

THE

# COLUMN

ATHENS STATE  
UNIVERSITY

ATHENS.EDU

SUMMER 2024



*Hebren Unveiled*

## OUR VISION

*Athens State University will be the premier destination for transfer students seeking the highest quality education and cutting-edge delivery at the most affordable cost. As the upper division university in Alabama, building on a tradition that began in 1822, Athens State University will be the catalyst for positive change in the lives of its students.*

## OUR MISSION

*The University advances the best interests of its students and the State of Alabama through teaching, service, research, and other creative activities to empower students to make valuable contributions in their professional, civic, educational, and economic endeavors. Through innovative communication and course delivery for high-quality undergraduate and select graduate programs, Athens State University provides a supporting environment for each student, demonstrating the importance of the diverse and interdependent nature of our state and society. Athens State University changes the face of Alabama by changing the lives of its students.*

## CONTACT US

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## CONNECT WITH US





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# *Onward Towards A Thriving University!*

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**Dear alumni and friends of Athens State University:**

As Athens State enters into its 3rd century of educating students, we are preparing to embark on a transformative strategic planning process that is aimed at raising us from our solid foundation to become an ever-more thriving university. As you know well, throughout our history, Athens State has remained steadfast in its ongoing commitment to providing exceptional education to our students and fostering a culture of innovation and excellence. However, as we stand on the threshold of our 3rd century, we recognize the need to adapt, evolve, and chart our course to ensure our continued success for generations to come.

The strategic planning process that we are about to undertake will serve as our pathway for the future, guiding us in our work to enhance the student experience, strengthen our academic programs, foster scholarship and innovation, and deepen our engagement with our community. This strategic planning process will be a collaborative effort drawing upon the collective wisdom, insights, and aspirations of our faculty, staff, students, community partners, and, of course, our alumni.

At the heart of this strategic planning process lies our commitment to moving forward and embracing a future where Athens State thrives in every sense of the word. What does it mean for us to thrive? It means not merely existing, but flourishing – excelling in our mission, making a meaningful impact, and empowering our students to succeed in an ever-changing world.

To achieve this vision, we must be bold, innovative, and forward-thinking. We will prioritize academic excellence, ensuring that our academic programs remain relevant, rigorous, and responsive to the needs of our students and society. We will invest in our faculty and staff, providing them with the support, resources, and professional development opportunities that they need to excel as educators, scholars, and mentors.

Thriving also means creating a campus environment that fosters a sense of belonging – where every member of our community feels valued, respected, and supported. We will redouble our efforts to promote equity both in and out of the classroom and strive to create a campus culture that celebrates and embraces our differences and our shared humanity.

Moreover, thriving entails leveraging our strengths and seizing new opportunities for growth and innovation. We will continue to expand our partnerships with industry, government, and the community to enhance experiential learning possibilities, facilitate scholarly collaborations, and address pressing challenges. We will embrace emerging technologies and pedagogies, harnessing their potential to enhance teaching, learning, and scholarship in the 21st century.

As we embark on this journey of strategic planning and transformation, I invite you to join us in shaping the future of Athens State University. Your insights, experiences, and perspectives are invaluable as we chart our course for the next century and beyond. Be looking for a variety of invitations that will be coming to our alumni and community partners for ways to share your feedback. Your voice will help ensure that Athens State continues to thrive for generations to come.

I am very excited and optimistic about the future of Athens State. Together, guided by our shared values and aspirations, I have no doubt that we will continue to grow into a thriving institution -- fulfilling our mission of empowering our students to reach their fullest potential and making a lasting impact on our world. Thank you for your continued support, dedication, and commitment to Athens State University. Onward ever!

Catherine M. Wehlburg, Ph.D.  
*Interim President*



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### **DENISE SANTOS NAMED NEW DIRECTOR OF ALUMNI AFFAIRS**

**A**thens State University is pleased to welcome Denise Santos as the University's new Director of Alumni Affairs.

Santos received her Associate of Arts in Humanities and Social Sciences from Onondaga Community College, her Bachelor of Arts in Speech Communications from State University of New York (SUNY) Potsdam, and her Master of Science in Integrated Marketing Communications from Nazareth University.

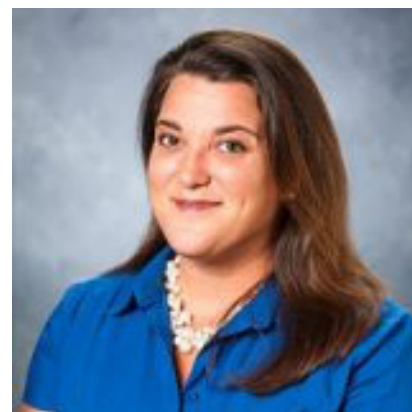
A New York native, Santos has nine years of experience in higher education. She worked as a coordinator of advising at Onondaga Community College in Syracuse, New York, where she advised students and helped coordinate the new student orientation program and transfer fairs. "OCC is one of my alma maters so it was fulfilling to serve those students and give back to a school that helped me get started on my own educational journey," said Santos.

Her most recent experience was with the Martin J. Whitman School of Management with Syracuse University, where she served as an academic advisor



for undergraduate programs for about five years. During her time there, she worked with students from their first year through graduation on major exploration, course selection, and general academic planning.

Santos and her husband decided to call Huntsville their home in January 2023. She is looking forward to spending time on Athens State's campus and meeting the University's alumni. ■



### **DR. KATHERINE KANDALEC-HOLM SELECTED AS NEXTLEVEL POSTSECONDARY CTE FELLOW**

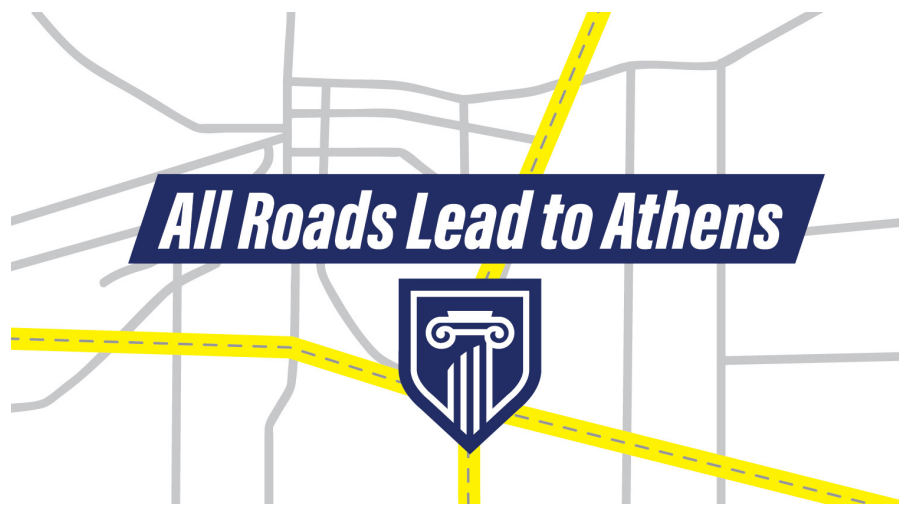
**Dr.** Katherine Kandalec-Holm, Interim Dean of the College of Education, has been selected as a NextLevel Postsecondary CTE Fellow for the Association for Career & Technical Education's (ACTE) 2024 cohort. The vision for the fellowship is to help develop the leadership skills of current and emerging postsecondary career and technical education professionals with an emphasis on addressing the needs of underserved populations.

The year-long fellowship serves as a professional development experience that allows members to work alongside a cohort of peer professionals and an experienced mentor to elevate their interpersonal skills and capacity to communicate, collaborate,

network, problem solve, and use time and resources effectively. Cohort members will identify a professional objective to address in their respective institution and, as a capstone project, carry it out to realize a lasting impact.

"I'm honored to have been selected for the NextLevel Fellowship Program, showcasing not only my dedication, but also Athens State's commitment to advancing career and technical education (CTE)," said Dr. Kandalec-Holm. "This opportunity will bring valuable insights to enhance our CTE programs, ensuring they stay at the forefront of innovation and industry partnerships. As we prepare the next generation of CTE instructors in Alabama, my participation in this fellowship program further positions our university as a leader in integrating technology and digital tools. I'm excited about the impact this will have on Athens State, reflecting our dedication to excellence in education and CTE innovation."

ACTE's mission is to provide educational leadership in developing a competitive workforce. The organization strives to empower educators to deliver high quality CTE programs that ensure all students are positioned for career success. The NextLevel Postsecondary CTE Fellowship at ACTE is sponsored by ECMC Foundation. ■



### **ATHENS STATE RECEIVES \$2 MILLION GRANT TO INCREASE POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION ACCESS TO STUDENTS IN RURAL AREAS**

**A**thens State University has been awarded a \$2.2 million Department of Education Rural Postsecondary & Economic Development (RPED) Grant to improve rates of postsecondary education enrollment, persistence, and completion among students in rural communities. The RPED grant program promotes the development of high-quality career pathways aligned to high-skill, high-wage, and in-demand industry sectors and occupations in the region.

The Biden-Harris Administration awarded a total of \$44.5 million in RPED grants to 22 institutions of higher education. Athens State was the only university to receive

this grant in the state of Alabama. The University's grant will run through the end of 2027 and will be used to leverage instructional technology, comprehensive wrap-around student support, and innovative educational outreach strategies to provide rural students with flexible and accessible learning opportunities to help them to succeed in postsecondary education and high-paying careers.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, only 29% of individuals between the ages of 18 and 24 are enrolled in higher education in America's rural communities, compared to almost 48% of their counterparts in urban areas and 42% in suburban areas. In addition to navigating how to pay for college and the application process, students in rural areas face other barriers in accessing and completing college, including reliable transportation, food and housing insecurity, and access to health care and high-speed internet.

"With this generous grant from the U.S. Department of Education, we aim to bridge the educational gap for rural students by not only increasing exposure and recruitment efforts but also by offering comprehensive support services," said Dr. Katherine Kandalec-Holm, Interim Dean of the College of Education. "Our focus on flexible course delivery, mental health, telehealth, and online tutoring reflects our dedication to the holistic success of every student. This funding will empower us to broaden our reach, enhance student support services, and create a more accessible and flexible learning environment."

This grant opens doors to a new era of education for rural students in Alabama. We believe in the transformative power of accessible education and are excited to implement flexible course designs and support services that cater to the unique needs of our students, fostering a community of learning that transcends traditional boundaries."

"This grant will help us continue our legacy of providing engaging, flexible learning opportunities for students from rural communities," said Dr. Lee Vartanian, Interim Provost & Vice President for Academic Affairs and Student Services. "I look forward to seeing the immediate impact this program will have on current and future students." ■



### **ATHENS STATE ESTABLISHES JOINT ENROLLMENT BSN PROGRAM WITH WALLACE STATE - HANCEVILLE**

Wallace State Community College in Hanceville and Athens State University have signed a Memorandum of Understanding to establish a new Joint Enrollment BSN program that will allow students to receive their Associate Degree in Nursing (ADN) and Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) degree simultaneously. In addition to better serving students, the program's benefits will extend to the consumers of the healthcare and professional nursing workforce across the nation.

Students completing the program will be enrolled in nursing courses concurrently at both institutions and will graduate from both Wallace State - Hanceville with an Associate Degree in Nursing (ADN)

and Athens State with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Nursing (BSN) in separate ceremonies with separate diplomas.

"This collaborative partnership between both institutions of higher learning demonstrates a commitment to the nursing profession," said Dr. Mark Reynolds, Chief Nurse Administrator at Athens State University. "The Joint Enrollment program is a wonderful opportunity for motivated nursing students at Wallace State."

"Wallace State's School of Nursing is a model for the entire state and we are excited to partner with them on a Joint Enrollment Program that delivers highly trained nurses and enhanced patient care to healthcare systems across Alabama," said Dr. David Ragsdale, Dean of Athens State's College of Arts and Sciences.

The Joint Enrollment BSN program will launch in Fall 2024. Athens State also offers an RN to BSN



degree program which provides a pathway for success to registered nurses already working in their field to complete their baccalaureate degree in nursing. For more information, please visit [athens.edu/BSN](https://athens.edu/BSN). ■

### **PHI THETA KAPPA ALUMNI ASSOCIATION AWARDED FIVE STAR CHAPTER HONORS FOR FIFTH CONSECUTIVE YEAR**

**T**he Athens State University Phi Theta Kappa Alumni Association (PTK) has been awarded Five Star Chapter Honors for the fifth year in a row. The Five Star Chapter Plan engages chapters in Phi Theta Kappa programs and celebrates their accomplishments. It outlines ten essentials to creating an engaged chapter and organizes them into themed categories, or “stars,” including Reach, Engage, Network, Lead, and Discover. All requirements must be completed during a calendar year.

“Achieving Five Star status once is an accomplishment; achieving it for five years in a row is a legacy,” said Dr. Katherine Kandalec Holm, Interim Dean of the College of Education. “We are proud to announce that Athens State Alumni chapter of Phi Theta Kappa international student honor society continues to exemplify excellence

in education, leadership, and service.”

“As the lead advisor, I am incredibly proud of our PTK students and the entire school community for achieving Five Star status for the fifth year,” Dr. Kandalec Holm continued. “This recognition speaks volumes about our collective dedication to creating an environment that nurtures academic success and global citizenship.”

Phi Theta Kappa is an alumni organization, comprised of members initiated at their respective two-year institutions. They are the premier honor society recognizing the academic achievement of students at associate degree-granting colleges and helping them to grow as scholars and leaders. The Society is made up of more than 3.8 million members and nearly 1,300 chapters in 10 countries, with approximately 240,000 active members in the nation’s colleges.

Information about PTK membership details can be found at [athens.edu/student-organization/phi-theta-kappa](https://athens.edu/student-organization/phi-theta-kappa). ■





**COMING SOON:**  
**Bachelor of Fine Arts in**  
**Theatre**

*With concentrations in:*

• Performance • Musical Theatre •

• Production and Design •



Aspiring theatre students will soon have a new option to complete their education en route to their dream career as Athens State will be introducing a new Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) in Theatre program. The upcoming program will be housed in the Alabama Center for the Arts in Decatur, Alabama. As opposed to the existing Drama program, which came out of the English program and focused more heavily on literature, the new BFA will allow professors to provide a more focused, production-based and work-oriented education to their students.

Dr. Hugh K. Long, Associate Professor of Drama & Theatre Arts, and William Richardson, Assistant Professor of Drama & Theatre Arts Lighting & Scenic Design, serve as the Theatre Department's faculty. Their passion and knowledge of the world of theatre give students a realistic glimpse into what a career in this field would look like. While Dr. Long earned his BFA at New York University, he "only wished (he) had the option of attending classes and performing in a state-of-the-arts facility like the Alabama Center for the Arts."

"This program will be exciting to students wanting a focused

approach to performance, technical theatre, or musical theatre," said Richardson. "The BFA allows for a focus on the student's specific interest and is intended to prepare them to enter the workforce and work professionally during and after graduation. Students will gain practical hands-on experience in an environment focused on their areas of study and the program is designed to get them direct employment."

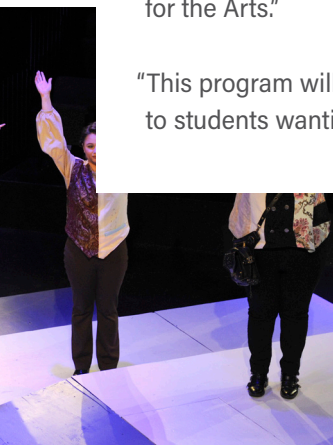
Those enrolled in the BFA will complete a core curriculum that includes courses in acting, directing, stagecraft, theatre history, and dramatic literature. Students will also have the opportunity to choose from three distinct concentrations that allow them to specialize in a particular area of interest: Performance, Musical Theatre, and Production Design and Technology. "Students have been asking for a more practical-based degree for a while, and we are happy to provide this in the BFA," said Richardson.

So why should students choose the new BFA program at the Alabama Center for the Arts? Richardson answered, "The Alabama Center for the Arts provides a comprehensive, artistic environment surrounding students with colleagues in all

aspects of the arts. Students of the BFA program will gain a top-quality education in state-of-the-art facilities for a fraction of the price of any similar program in the state. Not only will students learn in one of the best environments in the region, they will also learn in a community of artists and have opportunities to work across disciplines and with artists in many other fields. The Alabama Center for the Arts provides a unique community of artists all focused on the success and development of our students."

Dr. Long added, "This new BFA program presents a unique chance for young actors, directors, and designers to complete their education by performing and creating through an experiential learning curriculum tailored to their individual interests. We're all so excited to bring this opportunity to our students from all over North Alabama, and beyond, to give them the resources and the training to prepare them for an artistic career."

Application information for the BFA in Theatre will be coming soon! ■





Hebren  
Unveiled



*Starting in 1956, Hebrew the Bear has appeared on the Athens State University campus in various ways. The first mascot costume was created to symbolize the spirit of then Athens College, and its long, storied history. From cheering on the basketball team to being bear-napped multiple times, Hebrew quickly became a campus-wide celebrity and leverage for students to fundraise for local charities. While much has changed at Athens State since the days of late-night athletic events and fraternity pranks, Hebrew has remained a tried-and-true figure on campus.*

**S**amuel Barker graduated from Athens State on April 27, 2024, with a Bachelor of Science in Computer Science with a concentration in software and systems and a minor in mathematics. At his commencement ceremony, Barker surprised faculty, staff, and students by revealing his alter-ego, Hebrew the Bear. Barker made his way down the aisle in Carter Gymnasium and across the stage to accept his diploma and shake hands with Dr. Catherine Wehlburg, Interim President. Barker was in full graduation garb; only one thing was different. As Barker accepted his diploma he surprised everyone by revealing Hebrew's paws. The secret was out and his alter-ego revealed. The reveal also signified that he would no longer have the joy of being "the bear".

"Doing a graduation reveal was like a dream," said Barker. "After hyping up the campus and community at various events for a couple of

years, completely disguised, it was really fun to wear the paws while showing my face."

Samuel Barker enrolled at Athens State University in 2022 with his eyes set on being an engaged member of the campus community. His mom was a student at Athens State in 2018 and shared many aspects of her Athens State experience with her son. She encouraged him to look into Athens State programs that were aligned with his interests, shared how engaged faculty members were with students, and eventually, she showed him social media content that showcased Hebrew the Bear.

Barker recalled thinking, "Wow, I wish I was a student at Athens State because I want to do that."

Four years later, Barker was able to share this desire with Amy Garrison, Director of Student Engagement, during his Athenian

**“ To me, the bear represents courage, persistence, optimism, and victory. ”**

Ambassador interview. Athenian Ambassadors are the official hosts of Athens State University and represent the institution at various campus and community events.

"Samuel was a terrific ambassador," said Garrison. "As Hebrew the Bear, he connected with the community through his warm and energetic presence."

Barker was drawn to the leadership development opportunities and positive campus life experience he could have as an Ambassador, and the role became even more interesting to Barker when he learned that he could also represent the University as Hebrew.

"To me, the bear represents courage, persistence, optimism, and victory," said Barker. "I have been able to represent a school that has done a fantastic job with helping students, inspiring students, and pushing them along their college and career path."

He went on to explain how faculty and staff always encouraged him to do his best and persevere even when challenges arose. While at Athens State Barker chose to face challenges head on, with optimism, and get the job done to the best of his ability. Barker truly exemplified the Athens State spirit in and out of the mascot costume.



*Dr. Catherine Wehlburg, Interim President, congratulates Samuel on his graduation.*

"Samuel Barker embodied the spirit of Athens State University with his portrayal of Hebrew the Bear, our beloved mascot, while also exemplifying exceptional leadership and academic excellence," said Dr. Wehlburg.

Through Barker's dedication and passion for Athens State and assuming the role of Hebrew, he was able to manage the schedule and daily tasks with a can-do attitude. Hebrew is requested at all types of events. From Higher

**“ I believe in Athens State and the work that is being done here. ”**

Education Day at the state's capitol to holiday parties, an appearance from Hebrew is highly sought after.

When asked about a day in the life of Hebrew, Barker humbly commented, "My hat is off to Athens State and Student Activities for making the mascot role organized, equipped with costuming, and prioritized through the help of a Hebrew Handler."

A Hebrew Handler accompanies Hebrew to events, ensures that Hebrew navigates event locations safely, and assists with props and costumes. As Barker elaborated on scheduling, event attendance, costume logistics, and more, never once did he complain. He proudly spoke of his time as Hebrew and how much he believes in Athens State.

"I believe in Athens State and the work that is being done here," stated Barker. "It was an honor to be Hebrew for two years because I had the opportunity to give back what had been given to me."

Commencement ceremonies were always Barker's favorite Hebrew appearances, and what a full-circle moment it was being able to walk the stage as both a graduate and mascot. He joyfully articulated the rewarding experience it always was to see the smiles and pride

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that graduates shared with friends and family at the Commencement Reception each year.

"I got to see so much emotion at the receptions for each college," said Barker. "Everyone wants a picture with Hebrew, and I saw up close how each graduate was so proud of the moment. Proud of what they had accomplished and expectant for the road ahead."

What is ahead for Samuel Barker? First, he knows that Hebrew is in good hands under the advisement of the Office of Student Activities.

Second, Barker is pursuing a career in the computer science and tech industry and is open to wherever the field may take him. Through his rigorous coursework in the ABET-accredited Computer Science program at Athens State, he has been equipped with a depth of knowledge and is ready to step into a variety of tech-related career opportunities.

"We look forward to continuing our connection with Samuel as an alum and celebrating his future success," stated Dr. Welhburg.

Barker explained that Athens State will always hold a special place in his heart and that he would like to return for a Masters in Computer Science one day. Barker confidently stated that, "Athens State will always be there." He is right. Athens State will always provide a support system, connection point, and further education opportunities for graduates. ■





**Tyler Jones, Executive Director**

## Entrepreneurial Center Launches in Downtown Athens

A new entrepreneurial center has opened its doors in downtown Athens! Athens State University's Center for Lifelong Learning has become LaunchBox, a center that provides coaching, counseling, and consultation to business startups, small businesses, and businesses in transition.

Operated by Athens State University, LaunchBox strives to support local entrepreneurial growth, build stronger, more resilient small businesses, and support economic development efforts by creating more jobs and investment in our local communities.

Located at 121 South Marion Street on the historic downtown square in Athens, LaunchBox provides a multi-use, collaborative workspace for area entrepreneurs, small

businesses, idea makers, and creative types to gather, meet, and work. The historic building has converted nearly 9,000 square feet of former retail space into a facility that provides members reliable broadband, work stations, back-office amenities, and meeting spaces.

The facility offers a variety of professional networking events, workshops, and professional development opportunities, including free educational programming and training in areas such as how to start a business, developing a business plan, human resource management, and leadership development. Partnering with local consultants, with support from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), this programming is designed to generate ideas to solve local issues.

On April 1, LaunchBox welcomed Tyler Jones as its new Executive Director. He will work alongside Kim Dunnavant, Director of Operations and Dana Waldrop, Administrative Assistant. Jones

is a third-generation, dynamic entrepreneur hailing from the heart of Decatur, Alabama, where his innovative spirit has thrived. Over a span of more than a decade, he has spearheaded the creation of four successful ventures, each reflecting his unwavering commitment to adaptability and innovation. Jones is eager to leverage his experience to support aspiring entrepreneurs and small business owners in Athens-Limestone County.

LaunchBox is a collaborative partnership between Athens State University, the Athens-Limestone Chamber of Commerce, City of Athens, Limestone County Economic Development Association, and Athens Main Street, with support from ARC and the USDA.

To find out more about LaunchBox or sign up for one of the facility's professional workshops, visit [athenslaunchbox.com](http://athenslaunchbox.com).





*"Athens State has maintained a presence in downtown Athens for 14 years. Over the last several months, we reached out to a number of community and business leaders in an effort to gauge how we might best serve the Tennessee Valley region, and the decision was made to establish a business incubator that would benefit small businesses through space rentals, training, and counseling.*

*We have officially transitioned to what is now known as "The LaunchBox" that will help grow our economy by providing much needed services to small and transitioning businesses. We look forward to working with all of our strategic partners in North Alabama and beyond."*

Dr. Keith Ferguson, Vice President for University Advancement

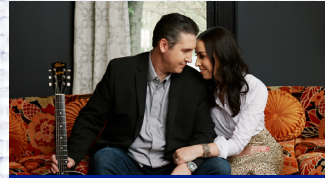


# TENNESSEE VALLEY OLD TIME Fiddlers CONVENTION

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**OCT. 2 - 5**

Cost of admission wristbands will be \$20 per adult for Thursday, Friday, and Saturday single day tickets or \$30 per adult for a three-day pass. Children under 12 will be admitted free with a paid adult. The preview night concert scheduled for Wednesday evening is free and does not require the purchase of an admission ticket. Tickets are on sale and competition registration is now open at [TVOTFC.org](http://TVOTFC.org).



**SPECIAL GOSPEL CONCERT – FREE & OPEN TO THE PUBLIC!**

**DARIN & BROOKE ALDRIDGE**

**WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 2 | 7:30 PM**



**THE MCLAIN FAMILY BAND**

**THURSDAY, OCTOBER 3 | 6:30 PM**



**AUTHENTIC UNLIMITED**

**THURSDAY, OCTOBER 3 | 7:30 PM**



**DARIN & BROOKE ALDRIDGE**

**FRIDAY, OCTOBER 4 | 6 PM**



**MICHAEL CLEVELAND & FLAMEKEEPER**

**SATURDAY, OCTOBER 5 | 7:30 PM**



## SEEING STUDENTS SUCCEED:

# MEET KATELYN DOOLEY

Meet Katelyn Dooley, a 2023 graduate from the Athens State University Behavioral Science program and recipient of the Athena Scholarship Award. Dooley says through her studies she was strengthened personally and professionally.

Dooley enrolled at Athens State University following a tragic housefire that caused her family to lose everything. She began the hard work of self-evaluation after the loss of her home and realized if she wanted to get different results in life, she needed to start taking different steps to get there.

"I knew that I wanted to provide a better life for my family," she shared.

"I had to choose the next right thing, one day at a time."

After the fire and birth of her third child, Dooley knew the next *right* thing was to finish her degree. Anyone can affirm that going back to college, rebuilding your home, and caring for three young children simultaneously is no small feat.

"I remember nursing Lucy and

typing with one finger to complete assignments," said Dooley. "I would ask myself, 'Why did I do this?'"

She knew in those still and reflective moments while feeding her baby that if she did not press on and pursue her degree, then she never would. She shared that she waited so long to go back to school because she did not believe in herself. Today, Katelyn Dooley does



believe in herself. She is a woman, mom, wife, friend, and counselor in the making – and no one can stop her.

Dooley's "why" comes from a deep-seeded desire to be a "stepping stone" for people struggling with their mental health. Her next step is to attain her master's degree in clinical and mental therapy in pursuit of becoming a licensed clinician.

Dooley displayed an enormous amount of grit and determination to be where she is today. She stated that through her personal and

professional work in mental health, she hopes to help people move forward from their pain to a healthy position in life.

### **About the Behavioral Science Program**

The Behavioral Science degree program at Athens State University is committed to guiding students to become psychologically and sociologically literate citizens of the 21st century by providing a broad and balanced understanding of psychology and sociology as a social and natural science. Students pursuing a behavioral science degree gain knowledge, skills, and

values consistent with the science and application of psychological and sociological principles. Visit [athens.edu/programs/behavioral-science](https://athens.edu/programs/behavioral-science) or scan the code below to learn more.



**NICHOLAS RIZZO, SPRING '24**

**Bachelor of Fine Arts (Graphic Design)**

Meet Nicholas Rizzo, a recent College of Arts and Sciences alumnus who studied at the Alabama Center for the Arts. Rizzo recently attained a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree with a concentration in graphic design. During his time at Athens State, Rizzo actively contributed to the vibrant community on campus.

A significant highlight of Rizzo's journey was his internship with Athens State's Office of Marketing and Communications for the Fall 2023 semester. In this role, he actively contributed to photography and graphic design projects for the University. This internship provided real-world experience and refined his skills in a professional setting. He also enjoyed designing for various student projects, including a campus movie night and buttons for students' backpacks.

Beyond academics, Rizzo has been an engaged member of the campus community. Serving as the President of Kappa Pi International Art Honor Society and an Athenian Ambassador, he embraced leadership roles, finding joy in giving back to the institution that shaped his future.



**BROOKE SINYARD, SPRING '24**

**Bachelor of Science in Education  
(Early Childhood)**

Brooke Sinyard is a recent College of Education graduate, where she received her Bachelor of Science in Early Childhood Education and a certification in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Sinyard chose Athens State because of the University's strong reputation for producing highly qualified education graduates as well as the supportive environment offered by the University.

Sinyard's time at Athens State University was marked by her exceptional campus involvement and leadership within the education community. She demonstrated unwavering commitment to educational excellence by setting a positive example and contributing to the University's supportive culture. "One of the most impactful experiences during my time at Athens State was the opportunity to encourage educational pursuits among my fellow students," said Sinyard. "It was an honor to cheer on and support my peers as they sought to complete their degree at Athens State."

**AMANDA VENA, SUMMER '24**

***Bachelor of Science in Accounting***

Amanda Vena is a current student in the College of Business studying to earn her bachelor's in Accounting. She anticipates graduating in the Summer of 2024. Vena's decision to complete her degree at Athens State was influenced by her family's legacy of Athens State graduates and the University's reputation for affordability and flexibility.

Throughout her time at Athens State, Vena has not only excelled academically but has also emerged as a prominent student leader that actively contributes to the campus community with the Athenian Ambassadors, Accounting Club, and Phi Theta Kappa Alumni Association. Each group has been instrumental in her personal growth and development as a leader.

"I chose to become involved in student organizations to connect with students, teachers, and the community," said Vena. "This has strengthened my interpersonal skills which will help me succeed in life and my career."



**GABRIELLE HARRIS, FALL '25**

***Bachelor of Science in Education  
(Health & Physical Education)***

Gabrielle Harris is a senior at Athens State pursuing a Bachelor of Education with a concentration in Health and Physical Education. She anticipates to graduate in the Fall of 2025. Harris embraces student involvement at Athens State and holds a position with the Bonner Leader Program (BLP). Harris is also a member of the Alpha Sigma Lambda Honor Society.

Harris expressed gratitude for the campus community and growth opportunities made available to her. Athens State has not only prepared her academically but has also provided practical experiences, such as tutoring and working with children with disabilities and behavioral challenges.

"I want to be a positive voice for children and adults in a negative world," said Harris, when asked about what comes to mind regarding her future career. "Athens State has given me so much and built my confidence to be a positive leader."

# CLASS NOTES

JAN - APR 2024

## Current Students

- Leda Rice has started a new position as Human Resources Generalist at First Solar.
- Ruth Seibert was recently featured in an article by the Decatur Daily.

## Class of 2023

- Meleia Foster Chappell has started a new position as a Regional Human Resource Business Partner with Benjamin Moore.

## Class of 2022

- Spencer Bell was included in Hartselle Enquirer's "20 Under 40" feature.

## Class of 2020

- Mollie Smith, Class of 2020 & 2022, has received an award from Lions International for her presidential excellence in the Gadsden Lions Club.

## Class of 2017

- Casey Smith accepted a new role as Product Manager of Services - Cell Biology Division at Discovery Life Sciences.

## Class of 2013

- Chris Moss, Class of 2013 & 2017, started a new position as Trade Compliance Analyst at Peraton.
- Danny Clem has authored two books - *Love Lost, Lost Love* and *The Library of Expediency*.

- Travis Sharp has released his second poetry book, *Monoculture*.

## Class of 2012

- James Harding became the Assistant Principal of Curry Middle School in Walker County in July 2023.

## Class of 2009

- Bradley Sides had a short story featured on the popular literary podcast LeVar Burton Reads, and he recently sold his next magical realism short story collection titled *Crocodile Tears Didn't Cause the Flood*.

## Class of 2008

- Cody McCain has obtained his EdD from University of the Cumberland.

## Class of 2007

- Isaiah Craig has begun a new position as the Associate Pastor / Missions at Rainsville First Baptist Church.

## Class of 2003

- Lorenzo Jackson has been named a member of the Morgan County Sports Hall of Fame Class of 2024.

## Class of 2002

- Natasha Smallwood has been hired as the new Albertville girls basketball coach.

## Class of 2000

- Sharon Porter accepted a position with NASA at Marshall Space Flight Center. She is also President of the Huntsville Chapter of National Contract Management Association (NCMA).
- Helen Crider has been hired as the Director of Admissions at Athens State University.

## Class of 1998

- Emily Niezer Johnston sought election in the March 5 Republican Party primary for the position of circuit judge for Alabama's 32nd Judicial Circuit in Cullman County.

## Class of 1997

- Eric Smith recently received the 2024 Eugene Current-Garcia Award for Distinction in Literary Scholarship from the Association of College English Teachers of Alabama (ACETA).
- Lesley Westmoreland Smothers has been named a member of the Morgan County Sports Hall of Fame Class of 2024.

## Class of 1993

- Joel Schrenk has been named the new football coach for Elkmont High School.

## Class of 1992

- Marcia Holmes currently serves as the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Mission Capabilities.

## Class of 1991

- Doris Posey has published a book commemorating her heritage and family with a tribute to the people, places, and traditions of a past generation in a historic city. The book is called *South Holyoke, One Legacy in Time*.

## Class of 1989

- Jimmy Bright recently released his latest book, *Able Abel*.

## Class of 1984

- Keith Barnes has been added to the Board of Directors for Pets Are Loving Support, Inc. (PALS).

- David Woodard recently retired as the Payroll Accountant with the Morgan County Board of Education after 32 years of service.

## Class of 1980

- Gary Orr has been named a member of the Morgan County Sports Hall of Fame Class of 2024.

## Class of 1978

- Randy Nelson has been named a member of the Morgan County Sports Hall of Fame Class of 2024.

## Class of 1967

- Randall Murphree recently published an article on the American Family Association's website

## Class of 1954

- Louis Johnson was a student pastor that attended Athens College 1951-1954. He retired in 1972 but preached 20 more years. Rev. Johnson lives in Tennessee and turned 92 years old in February 2024.

Let your fellow Athens State alumni see what you've been up to! Submit your alumni updates at [athens.edu/alumni](https://athens.edu/alumni).

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