

# BEREA COLLEGE

MAGAZINE



SPRING 2026 Volume 96 Number 4

# ROOTED IN COMMUNITY

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Berea College Magazine (ISSN 1539-7394) is published quarterly for Berea College alumni and friends by the Berea College Marketing & Communications Department. Periodicals postage at Berea, KY, and additional mailing offices.

Postmaster: Send address corrections to the Berea College Office of Alumni Philanthropy, CPO 2203, Berea, KY 40404.

Berea College is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization under federal guidelines.

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### About the cover

Cover photo by Kalilah Hicks '27

Kalilah '27 photographs her brother, Elijah Hicks '23, and sister-in-law, Moriah Wilbur '21, near their beautiful property in Slade, Kentucky, where they run Forest Forager, a small mushroom farm. Elijah returned to his roots in Stanton, where he, Kalilah and their siblings grew up. Sharing their story of commitment and excitement to live and thrive in their Appalachian community was made complete with Kalilah, a rising senior and photography manager in Berea College's Marketing and Communications office, coming home to capture this perfect mountain-top cover image.

Photo by Crystal Wylie '05

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Photos by Brooklyn Kenney



**Introducing**

**Whitney Leggett**  
Editor  
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Whitney Leggett is a storyteller at heart, shaped by a background in community journalism and communications across the healthcare, nonprofit and public sectors. She is drawn to share the stories that connect us, uplift missions and remind us there is purpose in our work. She enjoys spending time with her big family and exploring art, plants and sustainable fashion.

**LETTER FROM**  
THE ASSOCIATE VICE PRESIDENT FOR MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS

**Dear Alumni and Friends,**

I recently returned from a conference where the governor of Maryland and the mayor of Baltimore participated in a Q&A with attendees. During the conversation, Gov. Wes Moore shared a statement that resonated deeply with me: “The definition of success isn’t leaving, it’s staying and serving.”

In the context of this issue of *Berea College Magazine*, that statement reflects the heart and path of the individuals whose stories fill these pages. Beginning in the early 20th century, economic collapse and limited opportunity forced many Appalachian families to leave the region. For more than a century, Berea has recruited students from Appalachia to provide exceptional education and opportunity, while encouraging graduates to return and use their skills in service to their home communities. For many Appalachian students, success isn’t leaving the region; it’s embracing the rich culture, beauty and resources of Appalachia and staying to serve those who came before them and those who will follow.

That same culture and beauty can anchor the souls of those who come from outside Appalachia and never want to leave. I’m one of them. As a child in a military family, I lived in many places across the U.S. and abroad. But when I arrived in this small town nestled in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, the beauty, hospitality and sense of connection beckoned me to stay. Though I went to Washington, D.C., for an internship after graduating, I missed the belonging I found at Berea. I married a man with deep regional roots, and together we chose to stay and build our lives here.

In this issue, you’ll read stories of alumni who left their Appalachian towns for college and returned to serve their hometowns, others who came to Berea and knew they had found home, and a non-traditional student whose search for community ultimately led him here.

Being rooted in community takes many forms, but the heart of Berea—service and connection to place—becomes the heart of so many Bereans. Whether we stay or return after a long absence, it always feels like coming home.

**Abbie Tanyhill Darst '03**  
Associate Vice President for Marketing and Communications



**Thank You for Your Gift on Giving Day.**

Together, we raised 70 tuition promise scholarships and counting. Your gifts provide every new class of Bereans with the education and experience they need to unlock their potential and build a life of unlimited possibilities.

*Your gift. Their future.*

# Building a Community of Writers



By Brooke Donley '26

**R**eceiving a Grammy Award recognition in 2024 has been one of the highlights of Matt Parsons' career. However, his love of music and poetry was born long before "I Built a World" was nominated for Best Bluegrass Album. Parsons '15 grew up in a household that created his love of both music and literature.

"My mom was a high school librarian, and my dad was a Bluegrass musician," Parsons explains. "Education has been a pillar of my life and led me to be an educator myself."

Being homeschooled allowed Parsons to choose how he wanted to spend his time learning. "I had the choice of whether I wanted to learn math for half an hour or play guitar for two hours," he said. "Let's just say I built up the callouses. My math scores didn't suffer from this model of teaching."

Keeping his options open for college was important to Parsons because he wanted to make sure he was making the right choice. "I liked Berea because when I told them about other schools I applied to, they were respectful of other places I was applying," he said.

Parsons was excited to be accepted to Berea and for the opportunity to study many subjects that interested him. Professors, like Chris Green, director of the Loyal Jones Appalachian Center, were instrumental in helping Parsons choose and successfully navigate the Appalachian Studies major. "He (Green) made sure that I knew Appalachia was my culture, too," Parsons said. "He moved my interests in an academic manner. I attended the Appalachian Studies Conference annually. Everyone who cares about this region and literature should attend."

"I didn't think of myself as a writer before coming to Berea," Parsons

continued. "I thought that writing was something that everyone did."

Silas House, who holds the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Chair in Appalachian Studies at Berea, noticed Parsons playing music during his sophomore year and invited him to join his senior creative writing seminar. "I felt really inadequate in that workshop since most of the other students had literature backgrounds, but Silas has a way of making writing a step-by-step process. It's not potion making; it's following a recipe."

This allowed Parsons to feel more confident in his writing. One of the best things that happened to Parsons during his time at Berea was attending the Appalachian Writers' Workshop at Hindman Settlement School. "Silas House dragged me to Hindman, kicking and screaming the first time," he recalled. Since then, Parsons has not only attended workshops at Hindman, but he has also taught workshops there. Just down the road in Hindman, Parsons is being trained in the factory process at Troublesome Creek String Instrument Company and is currently building a personal guitar there through grant funding.

While he was a student at Berea, Parsons' article was published in "Still: The Journal" with House's help. He has gone on to publish two poetry books, "Holy Land" and "Mountain Roosters." He has also written many songs, such as "Middle Class" and "Cyanide Queen," which he sometimes performs with his wife, Annuet, in their music group Whistle & Fish. Matt and Annuet, have three kids: Hattie Jane, 5, Sidney Goodnight, 3, and Elsie Odette, 2 months.

Aside from mentors who helped him in the academic world, Parsons also gained a friend for life in Rick Childers, the Appalachian Male Initiative advocate and mentor. "When I asked to read what he was

writing," Parsons said of Childers, "I learned that he, too, was a writer."

Having a friend in the writing community made him believe the writing world was accessible to him. "It was great to start to see a community forming around me," he said. "I hope to give the same access to people with songwriting since that is the world that I have access to."

After graduating from Berea, Parsons earned a Master of Fine Arts degree from Eastern Kentucky University, where he had the opportunity to travel to Portugal. Having traveled all over the world, he noted how many people seemed to know about Berea. "You don't realize it until you are on a tour in Europe and someone has heard of Berea College," he said.

Though Parsons still occasionally travels for his work, he now calls Olive Hill, Kentucky, home. He lives on a homestead with his family, which was always his father's dream. "We all wanted to do something that was a righteous and morally OK way to live," Parsons said.

This family tract of land is more than the land itself; it is about its history. The land Parsons' father purchased was part of an old strip mine. "It seemed like the right thing to do to make this land into something productive," he said.

While Parsons is proud of his Grammy-recognized song, he was not waiting for this moment, nor did he expect it. "My band got a gig singing for Red Barn Radio in Lexington, and I performed the song I wrote," Parsons explained. "I was fulfilled by the art I was creating and the local opportunities to showcase it, whether it be my poetry, songwriting or singing." ■

Matt Parsons '15 holds his middle child, Sidney Goodnight, on his shoulders outside their homestead in Olive Hill, Kentucky, the place he loves to return after any traveling for his music or writing. Photo by Niema Hussain '27



By Fran Duarte '29

**T**hey could have built their careers anywhere. Instead, Albert Yongbang '00 and Antoinette Yongbang '00 chose to stay in Lexington, Kentucky, a place where their nursing degrees became more than an occupation, but rather a shared mission to make a great difference.

Everything started at Berea College. When Albert applied for college, things were complicated for him in Cameroon. "Berea, in that sense, saved my family because it afforded me the opportunity to come here and pursue an education," Albert said.

But more importantly, Berea helped him find his passion for nursing, which he still pursues today. "I've helped educate other budding nurses, people who are interested in getting into nursing," he added. "I feel like with that exposure, I've been able to actually impact people's lives with what I do."

For Antoinette, Berea also opened doors, not only in her major but also culturally. She hadn't explored many other cultures outside her home community of Birmingham, Alabama. "I feel like going to Berea gave me a worldview, but it also made me just aware," she said. "I go to lunch, and I'm eating with somebody from Nigeria. I married somebody from Cameroon. I just think it gave me this worldview that has helped me throughout my life, and just having an open and warm and accepting heart as far as nursing."

This love and warmth are woven into the way the Yongbangs help their community.

Antoinette is a nurse at UK Healthcare and is a clinical documentation specialist at the hospital. With the tools Berea gave him, Albert is now working as a certified registered nurse anesthetist at UK Healthcare. But his job does

not involve only a medical setting; he also serves as a mentor in the Observation and Learning Experience (OLE) program, where he educates other young nurses and students who are trying to become anesthesia providers.

The impact he has made is evident. He sometimes gets calls from those who have shadowed him expressing how those interactions have changed their life and career trajectory. "Those little stories really make me realize that whatever we do makes a difference," he said.

The Yongbangs also participate in the Emerson Legacy Endowment, Inc., which supports low-income and disabled seniors in Central Kentucky. The couple are members of Lexington's Unitarian Universalist Church, where a group of members

this committee. It has given me a chance to give back," Antoinette said.

The Emerson Center's work is deeply grounded in serving Appalachian communities and helping meet many of the challenges facing families in the region. The Center focuses on issues such as limited access to healthcare, limited knowledge about issues that affect health and financial constraints. "I do my best to educate as much as I can, and if I have to redirect them to social workers or whoever can give them information that will make their lives better, then I do that," Antoinette explained. "Education is the biggest thing."

The couple's community contributions have also impacted their own children. "We have three

### **"I feel like going to Berea gave me a worldview, but it also made me just aware"**

— ANTOINETTE YONGBANG '00

pooled their money and opened the housing development, for which Antoinette serves as vice president.

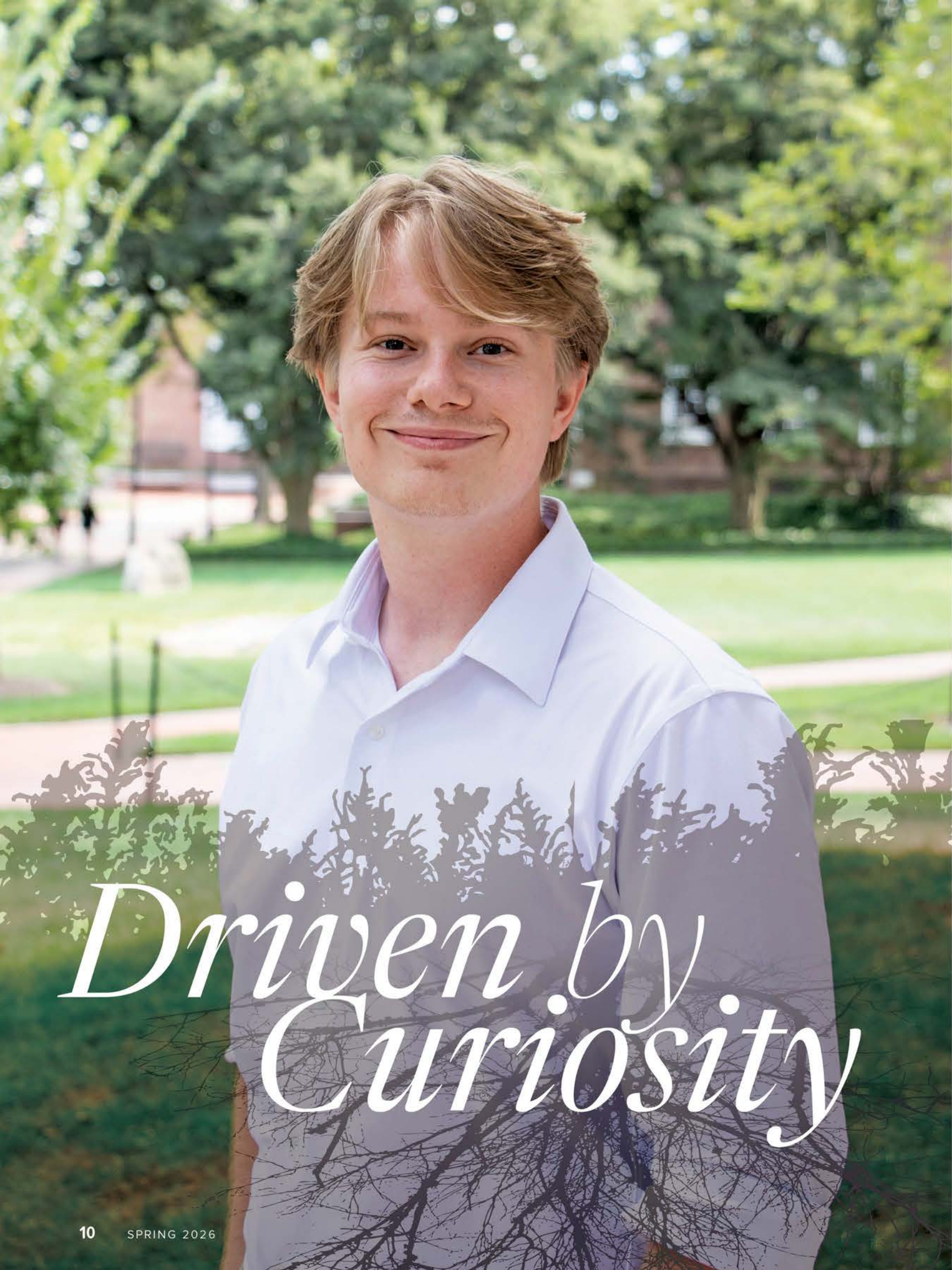
Antoinette's current plans for the nonprofit involve deep engagement with the community. After the sale of the building, the group has transitioned to managing a legacy fund from the proceeds of the sale. The mission of Emerson Legacy Endowment, Inc. is to improve the quality of life for low-income or disabled seniors in Central Kentucky by supporting nonprofit organizations that provide essential services; enhance independence; and foster dignity, security and connection in later life. "All of these things we are doing to help build the community. I really enjoy being on

boys, and we try to be good examples by working hard and showing them that determination pays off," Antoinette said. "We both came from very humble beginnings, but it doesn't have to stay there.

"Kindness," she continues, speaking about characteristics they try to instill. "Being kind to yourself and to others. Something as simple as smiling at someone can make a difference."

"You don't do things expecting something in return," Albert added. "You just do it because it's what makes the world go around. Life is short, so we try to do the best we can while we're here." 📖

The Yongbangs chose a location meaningful to them for their magazine portrait: the Unitarian Universalist Church of Lexington, where they worked alongside fellow members to help launch what would become Emerson Legacy Endowment, Inc., an organization dedicated to improving the quality of life for low-income and disabled seniors across Central Kentucky. Photo by Ehku Say '26



By Brooke Donley '26

**“M**y story isn’t one of beating the odds; it is one of unwavering support that changed the odds,” explained William Woelki ’22 during his TED Talk as a doctoral student at the University of Delaware in November 2025.

Woelki has devoted his studies to bringing awareness, through research, to issues such as housing instability and the foster care system. His own lived experiences as a child in the foster care system brought him to where he is today.

“Doing research with children in these systems has allowed me to hopefully show other youth in foster care that their story matters,” Woelki said. “I want to understand and improve the systems that affected

let them talk,” Woelki emphasized. “This methodology creates shared ownership in their own stories.”

Woelki’s story begins like many other Berea College students: he thought Berea College was a scam when he heard the words “free college” from an Upward Bound counselor in high school. “I was sure that Berea would either be a total scam or my golden ticket,” he said.

Curiosity has driven Woelki in many aspects of his life, including researching Berea College. In his research, much more than Berea’s No-Tuition Commitment intrigued Woelki. “I was really interested in the fact that I would work as a part of my experience,” he said.

Beginning as an Information Systems and Services (now IT) support student, Woelki began to

During his senior year, Woelki decided to add a major in child and family studies to his biology major. “I was fascinated with how humans develop,” he said. “I wanted to search for answers about everyday life. I was approaching the question of human development from two different angles.”

He also realized he did not want to go to medical school. “I found out that I really didn’t like blood,” he explained. “I wasn’t trying to be a doctor because it would make me happy; I was chasing money and everyone else’s ideas for my life.”

Instead of going to medical school, he decided to pursue a Ph.D. at the University of Delaware, where he received a full-tuition scholarship. The transition to Delaware was a time when Woelki was unsure of what the future would hold, but he

**“The curiosity that drove me to Berea and flourished while there will lead me through my next chapter.”**

– WILLIAM WOELKI '22

my siblings and me by allowing students to understand the systems they are in.”

Student voice is an important part of Woelki’s research, and he has published a few works on the subject. There is one important thing Woelki wants people to know: “I don’t do research on kids,” Woelki clarifies. “I do my research with kids to elevate student voice.”

This concept of participatory research allows the participant and the researcher to work together to craft a research question and learn together. This model is important to Woelki because it gives students a voice in their own stories. “A lot of times, people in power will invite students to the table, but they won’t

create a map of what his time at Berea would look like. “I was a biology major who was certain to go to medical school, even going as far as taking the MCAT,” he recalled.

However, Berea’s liberal arts-education model and work-learning-service experience encourage students to explore their options. Working as a teaching assistant opened his eyes to the social sciences. His last two years, he was an interfaith student chaplain coordinator. “It is just the nature of Berea to allow students to expand their horizons,” Woelki said. “Dabbling in everything at Berea taught me that it is important to find yourself while at Berea. I wanted to expand the campus understanding through interfaith dialogues.”

knew he needed more schooling to be an expert in the field. “I approached the beginning of my Ph.D. program just like Berea. I thought, ‘Let me see what I can get into,’” Woelki said.

This attitude has allowed Woelki to find many ways to bring his ideas to life. He is in the last semester of his Ph.D. program, where he is studying human development and family sciences. However, curiosity is still his driving force. “I’m involved in national, state and grassroots advocacy efforts,” he said. “I go to Capitol Hill, where I hope to elevate youth voices on key issues like housing stability and foster care.”

Aside from being an advocate for youth, Woelki teaches classes at

Photo by Shelly Silva, University of Delaware



William Woelki '22 moved audiences with a vivid recap of his experiences living in foster care and his journey through Berea College. In his dynamic talk, Woelki recognizes that no one gets anywhere completely on their own. For Woelki, Berea's faculty and staff were the unwavering support he needed to pursue his next step. Watch his video at [www.berea.college/Woelki-Ted-Talk](http://www.berea.college/Woelki-Ted-Talk). Photo submitted


Delaware in human development and social work. "I'm really passionate about teaching. It is one of my favorite parts about my job," he said. "On the first day of the semester and throughout, I explain to my students that they are experts on themselves. No one can take away their lived experience."

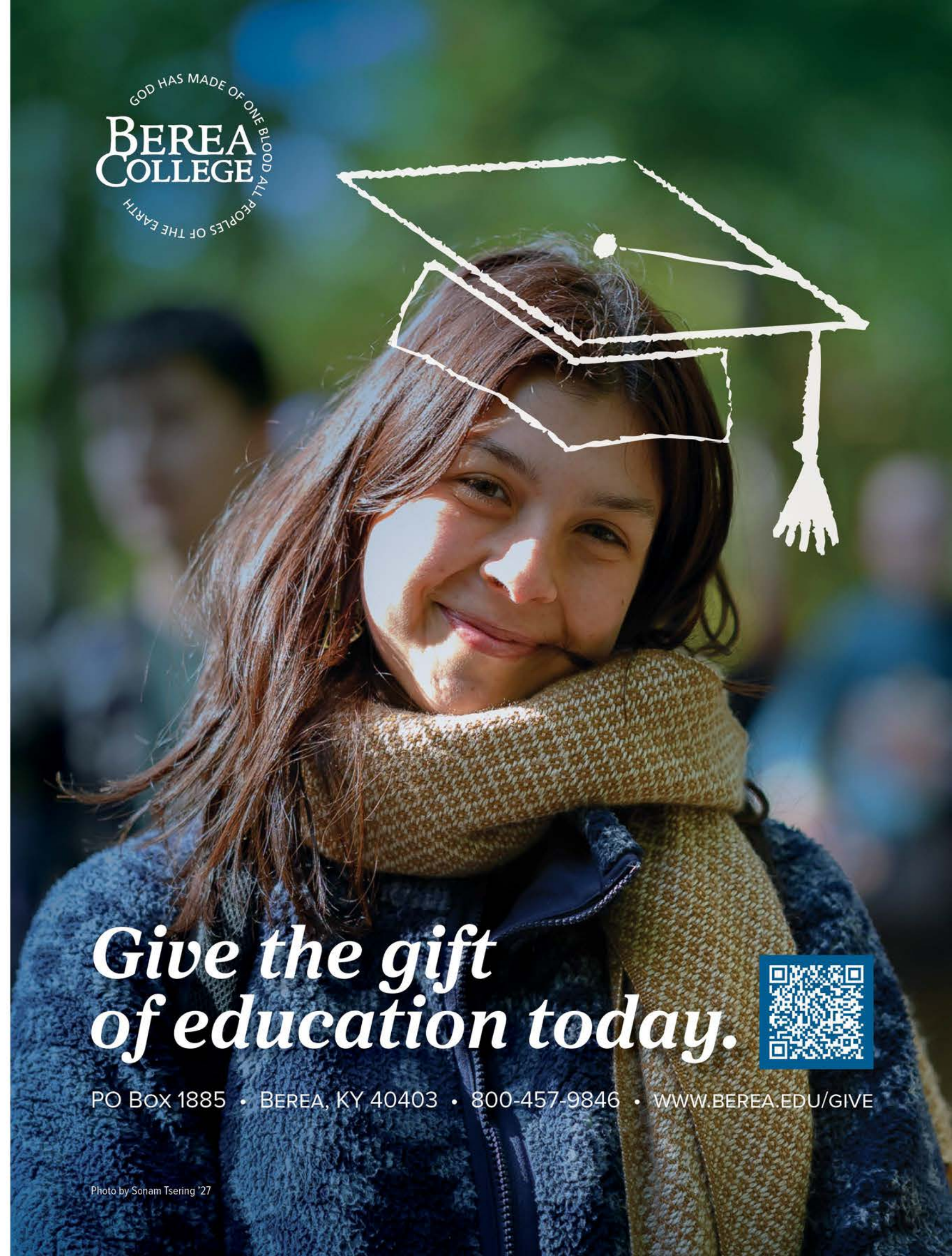
Because of his experience, Woelki was asked to give a TED Talk. He wanted to talk about the youth he advocates for, but he took an approach that avoided a deficit

narrative. "I wanted to highlight the strengths of the youth who are a part of the system because we are not individually responsible for what happens to us," Woelki admits. "If it weren't for Berea, I wouldn't have been prepared for my postgraduate career."

Woelki not only wanted to educate people outside of the system about the youth inside it, but he also wanted to educate the youth inside. While at Berea, he would often watch TED Talks on areas of his life he

wanted to improve. "I hope that at least one student who is in the system and wonders if they are going to make it out watches the video and gains some hope that it is possible," Woelki said.

He does not anticipate a large life change when he graduates from the University of Delaware this spring. "My life will be more of what I'm doing now," he said. "The curiosity that drove me to Berea and flourished while there will lead me through my next chapter." 



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# Care into Action

A-Nya sits in the office of the West Virginia Citizen Action Group, one of the local organizations she works with as a community democracy coordinator for Fair Shake Environmental Legal Services, a nonprofit law firm that helps underserved people and communities access environmental justice through affordable legal support and education.

Photo by Brooklynn Kenney

By Zach Coleman '29

**A**-Nya Badger '23 believes she always had a strong sense of justice. She remembers her first step into activism when she was 3 years old. After an incident of police brutality in her hometown, her father took her up to Charleston, West Virginia, to join a march in protest.

"My dad had taken me, and I didn't understand what was going on," she recalled, "but I was really taken by the chant. I had my little sign up, and I was so excited. I didn't understand fully, but I knew something bad had happened, and that it wasn't right."

Badger grew up in Kanawha County, also known as "Chemical Valley," in Dunbar, West Virginia. There, she faced racist remarks and the harsh effects of pollution. "Honestly, it was kind of miserable," Badger recalled. "It really was, especially being a young, nerdy Black girl in a mostly white area."

While the harsh effects of her environment were pushing her down, she found inspiration in seeing activism in various media. "Growing up with a slew of books and movies like "The Hunger Games" and "Divergent," this trend of fighting the government showed me I could make a change."

During her high school years, Badger immediately got to work. She joined the Stay Together Appalachian Youth (STAY) Project, an organization focused on connecting Central Appalachian youth, building community and inspiring leadership. She later became an advisory board member of Black Appalachian Young and Rising (BAYR), a Black autonomous youth program that the STAY program is currently incubating.

Badger also became involved with Rise Up WV's Youth Organizing Division, a program dedicated to empowering youth through progressive activism. There, she organized around the opioid epidemic in the state during 2019. Her work helped change a state law in West Virginia regarding drug felons being barred from receiving SNAP benefits. ([Learn More: https://](#)

[www.berea.edu/gravy/activism-as-a-queer-black-appalachian](http://www.berea.edu/gravy/activism-as-a-queer-black-appalachian)) "Coming off of that, I felt like I was in charge of the entire world," she said.

Badger's passion for activism aligned perfectly with the vision of a certain Berean. Throughout her high school years, from her school and her church, she had heard about a college in Appalachia that offered tuition-free education. Badger was very skeptical at first, "It sounded too good to be true," she said.

Badger believed she would be heading to a local college in West Virginia, but changed her mind after being nominated for the Woodson Scholars Award, which honors exemplary high school juniors from low-income households who exhibit academic excellence, leadership within their community and embody Dr. Carter G. Woodson's mind and spirit by providing them access to Berea College's No-Tuition Commitment Scholarship and an invitation to preview the College.

"I got invited to be nominated for the Carter G. Woodson Award; this was the third or fourth time Berea had been mentioned to me within a very short period," Badger said. "I decided to go, and I absolutely fell in love with the campus, the opportunities and the feeling of being there at Berea."


Badger would take full advantage of Berea's opportunities. While pursuing a psychology major, she added peace and social justice to her majors to deepen her understanding of activism. "My environmental justice class really gave me a clear understanding of how various issues interconnect with one another," she recalled. She also continued providing support for others as a student chaplain in her gender-inclusive residence hall. "I really wanted to carve out space for queer and marginalized people to at least have a little shelter of protection or be a welcoming presence that isn't judgmental or hurtful to them," Badger explained.

After graduation, Badger initially wanted to go somewhere else to live her life. But a lack of resources and job options in her field made her

reconsider. She thought, "I could stay in my home state around the people that I love, who make my life rich in other ways." Badger struggled with finding a job in her first year after graduation. "I applied for over 400 jobs in my first year out of college, and the only job prospects I ended up landing were ones that I had personal connections or relationships with, or like some small stipend in volunteer work. I ended up doing a lot of random things."

Badger's long-standing commitment to activism and service, though, became her saving grace. Today, she is a community democracy coordinator for Fair Shake Environmental Legal Services, a nonprofit law firm that helps underserved people and communities access environmental justice through affordable legal support and education. At Fair Shake, Badger gathers people from various communities and educates them about the democratic levers of power available to them to advocate for what they want to see in their communities. She connects them to legal resources, helps community members navigate protecting themselves from pollutants and turns their dreams for their communities into reality. Badger loves the feeling of winning and helping people go up against these companies. "Last year, we supported a ballot referendum that made it illegal for Pittsburgh to sell, lease or transfer the water utility to a private company," she recalled.

"What drives me is the personal fulfillment of knowing that I'm putting my effort into opening channels for people who were like me before I got into organizing; people who had this frustration and nowhere to voice it or vent it," Badger said. "I helped them not feel so trampled by the system."

Badger plans to continue down an activist path for the foreseeable future within her career and her life. "It feels good to know that I'm doing more than just wishing things could be better," she said. "It's also good to see people benefit from the passion and care being put into action." 

# Taking Root in New Soil



By Zach Coleman '29

Zac '29 didn't believe he needed to go to school to become a farmer. But after hearing from one of his friends, a non-traditional student, about some of the forestry classes Berea College offered, he wanted to audit a class as a community member. The only problem with his class audit was that if he were to audit a single class, it wouldn't fit with his work schedule. With deep consideration, Zac went all in and enrolled as a full-time student.

"Even though it's really cheap to audit a class as a community member, it doesn't fit into a regular working person's schedule to take three days a week, two hours out of each day, in the middle of the day to do something," Zac said. "It's not very conducive to having a job. So, I decided that if I wanted to study anything, I would need to go all in. I quit my job and became a full-time student. So far, no regrets. I'm really enjoying it."

Originally from a town near Portland, Oregon, Zac always valued the ground beneath his feet and the environment around him. "It's very green there," he said, "and there were lots of parks. I really enjoyed being outside and being in nature." He recalls starting his farming journey growing vegetables in his mother's backyard. "In high school, I became a vegetarian, and I was the only one who nearly ate any vegetables in my family," Zac recalled. "I had to learn how to make food for myself, and then that created an interest in food in general, so I started a garden in my mom's backyard."

Zac loves to stay connected to nature in one way or another. He has traveled the country back and forth for seasonal farm work. When winter began, he would travel to warm places throughout the country and even went to Nepal and South America to escape the cold weather.

"I worked in Arizona, California and Oregon, but when I wasn't working, I would have about six months of the year to travel. So, I'd work every single day for months straight, save money, and then travel for several months and live out of a vehicle." In 2019, Zac officially moved to Kentucky. "Being somewhere green with lots of water and greenery was important," he said.

He first lived in Campton, Kentucky, home of the famous Red River Gorge. Later, he realized the land was too hilly and rough for him to start a farm. Looking for a place with the right conditions at a good price, he moved to Berea in 2020.

"Of course, I had friends in Oregon, but I didn't really know any of my neighbors," Zac said. "It wasn't until I started doing seasonal farm work that I saw tight-woven communities in more rural areas. And that was when I realized what I was really wanting to find: close-knit communities."

Throughout his seven years in Kentucky, he planted roots by staying in Kentucky during the winter instead of fleeing to somewhere warmer.

"I spent so long avoiding winters and seasons, when I finally settled in Kentucky, it was the first time I'd been somewhere for spring, summer, fall and winter, and getting to know the plants and the landscape throughout the seasons," Zac said. "Now that it's been seven years or so, when you see the patterns of when things bloom and when the leaves fall, you know when the first snows usually are."

He was lucky to find like-minded gardeners in the area. "I was largely just isolated on this small property in the rural area outside Berea," Zac recalled, "But then I met some of my neighbors who are also around my age who had recently moved to the area and were also interested in farming. I still hang out with a lot of those people and grow food together with them today."

Photo by Timothy Housa '27



Though born in Portland, Oregon, Zac '29 has transplanted himself in Appalachia, where, for the first time, he encountered all four seasons and a thriving community of like-minded people. A non-traditional student, Zac works in the College's greenhouse, using his vast knowledge of farming in his daily work. Photo by Timothy Housa '27

With the COVID-19 pandemic raging throughout the country, Zac was truly isolated for a while. A few months after moving to Berea, he was invited to an outdoor coffee social where he met his neighbors, looking for members to join their gardening group. With this community, Zac was now a part of a group called the Food Fellowship.

Zac and 10 of his neighbors grow food together, providing at least six months' worth of staple crops. "We get together and do some gardening for two to four hours, and by doing that, we can grow over 2,000 pounds of produce without any machinery or anything on several small properties of land," he said.

Zac's Food Fellowship works together to distribute the heavy


workload of growing and producing staple crops across three separate plots of land.

One of the biggest problems the Food Fellowship faces currently is time. "Everyone's just really busy working on their own things," Zac mentioned. To solve this issue, he intends to build a cooperative farm after he graduates from Berea College. Not only will his Food Fellowship produce more food, but he intends to split the harvests to sell to buyers, sell to his community at reduced prices and donate free produce to his community.

"They say many hands make light work, so that would be my goal after school, to set up some sort of cooperative farm so that we can have strength in numbers and

all produce food, but help each other in doing it, so that hopefully we might have more time to do other things in life," Zac said about his future vision.

Comparing himself to a member of the Appalachian community, Zac recounts the values he has learned and what brought him here.

"I don't know if I've been here long enough that a born-and-raised Appalachian would consider me Appalachian, but I love this place, and this is where I plan on spending the rest of my life," Zac said. "I've been all over the world, and this is my favorite place I've been, and I chose to be here." 

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photo by Maya Meads '27

# Working from Home

While Lewis has an office at Hazard Community and Technical College, he also established a second workspace at the Leslie County Public Library in Hyden, where he regularly meets with students. During the magazine photo shoot, he even ran into a few of them who staff the library.

Photo by Crystal Wylie '05



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BEREA COLLEGE

During the magazine photo shoot, Lewis and photographer Crystal Wylie '05 realized she had photographed him more than a decade earlier for a Berea College Admissions billboard campaign. The project featured students from 12 recruitment regions, with billboards displayed in their hometowns; Seth's ran in Hazard from October 2016 through March 2017.

By Derek Shorkey '27

**F**or Seth Lewis '15, his first semester at Berea was nearly his last. Going through a difficult time in his life, he had every intention of dropping out.

He walked into his labor supervisor, Jeffrey Linville's, office resolved to let him know. His supervisor, though, simply replied, "Sit down, Seth—no, you're not."

"That was all it took. I stayed all four years. Best decision I've ever made," Lewis recalls.

Lewis held a few labor positions during his time at Berea, from a desk job in the Loyal Jones Appalachian Center, to working on the farm, to serving as a teaching assistant. It was his position in facilities management that he looked back on with the most clarity.

"For two years, all those people you see setting up chairs and tables for events around campus, that was me," Lewis said. "I loved that job and my supervisor."

Lewis is no stranger to hard work. He descended from a family of Appalachian miners, but he was determined to break this tradition when he applied to Berea. His various labor positions helped to clarify how he felt about his home.

"For five hours a week, I worked in the Appalachian Center," Lewis explained. "On top of that, I worked on the farm. Despite my Papaw being a coal miner and a farmer, I had not done much farm work. Those two jobs specifically helped root me to my place in my land, and I continue farming now to this day."

After deciding to stay at Berea, Lewis began giving back to the Appalachian region, starting with his campus community.

Lewis was one of the founders of the Appalachian Student Union, a student organization still strong on campus to this day, serving Appalachian students and providing educational opportunities about the region.

"Some other folks from the Appalachian Center and I realized that there was no group on campus that catered specifically to Appalachian students," Lewis said. "This being an Appalachian institution, we felt like there was a real need for there to be a student organization for that. We took the handle and made it ourselves."

Berea has a strong connection to Appalachia, rooted in its Great Commitments. Today, Lewis continues to embody the same commitments that Berea has to Appalachia in his work as coordinator of the Ready-to-Work program in Hazard, Kentucky.

"I came to school, and I turned right around and moved back home," he said.

The Ready to Work program is a partnership between the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS) and the Department of Community-Based Services (DCBS), where low-income individuals pursuing higher education can be supported economically.

The program partners with students receiving food stamps and KTAP, or Kentucky Transitional Assistance Program, funding. A condition of KTAP funding is labor, which could take the form of volunteer work or employment. Ready to Work helps students fulfill that requirement by placing them in jobs and volunteer positions.

"Our students get their education, and they get paid through us," Lewis explained. "It's a win-win situation. Instead of just getting to volunteer and just get the KTAP, you get the KTAP, you get the food stamps, you get your education and you get paid. It's supposed to be a step to help lift families out of generational poverty, and I think it really does that when they take advantage of it in the right way."

Lewis says his experience with balancing labor and classes at Berea

has been vital in connecting with the students he's supporting.

"I tell the students all the time: 'I know exactly what you're doing. I also worked 20 hours a week and went to school at the same time. I know what it's like,' so that gives me the ability to connect with these students."

In addition to his student work experience, he also continues to adapt his training in political science and history to help better serve the students he guides. Owing to the liberal arts model of Berea, his education applies to a wide range of situations he faces in his work today.

"History taught me how to unpack specific stories and how to look at them with nuance," Lewis said. "Political science taught me how to zoom out and look at them with a broad perspective."

Lewis spoke at length on the issues facing the Appalachian region. The Ready to Work program has given countless Appalachian people the opportunity to regain control of their lives, crucially, for themselves and on their own terms.

"When you show people that they have independence, after they've been nothing but beaten down the whole time, whether that be circumstances or decisions or what have you, that's a very powerful and freeing thing," Lewis said.

Lewis implored fellow Appalachian people to be conscious of the troubles faced by the region, from the opioid epidemic to poverty. In a place as rooted in community as Appalachia, there are seldom more important things than sticking together through hardship, Lewis says.

"More people need to come home," Lewis implored. "If you want to fix it, be part of the solution." ■

*The thoughts and opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the individual expressing them and do not necessarily reflect the views of HCTC, KCTCS, DCBS, or any other relevant third parties.*

# Coming Back to My Favorite Place



By Fran Duarte '29

If you could live anywhere in the world, where would you choose? For many of us, the answer would be difficult. After all, there are countless amazing places across the globe. But for Elijah Hicks '23 and Moriah Wilbur '21, the answer is simple. After exploring more than 85 places around the world, their choice remains Slade, Kentucky.

The couple's journey began at Berea College, where Hicks majored in agriculture and natural resources with a minor in English. His interest in mushrooms started during a research project with a fellow senior studying whether fungi could break down plastic. "We basically fed the masks to these mushrooms...and the mushroom indeed grew all over this blue plastic mask," he explained.

Since then, Hicks' mushroom research has continued, interested not only in their unique biological abilities but also in the implications they have for addressing environmental and agricultural challenges.

Meanwhile, for Wilbur, choosing to major in health and human performance stemmed from the situation of her country, Tajikistan. "Where I grew up, women and girls had little access to programs and resources that would allow them to take care of their physical health," she said. "Not only was opportunity lacking, but girls are often discouraged or forbidden to participate in sports."

Wilbur pursued her major because she believed pursuing health is a human right and that it was a small way she could honor the women and girls in her life who had been denied these rights.

With time, after Wilbur and Hicks married, an amazing opportunity came their way, a program that gives graduating seniors a \$40,000 grant to conduct independent and global exploration outside the United States: the Thomas J. Watson Fellowship. "I

was studying the intersection of tourism, small-scale tourism, community empowerment, regenerative agriculture and wilderness preservation; how do we hold these things together?" Hicks explained.

Throughout these travels, they were amazed by the stories and successes they encountered in other places. "One of the greatest lessons I learned from Elijah and my Watson experience is the impact ownership of place has," Wilbur said. "The communities we visited where the people had an obvious love and pride for their homeplace, led to the flourishing of the land and the community."

Moriah also reflects on how these lessons made her realize their next step as a couple. "I think we often feel the need for big solutions to the big problems our world faces," Wilbur said. "But the flourishing of people and place comes through a series of many small solutions that ultimately lead to big lasting impacts that are sustainable, and this can only happen when people feel significant connection to land and community."

This realization led her and Hicks back to Appalachia, with a desire to steward and learn to love the community and land that had given them so much.

During the final month of their travels, the couple began brainstorming their next project upon returning to Kentucky. Starting a mushroom farm was initially a long-term dream, Wilbur explains, but it soon became a reality.

Today, they run Forest Forager Farm, a small-scale mushroom operation focused on sustainability, education and community engagement.

Mushrooms fascinated Hicks not only for their environmental benefits but also for their health potential. He noted, for example, that lion's mane mushrooms have been shown to

**“Berea didn’t give me a clear path in life, but it gave me the chance to grow, explore different disciplines and receive a free education, which I’m really grateful for.”**

– ELIJAH HICKS '23



Elijah Hicks '23 checks on mushrooms in the indoor environment conducive to their proper growth. Elijah and his wife, Moriah Wilbur '21 grow various types of mushrooms on their property, Forest Forager Farm, in Slade, Kentucky. Photos by Kalilah Hicks '27

improve cognitive performance and may help treat conditions such as Alzheimer’s and dementia. More importantly, Elijah remarked that mushrooms can be grown in a small space with a low environmental footprint, making them a promising sustainable food source.

“Economically, this is something that, if we can get it off the ground and get going, really makes sense in a way that farming tomatoes or strawberries doesn’t really make sense in our economy,” Hicks said.

The couple also hopes their farm can support tourism and small business development in Kentucky. Hicks

believes that responsible tourism and local enterprises can help Appalachia thrive while preserving its natural beauty.

Returning home after traveling the world confirmed something for him: Appalachia is where he belongs. “Every day I’m here, I just feel really lucky to live in such a beautiful region with mountains and hills and water and trees,” he said. “I really did travel the world, and coming back here, this is my favorite place.”

Hicks explains that Berea made this path possible. “I wouldn’t have this opportunity without Berea. If I were paying off \$120,000 in debt, I’d have

to prioritize getting a job that makes a certain amount of money. Where I am now involves a lot of experimenting and figuring things out, and it’s not always comfortable, but it’s a gift. Berea didn’t give me a clear path in life, but it gave me the chance to grow, explore different disciplines and receive a free education, which I’m really grateful for.”

Choosing Slade, for Hicks and Wilbur is important not only for the place they live. After seeing all kinds of places around the world, they realized that the place they want to shape, protect and grow is still Slade, Kentucky. [B](#)

# NOMINATE STUDENTS TO BEREA COLLEGE

## 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 Summer Simmons '05. She teaches Math at Madison Southern High School, Berea, Ky.

Photo by Crystal Wylie '05



**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.

# A Calling Fulfilled



Photo by Brooklynn Kenney

By JoJo Wray '04

I knew I might toss and turn all night, disturbing my dogs (and husband) if I didn't text Judy Sizemore some questions. In the morning, Jackson County Middle School students would interview me for a revisit of a project started 30 years ago. The book "Jackson County People and Places" was started when Judy worked with the Tyner Family Resource Center to collect stories from local people. Judy shared that the Jackson County Public Library would publish this anniversary edition so the students could see themselves as authors. I had a chance to see the previous edition during a break. It's a wonderful collection, a source of pride in history, recipes, remedies and the community's natural resources and working traditions.

Why was I doing this? I (affectionately and with pride in my heart) blame Brushy Fork Leadership Institute. Its annual gathering connects neighbors in communities and surrounding states and offers relevant training in leadership, nonprofit management and skill development. In 2019, I attended my first Brushy Fork Leadership Gathering hosted and supported by Berea College. It opened the door to a path of personal growth; new friendships; and making a difference in the lives of animals, the environment and educating children—my passions.

The sun was cresting the foothills as I drove toward the middle school, ready with talking points and pictures. I was prepared to discuss my animal rescues or my organic gluten-free farm (I have Celiac Disease). I was a little nervous.

The students had great questions. The process allowed the children's curiosity to guide the dialogue throughout the interview. "Does

spaying and neutering make animals sick or gay?" And "What CAN you eat?" They laughed when I told them Celiac Disease wasn't going to stop me from eating junk food. I explained that after the diagnosis, I quickly bought a deep fryer and learned to make gluten-free fried cheese sticks. Judy encouraged them to write down quotes.

I left the school energized. Later, I received a note from Judy saying the kids were captivated. She shared that I provided not only a great interview but also excellent advice for the students.

This wasn't the first time I'd been invited to speak at a local school. I completed a Brushy Fork six-month leadership program for Jackson County in 2022. Our cohort chose a project called "Take Pride Where We Reside." Our mission was to educate, clean up and beautify our community for the benefit of our citizens and visitors, promoting tourism and economic growth.

We spoke with elementary students about recycling and played guessing games with props while sharing facts. We spoke at the fiscal court. We set up a booth at the annual fall fair and gave out vegetable and herb seeds. We had a photo stand-in of a fish and a turtle made by a high school class. We chose the turtle because Jackson County is part of the Sheltowee Trace National Recreational Trails. "Sheltowee" is the Shawnee name meaning "Big Turtle." The fish represents the numerous creeks in Jackson County. We organized a public cleanup at Flat Lick Falls, a beautiful 30-foot waterfall that is easily accessible, free to visit and located in the Daniel Boone National Forest.

Judy and I connected because of our friends and shared passions through

Brushy Fork Leadership Institute.

When we first moved to the country, a little more than a decade ago, to a county that is more Daniel Boone National Forest than not, I felt isolated, disconnected and without community. The nearest neighbor is at least a five-minute jaunt away. There are no sidewalks that connect hollers and towns. Brushy Fork Leadership Institute connected me to my community and gave me tools to pursue my passions.

My husband and I got to know our neighbors and reduced the number of unwanted and unaltered animals, a real problem in Eastern Kentucky. We helped find homes for 15 dogs and nine cats, ensured they were spayed or neutered and received a rabies vaccination, deworming and tick and flea treatment. And maybe a few of those dogs (four) joined our pack.

Lots of people may ask, "Why did you move?" There are lots of answers. Family. Land. Legacy. But one of the main reasons is that institutions like Berea College and Brushy Fork Leadership Institute invest in people, communities and Appalachia. I attended my first Gathering because Brushy Fork, as part of Berea College, is a local resource for professional development.

One summit changed the direction of my life. I was a repeat customer. Now I'm thinking about starting a non-profit animal rescue to help provide resources to those who need a hand. The connectedness and belonging I feel now, I owe in large part to the effectiveness of this partnership. Living in an area with access to those resources is a blessing and a calling fulfilled. ■

**"It opened the door to a path of personal growth; new friendships; and making a difference in the lives of animals, the environment and educating children—my passions."**

— JOJO WRAY '04

# Taking a Different Route



By Kim Kobersmith

**A**s the transportation director for Kentucky River Foothills, Tyler Burris '13 does a lot of different things in a day. He supervises 40 employees, including 35 drivers and a mechanic. He oversees the department's \$2 million annual budget and keeps finances in check. He fills out federal grant applications and submits monthly reports. He orders new vehicles for their public routes and shuttle services. He even drives when needed and, in a pinch, acts as dispatcher.

"We are a small operation, and everyone has their hands in the cookie jar," Burris said. "I help out wherever I'm needed."

The services Burris oversees constitute the only public transportation in Foothills' four-county service area of Clark, Estill, Madison and Powell. Along with three scheduled bus routes, Foothills provides the Big E Transit Service on the Eastern Kentucky University campus, a Madison County Connector Service, Intercity Service runs to airports, train stations and national bus stations, non-emergency medical transportation and, occasionally, local festivals.

Foothills is the largest human services agency in its service area, with a mission to remove barriers to essential services. Transportation can be a huge barrier, especially in small towns and rural areas, and the nonprofit provides services at a low cost to ensure they are accessible to everyone in the community.

"Foothills Express bridges a gap for people, whether it's a Medicaid client in need of life-saving dialysis or someone whose personal

vehicle breaks down and is in the shop for a couple of days," Burris said.

Burris was born and raised in Rockcastle County, just south of Berea. His grandparents owned a video store and tanning salon in Brodhead. It was a happening place, back in the day, and Burris would head over after school to join his mom, who worked there. He might not have attended Berea College without the influence of his high school AP chemistry teacher, Ms. Barker, who was an alumna. She was pivotal in his decision to apply and helped guide him through the process.

As a business major with a marketing concentration, one of Burris' favorite memories was being a "mystery shopper" in the college bookstore for a marketing class. While the shop was doing well overall, the students' marketing analysis generated a few ideas for improvement that they presented to management. He felt they made a tangible difference.

Along the way, Burris had many challenging classes and professors, but he realized and understood the value of a Berea College education through those classes and professors. He even made a point of thanking one teacher for what he learned before he graduated.

Serving in work positions in both the facilities management office and the office of internships gave Burris valuable business and marketing experience. After graduation, he grew discouraged about finding a job but kept pushing himself to apply. That persistence, plus the power of his Berea College degree and work experience, helped him land a marketing position at Rural Transit Enterprises Coordinated, Inc.

**He might not have attended Berea College without  
the influence of his high school AP chemistry  
teacher, Ms. Barker, who was an alumna.**

(RTEC), a transportation company that serves 15 counties in Southeastern Kentucky, reaching to the Tennessee border. Six years later, he worked his way up to his current position at Foothills. He says he wouldn't be there without his Berea College degree.

Family and community are important to Burris. He has been married to his wife, Candice, for nine years, and together they have a 5-year-old son, Canyon. He returned home for many weekends in college to attend church and spend time with his parents and brother. When his dad had a stroke during his Berea years, he made every effort to help as needed. As he was seeking

work after graduation, they provided a soft spot to land. Traveling with the Berea College golf team exposed him to other areas and opened his eyes to a wider world, but Kentucky is home.

One of the things Burris loves about Foothills is that it is about more than transportation. As the oldest community action agency in Kentucky, founded in 1962, it reaches much of the community through its 40 programs. Foothills removes barriers to housing, education, healthcare, employment and social connection, helping individuals and families achieve long-term stability and independence.

The work at Foothills aligns with Burris' desire to be of

service and his passion for making life better for his Appalachian neighbors. He watched his mom work in the medical field and saw how much serving there meant to her, but he didn't feel compelled to enter that field. In college, he had an insurance company internship that proved to him it wasn't his cup of tea. He knew he could find his forte in business in another way.

"It made me want to help out more in some form or fashion, so I made the decision to go that route," Burris said. "It's been an amazing journey with Foothills, and I am using my expertise to help people. They truly care about the community, and I feel like I am at home." 📺



Tyler Burris '13, transportation director, and Joe Wilkie '90, fleet manager for Kentucky River Foothills and leader of Country Dance programs at Berea College, stand in front of the organization's fleet in Richmond, Ky. Burris oversees regional transportation operations, ensuring clients have reliable access to essential services.



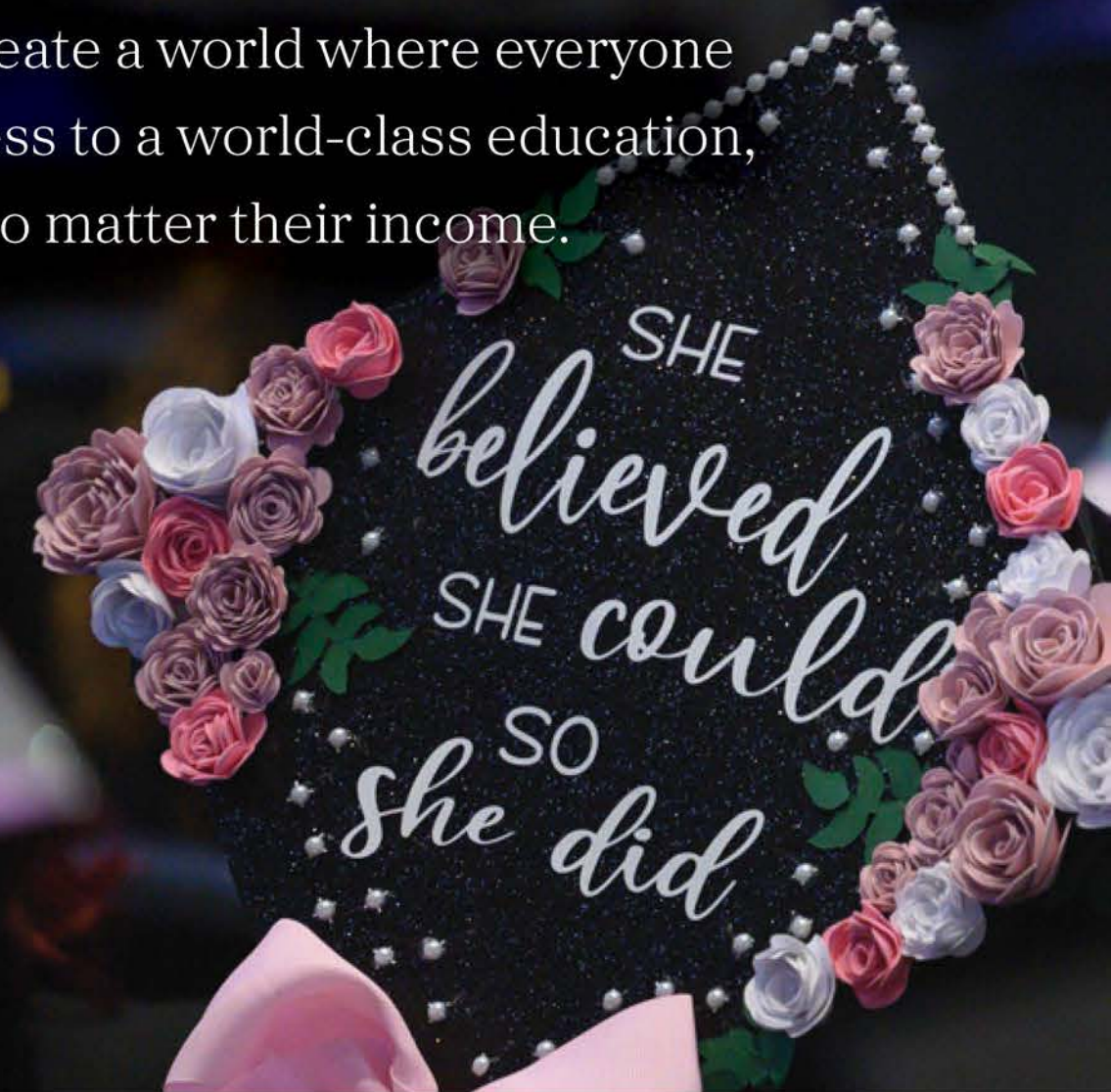
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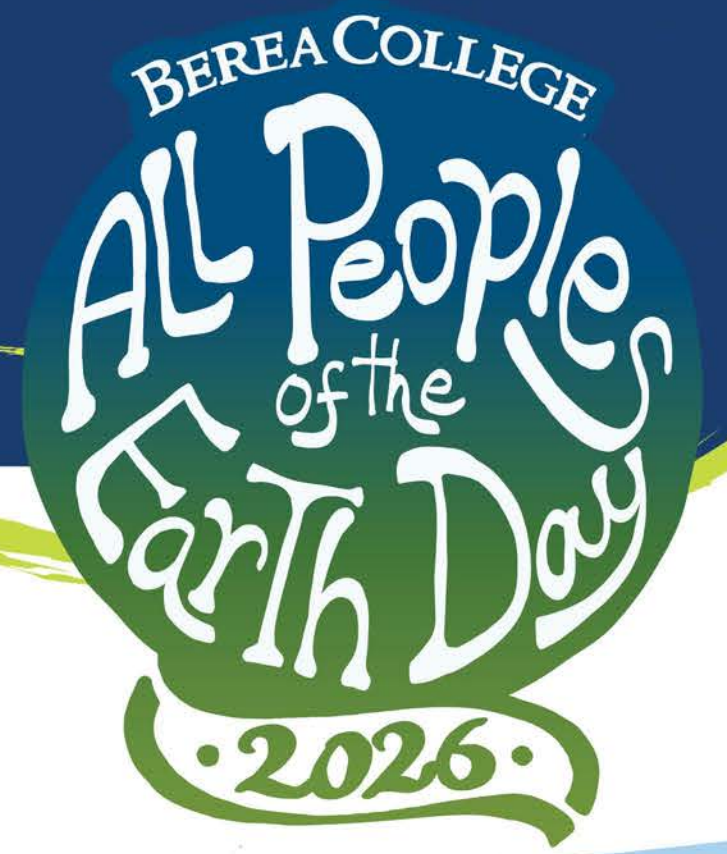
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Photo by Nay Kaw '23

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# A DAY FOR EVERYONE



The second annual All Peoples of the Earth Day centered on “all peoples” coming together to celebrate spring renewal and the spirit of our campus community. Students, faculty and staff gathered at Alumni Fields and Brushy Fork, enlivening those special outdoor spaces with new additions like a gazebo and swings and enjoying the natural beauty that makes Berea so unique. Classes and labor are canceled for the day, allowing for a full day of Berea-unique experiences, from the Big Swap to the Sunset Celebration, where music and dance ensembles performed through the evening. Whether through climbing, hammocking, planting trees, painting a mural or simply spending time with friends, the day allowed everyone to explore hands-on activities across campus.



**PHOTO GALLERY**  
Scan this QR code or go to the link below to see more photos!  
[www.berea.college/All-Peoples-2026](http://www.berea.college/All-Peoples-2026)

# Finding New Purpose in Retirement

By Judith Weckman



Judith Weckman and her karate instructor bow to one another just before Weckman is presented with her blue belt, representing expanding knowledge and intermediate skill level. Karate is one of many activities Weckman has pursued in retirement. Photo submitted

## Retirement 1.0

Travel more, organize the house and catch up with long-lost friends. These are often the first priorities after retirement. But what next? For me, retirement was an opportunity to find deeper meaning.

I worked at Berea College for 28 years, and throughout all that time, I kept a copy of The Great Commitments by my desk. The Commitments served as my guide in designing and conducting studies to strengthen the College's mission. I then applied a model of student Engagement (readiness for college), Inclusion (group identity) and Achievement (outcomes) to assess student success.

As I prepared for retirement three years ago, I thought about how I might structure it when the time came. Did I even want that? I decided I did, and so I settled on a loose framework of service, wellness, personal development and creativity, which now serve as my new Commitments.

## Retirement 2.0

This framework has helped me engage in a wide range of meaningful activities and still have ample free time. **Service**—I continue my work in canine search and rescue, have created native plant restoration gardens on city property (e.g., Berea Pollinator Gardens) and actively participate in the local pro-democracy group, WeShowUp.

**Wellness** (social, physical, spiritual)—I joined a church and a book group and regularly enjoy pickleball, wallyball, contra dance, Bridge and karate. **Personal Development and Creativity**—I obtained certification as a Master Naturalist and completed several writing projects, including an illustrated children's book featuring archaic and whimsical animal group names (e.g., a charm of foxes, a murder of crows).

I have been blessed with good health and a close family. My framework is helping me connect with friends, old and new, and engage in new activities. At 70, I look forward to exploring new paths along the way.

BEREA COLLEGE  
**ONE REUNION 2026**  
 SAVE THE DATE  
**SEPTEMBER 25-27**  
 our big reunion event weekend!  
 stay tuned for more information

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.



**SUBMIT CLASS NOTES**

To submit class notes and photographs, scan this QR code or go to: [www.berea.edu/alumni/class-note](http://www.berea.edu/alumni/class-note)

**1970**

**Annette L. Hobbs** is in a movie that is streaming on Amazon Prime. ‘My Boyfriend’s Wife is Dead,’ was filmed in Louisville, Ky., this past winter. She is also going to be in a movie titled “Let’s Murder Like it is 1999,” which was filmed in Tampa, Fla., and a horror thriller titled “Lesions,” filmed in Virginia.

**Roger Wade** and **Sue Mann Wade** were married in Danforth Chapel in 1970. Both are retired and live in Marysville, Ohio, and would love to hear from Berea friends.

**1977**



**Dave Walthour** is celebrating 30 years since his move to New Hampshire in 1996. This year is the beginning of his 15<sup>th</sup> year as pastor of Union Church of Enfield Center.

**1979**

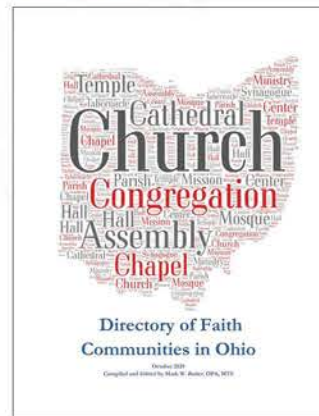
**James Stratman** has joined the membership and is active in the California MAGA movement and Agenda 47, promoting President Donald Trump and JD Vance’s 2028 candidacies.

**1989**



**Renee C. Staton** is celebrating 36 years as an American Airlines flight attendant, based in Miami, Fla., and she still loves flying all over the world.

**1995**



**Mark W. Butler** has published the Directory of Faith Communities in Ohio, a statewide resource created to strengthen partnerships between behavioral health entities and faith communities. The book lists more than 6,000 verified congregations and reflects a lifelong commitment to service, inclusion and justice. Inspired by Berea’s values of learning, labor and

love, the directory helps connect families and care providers with faith leaders who can offer understanding and hope.

**Arlisha Williams** became the first-ever female mayor of Cairo, Ga. **Read more:** <https://bit.ly/4csUvWq>

**2000**



**Maritza Lea Arnett** writes that through life’s many ups and downs, her journey continues. She has been able to travel and live far and is now close again. She is widowed and has a daughter. She just wanted to reach out to her fellow alumni.

**2007**

**Blake Ryan Henry**, after holding multiple positions through the past 15 years with Cabinetworks Group, was promoted to a multi-site engineering manager at the corporate office in October 2025.

**2009**

**Christian Motley** has been appointed senior vice president, chief program officer at Results for America, a national nonprofit that partners with governments to shift public dollars toward evidence-based solutions and

advance economic mobility. In this role, he will lead Results for America’s government-facing work across local, state and federal levels, aligning efforts to help communities achieve improved outcomes for youth and families. He continues to be based in Lexington, Ky.

**2014**

**Victoria A. Barbour** completed her doctoral studies in October 2025 at Liberty University in community care and counseling.

**2015**

**Patrick Elzinga** is a senior program services manager at Vizient Inc. Elzinga leads cost-saving initiatives for more than 30 health systems. His strategic innovations during the COVID-19 pandemic helped hospitals overcome critical shortages while establishing financial sustainability. **Read more:** <https://bit.ly/4qzf1bi>

**2018**

**Nana Boateng** wrote a note for **Quentin Savage ‘16**, who passed in October 2025. He graduated with a BA in English literature. While at Berea, Savage was a pivotal force in leading student rallies for Black Lives Matter and racial justice and equality across campus and in the wider Berea community. He co-led Bereans for Michael Brown with Anna Loveless, was a recipient of the Peacemaker of the Year award and the Mario Savio Award for Young Activists presented by the University of California Berkeley, and was an incredible poet. The Mario Savio award is presented each year to a young person with a deep commitment to human rights and social justice and a proven ability to transform this commitment into effective action.

**Mark your calendars for Mountaineer fall sports!**

**All Berea home athletic events are free to attend!**

See if the Mountaineers are playing in your area by following any team’s schedule at [www.bereaathletics.com](http://www.bereaathletics.com)

# Alumni Office Has Moved!

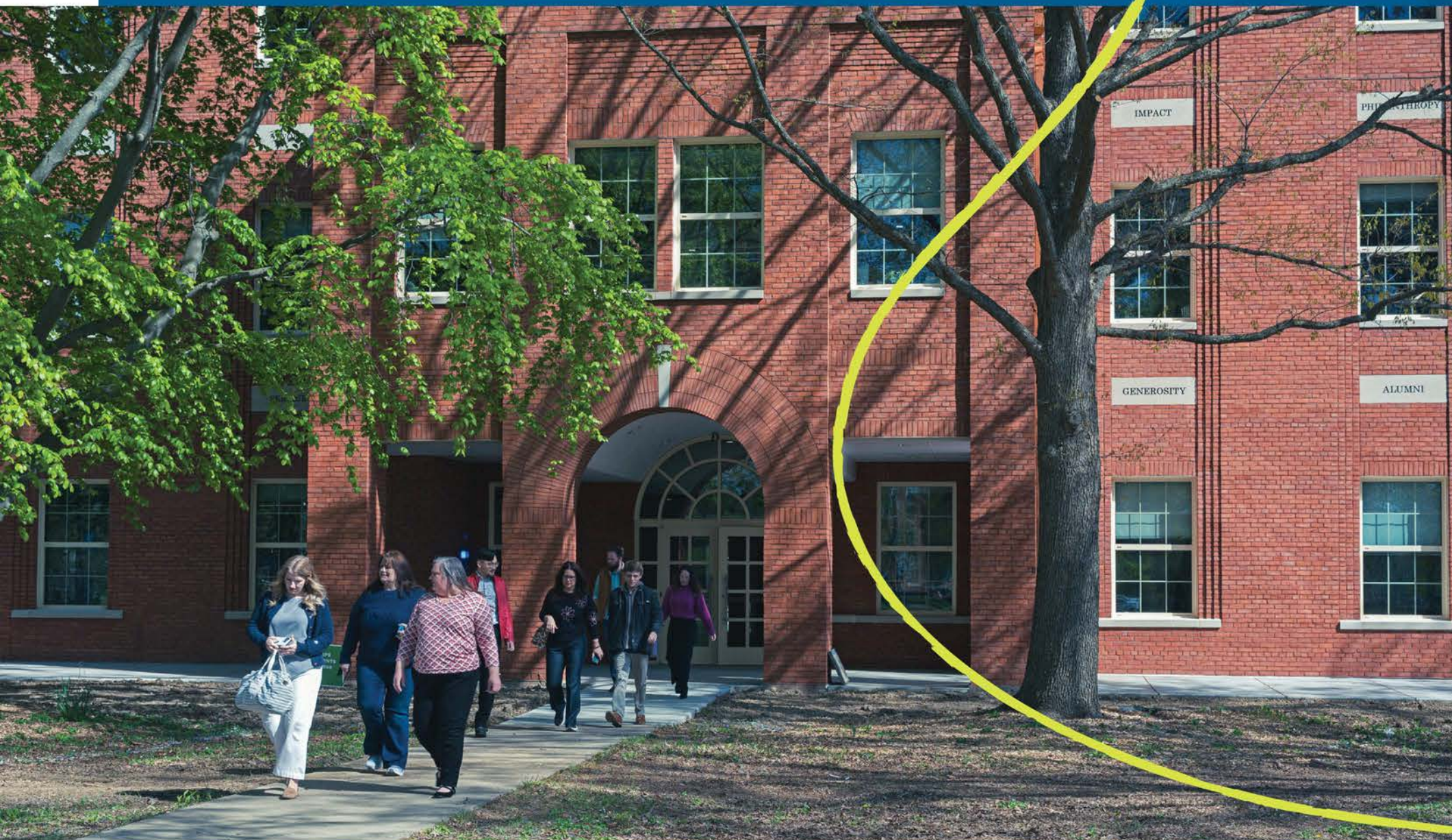


Photo by Sonam Tsering '27

Stop by  
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Executive Director  
of Alumni Philanthropy

**Faith Calhoun-Louden '03**  
Assistant Director  
of Alumni Engagement

**Alysia Mora '21**  
Alumni Philanthropy Coordinator

**Reganne Fox '23**  
Alumni Engagement Associate

**Teresa Kash Davis '84**  
Senior Associate Vice President  
for Alumni and Philanthropy



Call us at (859) 985-3104 for assistance.

## Silas House Inducted into Kentucky Writers Hall of Fame

Silas House is one of Kentucky's most celebrated literary figures. He is a bestselling novelist, playwright, essayist, activist and former Kentucky Poet Laureate whose work spans genres, platforms and audiences. He also serves as associate professor of Appalachian Studies and National Endowment for the Humanities Chair in Appalachian Studies at Berea College.



Photo by C. Williams

In March, House was inducted into the Kentucky Writers Hall of Fame, along with five other distinguished Kentucky writers.

"At Berea, Silas embodies our Great Commitments through his teaching, scholarship and engagement with students," said President Cheryl Nixon. "He challenges and encourages our students to find their own voices while honoring the stories that shape who they are. His presence on our campus is a gift, and this Kentucky Writers Hall of Fame recognition affirms what we already know: that his work matters deeply, both here and far beyond."

In recent months, House has published two national bestsellers in entirely new genres: "All These Ghosts," his first poetry collection, and "Dead Man Blues," a murder mystery written under the name S.D. House. The poetry collection is a finalist for the Southern Book Prize and a rare USA Today bestseller, earning national attention, including an NPR interview.

Born in Corbin and raised in Lily, Kentucky, House earned his bachelor's degree from Eastern Kentucky University and later an MFA from Spalding University. After early recognition as an emerging

Southern writer, he published "Clay's Quilt" in 2001, launching a career that includes acclaimed novels such as "Southernmost" and "Lark Ascending," the latter winning the 2023 Southern Book Prize. His forthcoming novel, "The Tulip Poplars," will be published this fall.

Beyond books, House's impact extends to teaching at Berea College and Spalding University, editing to uplift Appalachian writers, environmental and LGBTQ activism, film and music projects—including a Grammy-nominated collaboration with Tyler Childers—and a podcast spotlighting Kentucky writers.

## Berea College Wins Cooper Hewitt 2026 National Design Award



Photo by Sean Hall '25

In March, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, announced the winners of the 2026 National Design Awards.

The Product Design award, given to an individual or firm for the forward-thinking design of objects, products and materials, was presented to Berea College Student Craft, which integrates design education with hands-on making, continuing a tradition that began in 1893 as part of the college's tuition-free work program. Today, its craft program provides experiential learning for students across all 35 academic majors. Foundational to the curriculum is the belief that every student in the program must feel safe and

supported both to succeed and to fail, as most students have not had formal art and design education prior to arriving at Berea College. Students design, prototype, test and market thousands of objects annually, gaining a deep understanding of the inherent qualities of the raw materials they work with through rigorous hands-on experience.

Launched in 2000 as an official project of the White House Millennium Council, the National Design Awards celebrate excellence and leadership in design, recognizing the innovation and impact of individual designers and organizations across 10 categories. Award recipients are selected by a multidisciplinary jury of

practitioners, educators and leaders from a wide range of design fields.

"At Cooper Hewitt, we celebrate design not only for its impact and innovation, but also for its role as a civic force—one that reflects shared values rooted in the common good, fuels creativity and shapes everyday life," said Maria Nicanor, director of Cooper Hewitt.

"The National Design Awards demonstrate the potential and possibilities of American design, shining a spotlight on the designers and communities whose talent and creativity speak of the pluralistic richness of America at its best," said Aric Chen, chair of the 2026 National Design Awards jury.

## Berea College to Open Visitor Center Showcasing the “Berea Story”

The Berea College Visitor Center will undergo a major transformation designed to immerse guests in the “Berea Story,” offering a deeper connection to the College’s mission when it reopens in summer 2026.

“We are reimagining our Berea College Visitor Center, in College Square, to capture who we are as a College and how we share our mission and values – past, present and future – with the many people who come to campus each year,” President Cheryl Nixon said. “The new Visitor Center will be dedicated to helping visitors deepen their

connection to Berea College. It will operate within the Alumni, Communications and Philanthropy division and align closely with that division’s storytelling and relationship-building roles.

“Whether someone is a prospective student, alumnus, donor, community member or first-time traveler passing through Berea, the Visitor Center will offer a meaningful and inspiring introduction to the College we all serve,” Nixon added. “I look forward to welcoming visitors into a space that reflects the heart, history and future of Berea College.”

The Visitor Center closed in May and will reopen this summer with more than just updated décor.

Through displays and kiosks, the reimagined space will highlight the many things that make Berea unique – its history and Great Commitments, academics, athletics, centers, music ensembles, farm and forest, student labor, craft and more.

As part of this process, the College’s Log House Gallery will continue Berea’s retail business and oversee the creation of a new Berea College “spirit shop” in the former White Stitch location on College Square.

## Berea College Joins Associated Colleges of the South

Berea College has been invited to join the Associated Colleges of the South (ACS), a consortium of leading private liberal arts institutions across the Southern states.

This is the first time a new member institution has been added to ACS in more than 25 years. This partnership connects Berea College to a network of peers committed to strengthening the liberal arts through collaboration, shared learning and innovation.

Founded in 1991, the ACS brings together private residential liberal arts institutions to:

- Facilitate shared learning and collaboration through 30+ leadership groups by role
- Advance faculty and leadership development through shared programming
- Support innovation and collaboration through summer grants, mentoring programs and cross-campus projects
- Offer consortium-wide services including benchmarking, tuition exchange and shared subscriptions

ACS institutions include Centenary College of Louisiana, Centre College, Davidson College, Furman University,

Hendrix College, Millsaps College, Morehouse College, Rhodes College, Rollins College, Sewanee – University of the South, Southwestern University, Spelman College, Trinity University, University of Richmond and Washington and Lee University.

Berea College onboarded in the spring in preparation for the 2026–27 academic year. This past semester, Berea College:

- Hosted ACS leadership for a campus visit to share about the college and to learn more about ACS programs and opportunities.
- Connected Berea faculty and staff with ACS leadership and community groups for peer learning and support.
- Learned more about programs, resources and collaborative initiatives available to faculty and staff for 2026-27.

Joining ACS aligns Berea with other Southern institutions that share its commitment to the transformative impact of a high-quality liberal arts education. It allows Berea to expand faculty and professional development offerings, enrich teaching and learning initiatives and innovate and learn together with other leading liberal arts institutions in the South.

## Staff, Faculty & Trustees Dr. Rhoda Billings '59 Trustee (1990-1996) Dec. 29, 2025



Photo Submitted

Rhoda Jean Bryan Billings, 88, of Raleigh, North Carolina, passed away peacefully on Dec. 29, 2025, surrounded by her loving family.

Born Sept. 30, 1937, in Wilkesboro, N.C., Rhoda was the fourth of six children. A gifted student, she graduated from Wilkes Central High School in 1956 as salutatorian at age 17 and earned an English degree from Berea College in 1959. That same year, she married Donald R. Billings. Together, they shared 63 years of marriage, raised two children, Renee and Doug, and eventually settled into their beloved 40-acre home in Lewisville, where they lived for nearly five decades.

Billings earned her law degree from Wake Forest University School of Law in 1966, graduating first in her class and as the only

woman in her class. Her trailblazing career included election as one of Forsyth County’s original District Court judges in 1968—the youngest and only woman—and appointment to the North Carolina Supreme Court in 1985, where she became the state’s first woman Chief Justice.

Rhoda also served for decades on the Wake Forest Law faculty, retiring as professor emeritus in 2003, and received numerous honors, including Wake Forest’s Medallion of Merit and the North Carolina Bar Association’s highest award.

Despite her many accomplishments, Rhoda’s greatest joy was her family. A quiet, witty and deeply loving woman, she found happiness in gardening, time outdoors and family traditions.

### 1940s

**Frances Carroll '43**  
No obituary available

**Gene David Barber '47**  
Obituary unavailable

**Betty Smith '49**  
Jan. 28, 2026

### 1950s

**Dr. Ohlen Rudolph Wilson '50**  
Nov. 8, 2025

**Martha Wilson '51**  
Dec. 31, 2025

**Wesley Wilson '53**  
Jan. 4, 2026

**Lucille Buttram '54**  
Aug. 7, 2023

**Helen Cangle '54**  
Dec. 2, 2025

**Ellen R. Conley '54**  
Obituary unavailable

**J. Clyde Hall '55**  
Sept. 26, 2025

**Jemmie VanWinkle '55**  
Jan. 11, 2026

**Elmer Gray '56**  
March 26, 2025

**Mary Meece '56**  
Jan. 13, 2026

**Shirley D. Rion '56**  
Nov. 11, 2025

**Joyce V. Judge '57**  
Feb. 14, 2026

**Virgie Claycomb '58**  
Obituary unavailable

**John Holbrook '58**  
Nov. 21, 2023

**Stephen M. Hunter '58**  
Sept. 27, 2025

**Thomas H. Loftis '58**  
Oct. 14, 2025

**Elizabeth Summers '58**  
Nov. 12, 2025

**Karen Adams '59**  
Feb. 7, 2026

**Dr. Rhoda Billings '59**  
Dec. 29, 2025

### 1960s

**Kathryn Huff '60**  
Nov. 6, 2025

**Cleta Roberts '60**  
Dec. 5, 2025

**Dr. Chella David '61**  
Oct. 24, 2025

**Howard K. Hicks '61**  
May 21, 2024

**Dr. James E. Parks '61**  
Feb. 4, 2026

**Esther Hembree '63**  
Obituary unavailable

**Noreda Carrington '65**  
Nov. 12, 2025

**B. Richard Collins Jr. '65**  
Oct. 6, 2025

**Jerry J. Cox '65**  
Sept. 24, 2025

**Larry D. Crabtree '65**  
June 23, 2025

**James M. Frazer '65**  
Nov. 18, 2023

**Linda Shafer Myers '65**  
Sept. 5, 2025

**Edith Elmira Vance '65**  
March 6, 2025

**Jacqueline Gilreath '66**  
Oct. 15, 2025

**Dr. Rhoda Billings '67**  
Dec. 29, 2025

**Johnny E. Tolliver '67**  
Obituary unavailable

**William Dale Sturgill '68**  
Sept. 18, 2025

**Stella Campbell '69**  
Jan. 7, 2026

### 1970s

**Barbara Curtis '71**  
Jan. 21, 2026

**Ira E. Scott '71**  
Jan. 15, 2024

**Robert Sotzing '71**  
April 8, 2025

**Charles J. Bacigalupi '73**  
Obituary unavailable

**Rhonda Marie Weaver '74**  
Oct. 31, 2025

**Ricky Lynn Thompson '75**  
Feb. 27, 2026

**Billy L. Lane '76**  
Oct. 2, 2025

### 1980s

**Melanie Jane Perry '82**  
Dec. 23, 2023

**Delynn Paris '85**  
Nov. 27, 2025

**Marie Stuart '87**  
Obituary unavailable

### 1990s

**Robert Charles Halcombe '91**  
Feb. 3, 2026

**Eef Ji Fontanez '93**  
Nov. 8, 2025

# BEREA COLLEGE MAGAZINE

Periodical postage paid at Berea, KY and additional mailing offices.  
Send address changes to Berea College Magazine, c/o Berea  
College Alumni Association, CPO Box 2203, Berea, KY 40404.



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photo by Brooklynn Kenney

