

SPRING 2026

UNIONITE



THE UNION UNIVERSITY MAGAZINE



Matt Messer ('08)

REFINED BY FIRE

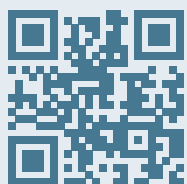
EDGE Students

FROM SERVED TO SERVING

Chelsy Crawford

MAKING SPACE FOR STUDENTS
TO ENCOUNTER GOD

DO YOU KNOW A *future Bulldog?*



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You've seen it...

Character. Curiosity. Leadership. Faith.

The kind of student who would thrive at Union.

If someone comes to mind, send them our way.

We'll take it from there.



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UNIVERSITY



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Each year at Homecoming, the university presents Meritorious Service Awards to select graduates who have distinguished themselves in a number of ways.

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Samuel W. "Dub" Oliver

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From the PRESIDENT

There's a word that has shaped Union University's story for more than two centuries: faithfulness. Not our own faithfulness, although we certainly aspire to that, but God's faithfulness to us. Again and again, in seasons of challenge and in seasons of abundance, the Lord has proven himself faithful to this institution and to the mission he has entrusted to us: to provide Christ-centered education that promotes excellence and character development in service to Church and society.

As I reflect on where Union stands today, I am filled with gratitude for that faithfulness and with deep anticipation for all that lies ahead.

Nowhere is that anticipation more visible than in the new chapel that will soon be under construction on campus. For 50 years, the G.M. Savage Memorial Chapel was a sacred gathering place where generations of students have worshiped, been challenged by Scripture and surrendered their lives to Christ. We honor that legacy.

But we recognized the need for a space that serves the generations still to come. When it opens (planned for early 2028), the steeple of the new chapel will rise above every other building on campus

— a deliberate declaration that Christ is central to everything we do here. I am deeply grateful to the many alumni and friends who have already given generously toward this \$30 million project, and I invite others to join us.

Union is also pressing forward beyond our Jackson campus. This fall, Union Uni-

versity Memphis will open on a newly acquired 36-acre campus in Cordova, Tennessee — a significantly expanded and more accessible presence in one of the state's most important cities. And plans are moving forward to launch a charter school called Union Academy, extending our educational mission in ways we look forward to sharing more about soon.

A new chapel. A new campus. A new school. Each one reflects the same conviction that has always driven us: that God-honoring education, pursued with excellence and united with our Christian faith, is among the most consequential investments we can make in people. And it's one of the most strategic ways we can influence the world, to the glory of God.

Protinus — onward. We press forward together, with confidence in our God who has been faithful before and is faithful still.

With abiding hope,



Samuel W. "Dub" Oliver, Ph.D.





Campus NEWS

Union to Launch Civil and Computer Engineering Concentrations

Union University's Department of Engineering will add concentrations in civil engineering and computer engineering beginning in the fall 2026 semester.

The Bachelor of Science in Engineering currently offers concentrations in mechanical engineering and electrical engineering.

"Our vision for the department has always been to add more concentrations," said Jeannette Russ, chair of the engineering department. "We just had to wait until the time was right, and we feel like that time is right now."

Civil engineering encompasses the design and construction of structures that

often serve the general public, such as bridges, highways and other infrastructure. Computer engineering involves the design, development and maintenance of computer hardware and systems.

Both concentrations will appeal to students interested in service and global missions, offering students a way to use engineering for a greater cause.

"We want our students to have a heart for missions," Russ said, "and we want them to see that what they do in engineering can impact the world for Christ as well as making life better for the people they serve."

Johnson Appointed Dean of Union's College of Arts and Sciences

Fred Johnson became dean of Union's College of Arts and Sciences prior to the fall 2025 semester.

Johnson comes to Union from Whitworth University in Spokane, Washington, where he had served as an English professor since 2008. He previously served as an instructor and graduate assistant at Ball State University and as an instructor at Ivy Tech State College.

"Fred Johnson brings a wealth of experience from serving not only as an excellent and well-loved faculty member but also in key leadership roles at his previous institution," Union Provost Jacob Shatzer said. "He combines vision, passion and a commitment to our mission that will enable



him to both fit in well with our strong College of Arts and Sciences and propel them forward in the coming years."

A 1996 graduate of Taylor University with majors in secondary education and English, Johnson completed both his Master of Arts and his Doctor of Philosophy in English from Ball State University.

He and his wife Molly, a veteran teacher who will be working for the South Gibson school system, have two teenage sons, Liam and Colin.

Williams to Lead Union's College of Nursing and Health Sciences

Janice Williams has been named dean of the College of Nursing and Health Sciences at Union.

Williams, a two-time Union graduate with an Associate of Science in Nursing in 1985 and a Bachelor of Science in Nursing in 1987, returns to her alma mater after serving as professor of nursing and founding program director of the Armstrong McDonald School of Nursing at College of the Ozarks in Point Lookout, Missouri, since 2005.

"Janice Williams brings to us decades of experience leading, innovating and inspiring while educating excellent nurses," Union Provost Jacob Shatzer said. "Her expertise in accreditation, as well as her

servant-hearted leadership and care for people, will have an immediate impact throughout the College of Nursing and Health Sciences as we begin this new season of leadership."

After graduating from Union, Williams completed her Master of Science in Nursing from the University of Tennessee Health Science Center in Memphis and her Doctor of Nursing Practice from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. She has earned certifications as an advanced practice adult care clinical nurse specialist, diabetes educator, parish nurse and academic nurse educator.

Janice and her husband, Richard, have four young adult children.



Union Academy to Begin in Fall 2027

Union University will launch a public charter school in the fall of 2027 after the Jackson-Madison County School Board approved the initiative during an April 28 meeting.

The proposed school, Union Academy, will offer tuition-free education and a faith-based Christian college preparatory program for students in kindergarten through 12th grade.

"Union University is deeply committed to the flourishing of Jackson and its families," Union President Samuel W. "Dub" Oliver said. "We believe Union Academy will offer a distinct and valuable choice for parents who want an education that prioritizes both Christian formation and academic excellence. We are in the early stages, but we are excited about the possibility of serving our community in this new way."

A charter school is a publicly funded school of choice that operates under a contract with a governing authority. While Union Academy will be distinct from the university, it will benefit from Union's educational resources and heritage.

Whitacre Shares Journey from ADM Price-Fixing Scandal to Faith at Union Luncheon

Mark Whitacre, once the fourth-highest ranking executive at Archer Daniels Midland, spoke at Union's Faith in the Marketplace luncheon Feb. 10, recounting his involvement in the largest price-fixing scandal in American history and the faith journey that followed.

A Cornell-trained biochemist, Whitacre rose to president of ADM's BioProducts Division before being drawn into a price-fixing scheme that had been running for 12 years. He eventually agreed to wear a wire for the FBI for three years, but the stress pushed him to attempt suicide.

Whitacre served more than eight years in prison, where a visit from Prison Fellowship founder Chuck Colson led to his conversion. He spent his sentence helping fellow inmates with education, later describing it as his first experience of servant leadership.

Since his release, Whitacre has worked in faith-based business and now serves as vice president of culture and care at Coca-Cola Consolidated. He closed with the same phrase he said shaped both his rise and his fall: "Show me your mentor, and I'll show you your future."



Campbell Earns 800th Career Victory to Close Out Stellar Coaching Career

Union University women's basketball head coach Mark Campbell ended his coaching career by reaching the rare 800-win milestone.

Campbell announced prior to the 2025-26 season that this would be his final as head coach. He will remain at Union as the director of athletics.

His 800th career win came March 13 in the first round of the 2026 NCAA Division II Women's Basketball National Championship, making him the second fastest coach in NCAA history to reach that milestone. He did so in 929 total games, just one game shy of Geno Auriemma at UCONN.

The Lady Bulldogs' season ended the next day with a loss in the NCAA South Regional, closing out

Campbell's coaching career with an overall record of 800-130.

He is one of 22 NCAA women's coaches all-time to reach 800 wins. In his 27 years at Union, Campbell went to 26 national tournaments, won five national titles and advanced to at least the national semifinals 13 times. He won 21 conference titles, 16 conference tournament titles and four region titles.

"Basketball has allowed me to be part of a family beyond my immediate family, and that is something I will always be grateful for," Campbell said. "Those 800 wins really represent every player who has worn this jersey and this amazing community here at Union University. I am thankful to the Lord for the privilege of being a coach."



Photo by Ashten Canada



Union held the 1823 Society Weekend April 16-17, with members of the classes of 1955-1976 in attendance. More than 35 alumni gathered to celebrate the induction of the class of 1976 into the 1823 Society, which consists of alumni who have celebrated 50 years or more since their graduation.

Union Pharmacy Students Score Nation's 12th Best NAPLEX Pass Rate

The Union University College of Pharmacy's class of 2025 scored a 95.8 percent pass rate for first-time attempts on the North American Pharmacist Licensure Examination, giving Union the second highest pass rate in Tennessee and 12th highest nationally.

The 95.8 percent is Union's highest pass rate in the last five years. The Tennessee average this year was 90.9 percent (up dramatically from 77 percent last year), while the national average was 86.8 percent, compared to 75.9 percent last year.

Union was also the highest performing program among evangelical Christian universities nationally.



Union Releases Williams' New Testament to Celebrate Key Anniversary

To mark the 100th anniversary of Charles B. Williams joining the Union University faculty in 1925, Union University Press has released a special edition of his translation, "The New Testament in the Language of the People," first published in 1937.

Williams (1869-1952) is one of the most prestigious biblical scholars associated

with Union. His translation became a favorite in many churches around the world and was published while he was serving as professor of Greek and ethics at Union.

Williams retired from Union in 1939 after serving for 13 years. A scholarship in his honor was established in 1986, and in 2004, his family commissioned and donated a portrait of Williams that now hangs in the Ryan Center in Jennings Hall.

Union President Samuel W. "Dub" Oliver said Williams' New Testament "has been loved by generations of faithful men and women as they study God's Word."

"We're grateful for the legacy of faithful men like Dr. Williams who loved the Bible and who wanted others to love it as well," Oliver said.

Williams' daughter, Charlotte Williams Sprawls, and her husband, Perry Sprawls, previously held the copyright but transferred it to Union because they wanted to see the translation available to future generations.

The New Testament is available for purchase at Amazon.



Butterfield: Homosexuality a 'Fruit of Unbelief' Rooted in Rejection of God

Rosaria Butterfield told Union University students Feb. 25 that her former identity as a lesbian activist was not the root of her sin, but rather the "evil fruit" of a deeper unbelief in God.



Speaking in the G.M. Savage Memorial Chapel as the featured guest for this year's Crabtree Family Life Series, the author and former Syracuse University professor shared the narrative of her radical conversion from a prominent leader in the LGBTQ movement to a Christian and a pastor's wife. She cautioned students against a "half-gospel" that offers forgiveness for guilt without the power to break the bondage of sin.

"My sin was unbelief. My sin was refusing the free offer of the gospel," Butterfield said. "Homosexuality is a sinful deed of the flesh, not a permanent feature of any Christian's life."

The three Butterfield addresses can be viewed by scanning the QR code.



Union's 4th Annual EQUIP Youth Apologetics Conference Draws More than 300

Listening carefully to the world is the way to build a connection with it, Joshua Chatraw advised a group of high school students on the Union University campus in September.

"That's called double listening," said Chatraw, the Beeson Divinity School Billy Graham Chair for Evangelism and Cultural Engagement at Samford University. "We listen to the word of God, and we listen to the world, but we listen differently. We listen to the world with critical alertness — anxious to understand it — but resolve to not necessarily believe it."

Chatraw was the keynote speaker at the fourth annual EQUIP Youth Apologetics Conference that drew more than 300 high school students to the Carl Grant Events Center. He said he desired to equip teenagers with the tools to interact with the problems afflicting the world but also their churches.

The conference, sponsored by Union's School of Theology and Missions and the Tennessee Baptist Mission Board, was designed to challenge high school students to think critically about biblical truths and provide answers for theological questions they may have.





Chapman Headlines Union's 27th Annual Scholarship Banquet

A concert by Christian recording artist Steven Curtis Chapman and a celebration of the 10-year anniversary of Union University's EDGE program highlighted the 27th annual Union Scholarship Banquet Nov. 5 at the Carl Perkins Civic Center.

FirstBank and Elite Contractors were the lead sponsors for this year's Scholarship Banquet.

"The Scholarship Banquet is always a key event at Union every year as we celebrate the generosity of donors and invest in the dreams and future success of our students," said Catherine Kwasigroh, Union's vice president for institutional advancement. "Every gift given helps transform lives, making it possible for more students to pursue their calling and education at Union. We are grateful for each donor's belief in our mission and for their friendship to Union."

The EDGE program began in 2015 to give students with intellectual and developmental disabilities the opportunity to attend Union and live on campus. The two-year certificate program focuses on developing communication, employment and independent living skills.

Since its launch, 73 students in 10 cohorts have enrolled in the EDGE program, which stands for "employment training, daily living skills, godly focus and educational enrichment."

In his concert, Chapman sang some of his songs that have become favorites among Christian music fans since his career started in the 1980s, such as "Speechless," "The Great Adventure," "I Will Be Here," "My Redeemer is Faithful and True" and "Cinderella." Chapman is the most awarded artist in Christian music history, with 60 Dove Awards, five Grammy Awards, an American Music Award and a historic 50 No. 1 singles. He has sold more than 16 million albums.

Chapman has been involved in Union's story at different points over the years, and he said he was glad to be back again.

"I'm so thankful for this university. It is very near and dear to my heart because some of my favorite people on the planet have spent time here," Chapman said. "I'm very grateful for the heartbeat of this school, this community, and for the impact that it has had in the world, is having, and is going to have — in part because of us gathered here tonight."



Classics Major at Union University to Begin in Fall 2026

Union University will launch a classics major in the fall of 2026 with tracks focusing on classical languages and classical civilizations.

"A classics major traditionally involves studying the history, the language, the art, the philosophy and the literature of ancient Greece and Rome," said Scott Huelin, professor of English and director for Union's Honors Community. "The way that we're thinking about classics, however, is not just focusing on

ancient Greece and Rome, but on ancient civilizations more broadly, especially the ones that impact not only the history of the West, but also the development of Judaism and Christianity."

The major will be housed in Union's Department of Language, Literature and Writing and will consist of 33 required hours — nine core hours and 24 additional hours that will depend upon the track selected.

For more information about the classics major, email Huelin at shuelin@uu.edu.

Union Serves Residents During 23rd Annual Campus and Community Day

For Union University junior Rebekah Ruth Basie, serving at Jackson's Birth Choice pregnancy medical clinic Oct. 21 was about more than simply lending a helping hand to a local nonprofit organization.

"As a believer, if the Lord cares about life, I should care about life," Basie said. "And not in name only."

Basie, a sociology major from Pine Mountain, Georgia, was one of more than 700 Union University students and employees who participated in the 23rd annual Campus and Community: A Day

of Remembrance and Service. Each year, Union cancels classes for the day so faculty, staff and students can serve, in gratitude for the ways the Jackson community helped Union after tornadoes hit campus in 2002, 2003 and 2008.

This year, the initiative included more than 40 projects at local schools, churches and nonprofit organizations and on the Union campus.

Basie led a group of students from Union's Life 139 chapter to help do landscaping and cleanup work at Birth Choice,

in addition to laying a new sidewalk. Caroline Lancaster, a freshman nursing major from Jackson, Tennessee, worked with her Jillz Ultimate Frisbee teammates at Jackson Central-Merry Early College High to lay pavers, rake, trim shrubs and do other general landscaping work.

Nathan Lewis, the JCM principal, said as a West Tennessee native he remembers the tornadoes that hit Union, and he is thankful for how the university has served JCM in various ways over the years.





Union EDGE Program Moves into New Home

Union University's EDGE program dedicated its new lab space Feb. 5, officially opening the renovated home for students with intellectual or developmental disabilities.

The Union EDGE program encourages increased independent skills that lead to a better quality of life and aligns with Union's mission of providing Christ-centered education. EDGE is an acronym for employment training, daily living skills, godly focus and educational enrichment.

Located in the Penick Academic Complex in the area formerly occupied by the engineering department before its move to

The Ethos Forum, the new multi-functional lab was designed specifically to serve the needs of EDGE students.

The space includes a cooking lab, which features two distinct cooking pods and a teaching station; a student lounge equipped with couches, a television and games to foster community; and a classroom space with tables and a monitor for presentations.

This year marks the 10-year anniversary of the program since its inception in 2015. The new lab was funded through a generous state grant and private donations.

A 'Mighty Evangelist': Union Mourns Loss of Alumnus Steve Gaines

Ray Van Neste was a young professor at Union when he had lunch with Steve Gaines one day. Years before, when Van Neste was an undergraduate student at Union, Gaines had been his pastor at West Jackson Baptist Church and had officiated at Van Neste's wedding with his wife Tammie.

The two had maintained a friendship and had enjoyed lunch together when Gaines was returning Van Neste to his office in Jennings Hall. Van Neste was about to get out of the car when Gaines stopped him.

"This doesn't happen very often," Gaines told him, "but I feel like the Lord's prompting me to give you whatever money I have on me. I have no idea how much that is."

So, Gaines reached into his wallet and pulled out the cash — something like a couple hundred dollars. As a father with four young kids at the time, the gift was certainly a blessing to Van Neste.

That weekend, Van Neste was preaching at a rural church some distance away from Jackson that required an overnight stay. The church didn't cover all his expenses, so that money from Gaines was enough to pay Van Neste's costs with a little left over.

"There was a genuineness to Steve," said Van Neste, dean for Union's School of Theology and Missions. "He was a man of care and a man of love."

Gaines, a 1979 Union graduate and one of the university's most prominent alumni, passed away March 20 at age 68 after a battle with cancer. He met his wife Donna ('80) at Union, and all four of the couple's children are Union graduates — Grant Gaines ('05), Lindsey Wingo ('09), Alli Hill ('11) and Bethany Golding ('15).

Gaines was a Southern Baptist pastor who served most notably at Bellevue Baptist Church in Cordova, Tennessee. He was president of the Southern Baptist Convention from 2016-2018 and was a Union trustee.

To those who knew him, Gaines was a man committed to the Bible and to evangelism — and he was a man who loved and served his alma mater.

"Steve Gaines means the world to me and to Union," said Union President Samuel W. "Dub" Oliver. "He was ever committed to advancing Union as a Christ-centered university."

"What comes immediately to my mind, in thinking about Steve Gaines, is evangelism, prayer and Scripture," Van Neste said. "He really had a strong prayer life and was regularly encouraging people to pray. He memorized large portions of Scripture. And he strongly pressed for being a gospel witness. I saw him live those out faithfully."

After serving as pastor at West Jackson and at First Baptist Church in Gardendale, Alabama, Gaines was called as senior pastor of Bellevue in 2005. He announced a kidney cancer diagnosis in 2023 and transitioned out of the Bellevue pastorate in 2025.

A native of Dyersburg, Tennessee, Gaines initially attended the University of Tennessee at Martin on a football scholarship before transferring to Union his junior year of college. George Guthrie, a longtime Union professor who now teaches at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, played football with Gaines in high school and had a lifelong friendship with Gaines.

Guthrie described Gaines as a "rough character" in high school. But then things changed.

"While he was at UT Martin, his life was transformed by interaction with some very dynamic Christians on campus," Guthrie said. "I mean, transformed."

Guthrie and Gaines both came to Union largely through the influence of Bob Agee, who was serving as interim pastor of First Baptist Church in Dyersburg at the time. During their time at Union, Gaines and Guthrie sang, preached and ministered together on campus and at a variety of locations across West Tennessee. Guthrie had been a Christian for years, but for Gaines, his time at Union marked the beginning of his walk with the Lord.

"I think we kind of both held on to the closeness of our relationship because we both continued to have a passion for Christ," Guthrie said. "I think at the heart of who Steve was — the heart of hearts — was his deep, deep love for Jesus. That was the underpinning for everything that was driving him in ministry."

Gaines was a "mighty evangelist" who worked and lived so heaven would be crowded, Oliver said.

"I never will forget his challenge to us at Union when he spoke at commencement one year and asked, 'When was the last time you led someone to Christ?'" Oliver said. "He followed that with, 'Even better, when was the last time you tried?'"

He also described Gaines as a man who was faithful in prayer and a constant encouragement. Oliver regularly received text messages from Gaines, who said he was praying for Oliver and for Union. Gaines loved his alma mater, and Bellevue recently established a scholarship at Union honoring him and Donna.

"His influence will ripple through Union for years and years," Oliver said. "We rejoice in the good gift God gave us in Steve Gaines."



Steve Gaines speaks on Scripture during chapel, March 8, 2017.



Union Breaks Ground on New \$30 Million Chapel

Pictured from left are Lane Pyron, student body president; Jeff Perkins, chairman of Union's Board of Trustees; Harry Smith, trustee and chairman of the campaign steering committee; Dub Oliver, Union president; Janet Ayers, chairman of the Ayers Foundation Trust; Ray Van Neste, vice president for university ministries; Carter Hord, architect; and Rusty Linkous, general contractor.

Union University ceremonially broke ground April 10 on a new \$30 million chapel, a project described as the campus capstone that will serve as a visible testimony of the institution's Christ-centered mission for generations to come.

The freestanding facility, located on the eastern edge of the Jackson campus, will be clearly visible from Highway 45 Bypass. Its design features a steeple that will rise above every other building on campus, symbolizing the university's commitment to keeping Christ at the forefront of its work.

Union President Samuel W. "Dub" Oliver opened the ceremony by citing Psalm 95:6 and expressing the university's desire to create a space dedicated solely to the worship of God.

"This chapel will testify to our deepest longings, to our eternal aspirations and to our commitment to future gener-

ations," Oliver said. "It will represent to all that the worship of God is the beginning and end of all learning and knowledge. It will also be a symbol of Union's determination to consecrate all of our days to the Lord Jesus Christ."

The project is a central priority of "Union 200: The Bicentennial Campaign." Jeff Perkins, chairman of the Union Board of Trustees, shared that the original campaign goal was \$60 million, but the Board felt led to increase it to \$80 million to include the new chapel.

"The challenge we looked forward to was how we would trust God for the unimaginable," Perkins said. "If he wanted us to build a new chapel, we knew he would provide. And here we are today, standing on the threshold of a new era in Union's history."

The new facility will replace the G.M. Savage Memorial Chapel, which has

served the campus since 1975. Construction of the new structure was scheduled to begin in late May. Plans were for the pipe organ to be disassembled, stored and reassembled in the new chapel.

The Savage Chapel has served Union well, Perkins said.

"And now we come to God to ask for the blessing upon this new chapel, one that we pray will stand for decades to come," Perkins said. "With these walls that are soon to be constructed, we pray that they will be filled with the resounding truth of God's sovereignty, his salvation and his love. And may we have hearts of thankfulness that recognize his mighty hand of provision."

Lane Pyron, Union's student body president, spoke on behalf of the students who will benefit from the new facility.

"This chapel will be a sacred space where we gather to worship, to be chal-



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THE BICENTENNIAL CAMPAIGN

**Give to the
new chapel**



lenced, to confess, to celebrate and to be sent out,” Pyron said. “It will be a place where God shapes hearts and calls students into lives of service to church and society. What we celebrate here is not just the start of construction. It is the visible testimony of God’s faithfulness and the shared commitment of this community to be devoted to Christ-centered education.”

Oliver thanked representatives from Hord Architects of Memphis who designed

the building, which will include four columns at the entrance representing Union’s core values: excellence-driven, Christ-centered, people-focused and future-directed. The Union president also recognized Linkous Construction, which will serve as the project’s contractor.

Plans are for Union to dedicate the new chapel in January 2028.

To date, donors have given more than \$15 million toward the \$30 million project

cost. Naming opportunities remain available, and contributions can be made online.

“We’re grateful to you and to so many others whose prayers and other support continue to advance our mission to provide Christ-centered education that promotes excellence and character development in service to church and society,” Oliver said during the groundbreaking ceremony. “What an exciting day to be part of the Union family.”



John Foubert, Jay Beavers and Katie Yeaglin

Beavers, Foubert, Yeaglin Honored at 2026 Awards Day

Union University presented more than 80 awards to students, faculty and staff April 17 at the annual Awards Day chapel service.

The Carla D. Sanderson Faculty of the Year Award went to Jay Beavers, associate professor of English.

Katie Yeaglin, administrative assistant to the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, received the Gary L. Carter Staff of the Year Award.

John Foubert, professor of education, received the R. Keith Absher Faculty Researcher of the Year Award, which recognizes a full-time faculty member who has made significant and sustained scholarly contributions to his or her discipline and the academy.

A full listing of award recipients is available by scanning the QR code.





23rd Annual Scholarship Symposium Showcases Student Research

Union University held its 23rd annual Scholarship Symposium March 31, bringing undergraduate and graduate students to the Carl Grant Events Center and classrooms across campus to present collaborative research projects completed during the academic year.

"The Scholarship Symposium allows students to show the results of their hard work and gives them experience in presenting their research," said Suzanne Barham, academic affairs and accreditation specialist and symposium coordinator. "Since each of the research projects involves a faculty adviser, it allows faculty and students to work together on research projects, which results in more hands-on learning."

Sponsored by the Union University Research Program, the Scholarship Symposium is designed to highlight the academic excellence students achieve throughout their time at Union. This year, 82 posters were displayed in the Grant Center and 41 projects presented orally in various academic spaces. Barham noted that there was a significant increase in the number of poster presentations from the previous year.

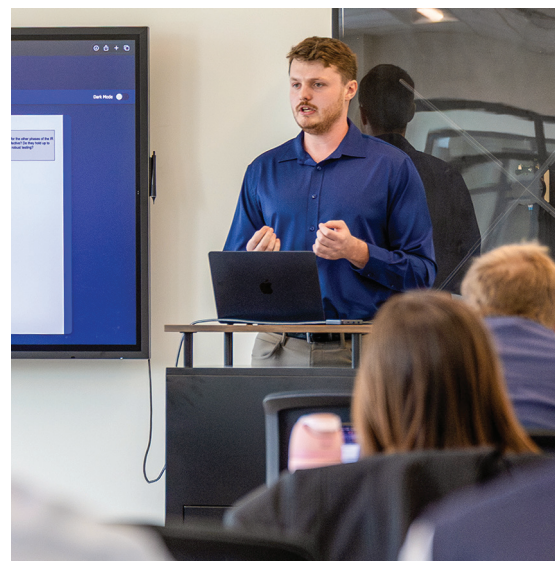
"I was very excited to share my project, particularly in poster format," said

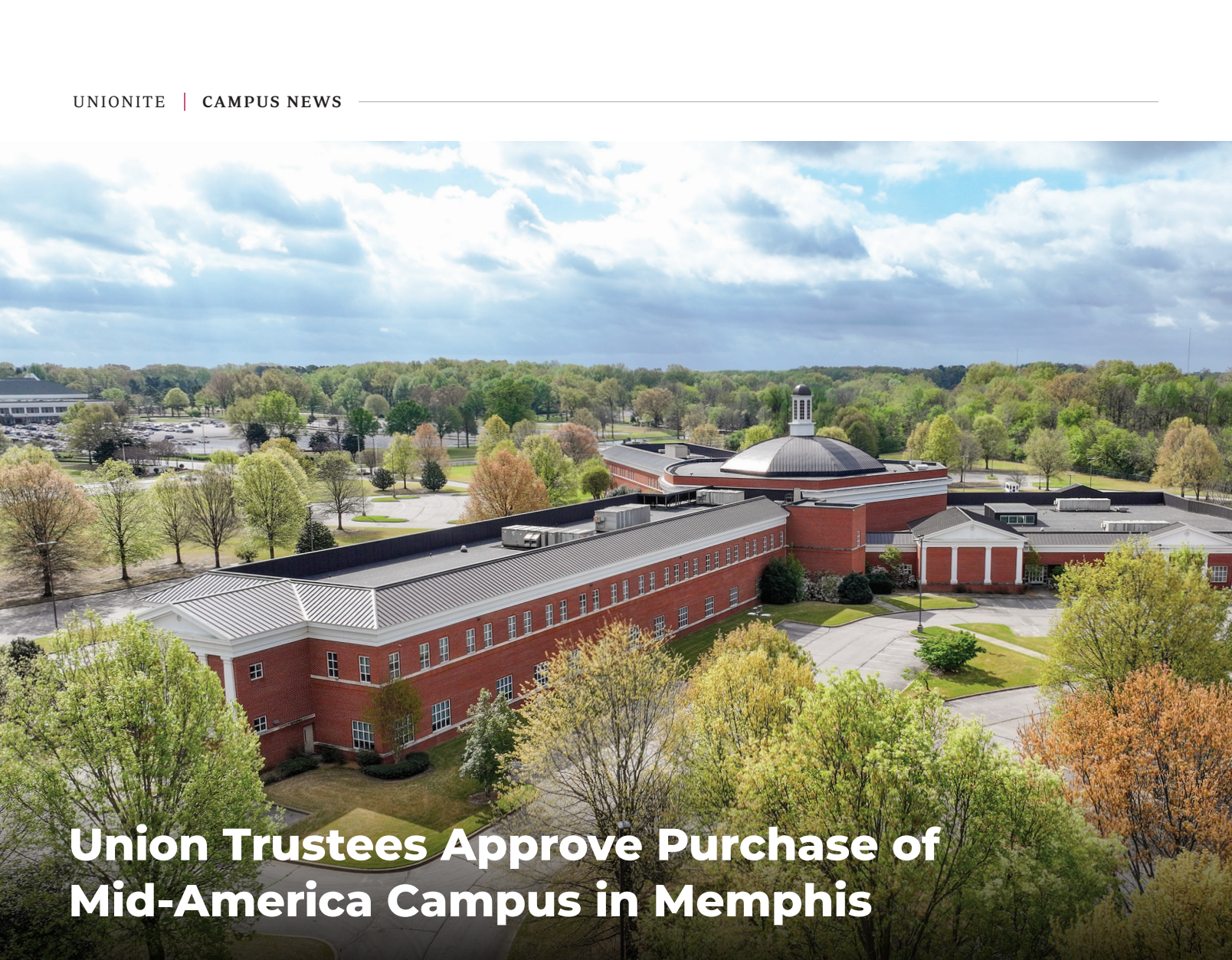
Abby Thomas, a senior art major with an emphasis in graphic design. "I think a lot of what I have to say is more conversational. ... The poster part of the symposium is such a cool event because you are able to get face-to-face information from the students themselves, rather than trying to delve into such a variety of topics yourself."

This year's Scholarship Symposium showcased research across 11 major disciplines, from artistic and literary endeavors such as Thomas' project, "A Judgment of Books and Covers," to astrophysics research done by senior physics and history double major Timothy White.

"While my project is pretty far on the niche side, I hope that it will interest people in astrophysics as well as help us better understand how large-scale celestial events work and how that might affect our own galaxy," White said.

With projects related to creating affordable alternative diabetes medication to emphasizing the importance of sentiment and empathy in business to crafting a full picture book being sold after the event, the Scholarship Symposium gives these students the opportunity to contribute unique, personal projects to a school-wide collection of knowledge.





Union Trustees Approve Purchase of Mid-America Campus in Memphis

Union University acquired the Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary property on Appling Road in Cordova, Tennessee, after university trustees in their Dec. 5 meeting authorized the purchase.

The university plans to sell its Germantown property at 2745 Hacks Cross Road and move its operations from that facility, including the Memphis College of Urban and Theological Studies, to the new location, which will be named Union University Memphis.

"This property next to Bellevue Baptist Church gives Union a much more prominent location in Memphis that is easily accessible from Interstate 40 and much more visible than our current Germantown campus," said Jeff Perkins, chairman of Union's Board of Trustees. "It also gives us an opportunity to expand our

programs and try new initiatives in the Memphis market."

The current Germantown campus is 14 acres and about 39,000 square feet. The Mid-America Seminary property is 36 acres and 138,000 square feet. Union currently offers in-person programs in nursing, social work and Christian studies at Union University Germantown. Union President Samuel W. "Dub" Oliver said university administrators are in the process of evaluating programming options for the new campus to use the location as fully as possible.

The Mid-America property became available when the school moved to a new location in Arlington. Union took possession of the property in January and plans for the new campus to open in the fall semester of 2026.





Union faculty and staff participated in a work day at the new Union University Memphis campus in April.

Green Urges Courage and Conviction in Preserving Baptist and Evangelical Identity

Baptist institutions' health and faithfulness depends on leaders willing to uphold both their Baptist identity and broader evangelical convictions, even when culture pushes back, argued Brad Green, professor of theological studies at Union.

Green made that case March 19 in Union's annual David and Lanese Dockery Lectures on Baptist Thought and Heritage, weaving personal memoir with intellectual history to trace forces shaping Baptist higher education over the past half-century.

Among key figures Green highlighted was theologian Carl F.H. Henry, widely

regarded as the dean of 20th-century evangelical theology, describing him as "an institution man, an institution builder" whose Christian worldview thinking became foundational to institutions like Union.

Green also reflected on the influence of David S. Dockery, whose commitment to biblical inerrancy and Christian worldview thinking shaped Green's own convictions and later Union's mission when Dockery became president in 1996.

"We need courageous leaders who can lovingly, kindly, firmly say, here we stand, and let's move forward," Green said.



Stewart Affirms Bible's Reliability at 14th Annual Bible Conference

Christians have no reason to worry about the accuracy or preservation of New Testament texts, argued Robert Stewart at the Ryan Center's 14th annual Bible Conference, held March 20-21 at Union University.

"The New Testament is the most evidenced ancient book of all time," said Stewart, professor emeritus of philosophy and theology at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and the 2026 plenary speaker.

This year's conference, entitled "Contending Earnestly: Becoming Faithful Stewards of the Word of God," centered on apologetics, with sessions on biblical archaeology, defending Scripture on social media, textual criticism and foundational gospel truths.

In a plenary session, Stewart guided attendees through evidence-based manuscript analysis demonstrating the trustworthiness of biblical texts, describing how most manuscript variants are simple spelling or synonym discrepancies, and how even more significant differences can be explained when analyzing thousands of manuscript copies together.

"We should not shy away from these texts," Stewart said, urging pastors to teach their congregations about variants before they encounter skeptical outside sources. "You should always teach."



Janney Challenges Union Community to Rethink Civil War History

Think of Appomattox as a starting place rather than an ending point, Caroline Janney told Union University students and Jackson community members Oct. 6 in the G.M. Savage Memorial Chapel.

Janney, the John L. Nau III Professor of the American Civil War at the University of Virginia, spoke as the 28th annual Carls-Schwerdfeger Lecture Series speaker, giving two addresses on Civil War memory and the aftermath of Robert E. Lee's surrender to U.S. Grant.

During the evening lecture, Janney debunked common misconceptions about

the Confederate surrender, clarifying that the Appomattox agreement was not a peace treaty but a military order paroling Lee's soldiers as captured prisoners of war. She detailed the difficult and often violent journeys Confederate soldiers made homeward, and the hardships faced by newly freed slaves.

Janney concluded by challenging her audience to see Appomattox not as a clean ending but as the beginning of unresolved legal, social and political questions that "would play out in the decades, and perhaps even centuries, to come."

PICTURE THIS

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506 receive degrees at Union's 201st commencement



Patrick Basie first learned about Union University through Impact 360 and found that his time as a Union student shaped both his engineering career and his faith.

On May 2, Basie was among 506 graduates who received their degrees during two ceremonies on the Great Lawn.

Basie, of Pine Mountain, Georgia, earned his degree in engineering with an electrical concentration and will join the team at Nidec Leroy-Somer in Lexington, Tennessee. A member of the Honors Community, he credited both faculty investment and Christian community as crucial components of his time at Union.

"The Honors professors have been an integral part of my spiritual formation," he said.

As part of the commencement ceremony, Amy De Groot, of Sioux Center, Iowa, who double majored in public relations and history, received the Tigrett Medal, which is awarded to an outstanding senior in each graduating class.

Andrew Walker, dean-elect of the School of Theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, delivered the com-

mencement address. Walker, who also serves as associate professor of Christian ethics and public theology at SBTs and is a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, challenged graduates to resist what he called the "mythology of disruption" — the cultural pressure to build platforms, chase significance and define success by visibility and accomplishments.

Instead, Walker called graduates to a life of ordinary faithfulness, drawing on 1 Timothy 6:6 — "Godliness with contentment is great gain" — as his central text.

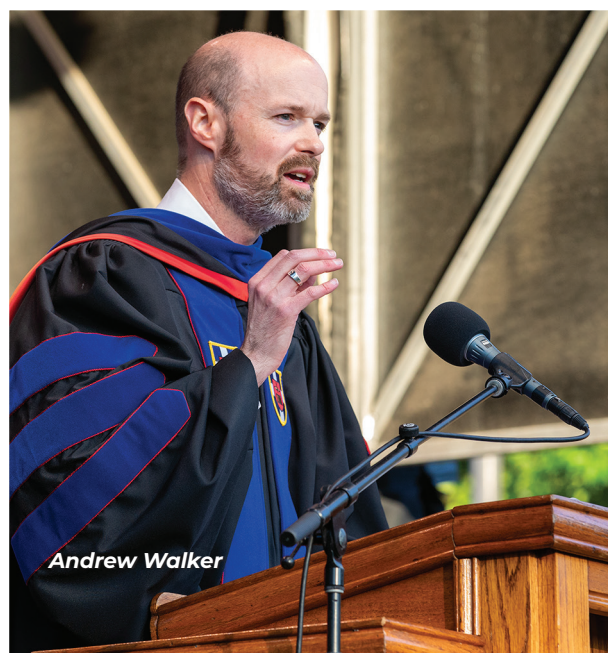
"The Christian life is not a disruption strategy," Walker said. "The gospel does not primarily call you to change the world. It calls us to be faithful in the world. And those are not necessarily the same thing."

Walker described the ancient Christian vision of a good human life: work done honestly and with excellence, marriages built with patience, children raised

in faith, neighbors served without recognition and churches tended by people who understood that slow work is lasting work. He called that vision "stubbornly ordinary" but also the most demanding and rewarding he had ever encountered.

"You cannot change the culture," he told graduates. "But you can change the culture of your dinner table."

Walker pushed back on the idea that the church is immune from its own version of



Andrew Walker



Amy De Groot was awarded the 2026 Tigrett Medal.

this ambition culture, acknowledging his own culpability before pressing graduates toward commitment to marriage, to a local church, to a city and to neighbors known by name.

“God will ask whether we were faithful, not whether we were elite,” he said. “That is your inheritance. Go claim it.”

For Brianna Correia, faithfulness and perseverance marked her entire journey through Union’s pharmacy program. Correia, who hails from Bermuda, found Union while researching colleges and chose to attend because of its Christ-centered commitment and strong academics.

“I appreciated the personal attention from professors and the opportunities to grow academically and spiritually,” she said.

One professor in particular, Jennifer Byrd, proved to be a steady source of encouragement throughout Correia’s time at Union.

“She believed in me even when I struggled to do that myself,” Correia said. “I can honestly say I wouldn’t have made it through this program the same way without her.”

After graduation, Correia will begin a residency at the University of Tennessee Medical Center in Knoxville. She carries with her a conviction shaped by the people around her at Union.

“They’ve not only helped me become a better student and future pharmacist, but they’ve also shown me the importance of pouring into others,” she said. “That’s something I’ll carry with me into the next chapter — both professionally and personally.”

The theme of faithful persistence also resonated with Wayne Lauderdale Jr. of Memphis, Tennessee, who earned his Bachelor of Science in Organizational Leadership through Union’s School of Adult and Professional Studies.

Lauderdale spent 14 years building his trucking business before realizing something was missing. Grateful for what his career had provided his family, he set out to earn his college degree — a pursuit made

possible by Union’s BSOL program, which allowed him to pursue his education without stepping away from work or family.

He found that Union’s professors actively helped him apply what he was learning to strengthen and grow his business.

“The fact that Union aligns with my faith and values made the choice even more meaningful,” Lauderdale said. “It truly feels like the place God intended for me to grow academically, spiritually and professionally.”

Lauderdale’s graduation does not mark an ending. He is already enrolled in Union’s Master of Business Administration program and will continue his education at the same institution where he found his footing.

REFINED BY *Fire*

by Jenny White





Matt Messer decided the best way to save his marriage and reputation was to look for a way out of his business. What started as a hobby building drum smokers in his basement had grown into an uncontrollable wildfire that had begun to singe the edges of his most important relationships.

What Messer didn't know at the time was that God would use the very thing threatening to undo him to reshape his calling and restore what mattered most.

Messer, a 2008 Union graduate, had often dreamed of starting a business. Over the years, he had held onto his love of cooking, smoking and all things barbecue.

When he shared the idea of starting a catering business with his wife Chelsie, who was often hesitant when he pitched random business ideas, she was on board. They had always enjoyed catering together, and the business had potential.

Feature **STORIES**

Before 2020, Messer had built Cotton Gin Smokers into a small business that he ran as a hobby alongside his work with Life Action Ministries. As a self-funded ministry worker, the business was a helpful addition to their finances.

But when the COVID-19 pandemic brought his role at LAM to an abrupt halt, Cotton Gin Smokers caught fire and began to rapidly grow.

Back in his Texas high school shop class, most of Messer's classmates gravitated toward ranch and cattle projects by building and repairing pens and fences. Messer, the son of a Southern Baptist pastor, didn't have cattle to manage or fences to repair. Instead, he decided to build something he could use.

After gathering a worn boat trailer from a neighbor and a set of donated pipes, Messer hauled everything to school and got to work building a smoker. It was the first smoker anyone had ever built in shop class, and he had no way of knowing that the sparks flying from that project would follow him for the rest of his life.

Because of the COVID-19 shutdown, Messer's calendar, once packed, went blank. He had to cancel a whole season of events for his LAM team. Disheartened and confused by the drastic change, Messer found himself at home with no events on his calendar, no team to lead and a basement full of tools.

"I called my boss and said, look, I'm just going to do some stuff. I've got to keep myself busy," he said.

So he went to the basement.

Messer set a modest goal that first year — build one smoker a month. He built 26. The hobby was becoming something else entirely.

A picture posted on social media pulled in an order, then another and another. Soon, Messer moved out of his basement and began recruiting friends and family to help him with the business. They outgrew their space three times in a matter of months.

The quick business growth left Messer scrambling to take care of basic business needs.

"I was just surviving from one sale to the next and robbing Peter to pay Paul, not knowing how I would pay my employees from week to week or even keep the power on," he said.

There were times when Messer and his employees would be working in the shop and the power would go out. Embarrassed because he hadn't paid the bill, Messer would try to play off what was really happening and act like he didn't know why the electricity was suddenly off. But it all pointed back to him.

"I couldn't keep my head above water," Messer said.

The stress didn't stay at the shop. Messer's family often paid the price for this growth as work pressures followed him home.





Parenting three young children, balancing a marriage and trying to manage the roller coaster of running a business left Messer facing a battle in every direction.

"I always felt like I was driving home to World War Three," he said. "I've got to get my armor on, get my arrow sharpened and be ready for battle. It was me against everybody."

Messer became an angry husband and father, grew distant and began making decisions that pushed Chelsie further away.

Messer admits that there were times when he would find reasons to stay late so he didn't have to face the chaos at home. Soon, Chelsie grew weary of his long hours and began to resent the business.

contrast to the young man who had once buried himself in Scripture at Union and watched God show up in dorm rooms and tornado wreckage.

Messer had transferred to Union, where his younger brother Tim was already enrolled, after spending two years on a road crew with LAM and two years at a local community college.

Union pushed him in ways he hadn't anticipated. He studied Scripture, wrestled with theology and found his faith taking on new depth and weight.

"It helped my roots grow deeper," he said.

Then in 2007, their father died. The brothers who had once jostled for their own space on campus now leaned into

each other. Messer noticed that grief moved differently through Tim, who began pulling away from the church. Messer didn't push — he just kept showing up at Tim's door, kept extending the same invitation to come to church, week after week.

Tim usually said no. Then one Sunday, he said yes. Mostly, he admits, to get his brother off his back.

"It was really just to pacify him," Tim said. "But God used that particular day to wrestle with me and not let me keep wandering away."

Messer's persistence and intentional investment in Tim's life helped draw him into truly following the Lord, he said.

Meanwhile, the Union community wrapped loving arms around both of them. Lambda Chi Alpha brothers packed into their dorm rooms, wept with them and refused to leave them alone in their grief. Dean Kimberly Thornbury quietly arranged for 13 friends to make the drive from Jackson all the way

to Amarillo for the funeral. The university extended generous financial aid so both brothers could finish their degrees.

Less than a year later, the 2008 tornado ripped through campus.

"Both times I was faced with a literal need for a comforting, healing savior," Messer said. "Getting to see God move in the way he did through both of those situations impacted me for the rest of my life."

After graduating, Messer channeled everything into ministry, first as a bi-vocational youth pastor in Clifton, Tennessee, then back with LAM, traveling the country and sitting with pastors who carried burdens much like his father once had.

"After seeing some of the hurt and pain that he dealt with and getting to be there for some of those pastors and hearing their stories, it really did mean a lot to me to be able to serve in that way," Messer said.

It was during those years that he met Chelsie Rademaker, who would become his wife.

For a while, life moved the way Messer had always imagined it would. He and Chelsie built a life and family together, and ministry occupied much of his time. He assumed he'd spend his life in full-time ministry.

Although 2020 brought a temporary halt to his routine, Messer would step away from LAM the following year and focus on building Cotton Gin Smokers.

Over the next couple of years, rapid growth caused manufacturing lead times to grow longer, and over time, customers began to express their frustrations on social media.

Since he wasn't a businessman by nature or training, Messer admits that he needed more people around him who could point him in the right direction and help him make smart business decisions.



They sought counseling, but Messer knew the truth: he wasn't living according to the faith on which he had built his life.

It was a version of himself he barely recognized and one that stood in sharp

"God
is a God
who redeems.
He loves
to redeem
things we've
messed up."



The Messer brothers — Tim and Matt.

The stress of it all settled on Messer, and he wore it like a tattered coat. Disconnected and frustrated at home, his unhappiness was visible. To add to the family complexities, Chelsie decided to enroll in nursing school so she could focus on something other than the smoker business, which had begun to feel like a weight the whole family was carrying.

With lives going in different directions, Messer turned his attention to a relationship at work and made choices that nearly broke his marriage.

"There was a lot of darkness in our home," Messer said. "Not a lot of joy, not a lot of peace."

During his half-hearted counseling attendance, he told Chelsie that he didn't know if he wanted to work on their marriage any longer.

Looking back, Messer sees that he and Chelsie weren't on the same team.

"I had done so much to destroy my reputation, my marriage, my family and my business," Messer said.

One night, after Chelsie quietly confronted him, he blew up and left the house in anger.

By the time he returned, she was asleep on the couch with her Bible open beside her. He stood there in the silence, and for the first time, he realized the gravity of his actions.

"I knew what I had done was wrong," Messer said. "God began to convict me. He began to break me down and rebuild me."

Repentant and broken, Messer relented and let God do what only he could do: redeem.

Many difficult months followed. He and Chelsie returned to counseling. He re-

committed to his role as a husband and father, and he began looking for a way out of his business.

Messer reached out to Aaron Norris, of Norris Thermal Technologies, whom he knew from the barbecue competition world. Norris owned two companies, so Messer pitched him the idea of buying Cotton Gin Smokers.

Instead, Norris offered him a second chance.

Norris saw the strengths Messer brought to business and saw his heart for people.

Although Messer was honest about the fires he had walked through, Norris could see his faith in Jesus.

In January 2025, Messer took the opportunity to partner with Norris. Messer now helps manage Cotton Gin Smokers and Norris' Tribal Fire Grill while Norris helps manufacture the smokers. The arrangement has changed more than just the business structure.

Working alongside fellow believers shifted the atmosphere in ways Messer hadn't anticipated. The stress that once followed him home began to lift.

"It's a whole new setting," Chelsie said. "His business is flourishing again, and there's not the weight or pressure that was there."

Messer sees the change as part of a larger work God has been doing in his life.

"Each chapter of life has been one that he has used to refine, mold and sanctify me," Messer said. "God's not done with me. I've got to keep moving forward."

That forward movement has shown up in tangible ways, with a stronger family, a deeper faith and a growing business. Today, Messer lives in Niles, Michigan, where he and Chelsie are raising their three children. What once felt like a fire that could consume everything has, in time, become the very thing God used to refine his life and rebuild it by grace.

"God is a God who redeems," he said. "He loves to redeem things we've messed up."



PERU



CAOS
GRANÍTICO
(CANTERAS)



From Served to Serving: Union EDGE Students Take Program's First Missions Trip

by Tim Ellsworth

Lindsay Davis saw the young Peruvian man and knew there was an instant connection.

"Hey, he has Down syndrome, just like me," Lindsay said before she went over and engaged with him, chatting and giving him a hug.

What Lindsay didn't know was the young man's mother had died 12 years before. His sister, speaking through a translator, said he hadn't spoken again since her death. He was almost entirely disengaged with the world around him.

But with Lindsay, he met someone who also had Down syndrome. He recognized the similarities between them. And for the first time in years, the young man started trying to speak.

"Lindsay was just being herself and going and saying hi," said Rebecca Holloway, director of Union's EDGE program. "To see the connection that they were making with one another was really, really sweet."

That was just one meaningful encounter on a 2025 summer mission trip that Lindsay and other students from Union's EDGE program took to Peru. Partnering with the organization Joni and Friends — founded by Joni Eareckson Tada — and with students from the physical therapy program at Hardin-Simmons University, Union's EDGE students helped fit and deliver wheelchairs to people with physical disabilities.

While Union EDGE students are used to being served in various ways by the Union community, this trip to Peru gave them an opportunity to be the servants.

"Just because you have a disability doesn't mean that your life won't have purpose or that you won't be able to do things," Holloway said. "I think we got to see Union EDGE students being meaningfully included in a way that maybe they had never been before. They saw how their unique situations, their gifts and their talents uniquely qualified them for such a time as this."

Launched a decade ago, the EDGE program for students with intellectual or developmental disabilities encourages increased independent skills that lead to a better quality of life. EDGE is an acronym for employment training, daily living skills, godly focus and educational enrichment.

The Union contingent to Peru consisted of five Union EDGE students, five traditional undergraduates who serve as EDGE mentors, along with Holloway and her husband Trenton, who serves as assistant director of student government and Greek life at Union.

Union personnel helped measure patients and select wheelchairs that fit them. They made cushions, armrests and footrests to customize the wheelchairs to the needs of the individuals. Most of the people they served in Peru had cerebral palsy, had suffered a stroke or had been in an accident causing a spinal cord injury.

"It was incredible to watch our students connect with the individuals we were serving, because they had varied levels of disability," said Anna Fultz, assistant director for student support in the EDGE program. "Our students are used to being the ones with the disability and getting the extra support. Seeing other people who have a lot more struggle in their lives than they do shifted their perspective."

For EDGE student Ellie Brogdon, the trip provided an opportunity to "get out of my comfort zone," she said.

Brogdon performed a variety of tasks during the week. She learned how to help transfer people from one wheelchair to another. She prayed for those the team was serving. She retrieved wheelchairs or cushions when needed.

She remembers one mother in particular whose son was paralyzed. The mother regularly had to carry her son up multiple flights of stairs to get to their home.

That level of sacrifice opened her eyes to the kinds of sacrifices her parents had made for her, to help her succeed, she said. And when the boy got his wheelchair, the mom began crying.

"That little thing just brought a glimpse of hope," Brogdon said. "This is a whole new opportunity to do new things and a little weight lifted for them."

Brogdon has an intellectual disability that she struggled with for years during school. She was behind her peers academically. No matter how hard she worked, no matter how many hours she spent at the table trying to focus on her studies, things never clicked.

Her senior year, she heard all her friends talking about where they were going to college. She felt excluded.

"It was really hard to see the goodness in it," she said. "All I saw was the negativity. I'm never going to go to college. I'm never going to be able to get the career that I wanted."





But then she heard about Union's EDGE program through her brother Lucas, who had attended Union. She applied and enrolled and found it to be the perfect fit for her.

"It's helped me grow and learn to accept myself," she said. "We're uniquely made, and there's no mistakes."

Chaselyn Dabbs, an exercise science major from Linden, Tennessee, graduated in May 2026 and served as an EDGE mentor during her time at Union. The trip to Peru gave her a glimpse of how she could use physical therapy in a missions setting.

"We have a view of the special needs population and those with disabilities, but to actually go to a different country to see how it affects them differently — with fewer resources — touched me on a

lot of different levels," she said. "The Lord sees them, too, and he cares for them. It might not look exactly the way it does here, but he's still providing for them."

Dabbs said she was encouraged to see how Union's EDGE students responded. For many of them, it was their first missions experience. For some, it was their first time out of the country. It proved to be a huge step in their faith and in their personal development, she said.

"It's important to remember that no matter your disability or your special needs, the Lord can use you in that," she said.

At the end of their trip, the EDGE students hiked to Machu Picchu — a high altitude, physically demanding hike that challenged the entire team. The students all encouraged one another and helped each other to complete the strenuous trek.

"It was one of the toughest things I have ever done," Brogdon said. "It's so high. You're fighting the altitude. You're pushing yourself. And I just loved how encouraging people were to each other on the team."

"It was a perfect culmination of the trip and such a picture of how we do these experiences," Holloway said. "We do these things hand-in-hand with one another. We couldn't do it on our own. We do it together, and we do it for one another and for the glory of God, ultimately."

Holloway teaches her EDGE students that God has created them a specific way for a plan and a purpose. They are part of the kingdom of God, and they have important roles to play. The entire experience in Peru was full-circle moment where EDGE students could see how God could use them to serve and bless others.

Whether it was Brogdon spending 45 minutes throwing a ball to a boy who had almost no range of motion or another EDGE student, Hope Hixson, kneeling beside a blind boy and singing "Jesus Loves Me" to him, the missions experience gave students an opportunity to use their God-given gifts.

"Being missionally minded is not exclusive to being in Peru, but it's the way that we want to live our lives," Holloway said. "We have a gospel calling. We want to be making a kingdom impact, and our students with intellectual and developmental disabilities are not excluded from that. They absolutely have a meaningful role to play in the body of Christ."



Fall 2026 Alumni Events



Birmingham Alumni Brunch

August 22 | Birmingham, AL
Birmingham Zoo
10:00-11:30 AM

Family Weekend

September 26
Class Reunions for:
2025, 2021, 2016, 2006

Homecoming Prayer Breakfast

October 29
Carl Grant Events Center
6:45-7:45 AM

Alumni Meritorious Service Awards

October 30
Carl Grant Events Center
6:00 PM

Alumni & Friends Dinner

November 17 | Sevierville, TN
5:00-7:00 PM
Wilderness at the Smokies

Scholarship Banquet

December 1
Carl Perkins Civic Center



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Beyond the Degree:

*For Clayton and
McKinley Martin,
Union Provided
a Calling*

by Jenny White

When Clayton and McKinley Martin graduated from Union in 2016, they walked away with more than degrees. They walked away with a calling and a vision that would take them around the world.

Clayton, who came to Union on a soccer scholarship and majored in sports management, had his trajectory forever changed during a 2014 mission trip to Haiti. It was there that God called him to ministry and planted the seed for what would become Among the Nations, a missions nonprofit he now leads as founder and CEO. He also serves as lead pastor of the Springville Campus of Faith Community Fellowship in Springville, Alabama.

McKinley's life as a student-athlete took an unexpected turn when an injury ended her softball career and her scholarship. But she chose to stay because Union had become home.

"From the moment I stepped on campus, there was a genuine sense of joy, purpose and light that's hard to describe but easy to feel," she said.

After graduating with her elementary education degree, she returned home to teach second grade at the very school she attended growing up. She also serves alongside Clayton in ministry and as co-founder of Among the Nations.

Together, they are raising three daughters and building a family centered on faith and the Great Commission — something they both credit, in large part, to their time at Union.

"My life would look drastically different if Union wasn't a part of our story," Clayton said. "I'm grateful for the degree, but even more than that, I'm grateful for meeting my wife, the community, the deep care for people and the experiences where my faith grew beyond my own borders."

McKinley echoes that sentiment. "I came in as a freshman with a weak faith, but through friendships, leadership on campus and being connected to a local church, my faith became my own," she said. "Union created an environment where I was constantly encouraged and

challenged to grow, and those years were truly foundational for who I am today."

Clayton and McKinley have simple but sincere advice for those considering Union. "If you're looking for a place where you'll be challenged academically, grow spiritually and be surrounded by people who truly care about you," McKinley said, "Union is that place. Lean in, and it can truly shape the trajectory of your life."

Clayton's encouragement is more direct: "If the Lord is leading you here, go for it. He will provide."

What began on Union's campus in classrooms, on athletic fields and through experiences that stretched their faith has grown into a shared life and a mission that spans the globe.

Learn more
about the work of
Among the Nations



FULL SPEED A

When the USS John F. Kennedy (CVN-79) completed its first-ever builder's trials off the coast of Virginia, A.J. Zeak ('24) was on board.

Builder's trials mark the first time a carrier tests its systems at sea without relying on shipyard equipment. During the weeklong milestone, the ship underwent high-speed turns, "crash backs," shifting from full speed ahead to full reverse, and extensive systems testing ahead of its delivery to the U.S. Navy.

Zeak, two years into his role at Newport News Shipbuilding, serves on a team responsible for electrical components within the propulsion plant, specifically automation systems that monitor plant conditions and reduce the number of sailors required to operate the ship. During sea trials, he acted as an on-call representative supporting the Navy with troubleshooting across electrical, mechanical, structural and software systems.

"As an engineer," Zeak said, "seeing something you work on constantly and finally seeing it operate as designed is an amazing feeling."

Zeak credits Union's distinctive engineering curriculum, which gave him depth in both electrical and mechanical



HEAD

Union Engineer Takes Part in Historic Aircraft Carrier Trials

by Jenny White

concentrations, as a direct advantage on the job. When structural or mechanical issues occurred, he was ready to face the challenge.

"It not only set me up for success," Zeak said, "but helped us solve these problems at a quicker pace. For that, I will be forever grateful to be an alumnus of Union."

Zeak spent eight days at sea living aboard the carrier in a bunk, using communal spaces and eating meals in the mess hall alongside other shipbuilders and sailors.

The John F. Kennedy is the second Ford-class aircraft carrier and is slated for delivery to the Navy in 2027 following preliminary acceptance and continued testing. Zeak said he would not trade the path that brought him here.

"I am so happy I chose Union for my degree," he said. "It was a great experience."

Beyond the career milestones, Zeak reflects on the role his faith has played throughout the journey.

"With Union, I felt God be present in the midst, and without his help, I couldn't be in the place where I am today," he said. "I am grateful for his will and guidance in leading me to Union, and hopefully he can use me to further impact others to advance his divine will."



Making Sp



When you first meet Chelsy Crawford, you'll notice her unassuming temperament and her easy, gentle spirit. She has a presence that invites conversation, welcomes story and offers a safe place for honesty.

Crawford joined Union in September 2024 to spearhead the spiritual direction arm of Union's counseling services.

Although it sounds like a high-minded offering, Crawford is quick to explain that the goal of spiritual direction counseling is simply to help students learn the practice of listening and discerning the movement of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

While spiritual direction shares common ground with counseling, mentoring and pastoral care, Crawford is careful to distinguish it. Where those offerings often involve guidance or advice, spiritual direction's primary offering is what the field calls "listening hospitality" — creating space for a student to hear what God might already be saying.

After her husband, Jason, was hired as a professor of English in 2011, they lived on campus for five years as part of the Faculty-in-Residence program. While on campus, Crawford noticed that although students came to Union for its Christian atmosphere, they were often struggling to nurture their relationship with the Lord or hear what the Lord might be telling them.

The one thing that students were desperate to grow, their spiritual life, was pushed to the side because of the difficulty of balancing coursework and social lives.

"Lots of things pull their attention," Crawford said. "I've noticed that students can kind of miss out on the main thing, which is actually cultivating their relationship with the Lord and experiencing his presence."

ace

Chelsy Crawford Helps Union Students Slow Down and Hear from God

by Jenny White



Chelsy Crawford and Tamarin Huelin, director for counseling services.



Crawford wondered if there were a way to help students develop and keep that communication line open with the Lord, so she began praying to that end.

She sensed a calling to the ministry she had seen modeled by her own mom, who had walked alongside students in their spiritual development.

That prompting led to her offering a space for students to listen and be mindful in a world that's busy and distracting.

"The heart of spiritual direction is creating a space to pay attention to where God's spirit is working in your life," Crawford explained. "When you take time to really pay attention, it's amazing how many places God actually shows up in your life."

Crawford typically meets with students one or two times a month to discuss

a wide range of topics. Life transitions, relationships, significant decisions and spiritual growth tend to drive conversations, and instead of giving advice, Crawford asks questions and creates space for students to consider the main question: "Where is God in this?"

During its first year, the spiritual direction offering operated a bit under the radar. This year, group sessions and retreats have been added to the program. Students have gathered to focus on topics such as vocational discernment or self-image as it relates to the image of God.

Crawford has seen a real growth in students' awareness of who they are in light of God's love.

"There's so much rapid growth that happens in such a short period of time. It's almost like when you're a kid and

you feel the growing pains," Crawford said. "You almost feel like you see them grow overnight."

For students who find themselves stretched thin between deadlines and decisions, Crawford's office offers something rare: stillness. The same gentle presence that draws you in at first meeting is exactly what she brings to every session, a quiet invitation to slow down, pay attention and discover that God has been at work all along.

Spiritual direction at Union is offered at no cost to students and is open to anyone curious enough to show up. For Crawford, that's really all it takes.

"God is already at work," she said. "It's just a matter of opening up the space to pay attention to where he's at work."

The rest, she trusts, takes care of itself.



Alumna of the YEAR

Meritorious Service Awards

Union University has a long history of producing graduates who excel in their careers, in ministry, in service and in life. Each year at Homecoming, the university presents Meritorious Service Awards to select graduates and friends who have distinguished themselves in a number of ways. These awards were presented on Oct. 24, 2025. Complete biographies and videos from recipients are available at uu.edu/alumni/awards/2025.

AR

Presented to a Union University graduate for distinction in his/her profession, service to mankind and/or contribution to Union University.

Cameron Conn ('05)

Cameron Armstrong Conn, a native of Dyersburg, Tennessee, serves as president of the Tennessee Independent Colleges and Universities Association, leading advocacy and professional development efforts for 34 private colleges, including her alma mater. She also oversees professional development initiatives strengthening Tennessee's independent higher education sector.

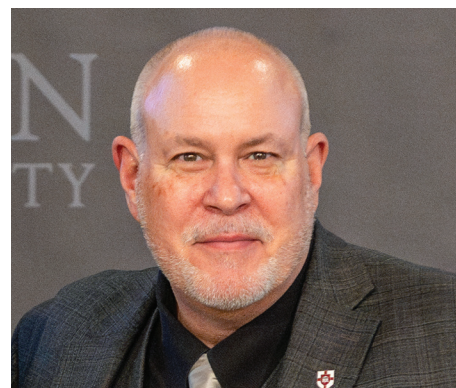
Prior to joining TICUA in 2024, Conn spent two decades in leadership at Mississippi College, Baylor University and Baptist Health Sciences University in Memphis, where she helped launch the College of Osteopathic Medicine. After completing her Union degree in biblical studies and teaching English as a second language, she earned her Master of Science from Florida State University and a Ph.D. from Azusa Pacific University.

An active researcher and mentor, she focuses on student-faculty interaction, student outcomes and Christian higher education. Conn and her husband, Patrick, live in Nashville, where they enjoy traveling and college sports.



Courtney Powell ('11)
Outstanding Young Alumna

Courtney Powell serves as operations director for the resource development team at Strategic Resource Group, an organization that funds indigenous ministry efforts throughout the Middle East and North Africa. In this role, she helps strengthen global ministry partnerships that advance the gospel in one of the most spiritually significant and challenging regions of the world. She lives in Arvada, Colorado, with her husband and three children.



Chris Nadaskay
G.M. Savage Legacy Award

Chris Nadaskay retired after the 2026 spring semester as professor of art and chair of the Department of Art after serving on Union's faculty since 1993. He taught painting, drawing, foundations, sculpture and digital imaging and was instrumental in shaping Union's art program for more than three decades. Nadaskay is an accomplished artist whose work has been featured in solo and group exhibitions across the country.



Warren Nunn
Lest We Forget Award

Warren Nunn dedicated his career to the banking industry as president and chairman of the board at The Bank of Halls, where he demonstrated a deep commitment to West Tennessee. He has served four years on Union's Board of Regents, nine years on the Board of Trustees, and, together with his late wife, Eleanor, provided enduring support through the David R. and Mildred Nunn Endowed Scholarship.



Jane Hopkins ('71) Family
Union Family Legacy Award

Jane Welch Hopkins, of Brownsville, Tennessee, continued her family legacy that began in 1924 by graduating from Union University with a degree in history and secondary education. Hopkins devoted nearly 30 years to teaching in the Haywood County School System before retiring in 2007. She and her husband, Richard, have three sons — Richie, Jim and Welch (all Union graduates) — along with two daughters-in-law and two grandchildren.


Linda Shoaf

*Robert E. Craig
Service Award*

Linda Ross Shoaf pursued a lifelong passion for teaching and nutrition. She began her career teaching nutrition before directing one of the nation's first accredited training programs for food service supervisors. For 18 years, Shoaf served on the Union Board of Trustees and spent three of those years as the secretary for the Executive Committee. In 2011, she and her late husband established a scholarship to aid students interested in pursuing a career in the medical field.


Craig Dismuke ('98)

*Distinguished Achievement
in Business*

Craig Dismuke serves as managing director and chief market strategist for Stifel's Fixed Income Capital Markets group, where he leads market analysis and strategy for institutional investors across the country. With more than 26 years in the financial services industry, Dismuke is widely recognized for his expertise in U.S. economic trends and interest rate forecasting. He is a frequent speaker at national financial conferences and appears regularly on CNBC, Fox Business and Bloomberg TV.


Steve Maroney ('87)

*Distinguished Achievement in
Government/Public Service*

Steven W. Maroney was president of the junior and senior classes at Union. He earned his juris doctor from the University of Memphis Cecil C. Humphreys School of Law in 1992. Maroney practiced law for nearly three decades, first with Waldrop & Hall and later with Teel & Maroney, before being appointed chancellor of Tennessee's 26th Judicial District in 2021. He has since served as presiding judge of the district and as a member of the Tennessee Judicial Conference.


Lee Sanders ('97)

*Distinguished Achievement
in Health Care*

Dr. Lee Sanders earned degrees in biology and chemistry at Union. He went on to complete a Ph.D. in pharmaceutical sciences at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center in 2003 and an M.D. in 2007. Sanders is board-certified in internal medicine and nephrology. He serves as associate professor at the University of Iowa and the Iowa City Veterans Affairs Health Care System, where he is also medical director of transplantation services.

2026 Meritorious Service Awards

**Outstanding Young
Alumni Award**

Presented to up to three Union University graduates who are age 40 or younger with a record of significant accomplishment in professional life and for service to Union University or the world.

Union Family Legacy Award

Presented to one family that has a strong tradition of attending Union University, with a minimum of three generations of graduates, and that has been consistently involved with and committed to the university.

Lest We Forget Award

Presented in recognition of longtime service and contributions to the Union University community.

Robert E. Craig Service Award

Named after Union's 13th president and presented to those who have made significant contributions to the university.

G.M. Savage Legacy Award

Given to a faculty or staff member for their ongoing commitment to Christ-centered education at Union University.

Distinguished Service Award

Presented to a member of the Union community for distinction in his/her profession, service to mankind and/or contribution to Union University.

**Distinguished
Achievement Award**

Presented to a Union University graduate recognizing significant contributions in areas of profession.



Scan the code
to make a nomination or visit [uu.edu/
alumni/awards](https://uu.edu/alumni/awards)



Ward Howard ('15)
*Distinguished Achievement
in Research/Science*

Ward Howard, a Union graduate in physics and mathematics, is a NASA Sagan Fellow hosted by the University of Colorado Boulder in the Department of Astrophysical and Planetary Sciences. His research uses data from the James Webb Space Telescope and other observatories to study how stellar activity impacts the atmospheres and habitability of distant planets. After Union, Howard earned a Ph.D. in physics and astronomy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2021.



Renee Emerson ('08)
*Distinguished Achievement
in Humanities*

Renee Emerson is the author of three full-length poetry collections along with several chapter books and a middle-grade novel. Her work has appeared in leading journals including *Shenandoah*, *The Georgia Review* and *The Southern Review*. She earned an MFA in poetry from Boston University, where she received the Academy of American Poets Prize, and in 2016 she was awarded an Individual Artist Grant by the Arkansas Arts Council.



Fondra Magee ('86)
*Distinguished Achievement
in Education*

Fondra Magee, a Union graduate in elementary education, began her career as a teacher before pursuing a master's degree in school counseling. She has served in Tennessee and now in Spokane, Washington. A credentialed school-based registered play therapist, she also mentors future counselors through Whitworth University's advisory board. In 2024, Magee was named Washington School Counselor of the Year and received the Spokane Chase Youth Commission Award.



Michele Walton ('02)
*Distinguished Achievement
in Not-for-Profit*

Michele Bennett Walton serves as publishing director for seeJesus, a global discipling ministry that helps the church see and reflect the life, death and resurrection of Christ through discipleship resources and training. In her role, she oversees the development of materials designed to form disciples who love and imitate Jesus. Before joining seeJesus, Michele served in various ministry and communications roles, including publicity, marketing and editing.



Jerry ('69) & Becky ('10, '11) Drace
*Distinguished Achievement
in Church Ministry*

Jerry and Becky Drace founded the Jerry Drace Evangelistic Association in 1975, leading revivals and family conferences across the U.S. and abroad. Jerry is pastor of Friendship Baptist Church in Friendship, Tennessee. Becky, a social work graduate, is coauthor of *44 Ways to Strengthen Your Marriage* and *Hope for the Home Study Bible* and author of *The Bright Side of Blue*. Together, they co-host "Hope for the Home" on American Family Radio.

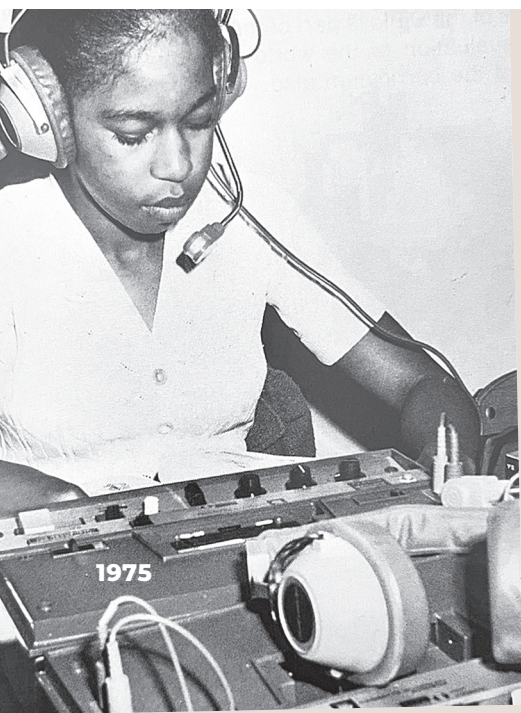


Pam Andrews ('78)
*Distinguished Achievement
in Arts/Media*

Pamela Simmons Andrews, a native of Poplar Bluff, Missouri, is an internationally recognized children's Christian songwriter, music educator and breast cancer survivor. She earned her Bachelor of Music Education degree from Union and a Master of Arts in music education from the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Andrews has written more than 700 songs and produced over 70 children's choir musicals, many of which present the gospel message to young audiences.



Old SCHOOL



The **UNIONITE** welcomes news from alumni. Please include contact information with your submission.



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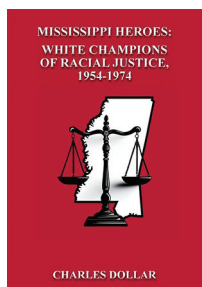


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1950s



Charles Dollar ('55) recently published a book, *Mississippi Heroes: Champions of Civil Rights, 1954-1974*. It recounts the stories of 59 white Mississippians who championed racial justice for black

Mississippians. More information is available at charlesdollarbooks.com.

1970s

Quinn Burkett Middleton ('77) released his second single, "Let's Get Happy," in January 2026, available on all major platforms, including YouTube, Amazon Music, Spotify and others. The release follows his debut single, "Save Us," in December 2025. Both songs feature the vocals of Deanna Colón, a standout performer from *America's Got Talent*.

1980s

Lawrence Ragland ('87) was recently awarded a Doctorate of Humane Letters degree from Tennessee School of Religion in Memphis. He is senior pastor at Pleasant



Hill Missionary Baptist Church in Hickman, Ky., and recently retired as an elementary art teacher with the Jackson-Madison County School System. He and his wife Tiffany reside in Jackson.

1990s

Carey Wade Dyer ('93) has written a book, *The Use of Christian Hymns in the Music Therapy Setting*, published by Barcelona Publishers. Dyer is a full-time music therapist in the Dallas/Fort Worth area and leads worship part-time for Lakeside Baptist Church in Granbury, Texas, where he lives with his wife Dena. They have two grown sons.

2000s

Steven Gream ('00) was inducted into the NJCAA Volleyball Hall of Fame class of 2025 as a head coach. While leading the Cowley College Volleyball program, he has an overall record of 339-53 with



two undefeated NJCAA DII national championships in 2023 and 2024 and a national runner-up finish in 2021. Gream has served as head volleyball coach at Cowley College since 2016.

Christopher James Haak ('02) began a new career with Burlington Stores in 2025 as a shortage control associate.



Jonathan Grimm ('03) has written a book entitled *The Future Poor: How Families and Communities Can Join Together to Survive the*

Looming Retirement Crisis, published by Read the Spirit Books.

John Mark Belew ('04) was recognized as the Regional Health and Wellness Director for the West/Southwest Business Unit for Walmart at a March 2025 meeting in Orlando, Fla. He is based in Omaha, Neb.



Rebecca Jones ('04) adopted her son Tyson Gregory Jones on Sept. 19, 2024.

Obed Thomas ('06) completed his Master of Business Administration degree from the University of Oklahoma in December 2025.

Heather (Kapavik) Cadenhead ('08) was nominated for a Pushcart Prize by *The Orchards Poetry Journal* for her poem, "Redemption is a Lump in My Throat."

Bill Hedspeth, professor emeritus of education who retired in 2003, has written a children's book entitled *Wilbur Gets a New Home*, published by Covenant Books.

2010s



Ronald Thomas Sr. ('15) earned his Master of Divinity degree from Duke Divinity School at Duke University.

Katelyn Walls Shelton ('16) was recently named one of seven recipients of the 2025-26 Robert Novak Journalism Fellowship. These seven journalists will spend a year researching and providing in-depth reporting on their chosen topics surrounding the principles of a free society. Katelyn is an opinion contributor to *WORLD* magazine, and her work has appeared in a variety of publications. She lives in the Washington, D.C., area.

Shenell Thompkins ('18)

was named the 2026 Nurse.org Best of Nursing Award Winner for Nurse Podcast Creator for her work with the *All One Nurse Podcast*. Thompkins, of Cordova, Tenn., is a nurse staff development specialist for Baptist Memorial Hospital in Memphis.



Hannah Shea ('19) graduated from Lincoln Memorial University's DeBusk College of Osteopathic Medicine on May 10, 2025, as a doctor of osteopathy. She began her family medicine residency at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center in Jackson, Tenn., in July 2025.

Trevor Fox ('19) and his family moved from Florida to Wisconsin, where he accepted a full-time position at Lake Geneva Ministries, a ministry that serves 30,000 guests per year through camps and retreats.

Hannah Crossett ('12) has written a memoir novella entitled *The Secret Keeper* that was scheduled for publication in the spring of 2026 through WestBow Press.

MARRIAGES



Jon Boord ('98) and **Melissa Horn ('98)** were married on July 28, 2024. They live between Vail, Colo., and Jackson, Miss.

Anna (Rape) Scalf ('16) married Matthew Scalf on Feb. 16, 2025.

Anna Grace (Sikes) Monroe ('22) married Kenneth Mark Monroe Jr. on Aug. 9, 2025.

MEMORIAM

Hugh Harris Harvey, Sr. ('54) died July 5, 2025, in Jackson, Tenn., at age 93. After teaching school for three years, he spent 30 years as a farmer in Madison County and served 54 years on the Southwest Electric Membership Corporation Board. He also served in the U.S. Army, where he achieved the rank of sergeant.

Carl Wayne Davenport ('57), age 95, died Jan. 8, 2026, at Woodland Terrace Assisted Living Facility in St Joseph, Mich. His most cherished professional role was as chaplain at the Alvin C. York Veterans' Administration Medical Center in Murfreesboro, Tenn., for 18 years.

William "Bill" E. Noblett ('57), of Newburgh, Ind., died June 21, 2025, at age 89. A standout baseball player who was signed by the St. Louis Cardinals, he served in the U.S. Army for two years and later co-owned Lockyear Business College.

Robert Johnson ('59) died August 27, 2024, at age 87. He was a Union baseball player for four years and a coach and principal in the Lebanon Special School District until retirement.

Robert Arthur Cummings ('61) died Dec. 15, 2025, at age 86 in Jackson, Tenn. He served as a plant manager in the manufacturing sector for many years and retired from the fishing lure industry.

Sally Steffens ('62) died Nov. 15, 2025, at age 84 at the Heritage Center in Evansville, Ind. She was a lifelong teacher who ran the greenhouse for vocational education at Menard Correctional Center for many years.

Kinnie Alexander Dismuke ('63), of Woodstock, Ga., died Jan. 22, 2026, at age 84. He served in the U.S. Army and worked in marketing for Owens Corning for more than 30 years. A devoted member of First Baptist Church in Cumming, Ga., he served as a deacon and Sunday School teacher.

Arthur Ray Dixon ('63) died Feb. 20, 2026, at age 91 in Humboldt, Tenn. He taught at Union University and spent 35 years as a teacher and coach in the Haywood County School System, and he was an ordained minister who served four churches over a 45-year pastoral career. He also served in the U.S. Navy as a corpsman.

Jerry Taylor Hart ('63), of Hopkinsville, Ky., died Sept. 9, 2025, at age 84 in Kuttawa, Ky. He practiced as an obstetrician-gynecologist for 41 years and delivered more than 11,000 babies. He also served in the U.S. Air Force in Okinawa, Japan, for three and a half years, reaching the rank of major.

Joe William Sisson ('63) died Oct. 8, 2025, at age 85 at Baptist East Hospital in Louisville, Ky. He worked for 30 years as a commercial insurance sales manager for Liberty Mutual Insurance and later worked as a barber.

Carol Ann Barrett Stricklin ('66), age 81, died Dec. 3, 2025, at her home in Lakeland, Tenn. She was an accomplished historian and genealogist who served as an ambassador for the Tennessee and National Senior Olympics.

Sherry Wallace Vaughn ('66), age 81, of Brentwood, Tenn., died Nov. 22, 2025. A valedictorian of her high school class, she completed her master's degree in music education from the University of Tennessee and taught music in public schools before dedicating herself to her family.

Elizabeth Pearl "Liz" Towater ('67) died July 19, 2025, at age 80 in Milton, Ga. A longtime teacher, she taught in Trenton, Tenn., and Fort Knox and Louisville, Ky., and later had a second career with AT&T.

Billy Eugene Gateley ('69) died Nov. 24, 2025, at age 78 in Memphis, Tenn. He taught math in Lexington, Tenn., for 35 years and served as a TSSAA official for football and baseball for several decades.

Norwood Doval "Buddy" Tisdale ('69), age 77, of Memphis, Tenn., died June 26, 2025. He began his career as a sportswriter for *The Jackson Sun* and later served as assistant principal in the Orange County School System in Florida before working in the household moving industry.

Nancy Robbins Halbrook ('70) died Dec. 18, 2025, at age 77 in Jonesboro, Ark. A CPA and musician, she taught music in Missouri and retired from the NEA Baptist Hospital accounting department in 2019.



Patricia "Patsy" Fulghum ('71) died March 7, 2025, at age 97 in Fairhope, Ala. She worked as a registered nurse in public health, teaching and as a psychiatric nurse at the state mental hospital in Bolivar, Tenn.

Vernon Cecil Knight ('71), of Jackson, Tenn., died Nov. 4, 2025, at age 78. He proudly served in the National Guard and enjoyed a long career as a dedicated associate with Lowe's.

Howard Jeffrey Keas ('76) died Nov. 16, 2025, at age 71 at Centennial Medical Center in Nashville, Tenn. He served as a youth minister at First Baptist Church in Jackson for more than 10 years and later worked as a realtor for Town and Country Realty.

Steven Austin Cavanaugh ('77) died Jan. 20, 2026, at age 71 in Louisville, Ky. He served as a pastor for more than 40 years, leading congregations in Pennsylvania and Ohio, and later worked as a chaplain.

Lynn Steffes ('78), age 68, of Paris, Tenn., died June 2, 2025, at TriStar Centennial Hospital in Nashville, Tenn. She was a registered nurse at St. Frances Hospital, Vanderbilt Children's Hospital and Henry County Medical Center, and she later worked as a dispatcher for the Henry County 911 office.

Wayne A. Cole ('81), of Henderson, Tenn., died Dec. 8, 2025, at age 66. He worked for many years in the insurance industry, spending most of his career in Jackson, Tenn.

Carol Sue Flowers Walsh ('82), age 65, of Obion, Tenn., died May 10, 2025, at West Tennessee Healthcare in Dyersburg. She attended Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and retired from teaching English at Obion County Central High School.

Michael "Andy" Gardner ('89) died Nov. 29, 2025, at age 68 in Trenton, Tenn. A retired registered nurse, he served as the director of Hospice of West Tennessee and was an active member of the Tennessee Nurses and Tennessee Hospital associations.

Janetta Doris Haynes Smith ('90), age 76, died Oct. 20, 2025, at her home in Jackson, Tenn. A registered nurse for 45 years, she served at Jackson-Madison County General Hospital and DCI and was also a licensed massage therapist.

Sarah Ann Milam Vanderburg ('92), age 90, died May 27, 2025. She was a registered nurse for several decades, serving at the Tennessee State Psychiatric Hospital, LeBonheur Children's Hospital and Crittenden Memorial Hospital, where she was also the director of Pro-Care Services.



Marilyn Clanton Smothers, of Jackson, Tenn., died Jan. 28, 2026, at age 90. A graduate of Shelbyville Central High School, she pursued a lifelong passion for education

and served as a respected professor at Union University until her retirement. She was a devoted member of Meridian Baptist Church for many years.

Michael Joseph Primeaux ('96), of St. John's, Fla., died Oct. 23, 2025, at age 56. He was an acute care nurse practitioner who served at several hospitals and was a professor at Union. In 2017, he helped open men's health clinics in Jacksonville and Tampa.

Amanda "Mandi" Michele Pack ('97), of Cordova, Tenn., died May 20, 2025, at age 49. Originally from Rutherford, Tenn., she dedicated 20 years to her career as a store manager at Walgreens.



Jimmy H. Davis ('70), who served as the O.P. Hammons Chair and Professor of Chemistry, died Nov. 2, 2025, at age 77. A graduate of Lexington (Tenn.) High School, he completed his bachelor's degree in chemistry from Union in 1970 and his Ph.D. from the University of Illinois in 1976. In 1978, he began his lifelong work at Union, where he held various teaching and administrative roles over the past 47 years.

His academic work has also involved collaborative work with Hal Poe, Union's Charles Colson University Professor Emeritus of Faith and Culture in the School of Theology and Missions. Together they published five books on different topics related to the integration of science and Christianity.

Judy Munsey Stranak ('98), age 77, died Sept. 24, 2025, at Jackson-Madison County General Hospital. The wife of longtime Union professor and coach Linn Stranak, she worked for more than 25 years as a specialist in hematology at Jackson-Madison County General Hospital and later founded Physicians Office Consulting.

Elaine Michelle Harris ('02) died Jan. 25, 2026, at age 45 in Dalton, Ga. She was a registered nurse for more than 20 years, specializing in the care of premature infants in neonatal intensive care units.

Meredith Jeanette Erlandson ('04), of Humboldt, Tenn., died Jan. 31, 2026, at age 46 at Jackson-Madison County General Hospital in Jackson, Tenn. She earned a master's degree from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and was known for her strong faith and dedication to serving others.

Lisa Loraine Brewster ('06) died July 1, 2025, at age 64 in Bruce, Miss. She was a registered nurse who served at Bruce Hospital and Oxford Hospital, specializing in emergency care, dialysis and travel nursing.

James "Jim" Taylor Moss Sr. ('07), of Jackson, Tenn., died Jan. 22, 2026, at age 78. He moved to Jackson in 1981 to serve as associate administrator of Jackson-Madison County General Hospital and helped establish West Tennessee Healthcare, serving as president and CEO until his retirement in 2007.

Brandon Lee Thornsberry ('08) died June 23, 2025, at age 41 at Vanderbilt Hospital in Nashville, Tenn. He began his career in athletic training at Montgomery Bell Academy and later transitioned into the fields of hospice and healthcare.

Neus Guasch Sikes ('09) died Aug. 21, 2025, at age 65 in Fredericktown, Mo. Originally from Barcelona, Spain, she served as a website content coordinator at Southwest Tennessee Community College and later as operations manager for the Assisi Foundation of Memphis.

Vonice Dell Black, of Trenton, Tenn., died Jan. 31, 2026, at age 77 at Jackson-Madison County General Hospital. A former Union employee, she worked for the Milan Army Ammunition Plant and spent several years as a nurse at Jackson-Madison County General Hospital.

Billy G. Griggs Sr., of Atlanta, Ga., died Sept. 20, 2025, at age 91. A friend of the university, he devoted much of his career to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Donor PROFILE

Gray Coyner: Investing in the Next Generation

For Gray Coyner ('08), the decision to attend Union University was rooted in a search for personal connection. Coming from a background where he valued knowing his instructors, he sought an environment where he wouldn't be just another number in a lecture hall.

A campus visit and the opportunity to sit in on a class convinced him that Union offered the welcoming, high-quality academic environment he needed to thrive.

Nearly 20 years after earning his accounting degree, Coyner serves as a principal at Thompson Greenspon in Fairfax, Virginia, and leads the accounting firm's construction and real estate niche. He first joined the firm as an intern in 2007 and was hired as a staff accountant upon graduating from Union.

Coyner credits much of his professional trajectory to the mentorship he received as a student, particularly from professors like Karen Miller, who

helped him solidify his path as a public accounting auditor.

"I think it's tremendously impacted my professional career," Coyner said of his time at Union. "The professors and how

they pour into their students, how they create a personal connection ... really has helped make me continue to be connected."

That sense of connection has inspired Coyner to give back consistently. His philanthropy is multi-faceted: he established an accounting scholarship where Miller selects the recipient, and he remains a dedicated supporter of Enactus.

His most significant contributions, however, focus on campus improvements. Coyner believes the physical environment should be a testament to the caliber of the students and faculty within.

"I think Union has phenomenal high-quality education, and I want the campus to match that," he said.

For him, giving back is an extension of how he was raised — to support and invest in his community.

"I consider Union my community," he said. "I want to enable Union to continue to meet its vision and its mission."

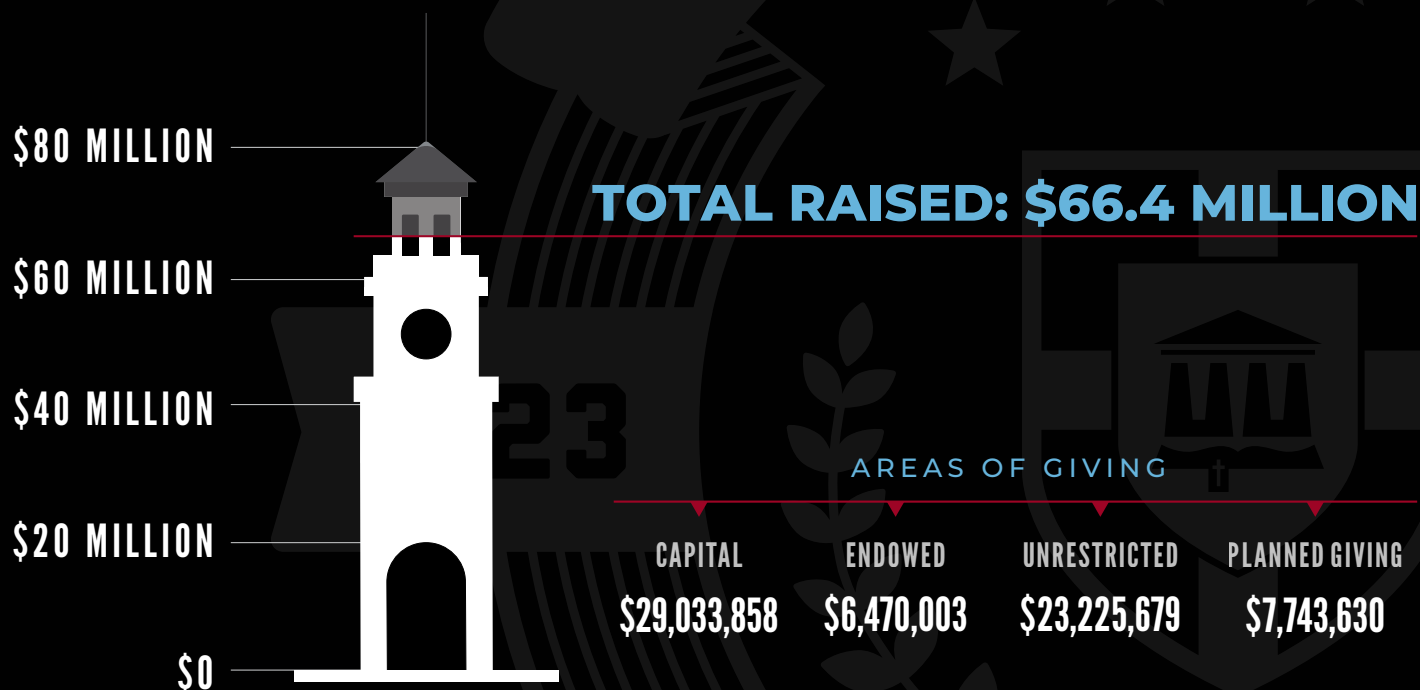




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Final FRAME



Members of the Lady Bulldogs basketball team celebrate Coach Mark Campbell's final home game Feb. 27.
Photo by Karley Hathcock ('22, '23)