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Mentorship beyond graduation

Gayla Parker

Bailey Buettner

Office of Communications & Marketing

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Lead photo: Gayla Parker (left) served as a friend and mentor to fellow first gen Bailey Buettner during Bailey's student days at Ouachita, building the foundation for a connection that remains strong today. Photo by Sarah Dean

For immediate release

Mentorship beyond graduation

By Gayla Parker & Bailey Buettner

November 17, 2023

For more information, contact Ouachita's Office of Communications & Marketing at comm-mark@obu.edu or (870) 245-5206.

Editor's Note: We're honoring Ouachita's first-generation students, alumni, faculty and staff throughout November with special events and emphases, including a series of weekly posts authored by first gens on the Stories blog. Read about our campus celebrations and find more stories at obu.edu/firstgen.

My grandmother could make the best biscuits ever over an open fire. My dad could tune a guitar to perfect pitch without a tuner. Those were just a few of the many skills they taught me. But there was one skill they could not teach me: navigating the world of higher education.

As smart and gifted as they were, high school graduation was not a part of their stories, much less college. When I graduated from high school, they were thrilled. They never imagined there would be multiple graduations to follow.

With each degree, there was a new first semester – but none that compared to the first semester at Ouachita. It was both exciting and frightening! I will forever be grateful for the professors who encouraged and guided me along the way. Without them, I may never have walked across another graduation stage. So, when I heard about the First Gen program, I knew it was the perfect place for me to give back.

What does it mean to be a First Gen mentor? For me, it is an opportunity to invest in the life a young woman. It is becoming her biggest cheerleader, her shoulder to cry on, her encourager, her listening ear, her accountability partner, her navigator, her life-sharer, her prayer warrior and her student. Yes, her student. While we may face many of the same challenges as a first gen, we face those challenges in a world that is ever changing. She faces decisions and issues that were not a part of my world. Mentorship is all about both learning from and teaching one another. At the center of it all is the universal truth of God's Word that is never changing and holds the ultimate words of wisdom. It doesn't get any better than that.

— *Gayla Parker, Adjunct, Ouachita Online*

I remember getting an email my freshman year that I had the opportunity to be paired with a first-generation college student mentor. My initial thoughts were, "How do they know I'm a first-generation college student? And why do I need a mentor for that?"

I didn't see the need at first, as I had always done pretty well in school. But being mentored by Gayla Parker became so much more than a resource for my getting through college.

The first time we met, she bought us coffee from Dr. Jack's and we sat right in the middle of the Student Center and hit it off instantly! She spoke with such brilliance and energy, and asked questions and listened with so much sincerity. She's lived a full life, having spent several years as a missionary in the Philippines; is a wife and mother; has completed seminary; and is working toward her doctorate.

Needless to say, she is full of wisdom. While we made a point to discuss my classes and how they were going, much of our time was spent talking about life, family, how to serve the Lord with our callings and what Jesus had been teaching us at the time. What began as a mentorship to help me with the ends and outs of becoming a successful college student turned into a beautiful discipleship. I knew that at each meeting I would be given practical advice on getting through school, as well as being covered in prayer.

I'm so grateful for the ways Gayla poured into me as a student and how we have stayed connected, even years after graduating.

— *Bailey Buettner, Assistant Director, Campus Ministries*