year anniversary of retirement, and what an amazing journey it has been! While I am still adjusting to this developing chapter in my life, the most salient takeaway for me at this time is learning to let go.

What does this concept mean? I can only speak for myself, and it means "letting go" of who I was (or perhaps who I thought I was) and how others view me. This does not mean denying my previous pre-retirement life in the field of education, but it does mean that I no longer regard that identity as who I presently am. Since retiring, I have had several opportunities to teach education classes. While I was grateful for such opportunities, it was a very easy decision to say a firm "no." There was no hesitation. My response initially surprised me as I always heard, "Once a teacher, always a teacher," and plenty of colleagues I know teach as adjunct professors in their retirement, but this situation just didn't resonate with me. I am still not quite sure why because I loved my career, but I just knew deep in my soul, I wanted to move on to new ventures. I also knew it was the right path because I also let go of the feeling of having to know why!

Other ways in which the lesson of letting go has been liberating in retirement include doing away with impossible to achieve to-do lists, which left me feeling dejected and frustrated when I worked. I started to address this issue before retiring and did so by being very careful as to which items actually made it onto the list in the morning. In short, I don't feel compelled to always be doing or constantly active or busy. Letting go also reinforced another lesson I started cultivating pre-retirement, and that was saying "no" without guilt or remorse. This was



a particularly difficult habit to learn, especially pre-retiree, but one that enabled me to survive and eventually navigate the incredibly busy existence one has as a Berea College student, staff or faculty member.

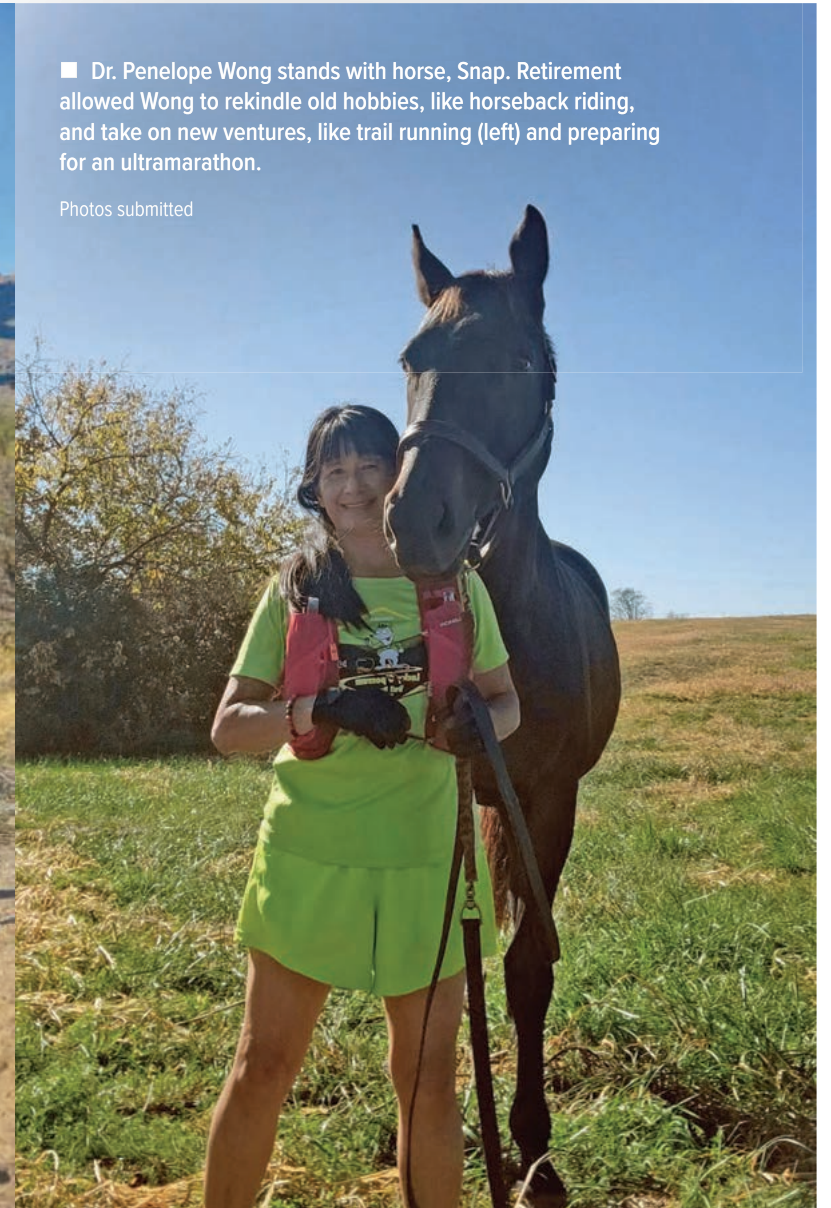
Because retirement has enabled me to be really discerning when saying "yes," I have much more space and time to embrace and lean into new opportunities and adventures, particularly ones that I would ordinarily not have partaken while working. One activity I particularly enjoy is reading books on topics with which I am absolutely unfamiliar and felt I didn't have the

time to read. For example, a few science fiction books by PM Press (see picture) I read echoed enough of reality to fascinate and terrify me both. Another joy of retirement reading is pursuing a lifelong interest that I felt I could not pursue pre-retirement: my fascination with astrology and the occult. Now with ample time and freedom to immerse myself in any type of reading and learning, I am engaging with ideas that are tremendously exciting, sometimes uncomfortable and unapologetically bold. Besides a plethora of books on these topics, two of my favorite podcasts are <https://www.youtube.com/c/EmilioOrtiz> hosted by a Gen Z



◀ Retirement has afforded Dr. Penelope Wong the time and space to read books she normally would not have thought to pick up, expanding her interests and developing new fascinations.

Photos submitted



■ Dr. Penelope Wong stands with horse, Snap. Retirement allowed Wong to rekindle old hobbies, like horseback riding, and take on new ventures, like trail running (left) and preparing for an ultramarathon.

Photos submitted

"I just knew deep in my soul, I wanted to move on to new ventures. I also knew it was the right path because I also let go of the feeling of having to know why!"

– PENELOPE WONG

future leader and <https://www.youtube.com/c/SoulfulRevolution> hosted by a wise spiritual woman.

While being retired certainly helps in engaging in the kind of "letting go" I just described, I also realize that I wish I had done more of it in my pre-retirement not simply to prepare for retirement but also to improve my

working life. Each individual's situation is unique, but for me, being much more intentional in emotionally, psychically, spiritually, physically and intellectually preparing myself made the two years preceding my retirement the most pleasant of my career. By engaging in the above-mentioned activities (i.e., having strong boundaries of saying "no,"

letting go, having at-home work days where I didn't commute to campus, etc.) within the context and constraints of Berea College life, I was much happier and a more engaged professor. In short, learning to let go in a variety of ways, a little at a time, not only improved my work life but also eased my transition through and into retirement.

Board of Trustees Elects Five New Members

The Berea College Board of Trustees has elected Joe Bagnoli '88, Adam Edelen, Donna Fick '86, Talina Mathews '89 and Celeste Armstrong '90 as members, each to serve six-year terms beginning immediately. Their terms will end on June 30, 2031.

"Each of these new trustees brings a deep connection to Berea's mission and a unique professional perspective that will guide our work into the future," said President Cheryl L. Nixon. "Their commitment to service and to educational opportunity

will help Berea remain bold and visionary in how we serve students. I am thrilled to welcome them to the Board."

In addition to these appointments, Samantha Earp was elected Board chair; Vance Blade, vice chair; and Shawn Johnson, vice chair. Incumbent chair Stephanie Bowling Zeigler completed four years of extraordinary service to the Berea College Board of Trustees and will continue as a trustee.

Retired trustees Charlotte Beason, William Richardson and David Shelton

were elected Honorary Trustees for life.

Read more about each new trustee at <https://www.berea.edu/news> or scan the QR code.



Berea Celebrates Graduates at May Commencement

Berea College celebrated 219 graduates at the 2025 commencement ceremony. The Class of 2025 includes students from 21 states and 28 countries, covering 32 different majors and 28 different minors.

The class also includes 103 first-generation college graduates.

"As you step forward into the world, take with you the lessons you've learned here — not only in the classroom but also in the connections you've built, the challenges you've overcome, and the values you embody," Berea College President Cheryl L. Nixon told the graduates. "We are so proud of you and cannot wait to see the positive impact you will make."

J. Drew Lanham, distinguished professor of wildlife ecology, master teacher and wildlife biologist in the Clemson University Forestry and Environmental Conservation Department, spoke to the graduating class about being committed to teaching and learning, even beyond their college careers.

A native of South Carolina, Lanham has published extensively in scientific literature and has taught courses in conservation biology, forest ecology, wildlife policy, ornithology and environmental literature and nature writing. He is also South Carolina's poet laureate. He has authored several publications, most recently "Sparrow Envy—A Field Guide to Birds and Lesser Beasts."



Photo by Sonam Teasing '27

Berea College Appoints New Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs

Berea College President Cheryl Nixon announced the appointment of Shewanee Howard-Baptiste, Ph.D., as the College's new provost and vice president for academic affairs.

Howard-Baptiste brings more than two decades of experience in higher education to Berea College, along with a deep commitment to academic excellence, student success and innovative academic leadership.

Howard-Baptiste served as vice provost for undergraduate affairs at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (UTC). She spearheaded visionary initiatives, such as overseeing a grant-funded program that delivers mobile healthcare services to underserved communities and partnering with local high schools to create a dual enrollment "University High" program.

Connecting academic excellence to student support is a hallmark of Howard-Baptiste's strategic leadership. Her career is dedicated to student access, retention and achievement, and she brings this student-centered focus to Berea.

Notably, Howard-Baptiste served as a faculty-in-residence at UTC, living in one of the campus' residence halls. Most recently, her position as vice provost focused on working closely with faculty on new academic program development, accreditation and strategic planning.

Howard-Baptiste is a full professor in health and human performance at UTC, bringing a teaching-focused approach to her administrative work. She earned a doctorate in educational administration at Miami University of Ohio, building on her undergraduate degree in exercise science and master's degree in health appraisal

and enhancement.

She teaches in areas such as health behavior, personal health and community and environmental health and has taught courses in Haiti focused on working with teachers to develop a health and physical education curriculum.



Photo by Crystal Wylie '05

Mountain Day

1875 2025

SAVE THE DATE
TUESDAY, OCTOBER 14

150

years





Distinguished Alumnus Award Honoree

Calvin Gross [85]

A native of Clover Bottom in Jackson County, Kentucky, Calvin Gross never imagined college was within reach. Raised on a tobacco farm, he spent his childhood working in the fields, foraging in the woods and wading creeks with his cousins. His family lived simply, relying on gardens, canning and community, but they always had food on the table and love in the home.

Though shy and often bored in school, Gross's life changed when he met Carolyn Pennington, a fellow Jackson Countian and Berea College graduate who became his teacher and later his guidance counselor. When Gross considered dropping out of high school, Pennington personally drove him to Berea and declared, "This young man is going to Berea College." That act of mentorship altered the course of his life.

Gross enrolled at Berea in 1981, earning a degree in studio art. He found deep friendship, especially through Berea's diverse international student community, and formed lifelong bonds that inspired him to explore the world. His labor assignment in Hutchins Library became the foundation for a career in academic librarianship.

After working at the University of Kentucky Library, Gross returned to Berea, where he rose through the ranks at Hutchins Library, ultimately succeeding longtime director Anne Chase. She supported his path to a graduate degree in library science and mentored him into leadership.

Gross's home in Climax, Kentucky, became a gathering place affectionately known as "The Little UN," where students from around the world came together to share food, stories and cultural traditions. His ongoing connection with these students is a testament to the inclusive spirit he found at Berea.

Grateful for the transformation Berea made possible, Gross has given back generously over the years, committed to ensuring that other young people realize they, too, can achieve their dreams—regardless of background.



Rod C. Bussey Award of Special Merit Honoree

Rick Gunter [67]

When Rick Gunter was a boy in North Carolina, he heard a radio interview with famed Louisville *Courier-Journal* reporter William "Skeets" Miller and turned to his father to say, "When I grow up, Dad, I want to do what Mr. Miller did."

That early inspiration led to a 65-year journey in journalism. Gunter, a native of Avery County, N.C., and Berea College graduate of 1967, has served on the staffs of seven weekly and daily newspapers, covering everything from presidential campaigns to triple homicides. He was editor of *The Pinnacle*, Berea's student newspaper, in 1966–67 and went on to serve in executive editorial roles at papers in Asheville, N.C., Winter Haven, Fla., and Staunton, Va.

Nearly 26 years ago, Gunter fulfilled a lifelong dream by purchasing *The Crewe-Burkeville Journal* in Nottoway County, Va., where he and his wife of 48 years, Deborah June Honeycutt, continue to publish what they proudly call "Southside Virginia's progressive voice." He serves as executive editor, publisher—and even janitor.

Now nearing 81, Gunter still reports and writes daily. With June's partnership and support, he remains committed to fearless commentary, community service and upholding Berea College's Great Commitments through journalism.

A Paul Harris Fellow of Rotary International and former Berea Alumni Executive Council member, Gunter has long been active in civic life. He is also a devoted sports fan, following the Washington NFL team since the early 1950s.

Gunter learned of Berea from his cousin, Dr. Jack Guy Braswell '49, and applied to only one college. When accepted, he wept with gratitude. He still considers Berea the defining "game-changer" of his life.

Rick and June Gunter live in Crewe, Va., and are the proud parents of two grown sons.



Alumni Loyalty Award Honoree

Dr. David Nickel [64]

A native of Greenup County, Kentucky, Dave Nickel credits Berea College with providing the singular opportunity that made his higher education possible. Despite graduating as salutatorian from McKell High School in 1960, his family lacked the financial means to support college. The offer to attend Berea changed the course of his life.

Nickel earned a Bachelor of Arts in chemistry and left Berea with a host of cherished memories—from playing varsity baseball to intramural football—and recognition through honors such as the Veltin Citizenship Prize and the Athlete, Scholar and Gentleman Award. Most meaningfully, he met his wife of 60 years, Jennie Tallent Nickel.

He went on to earn a master's degree in chemistry from the University of Kentucky and a Ph.D. in chemistry and higher education administration from Indiana University. His career spanned work in laboratories, higher education leadership and corporate training. He held senior admissions roles at Arkansas State and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and later served in leadership development at Goodyear and Lockheed Martin.

Returning to academia, Nickel served as faculty coordinator and lecturer in The Ohio State University's College of Business. He taught in Ohio and abroad in Wuhan, China, and contributed to curriculum and administrative development at several institutions. He conducted research on higher education leadership, publishing and presenting widely.

A committed volunteer, he served on the American Association of University Administrators board, chaired his church's Adult Learning Council and is active in Toastmasters International and Braver Angels. He and Jennie coordinated the Central Ohio Berea Alumni Chapter for two decades.

In semi-retirement, Nickel remains active and grateful, sharing wisdom with his five grandchildren and reflecting often on the lifelong impact of Berea College.



Alumni Loyalty Award Honoree

Dr. Jennie Tallent Nickel [65]

A native of Maryville, Tennessee, Dr. Jennie Tallent Nickel was one of 13 students to graduate from Berea College's nursing program in 1965. Her clinical experiences as a student—particularly her public health rotation in eastern Kentucky—proved formative. Driving mountain roads to visit families, schools and even a granny midwife, Jennie found her calling in community and public health.

Following her marriage to fellow Berean Dave Nickel, she pursued public health nursing positions across Kentucky, working first with the Louisville-Jefferson County Health Department, and later as a consultant to health departments in southcentral Kentucky. She earned a master's degree in community nursing from the University of Kentucky and taught at the UK College of Nursing before pausing her career to raise her two children.

When her children entered school, she commuted to Columbus to complete a Ph.D. in preventive medicine from The Ohio State University College of Medicine. Afterward, she joined the OSU College of Nursing, where she taught community health nursing and epidemiology, gained tenure as an associate professor and conducted research on case management for HIV patients, childhood immunizations and health service delivery.

Later, she transitioned to the Ohio Medicaid Program as section chief for data management and analysis, focusing on community-based care until her retirement.

Dr. Nickel continues to serve her community through literacy programs and food outreach, and she nurtures her artistic talents through oil painting—a passion first sparked by Berea's humanities curriculum.

For 20 years, she and Dave coordinated the Central Ohio Berea Alumni Chapter. Their dedication to Berea has never waned. Dr. Nickel considers her years at Berea to be life-defining, shaping her values, friendships and lifelong commitment to service and equity in health care.



Distinguished Alumna Award Honoree

Dr. Freida Hopkins Outlaw '68

Dr. Freida Hopkins Outlaw has dedicated her life to providing mental health care to underserved communities. A Kentucky native, she earned her baccalaureate in Nursing from Berea College, a master's in psychiatric nursing from Boston College and a Ph.D. from The Catholic University of America. She completed postdoctoral studies in psychosocial oncology at the University of Pennsylvania.

Dr. Outlaw now serves as professor in the Department of Family and Community Medicine at Meharry Medical College. Previously, she was academic program consultant to the Minority Fellowship Program at the American Nurses Association.

She has held numerous influential roles, including director of the Meharry Youth Health and Wellness Center, which focused on LGBTQ youth. As assistant commissioner for the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, she secured \$32 million in federal funding to improve the state's system of care for children and families.

Dr. Outlaw is a Fellow of the American Academy of Nursing and a national leader in advancing trauma-informed, equitable mental health care. Her scholarship spans depression, the impact of racism and toxic stress, seclusion and restraint and the mental health needs of children and LGBTQ youth of color.

She has co-edited award-winning texts, contributed chapters on social justice and ethics and serves as an editor of *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing*. She co-chairs the DEI Committee of the International Society of Psychiatric Nurses and serves on the AAN Fellow Selection Committee. In addition, Dr. Outlaw has served as president of the Nashville Health and Well-being Leadership Council. Her work continues to reduce stigma and expand access to compassionate care.



▲ Members of the class of 1965 prepare for their class photo at the class picnic.

Photo by Crystal Wylie '05



◀ Alumni at the Jazz at Sunset event look at documents and yearbooks of their time at Berea.

Photo by Brooklynn Kenney

▼ Despite the rain moving events inside, alumni from class years spanning 1950 to 1995 gathered at the class picnic in the Seabury arena to reminisce.

Photo by Crystal Wylie '05



▲ Nancy Hairston Abasiekong '74 carries her picnic plate to her table. Abasiekong and her family attend nearly every Summer Reunion and Homecoming event.

Photo by Crystal Wylie '05

▶ An alumnus' guest snaps a picture of other Summer Reunion participants and alumni at the picnic in Seabury arena.

Photo by Crystal Wylie '05





◀ President Cheryl Nixon shares a laugh with Alyce Graves '95 during the Great Commitment Society reception..

Photo by Crystal Wylie '05

▼ Alumni at the Jazz at Sunset event look at documents and yearbooks of their time at Berea.

Photo by Brooklynn Kenney



▼ Distinguished Alumnus Award recipient Calvin Gross (center right) was celebrated by former Hutchins Library colleague Harry Rice (left) and present colleagues Tim Binkley, head of Special Collections and Archives and Amanda Peach, Director of Hutchins Library.

Photo by Crystal Wylie '05



▶ Distinguished Alumnus Award recipient Freida Hopkins Outlaw '66 (center) poses with Betty Olinger '69 (left) and Brenda Smith Jackson '75, at the Alumni Awards ceremony in Baird Lounge.

Photo by Crystal Wylie '05

▶ Carolyn Coffey '70 (center) and Carol Shea Gilliam '75 (right) reunite with a classmate at the Alumni Awards ceremony.

Photo by Brooklynn Kenney

▼ New to Summer Reunion this year, the Jazz at Sunset event was a wonderful addition. Alumni gathered, talked, looked at yearbooks and enjoyed jazz music by candlelight.

Photo by Brooklynn Kenney



▲ Merry Stewart '75, husband, Wills Stewart and Berea Sociology Professor Jackie Burnside '74 share a hug and a photo after the Alumni Awards ceremony.

Photo by Brooklynn Kenney

◀ One of the best parts of Summer Reunion are alumni meeting after years of separation. Hugs, laughter and joy are constantly present throughout the festivities.

Photo by Crystal Wylie '05



▲ Members of the class of 1965 throw their hands up for a silly celebration pose during the indoor picnic.

Photo by Crystal Wylie '05

◀ Lisa Parsons Arnold '85 and husband, O'Neil Arnold '85 celebrate their 40th class reunion. O'Neil also transformed Berea College's photography as a freelance photographer for many years.

Photo by Crystal Wylie '05



Front row: Fred Winebarger **2nd row:** Winebarger's daughter, Margaret Ann L Bell and guest, Laura Schweda



Willie Jo Hipp, Joan Coy Bates, Ann Larkey, Peter Thoms, Everette Hartzog, D. Sherwood Mull



Ollie J. Lee, Shelby Duncan Lane, Evelyn Hance



Front row: Sue Witten Butler, Patty Hudson, Sue Tate, Ellen Hellard, C. Lorene Brown, Harold L. Brown **2nd row:** Paul Lewis, Marilyn Powell, Gloria Richards, Virginia McDavid Viers, Jim Viers **3rd row:** Ken Bowlin, Melinda Bowlin, Paulette Harder, Glenna Martin, Elton White, Veree Thompson Woodbridge



Front row: Iris Kennedy Waade, Doris Coffey Wyatt, Patt Hall Hinegardner, Ron Dockery, Nancy McCall Wilson, Judith Sherrow Conde, Carolyn Castle, Arleen Johnson **2nd row:** Polly Graves Abney, Nina Jean Hill, Raymond Hill, Charlotte Beason, Brenda McCann Irwin, Donnese Clevinger Kern, Judy Kennedy Smith **3rd row:** Donnie [Bear] Singelton, Charlie Ammons, Joe D. Elswick, Larry Pigman, Jim Wolfe, Janet McDaniel



Front row: Donald Taylor, Ann Hairston Hill, Nancy Hairston Abasiekong, Patty Anderson Davidson, Gwen Wiley, Joanne Strano, Cheryl Thomas McKinney, Frances Camille Williams Neal **2nd row:** Timothy Jackson, Brenda Smith Jackson, Kathryn Heatherly, Janice Y. Grigsby, Dawn Tello, Deborah [Sissie] Johnson, Jean Kerney Bellamy, Margaret Martin Mishra **3rd row:** Maxine Turner, Marilyn Todd Grossman, Peggy Combs David[son], Vicki Vanwinkle, Robert [Bob] Warming, Jeanie Murphy Hogg, Jim Roberts, JT Bingham, Barbara Johnson Bingham **4th row:** Nancy Wright, Glenda Huff, Tenant Kirk, Merry Stewart, Donna Bridwell, Melita Duffy, Brenda Phillips, Cindy Hise Gibbs **5th row:** Caroline Floyd Kpaduwa, Stephanie Tetzloff McCoy, Sandra Owens Barge, Harold Taylor, Rada Walker, James Shoopman, Nancy Pierce, Diane Orton Patton, Larry Woods



Front row: Donald W. Caudill, Tom Clinedinst, Dana Baker, Donyce Lynch Montgomery, Dianne Raybourn, Melinda Altizer Mills, Sandra Smith Moore **2nd row:** Peggy Neeley McQueen, Fred McQueen, Veronica Trent Grant, Deborah Byrd Thomas, Maria Stephens, Terry Callebs, Bonnie Edmondson **3rd row:** Barbara VanWinkle Mills, Annette Cabe, Earl Kincaid, Justine Conley, Jackie Collier, Rick Callebs, Larry Riddle



Front row: Willa J. Chambers, Le Jane Bandy Liebhart, Vivian Hairston Blade, Lisa Parsons Arnold **2nd row:** Lee Thomas, Ernie Kidd, Eddie Galloway, O'Neil Arnold

The Berea College Alumni Association enjoys hearing from Bereans from all over the world. The [Class Notes] section of *Berea College Magazine* reports verifiable news you wish to share with your alumni friends and associates: careers, weddings, retirements, births and other items of importance to our alumni. Please include your class year and name used while attending Berea. Notes may be edited for style and length. While we will make every effort to put your information into the next issue of BCM, some delays may occur. We appreciate your understanding.

Correction: Carolyn Coffey Pennington is listed with the class of 1997 in the Winter 2025 Berea College magazine; Pennington is a member of the class of 1970.



Front row: Missy Overfelt, Robert Phillips, Rhonda Gillespie Rule, James Mullins 2nd row: Tena Robbins, Celeste Armstrong, Gloria Graham



Darin Brooks, Linda Opundo, Alyce A. Graves

1978

Lynne Blankenship Caldwell began serving as an adjunct faculty member in the religion, ethics and philosophy department of Greensboro College (Greensboro.edu) in August 2024. She continues to serve as pastor of Danbury Community Church, Danbury, N.C., having returned to DCC for a third assignment in November 2023. DCC celebrated its 40th anniversary as a union church (United Methodist and Presbyterian Church, USA) in July 2024. The congregation and the community of Danbury recently welcomed and hosted Berea College Country Dancers, under the direction of **Joe Wilkie '90**, with AJ Bodnar and Tom Cunningham providing beautiful and wonderful music. Students at West Stokes High School, King, N.C., enthusiastically received the dancers in a midday performance, as did the vibrant arts community of Stokes County in an evening performance at The Arts Place, Danbury, N.C. Executive director of the Stokes County Arts Council, Eddy McGee, coordinated detailed arrangements for BC's Country Dancers for both performances on March 6. This was the first spring tour for Country Dancers since COVID. Other Berea alums in the audience included **Bill and Anne Ramsay '75**, and **Janice Nickell '82**, all current residents of Stokes County. Caldwell may be contacted at lynnebcaldwell@gmail.com. Lynne and her husband, Neill, continue to make their home in Winston-Salem, N.C.



1988

Rodney Griffin was recently inducted into the Kentucky Music Hall of Fame in Renfro Valley, Ky. He joins Dottie Rambo, John Conlee, Ricky Skaggs, Bill

Monroe, Dwight Yoakum, Rosemary Clooney and others.



Tedd Masiogale, M.A., CCC-SLP, was elected as a distinguished fellow in the Speech-Language Pathology Academy by The National Academies of Practice (NAP). In March, the annual induction banquet and awards ceremony were held in Washington, D.C. Read more: <https://bit.ly/4kpWJqa>



1993

Sgt. Matthew Silver is a dedicated leader in responding to sexual violence, balancing thorough investigations with survivor-centered support. He fosters strong collaboration between law enforcement, advocates and medical providers, enhancing Lexington's Sexual Assault Response Team response. His commitment to training, cross-agency partnerships and survivor care has made a lasting impact on the community. Silver received the B.R.A.V.E. (Believe, Respect, Advocate, Validate, Empower) award from the Kentucky Association of Sexual Assault Programs.

1995

Joe Rowe started a new position in December 2024 as director of Morehead State University's adult education academy for professional learning.

1998

Danny and Jessica Starcher Burdine relocated to Ruckersville, Va., in June 2024. Danny is now the director of operations at the University of Virginia School of Medicine.

2000

Celebrating 25 years at Homecoming, Nov. 21-23, 2025.

2001

Nicole Black Wilson graduated with a master's in clinical mental health in May 2024. She is a licensed professional counselor at a private practice in Columbus, Ohio, where she resides with her husband, **David Wilson**, and their three children.

2002

Robert Hayes, PhD, was recently hired as the assistant vice president of FACT Advising at the University of Kentucky. Dr. Hayes will have been at the University of Kentucky for 18 years this spring.

2005

Celebrating 20 years at Homecoming, Nov. 21-23, 2025.

2010

Celebrating 15 years at Homecoming, Nov. 21-23, 2025.

2012

Gerald Fitts re-enlisted for six more years in the Navy. His goal is to do 20 years overall and retire. He writes,

"Wish me luck! I hope everyone is doing well!"



Deb McIntyre has published a work of Christian historical fiction inspired by her ancestors' work on the Underground Railroad. "A Wishful Eye" is set in Kentucky's Bluegrass region and southern Indiana in 1849. McIntyre lives in Georgetown and is an educator for the Kentucky Department of Corrections.



2014

Dr. Wendell Bliss is an unsung hero, writes Jordan R. Ship, MD, FACEP. "During the time of the actual 2024 solar eclipse, at our solo-coverage, six-bed, rural, critical access hospital Emergency Department, Dr. Bliss performed a resuscitative hysterotomy on a pregnant patient in cardiac arrest in a valiant attempt to save the pregnant mother's and 24-week fetus's life. Ultimately these efforts were unsuccessful; but these were impressive efforts made by Dr. Bliss in a facility that has no L & D, no NICU, no pediatricians or obstetricians & no other physicians at that time in the hospital.

He then led two debriefings for all the staff involved to try to come to grips with this traumatic event. His calm, collected and compassionate manner was really helpful at the time of the resuscitation and for the ED staff to also recover from the tragic situation."

The New York College of Emergency Physicians awarded Dr. Bliss the Unsung Hero award. Read more: <https://nyacep.org/blissu/nsung/>

2015

Celebrating 10 years at Homecoming, Nov. 21-23, 2025.

2016

MARRIAGE: Chloe Conn to Connor Johnson on Aug. 31, 2024. Shortly after, they moved to Cookeville, Tenn., where they are expanding their coffee trailer business by opening a coffee roastery and shop called Pit Stop Coffee Co. in Cookeville.



2020

Celebrating five years at Homecoming, Nov. 21-23, 2025.

2022

Mikayla Craig graduated with her master's in sport administration from Arkansas State University on Dec. 14, 2024.



Tess Grant moved to a new apartment in March. She is very happy and excited. She is so grateful to Berea College for providing her with the education that has shaped her career and for helping to make her into the person she is today.

2025

Celebrating its first reunion at Homecoming, Nov. 21-23, 2025.



SUBMIT CLASS NOTES

To submit class notes and photographs, scan QR code or go to:

www.berea.edu/alumni/classnote

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photo by Christopher Rice '22

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Honoring the 25th Reunion for the Class of 2000!

As well as milestone years for 2005, 2010, 2015, 2020 and 2025.



BEREA COLLEGE

ALUMNI

photo by Kalilah Hicks '27

Photo by O'Neil Arnold '85



Larry D. Shinn

April 2, 2025

Dr. Larry D. Shinn, 83, former president of Berea College, passed away April 2, 2025. A visionary leader and compassionate educator, Dr. Shinn dedicated his life to creating inclusive, mission-driven learning environments focused on student success. During his 18-year tenure at Berea, he strengthened tuition-free education, expanded global learning and led sustainability efforts—including the creation of the Ecovillage and the Sustainability and Environmental Studies program.

His leadership helped generations of underserved students realize their potential and purpose.

Beyond his professional accomplishments, Shinn was a man deeply rooted in love—for learning, justice and his family. He was a devoted husband to Nancy, his wife of 69 years and a dedicated father, grandfather and great-grandfather. Whether traveling, reading, playing cards fishing, or teaching, he brought energy and generosity to everything he did. Shinn's legacy lives on through the countless lives he touched—with wisdom, warmth and unwavering purpose.

Staff & Faculty

Dr. Elissa May Plattner

Trustee 1993-2011
Honorary trustee 2012-2025
April 20, 2025

1940s

Caroline Kosko Pell [43]

Jan. 31, 2025

Dorothy Blackburn [48]

Feb. 12, 2025

Louise Hart [49]

Jan. 13, 2025

Ramona Layne Stylos [49]

Feb. 7, 2025

1950s

Iva Brown [53]

April 7, 2025

Mae Keeter [53]

Feb. 4, 2025

Louise Roe [53]

Jan. 16, 2025

Dr. Donald William Good [55]

March 6, 2025

James Leonard Greer [55]

March 24, 2025

Ella Ingle [55]

Jan. 1, 2025

Larry S. Saylor [55]

Dec. 26, 2024

Joyce Estridge [56]

April 4, 2025

CPT Thad W. Mills [56]

Dec. 16, 2024

Donald C. Baucom Fd. [53, 57]

Feb. 22, 2024

Dr. James Archie Gibbs [57]

Feb. 22, 2025

R. Mason Morrison [57]

April 13, 2024

Betty Ruth Hannah Rector [57]

Dec. 15, 2024

Helen York [58]

Feb. 19, 2025

Annette Dowdy [59]

Dec. 10, 2024

Gail Ross [59]

Jan. 23, 2025

1960s

Margaret Dotson Gibbs [60]

Dec. 29, 2024

Dr. Buelon R. Moss [60]

Jan. 22, 2025

Martha Kiser [61]

Dec. 2, 2024

Mary Elizabeth Marasa [62]

Aug. 27, 2024

Charles R. Sanford [62]

June 19, 2024

Linda Sanford [62]

Jan. 1, 2025

Everette L. Varney [62]

Feb. 20, 2025

Larry W. Hudson [64]

Feb. 9, 2025

Geneva Dingus Murphy [66]

Obituary unavailable

Earl R. Crawford [67]

Aug. 27, 2024

Calling Berea College Alumni Volunteers!



BEREA COLLEGE ALUMNI

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To learn more, scan the QR code or visit <https://www.berea.edu/giving/reunion/giving/chair> or contact Daniela Pirela-Manares '20 at pirelamanaresd2@berea.edu

Mary Jo Denton [67]

Aug. 15, 2024

Dr. David Lee Hunter [67]

Feb. 4, 2025

James Pressley Rawlings Jr. [67]

March 4, 2025

A. Maurice Dula [69]

Feb. 13, 2025

1970s

Corbett Wayne Byrd [71]

Sept. 27, 2024

Nancy Ruth Kittinger [71]

Feb. 25, 2025

Georgia Rigsby [71]

March 7, 2025

1980s

Thomas A. Haas Hogan [80]

May 29, 2024

Harvey H. Brodersen Fd. [85]

Feb. 13, 2025

1990s

James Gregory Butt [90]

Feb. 1, 2025

Wanda L. Nelson [99]

Feb. 22, 2025

2010s

Candice Alicia King [16]

Jan. 18, 2025

2020s

Kristen L. Sanford

Jan. 30, 2025



FULL OBITUARIES
To read full obituaries on our website, scan QR code or go to <https://magazine.berea.edu>

BEREA COLLEGE

MAGAZINE

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Sean Hall '25 and Evelyn Medley '25