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NEWS

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Ouachita Establishes Annie Abrams Living Legacy Award for black students, Tyrese Allen and Dayja James named first recipients

By Rachel Gaddis

June 19, 2020

For more information, contact OBU's news bureau at newsbureau@obu.edu or (870) 245-5208

ARKADELPHIA, Ark.— Ouachita Baptist University has established the Annie Abrams Living Legacy Award, a new scholarship to recognize black students. Tyrese Allen of Savannah, Ga., and Dayja James of McGehee, Ark., have been selected as the scholarship's first recipients and each will receive \$2,500. A matching gift is in place to endow the scholarship, allowing it to be awarded annually for years to come.

The scholarship will honor students involved in Ouachita's Multicultural Organization Reaching Equality (MORE) student organization who have demonstrated leadership, exemplified the university's mission and shown promise to positively influence the world.

"This scholarship is another step by Ouachita to do more in advancing racial justice and human dignity by further investing in black student leaders," said Ouachita President Dr. Ben Sells. "To receive the Annie Abrams Living Legacy Award will be an honor, as it is intended to recognize and develop leadership."

The award honors the living legacy of Arkadelphia native Annie Abrams – a civil activist, pursuer of social justice, educator, culture worker and museum curator – whose achievements include working alongside Daisy Bates to desegregate Little Rock Central High School, establishing the city's annual Martin Luther King, Jr. parade and leading the campaigns to rename High Street in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr. and 20th Street after Little Rock's first black mayor, Charles Bussey.



Dayja James



Tyrese Allen

Abrams was named to Arkansas' Black Hall of Fame in 2010, and she is the recipient of the Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday Award given by Coretta Scott King, the First Lady's Women in Public Service Award and the Brooks Hays Award for Civil Rights Champions.

"It is an honor to be able to name this prestigious award after Annie Abrams, who served as an extraordinary civil rights activist and world-changing leader from Arkadelphia," said Nicole Porchia, Ouachita's director of Multicultural Student Programs. "This scholarship also is offering black students at Ouachita the opportunity to have some financial ease and be acknowledged for the wonderful and strong attributes that make them both a deserving individual and influential leader not just to the black community but the campus community as a whole.

"This is another step toward progress that will move our Ouachita community forward in understanding the importance of standing together in support of equality," Porchia added. "It makes me proud to be a Ouachita alumna knowing that we, as a university, are moving in this direction."

Allen, a senior biology and psychology double major, recently was voted as Ouachita Student Senate's student body president for the 2020-2021 academic year. He also has served as vice president of MORE, where he coordinated much of Ouachita's Black History Month campus events in 2020 and assembled a Tiger Serve Day team.

James, a junior biology major, has been selected as president of MORE for the 2020-2021 academic year. She is involved in EEE women's social club and has been actively involved in MORE since her freshman year. James also is a member of Ouachita's Carl Goodson Honors Program.

“Tyrese and Dayja exemplify the leadership skills needed to make a positive impact and change on our campus,” Porchia said. “They are passionate about striving for justice and peace among all people and understand the importance of racial reconciliation.

“They both have shown us that they are a listening ear to the black community, but also that they recognize the importance of walking alongside others to make a difference; it is about unity,” she continued. “I consider them difference makers, and I know when they leave Ouachita, they will continue to lead in their communities.”



President Ben Sells meeting with Annie Abrams.

The Annie Abrams Living Legacy Award took shape earlier this month following a \$1,000 gift by former Ouachita student Stephanie Rodgers and a matching gift of \$25,000 from an anonymous donor to further grow and endow the scholarship. Rodgers’ gift came after a challenge given by North Central University President Scott Hagan on June 4 during the memorial service for George Floyd. During the service, held on NCU’s campus, Hagan announced that the Christian university would start a scholarship in Floyd’s name dedicated to inspiring young black leaders.

“It is time to invest like never before in a new generation of young black Americans who are poised and ready to take leadership in our nation,” Hagan said. He challenged other university presidents to make additional investments in scholarships.

Rodgers was watching the televised memorial service when she heard Hagan’s challenge. Both Ouachita and NCU are members of the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCCU), an organization with the mission “to advance the cause of Christ-centered higher education and help its institutions transform lives by relating scholarship and service to biblical truth.”

An advocate herself, Rodgers works as director of development for Arkansas Baptist Children’s Homes in Little Rock. Growing up in the foster care system through the ABC Homes, Rodgers later attended Ouachita like her foster father, a Ouachita graduate.

“I knew that it was God tugging at my heart and calling me once again to stand in the gap, this time for black students at Ouachita,” Rodgers said. “Knowing the integrity of Ouachita, I jumped quickly knowing that I had to, in order to be the first to give.”

“I was inspired by my fellow Christian college president, as well as by alumna Stephanie Rodgers who, at her own initiative, made the first gift to Ouachita to establish a scholarship for black students,” Sells said. “In response to this, and adding momentum, an anonymous matching gift of up to \$25,000 was given.”

After Ouachita received news of Rodgers’ and the anonymous donor’s gifts, MORE student leadership began working with university administration to name the scholarship, and a committee of faculty and staff members selected the first award recipients.

According to MORE student leaders, bestowing Annie Abrams’ name on the award makes the scholarship “more personal to the Ouachita community.”

“Annie’s achievements and works speak for themselves and act as a great example of the kind of recipient for such an award,” MORE student leaders wrote. “Two words that best describe her are ‘love’ and ‘action’: two of the most important attributes of a civil rights activist and world-changing leader.”

The daughter of the late Mrs. Q.V. Reed, who influenced many young lives in the Arkadelphia community as an educator, Abrams attended Dunbar High School in Little Rock, graduated from Dunbar Junior College with her certification in education and later earned her bachelor’s degree in special education from Philander Smith College.

In addition to her many achievements, Abrams has been involved in numerous community service organizations. Abrams served as a commissioner for the Fair Housing Commission and a treasurer of the Arkansas Democratic Black Caucus, and she was the first black president of the Parent Teacher Association at Little Rock Central High School. She continues to serve as honorary co-chair of the state Martin Luther King, Jr. Commission.

“After personally meeting Annie Abrams and learning about her life and legacy, including her ties to our community, it seemed ideal for Ouachita to honor her in a way that also recognizes and invests in black student leaders on our campus,” Sells said. “Abrams was moved by and affirmed this decision.”

To donate to the Annie Abrams Living Legacy Award fund, visit obu.edu/give and list “Annie Abrams Living Legacy Award” in the instructions line. The first \$25,000 given will be matched, doubling the impact. For more information, contact Terry Peebles, vice president for development, at peeplest@obu.edu or 870-245-5169.