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Office of Communications & Marketing

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For immediate release

**Honoring firsts (Green-Blevins Rotunda dedicated to Ouachita's first African American graduates)**

*By Felley Lawson*

April 24, 2023

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

Carolyn Jean Green and the late Gustine Blevins, who in 1966 became the first African American graduates in Ouachita's history, were celebrated Nov. 12 when the Green-Blevins Rotunda was dedicated in their honor.

The community-wide service and reception brought a standing-room-only crowd of students, faculty, staff and visitors to the refurbished rotunda in McClellan Hall at 10 a.m. for a program featuring guest speakers Green and Dr. LaJuan Martin, Blevins' son.

"I have felt like I'm truly coming home," said Green, the first Black student to live in a Ouachita dorm and pledge a social club, options she didn't have at the institution where she began her studies. "I know life can have us go in several directions – take us left instead of right and down instead of up – but by the grace of God, I was able to stay the course."

Graduating from Ouachita with a double major in political science and sociology, Green worked for two years on the staff of the Office of Economic Opportunity's Rural Training Program in Little Rock before becoming a career flight attendant with American Airlines. She retired in 2009 to her home in Temple Hills, Md.

"This dedication is a testament to the power of ministry and coalition," she said. "I hope the Green-Blevins Rotunda will remind students of Ouachita's history and vision, and how much they belong."

Speaking on behalf of Blevins' family, Martin said, "My mom loved God. She was always an educator, but before that, she was a human being trying to make her way in this world." As the first in her family to attend college, "She did something there was no template for."

Blevins was working as a dietician at the University of Michigan and taking classes at a nearby community college when she decided to return home to Arkansas and enroll at Ouachita to earn a bachelor's degree in education and fulfill her dream of becoming a teacher. She brought LaJuan and his older sister Judy with her to Arkadelphia, sleeping in their vehicle during the 18-hour journey because hotels wouldn't rent to Blacks. Her mother, a successful businesswoman who owned several properties in town, helped her find a home on Logan Street.

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Dr. LaJuan Martin

After graduation from Ouachita, Blevins returned to Michigan, where she began her 28-year career as an elementary school teacher and later earned a Master of Arts degree from Central Michigan University.

"I learned from my mom that hope is the seed of faith, and desire is the seed of purpose. You've got to start somewhere," Martin said. "Once you get your purpose going, and the winds of tribulation and pain start to come, stay focused. That's when you don't give up. That's when you go harder – when you expand your faith, not contract it. And that's what Gustine Blevins did."

After a brief update on Ouachita's growth in programs and enrollment, Dr. Ben Sells, Ouachita president, said, "It pales in significance to the effort and courage of Carolyn Green and Gustine Blevins, who enrolled at Ouachita in 1964 and persisted to 1966. Both are transformative moments for this university. They were pioneers paving the way for many Black students and other students of color who made the Ouachita experience their own, expanding Ouachita's world and changing its history for the good of all."

Dr. Lewis Shepherd '80, MSE '82, vice president for community & intercultural engagement at Ouachita, and Dr. Lisa Speer '88, university archivist, led a committee of faculty and staff through a two-year process of developing the rotunda display. It includes panels introducing Green and Blevins, as well as a photo exhibit titled "First" that honors contributions of Ouachita students of color who integrated the campus after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law.

"This is where students, faculty and staff will come to learn about the first two African Americans to become alumni of Ouachita, and many others who are on the walls behind me who helped to open doors that were previously closed to them," Shepherd said. "This hallowed space will represent the power of human determination, the drive to keep going when you would rather give up."

The dedication ceremony included a performance by Ouachita's Multicultural Student Programs Gospel Choir singing "Praise is What I Do" by William Murphy under the direction of Dr. Natilan Crutcher, visiting assistant professor of music at Ouachita. An opening prayer was given by Dayja James, a senior communication sciences & disorders major from McGehee, Ark., and president of the student group Multicultural Organization Reaching Equality. The late Rev. James "Bearcat" Reynolds '71, the first African American Tiger football player to graduate from Ouachita, offered a closing prayer.

The Green-Blevins Rotunda serves as a gathering place for student study and collaboration; its dedication and naming were approved unanimously by the university Board of Trustees. McClellan Hall, dedicated in 1977, was named for the late U.S. Sen. John McClellan and includes a display recognizing his service and the gifting of his papers to the university archives. The facility also has become home to the W.H. Sutton School of Social Sciences and the Michael D. Huckabee School of Education. While the rotunda exhibit will rotate periodically, the space will remain a demonstration of Ouachita's commitment to a Christ-centered approach to race.

"For this space, for this effort, for this historical moment, for this time in the life of Ouachita," said Shepherd, "to God be the glory."



*By Felley (Nall) Lawson '88, editorial coordinator*