

BREAKING BLUES

BLUEFIELD STATE UNIVERSITY

SPRING 2026



Paige Whittington's Journey at Bluefield State

—In Her Words

From Classroom Confidence to Career Readiness

Joseph Boadi's Bluefield State
Journey

Hojahnea Hodges

Starting Before You Feel Ready

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Cover Picture features the 2026 graduating
cohort, l - r: WV Senator Mark Maynard,
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"Jammy" Jamkhandi

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consists of students enrolled in the Humanities
– English and Strategic Public Relations and
Communications.

PAIGE WHITTINGTON'S JOURNEY AT BLUEFIELD STATE

— In Her Own Words



A proven leader, Paige shares the award from ASA for her service.

In what ways did Bluefield State help shape your confidence and professional skills?

Bluefield State has played such an important role in shaping both my confidence and my professional skills. As a first-generation college student, I came here not entirely sure of what to expect, but the opportunities and support I've had on campus have truly prepared me for life after graduation. Through my involvement in many organizations, I've gained leadership experience and learned how to communicate and collaborate with others. Being a student-athlete has also taught me time management, resilience, and how to work under pressure.

My internships with Bluefield State athletics and the CIAA in media and marketing have given me the hands-on experience in the field I want to pursue, and being the campus photographer has allowed me to develop my creative side. These roles have not only built my professional skills but also connected me with mentors and networks that will help me reach my goal of becoming a Sports Information Director or working in creative media at the collegiate level.

Bluefield State also gave me the opportunity to play softball overseas in both Italy and Spain. That experience gave me a whole new perspective of what I am capable of.

Overall, Bluefield State has helped me find my voice, step into leadership, and believe in myself, all while preparing me for a successful career after graduation.

How did your time at Bluefield State prepare you to work in high-level or professional environments?

My time at Bluefield State prepared me for high-level and professional environments by giving me opportunities to apply what I've learned in real-world settings. Through my internships with Bluefield State Athletics and the CIAA, I've gained hands-on experience I cannot get in the classroom. Being put in spaces where I had no business being and having to talk to people has also put me in the best position to learn the discipline and communication skills needed for professional environments. All of these experiences have helped me build the

confidence to contribute and thrive in professional environments after graduation.

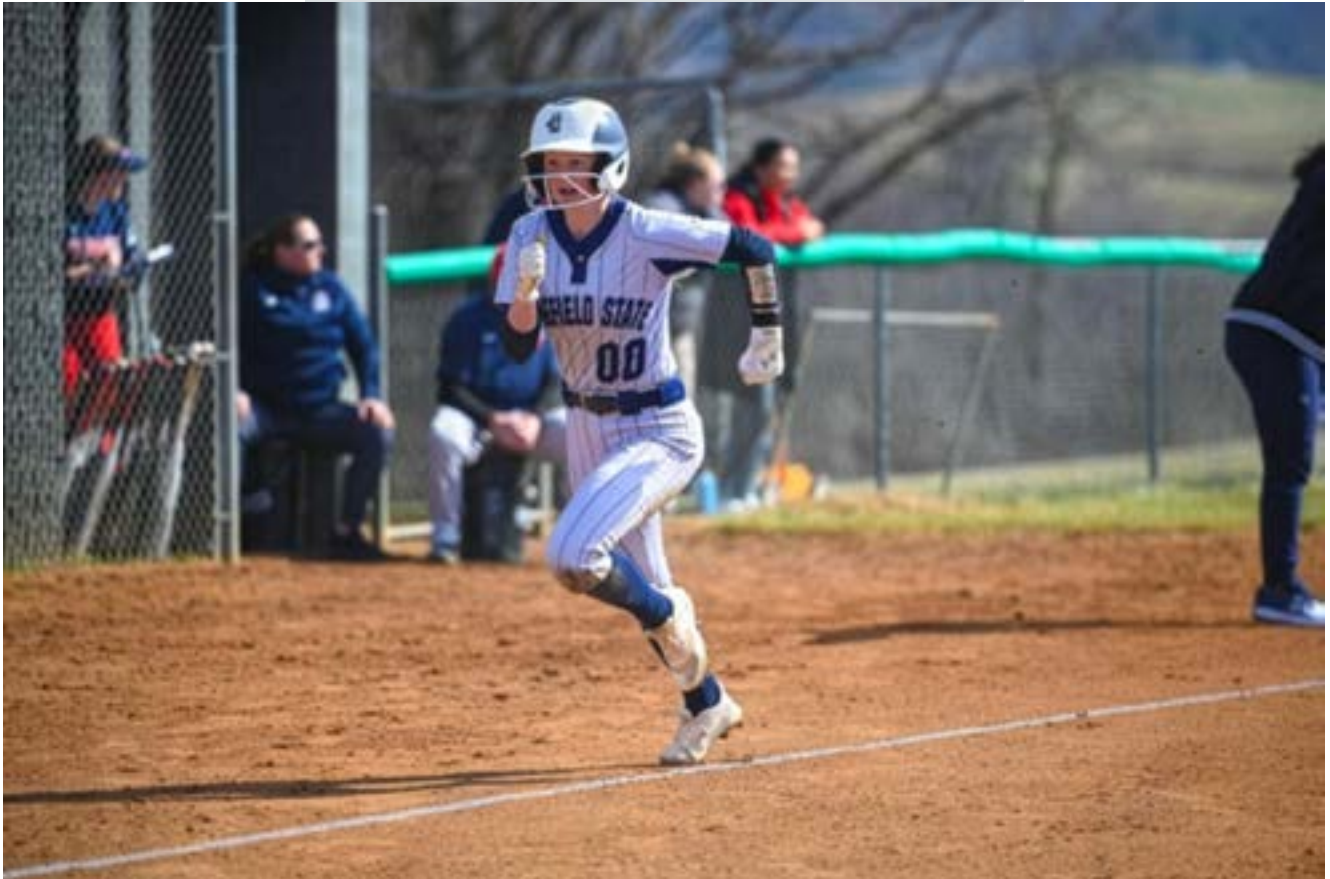
Were you involved in student leadership or campus organizations? If so, how did those roles impact your growth?

Yes, I've been fortunate to be involved in several organizations, including FBLA, SAAC (representative), SGA (College of Business Senator), and ASA (VP of Finance and Director of Communications).

Each role pushed me to step outside of my comfort zone and develop leadership skills that I'll carry with me long after graduation. Being part of these groups gave me the confidence to speak up, take initiative, and learn how to work effectively with different personalities. They also taught me how important it is to represent not just myself, but also my peers and the campus community.



Paige participated in the Student Government Association's Food Lions Community Service day activities.



An agile and disciplined athlete, Paige demonstrates focus and discipline on and off the softball field.

What experiences at Bluefield State taught you the most about communication and collaboration?

My experiences as both a student-athlete and as a media and marketing intern taught me the most about communication and collaboration. On the softball field, I had to learn how to work as part of a team, trust others, and stay accountable in my role of captain.

Off the field, the work required constant communication, meeting deadlines, and collaborating with staff and mentors. Those opportunities taught me how to balance creativity with professionalism while making sure everyone's voice was heard.

Can you share an example of how focus, discipline, and dedication during college helped you reach a career or personal goal?

Balancing being a double major, a student-athlete, and intern while maintaining a 3.2 GPA has required a lot of focus, discipline, and dedication. I try to just stay very organized and have my days and times planned out by the hour. This has helped me stay on top of things as well as stay balanced. Staying disciplined with my time, priorities, and responsibilities has shown me that I can handle the pressure of high-level environments.

How has your ability to navigate different environments both academic and professional been influenced by your time at Bluefield State?

Bluefield State has given me the opportunity to step into a variety of environments—whether it's in the classroom, on the field, or in professional settings. Moving between those spaces taught me how to adapt quickly, stay confident, and bring my best



Paige's versatility is evident in various environments!

self no matter where I am. Being a first-generation college student, I had to learn how to navigate academic settings while also taking on leadership and professional roles. That balance has prepared me to succeed in diverse environments and to approach new challenges with confidence.

If you could give current students one piece of advice based on your journey, what would it be?

My advice would be to take advantage of every opportunity that comes your way. Don't be afraid to step into roles that challenge you or feel unfamiliar, because those experiences will help you grow the most. Whether it's joining an organization, engaging in an internship, or just connecting with a mentor, those moments can open doors you never imagined. Looking back, the chances I took to get involved made all the difference in shaping who I am today.

How do you plan to give back to BSU?

I plan to give back to BSU by using the skills and experiences I've gained to help create opportunities for future students. Whether it's through mentoring, coming back to speak with student-athletes, or supporting the athletics and media programs, I want to be a resource for those who come after me. Bluefield State has given me so much, and I want to help the next generation of students find the same confidence and opportunities that I got here. I also plan on coming back next year to obtain a master's and hopefully give back to athletics and give kids in my position an opportunity I had.



Paige found time for many things at Bluefield State and here she is helping the campus look inviting.

ASHLEY ADAMS:

A LEGACY OF GRACE, LEADERSHIP, AND QUIET EXCELLENCE

By Honors Scholar Victoria Hall, Feature Writer



Ashley was privileged to intern at Microsoft.



Apple/HBCU Scholar 2024 – 2025
Pictured with Apple interns at Intern Day event, Summer 2024.

Long after achievements are listed and titles are forgotten, what endures is how a person made others feel. At Bluefield State University, Ashley Adams will be remembered not only for what she accomplished, but for the warmth, leadership, and quiet excellence with which she carried herself.

Over the past four years, Ashley has distinguished herself as an Honors Scholar, student leader, innovator, and steady source of encouragement to those around her. Driven, thoughtful, and deeply intentional, she built a college experience defined as much by character as by achievement.

Ashley credits Bluefield State's close-knit environment for helping shape the confidence she carries today. In a setting where opportunities were never out of reach, she consistently chose to step beyond her comfort zone and into spaces that challenged her to grow.

“One of the interesting ironies is that Bluefield State is a relatively small school, yet that environ-

ment pushed me to grow in ways I might not have at a larger institution,” Ashley shared. “Because of its size, I often found myself stepping outside of my comfort zone and getting involved in different opportunities.”

That mindset became a defining part of her journey.

As a Computer Science major, Ashley pursued academic excellence while broadening her studies through four minors — Data Science, Web Design, Information Systems, and Software Development — embracing every opportunity to expand her knowledge. Beyond the classroom, she immersed herself in campus life. She served as the student representative for the Honors College Committee, contributed to organizations such as the Computer Society, the International Student Organization, and Student Today, Alumni Tomorrow (STAT), and helped co-found the Black Students Alliance.

Wherever she served, Ashley became known for bringing both competence and kindness.



Presenting our solution during the TMCF x Kroger Innovation Challenge (2023).



TMCF x Kroger Innovation Challenge (2023).



Participation in multiple Pitch experiences.

"Some of my biggest growth came from stepping into rooms I wasn't fully ready for but chose to show up anyway." -Ashley Adams

"My time at Bluefield State University helped me develop a quiet confidence in who I am and what I bring to the table," she said. "Through academic challenges, leadership roles, and professional opportunities, I learned how to carry myself with intention, communicate with clarity, and show up prepared in every space I enter."

Ashley's story is also one of resilience. Arriving in the United States from Jamaica, Ashley began college while adapting to a new country, a new academic environment, and an entirely new chapter of life. Even then, she set ambitious goals for herself.

After her freshman year, Ashley pursued a summer internship despite hearing that freshmen, particularly international students, rarely secured those opportunities. Instead of accepting doubt, she built projects, expanded her network, and remained

committed to her goals. That summer, she earned not one, but two internships, ultimately spending the season at Microsoft. She was later recognized as an Apple HBCU Scholar, further reflecting a path shaped by preparation, persistence, and vision.

Yet what sets Ashley apart most is not only where she has gone, but how she has moved through each space — with humility, grace, and a desire to open doors for others.

"Giving back to Bluefield State University means helping ensure that the next generation of students, especially young women, have access to opportunities and mentorship," she said. "As a woman in technology, I understand how important representation and mentorship can be."

She hopes to remain connected to the university through mentorship, and future support, helping



Learning beyond the classroom at cybersecurity conferences with peers.

create pathways for the students who follow after her.

For current students still finding their footing, Ashley offers the same wisdom that guided her own journey.

“It is okay not to have everything figured out right away,” she said. “Give yourself permission to try new things, step outside of your comfort zone, and learn from both your successes and your setbacks.”

As Bluefield State University celebrates its graduating class, Ashley Adams stands as a reminder that true distinction is not measured only by honors or accolades, but by the lives touched, the opportunities created, and the grace with which success is carried.

Ashley leaves Bluefield State not simply as a graduate, but as the kind of alumna every institution hopes to produce and every student hopes to become. ■

TWO GENERATIONS, ONE FOUNDATION, AND A LEGACY CONTINUED

By Tia Jones, Editor and Feature Writer

For the Flanagan family of Logan, West Virginia, Bluefield State University is more than a university. It is a shared foundation shaped by discipline, leadership, service, and legacy.



Chris and Lexi were both student athletes at Bluefield State Summer 2024.

In 1995, Dr. Chris Flanagan graduated with a degree in chemistry, completing a collegiate journey defined by academic rigor and athletic commitment. A multi-sport athlete, Chris played basketball for the Big Blues and made history as the first individual in the University's history to be a member of the cross-country team for four consecutive years. Balancing collegiate athletics with a demanding science curriculum required endurance and structure, traits that would later define his medical career.

As a legacy student, Lexi understood that attending Bluefield State meant continuing a family story. "Walking the same campus felt bigger than just earning a degree," she reflected. "It felt like continuing a story."

While on campus, Chris was also a founding member of Phi Kappa Gamma Fraternity, further embedding himself in student life. Faculty mentors challenged him to meet high academic standards, particularly within the sciences. That preparation proved critical when he continued his education at the West Virginia School of Osteopathic Medicine. Now an emergency room physician for 25 years and counting, Dr. Flanagan practices at Boone Memorial Hospital, where composure, preparation, and decisive leadership are daily requirements.

He was also the first person in his family to graduate from college, thereby setting a precedent that inspired other family members to follow. For decades, the Flanagan name has remained connected to Bluefield State.

Years later, that legacy became personal for his daughter, Lexi Adkins.

As a legacy student, Lexi understood that attending Bluefield State meant continuing a family story. "Walking the same campus felt bigger than just earning a degree," she reflected. "It felt like continuing a story."

But while the legacy connected her to the past, Lexi built her own path through involvement, leadership, and resilience.

Bluefield State, she says, gave her opportunities "to lead, to fail, to grow, and to try again, all in an environment that still felt supportive and personal." That combination built what she describes as a level of "confidence that feels earned." Professionally, she developed the ability to manage her time effectively, communicate clearly, hold others accountable with grace, and represent something larger than herself. "Those are skills I carry into every room I enter now," she said.



Daddy congratulating daughter during graduation!

Her time on campus was defined by deep involvement. Lexi competed in volleyball and acrobatics and tumbling, participated in Gamma Beta Phi Honor Society and Student Government Association, and served as President of Alpha Sigma Alpha until graduation in 2025.

Balancing athletics, academics, and executive leadership requires discipline. There were seasons when her schedule stretched from sunrise to late evening—practices, meetings, events, and course-work filling nearly every hour. “I had to learn how to perform under pressure,” she explained. “There were nights I left practice, went straight to a meeting, and then stayed up finishing assignments very late.”

“Leading women who are your peers is a different kind of responsibility,” Lexi shared. As president, she led meetings, coordinated events, handled conflict resolution, and worked closely with university administration.

Staying disciplined during those demanding periods helped her gain strength while maintaining leadership responsibilities. More importantly, it reshaped her confidence. “That discipline translated into confidence,” she said. “I realized I was capable of more than I thought.”

Each organization shaped her growth in a different way. Athletics instilled resilience and accountability—the discipline to show up even when exhausted. Gamma Beta Phi reinforced academic excellence and the importance of remaining grounded despite competing demands. But her presidency in Alpha Sigma Alpha stretched her capabilities the most.

“Leading women who are your peers is a different kind of responsibility,” Lexi shared. As president, she led meetings, coordinated events, handled conflict resolution, and worked closely with university administration. She learned how to advocate respectfully, represent her chapter professionally, and make decisions that were not always easy but necessary. “Leadership isn’t about control,” she reflected. “It’s about service.”

Chartering and strengthening a relatively new chapter requires emotional intelligence and patience. Managing different personalities, organizing events, and supporting sorority sisters through personal losses and milestones demanded intentional communication. “Sometimes leadership looks like listening more than speaking,” she said. “I learned how to handle difficult conversations with compassion while still being direct.”

Her sorority sisters—her “ladybugs”—remain one of the most meaningful parts of her experience. Long nights, executive meetings, challenges, and shared victories helped to build bonds that extend far beyond academia. “These are not just my sisters. They’re my family,” she said. “They taught me loyalty, empathy, and the importance of community.”



Chris played basketball while at Bluefield State.

Bluefield State’s close-knit, relationship-driven environment also shaped how she navigates professional spaces today. Building meaningful relationships with professors, coaches, and administrators taught her how to advocate for herself respectfully while maintaining warmth and professionalism. Whether representing her team, her sorority, or her academic pursuits taught her that how she carried herself reflected something bigger than herself.

“Being a student-athlete and sorority president taught me composure,” she explained. “You can’t lead emotionally in every situation. You have to think, respond intentionally, and sometimes put others first.” That maturity now guides her in professional environments, where she walks into rooms confident in her ability to communicate clearly, lead with empathy, and handle pressure.

Looking back, Lexi encourages current students to get involved, even if it feels intimidating. “Some of my biggest growth came from saying yes before I felt ready,” she said. She advises students not to shrink themselves or make themselves diminutive. If they have latent leadership traits within them, she encourages them to step into these roles. If they have ideas, she urges them to voice them. At the same time, she emphasizes balance. Ambition matters—but so does rest – physical, mental, emotional.

For Lexi Adkins, giving back to Bluefield State is deeply personal. “Bluefield State was part of my family’s story before it became mine,” she said. “Now I feel a responsibility to pour back into it as it poured into me.” Giving back means mentoring younger women, supporting student organizations, staying connected, and representing the university well wherever she goes. It means being visible proof that growth beyond campus does not require disconnecting from where you started.

For Dr. Chris Flanagan, Bluefield State University built the academic and personal foundation that prepared him for decades in emergency medicine. For Lexi Adkins, it built the leadership framework, emotional intelligence, and confidence she now carries into every professional space she enters.

Across two generations, one campus shaped both a physician and a leader. Their paths differ, but the values are shared—discipline, resilience, service, and responsibility.

And in doing so, Lexi proves something powerful:

A legacy isn’t just inherited.

It’s continued. ■

FROM NORTH-RHINE WESTPHALIA TO WEST VIRGINIA:

How an Exchange Year Shaped My Path in Law and Global Citizenship

By Selina Poljak, former participant in the Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange Program



Selina managed to spend several hours every week at Second Chance for Cats in Mercer County, West Virginia.

When I completed my apprenticeship as a management assistant in wholesale and foreign trade in Germany in 2022, I knew I wanted to see more of the world – but I did not yet know how deeply one year abroad would change my life. As a Junior Ambassador of the 39th cohort of the Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange program (CBYX), I had the privilege of representing Germany in the United States and promoting cultural exchange and lifelong friendships between the two countries. I was placed in Bluefield, West Virginia for a year – a place that has since become my second home.

Academic Life at Bluefield State University

At BSU, I enrolled in “pre-law” courses to strengthen my understanding of the legal and political systems in the United States and prepare for my future legal studies in Germany. My classes included American National Government, Organizational Behavior, Business Law & Legal Environment, and Contemporary Issues of Criminal Justice. To feed my passion for languages, I also began learning Arabic. This combination of political science, law, and languages gave me a comprehensive perspective on how institutions function and how law shapes society.

I completed the semester with a 4.00 GPA and was honored to be included on the President’s List of Academic Excellence. Alongside my studies, I engaged deeply in campus life: I served as Secretary



Selina Poljak of Germany.



Selina with Carolyn and Jammy Jamkhandi.

of the Student Government Association, was an active member of the International Student Organization, helped manage the women's basketball team, and volunteered at Second Chance for Cats, a local cat rescue center, as well as Bluefield Union Mission, where food and clothing are distributed to people affected by poverty. These experiences taught me that leadership is not only defined by titles, but also by everyday commitment to community and service.

As basketball team manager, I helped organize practice sessions, prepared equipment and jerseys, and supported the team during games – learning how much coordination, trust, and behind-the-scenes work it takes to make a team successful. As Secretary of the Student Government Association, I took minutes, documented decisions, and helped with new policies in support of the student body. This role allowed me to experience, on a small but meaningful scale, how student representation and advocacy can shape campus life.

Becoming an International Student Ambassador

One of the most formative roles during my time at BSU was serving as an International Student Ambassador. In this position, I represented the international student body in policy discussions and acted as a key point of contact for students from around the world. Within this role, I also engaged in the GlobalWestVirginia initiative, where I helped promote exchange programs in Canada and Mexico and support the development of French and Spanish language skills of my peers, to foster a bridge between international and domestic students.

For United Nations Day, I helped organize a city-wide event in Bluefield that showcased traditional cuisine from about thirteen countries. It became a celebration of diversity and a tangible example of how food, language, and stories can bring people together across cultural boundaries. Of course, my German apple cake was not left out!

I also conducted campus tours for delegations, assisted with open days and outreach fairs for young people, and took part in webinars for prospective international students. Through all of these activities, I was actively engaged in promoting cross-cultural understanding and helped strengthen international engagement on campus.

“There could not have been a better placement”

Looking back, I can truly say: there could not have been a better placement for me. I was welcomed in this small town with open arms and warmth. My host, Janet Williamson and her family became my second family. We would sit together and talk for hours. Those first conversations were the beginning of a deep bond that still continues today.

My family in Germany supported me throughout my year abroad from a distance. Yet, as the first person to graduate high school (Abitur in Germany)

and attend university, I had few role models at home regarding academic and professional choices. In the United States, however, every person I met seemed like a puzzle piece that contributed to my development. I experienced immense support, and this made me appreciate my CBYX year and scholarship even more.

Once-in-a-lifetime internship in Washington D.C.

My Congressional Internship program (CIP) in Washington, D.C., in the office of Senator Joe Manchin was an unforgettable and intense time of my life. It was an extraordinary experience to witness senators and members of the House of Representatives in person – during votes, debates, and speeches. The daily calls from citizens across the country, and especially from West Virginia, illustrated how important communication between elected representatives and the public truly is. This experience reinforced my desire to work for the protection of human rights worldwide.



Selina, as were several other CBYX participants from Bluefield State University, was privileged to be selected for the Congressional Internship Program. She interned in the Senate Office of former US Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia.

My work in the Senate office included drafting summaries of committee hearings and preparing briefing notes or memos such as the visibility of exchange programs in West Virginia. One of my memos was attached to a project aimed at improving rural hospital infrastructure, which ultimately was forwarded to the White House. Knowing that my research could contribute, even in a small way, to political decision-making was incredibly motivating.

Another highlight of my time at the Capitol was working as a tour guide. I had the opportunity to guide visitors through the U.S. Capitol, including a group of more than seventy members of the National Guard. Standing in the Rotunda of the Capital for the first time and later taking my last walk through its hallways are memories that will always stay with me. No day during the internship was boring; each was filled with new impressions, responsibilities, and surprises. The CIP gave me direct insight into the U.S. political system and allowed me to grow in huge ways.

From the Capitol to the Courthouse

After my semester at BSU and my internship on Capitol Hill, I returned to West Virginia for another key experience during my exchange year: a four-month internship at the Mercer County Courthouse. There, I conducted research on the U.S. Constitution and the WV State Code, which deepened my understanding of the interaction between constitutional principles and everyday legal practice. I helped draft legal documents, and prepared case summaries to discuss with former Mercer County Circuit Court Judge Derek Swope's team. Additionally, I was able to accompany officers on home visits and to take part in visits to both juvenile and adult correctional facilities. These experiences profoundly shaped my understanding of different life realities and social circumstances.

Working so closely with judges, attorneys, and court staff allowed me to see how abstract legal norms turn into concrete decisions that affect people's lives. This experience confirmed my decision to study law once I returned to Germany. It made clear to me that law is not just a system of rules but also a tool for justice, participation, and the protection of fundamental rights.

A second home

West Virginia is a place I will never forget and I will be forever grateful to the Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange program. The people I met, the breathtaking landscapes I explored, and the second home I found there have shaped me as a person, academically and professionally. My CBYX year showed me how transformative international education can be – especially for first-generation university students.

Every role I took on has contributed to who I am today and to my decision to pursue law and human rights. The puzzle pieces have come together into a clear picture: a commitment to building bridges between cultures, defending democratic values, and using law to strengthen the rights of people around the world. ■

CRACHAD LAING

—BSU INVESTED IN ME,
SO NOW I ENABLE OTHERS

By Crachad Laing, BSU Alumnus



Crachad frequently addresses donors seeking to support his students.

In what ways did Bluefield State help shape your confidence and professional skills after graduation?

Bluefield State helped me develop confidence by placing me in environments where I had to lead, compete, and serve. As a student-athlete on the baseball team for all four years under Coach Geoff Hunter, I learned resilience, accountability, and how to perform under pressure. As President of the International Student Organization, I learned how to advocate for others, organize events, and work with people from diverse backgrounds. These expe-

riences, combined with my engineering technology education, gave me the confidence to step into leadership roles throughout my career.

How did your time at Bluefield State prepare you to work in high-level or professional environments?

Bluefield State prepared me by teaching me how to balance multiple responsibilities while maintaining high standards. Between engineering coursework, baseball, student leadership, and working on campus, I learned time management, discipline, and



Crachad frequently gets donors to support empowering activities of King's College School students in The Bahamas.

professionalism. The expectations of my professors, particularly Dr. Kerry Stauffer and Prof. Erik Baldwin, challenged me to think critically, solve complex problems, and approach challenges with an engineering mindset. Those skills continue to serve me in leadership positions within education and technology.

Were you involved in student leadership or campus organizations? If so, how did those roles impact your growth?

Yes. I served as President of the International Student Organization, which was one of the most impactful leadership experiences of my college career. It gave me the opportunity to represent students from many different cultures and backgrounds while helping build a stronger sense of community on campus. That role taught me how to communicate effectively, build relationships, and lead with empathy. Those skills have been invaluable throughout my professional journey.

What experiences at Bluefield State taught you the most about communication and collaboration?

Baseball taught me the importance of teamwork and trust. Engineering projects taught me how to collaborate to solve difficult problems. Student leadership taught me how to communicate with people who had different perspectives and priorities. Looking back, it was the combination of athletics, academics, and leadership that taught me how to work effectively with others and contribute to a shared goal.

Can you share an example of how focus, discipline, and dedication during college helped you reach a career or personal goal?

One of the defining experiences of my college years was balancing engineering studies, athletics, leadership responsibilities, and a campus job. I worked as a janitor on campus while pursuing my degree and playing collegiate baseball. There were many long days and early mornings, but those experiences

taught me the value of hard work and persistence. The discipline I developed during those years laid the foundation for my career as an educator, technology leader, and STEM advocate.

How has your ability to navigate different environments, both academic and professional, been influenced by your time at Bluefield State?

Bluefield State exposed me to people from many different backgrounds and experiences. As an international student, I learned how to adapt to new environments while staying true to who I am. Through athletics, leadership, work, and academics, I learned how to connect with people from all walks of life.

Today, whether I am working with students, educators, parents, business leaders, or community partners, I draw upon those experiences to build meaningful relationships and create opportunities for others.

If you could give current students one piece of advice based on your journey, what would it be?

Take advantage of every opportunity available to you. Some of the most important lessons I learned came outside the classroom: on the baseball field, through student leadership, through work, and through relationships with mentors and professors. Say yes to opportunities that challenge you, because growth rarely happens inside your comfort zone.

How do you plan to give back to BSU?

I hope to give back through mentorship, professional networking, and creating opportunities for future students. Bluefield State invested in me, and I would welcome the opportunity to support students pursuing careers in STEM, education, technology, and leadership. If my journey can encourage even one student to believe in what is possible, that would be meaningful to me.



Crachad at STEM camp for Bahamian students.

Looking back on your journey, what advice would you lovingly give to current Bluefield State students who are still finding their way?

Don't be discouraged if you don't have everything figured out yet. Most of us didn't. Focus on becoming the kind of person who is willing to learn, work hard, and help others. Success is rarely a straight path. The challenges you're facing today may very well become the experiences that prepare you for your greatest opportunities tomorrow. Trust the process, stay humble, and keep showing up every day. Your future self will thank you for it.

Where am I now and where am I headed to next?

Today, I serve as the Head of Educational Technology at King's College School, Bahamas, a member of the global Inspired Education Group network of private schools. My role focuses on the development, integration, and management of educational technology systems across the school. This includes everything from learning management systems and databases to artificial intelligence initiatives and the onboarding and support of educational tools that enhance teaching and learning.

Beyond my professional responsibilities, I have spent the past seven years leading a local nonprofit organization dedicated to expanding access to engineering and technology education. Through our programs, we have engaged more than 1,000 K-12 students and over 200 teachers across The Bahamas and the United States. We currently maintain a research partnership with The Ohio State University, where we work together to explore and promote best practices in STEM skill development.

Over the years, my work has also provided opportunities to serve as a government consultant, contribute as a published academic researcher, and present at conferences and events both locally and internationally. These experiences have allowed me to advocate for the thoughtful integration of technology in education while collaborating with educators, policymakers, and industry leaders to prepare students for an increasingly technology-driven world.

My experience at Bluefield State University played a significant role in shaping both my career and my approach to leadership. The patience, support,

and genuine care I received from faculty and staff taught me the importance of providing the same level of encouragement and guidance to others. The Engineering Technology program offered an exceptional balance of theory and hands-on application. It was a place where curiosity was encouraged, innovation was constant, and meaningful conversations about engineering happened every day. In many ways, I have spent my career trying to recreate that same environment for students and educators here in The Bahamas.

By my junior year at BSU, I began to seriously consider a career in engineering education. The rigor of the coursework, the complexity of the material, and my limited exposure to engineering concepts made my freshman and sophomore years particularly challenging. However, professors such as Kerry Stauffer, Erik Baldwin, and Sudhakar Jamkhandi made a lasting impact on me. They combined deep expertise with a genuine passion for helping students succeed, each bringing a unique teaching style that resonated with me. As I grew in confidence and capability as an engineering student, I discovered my own passion for helping others learn, grow, and achieve their potential.

That passion ultimately led me from engineering into education and educational technology. While my career path evolved, the problem-solving mindset, technical foundation, and commitment to life-long learning that I developed at BSU continue to influence my work every day. What excites me most about my current role is the opportunity to use technology to expand access, improve learning outcomes, and create opportunities for others. Whether I am working with students in a classroom, advising educational leaders, conducting research, or speaking to audiences around the world, I remain driven by the same mission: helping people develop the skills and confidence needed to succeed in a rapidly changing future. ■



Honors Scholar Hojahnea Hodges of Jamaica enjoyed an internship with Microsoft.

HOJAHNEA HODGES:

STARTING BEFORE YOU FEEL READY

By: Feature Writer Honors Scholar Victoria Hall

"Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." — Hebrews 11:1

For Hojahnea Hodges, this scripture reflects how she has moved through every stage of her journey.

Coming to Bluefield State University as an international student meant stepping into something unfamiliar. Instead of waiting until she felt fully prepared, she learned how to adjust in real time.

"Bluefield State helped me grow into someone who can walk into any room with confidence and clarity," she said.

Being in a smaller environment pushed her to step up. There was no room to blend in. She had to speak, take initiative, and trust her own ideas.

"Because of its size, I had to represent myself, take initiative, and move with confidence."

That mindset carried into the work she did across campus.

Through her role in Career Services, Hojahnea created newsletters like the Bluefield Chronicles and designed campus communications that helped students stay informed and connected. Her work made it easier for students to actually know what opportunities were available and how to access them.

"Creating content taught me how to present information clearly and professionally."

At the same time, she stayed deeply involved in leadership. She served as Vice President of the Computer Society, Secretary of Student Today, Alumni Tomorrow, and helped co-found the Black Students Alliance.

Her role in building the Black Students Alliance left



Hojahnea has enjoyed an internship with Microsoft



Hojahnea attended national and regional tech conferences with fellow BSU Honors Scholars - Shyiana Francis, Victoria Hall, Ashley Adams, and Computer Science Professor Kristin Hicks.

a lasting mark on campus.

“Co-founding the Black Students Alliance allowed me to help create a space for community, representation, and support.”

What started as an idea became something students could rely on, a space where people felt supported and connected. It became a place where students knew they belonged.

That impact continues beyond her time at the university.

In off-campus spaces, she stayed focused on building her professional experience. She applied for internships, refined her skills, and kept putting herself out there, even when results were not immediate.

“Securing internships was a major milestone for me, and it came from consistent effort over time.”

That consistency paid off as she balanced internships, leadership, and academics while maintaining her Honors Scholar status. It showed her how effort over time translates into real opportunities.

“Staying disciplined and focused led to valuable opportunities and real professional growth.”

Her experience as an international student also shaped how she approaches new environments. She had to learn quickly, adjust, and stay confident even when things felt unfamiliar.

“I learned how to communicate across different backgrounds and remain confident even outside of my comfort zone.”

There were moments where that adjustment was not easy. Learning how to navigate a new academic system while building confidence in unfamiliar spaces required her to grow quickly. Over time, those experiences became part of her foundation. They shaped the way she carries herself today, with a level of confidence that comes from having had to figure things out on her own.

Along the way, the people around her made a difference. Mentors and friendships gave her support, especially during moments of transition.

“One person who deeply impacted me was Rebekah Hatch, who encouraged me to take initiative and step forward with confidence.”

Looking back, Hojahnea does not frame her journey as something she had figured out from the beginning. It was something she built over time by taking action.

“Do not wait until you feel ready. Just start.”

That is the advice she carries forward.

As an alumna, she plans to stay connected to Bluefield State by mentoring students and sharing opportunities. She wants to help others navigate the same path, especially those who may not feel ready yet.

For Hojahnea, growth did not come from having all the answers. It came from taking the first step and continuing, even when the path was not clear. And through that, she leaves behind a standard of what it looks like to step forward with purpose, even before you feel ready. ■

FROM THE MINES TO THE MANUSCRIPT:

The Bluefield State Journey of Donald Hylton

By Tia Jones, Editor and Feature Writer



Don Hylton, who graduated from Bluefield State in 1981, is seen here with his father and Grandma Ethel Hylton.



Don received a safety award from his section supervisor, Harold Shrewsbury.

When Don Hylton walked across the graduation stage at Bluefield State College in 1981, personal computers were not yet common, and the institution had not yet gained university status. What the college lacked in modern technology, it made up for in preparation, equipping one Mining Engineering Technology graduate with the foundation for a career defined by leadership, technical expertise, and penmanship.

Graduating magna cum laude with a Bachelor of Science in Mining Engineering Technology and earning membership in Alpha Chi, he entered the coal industry at a time when hands-on knowledge was paramount. The curriculum emphasized practical mining operations and engineering fundamentals — training that would later prove essential as he moved into increasingly complex management roles.

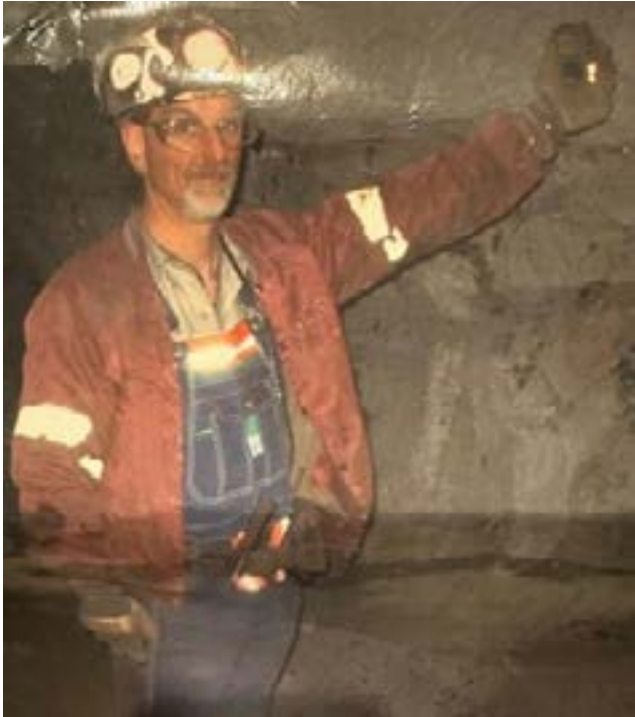
Throughout his career, Don credits his Bluefield State education as the backbone of his success.

As a coal mine shift foreman managing 80 to 100 employees per shift, he relied heavily on lessons learned in Labor-Management Relations from Dr. Steve Bourne. The class not only introduced him to management theory but also prepared him for high-pressure environments. During official investigations conducted by state and federal mine inspectors, often structured like court proceedings, the mock trials in Bourne's class gave him the confidence to respond clearly and succinctly.

Public speaking, another critical skill in mining management, began in the classroom of Language Arts Professor Rita Hill. Early in his career, he conducted safety briefings before crews went underground, addressing standards, procedures, and daily assignments. Though intimidating at first, the foundation laid at Bluefield State allowed him to grow comfortably, leading from the front.

As his career progressed, Don traveled to other

company mines as a conveyor belt coordinator, presenting underground projects and equipment developments. With time and experience, his confidence grew, but he never forgot where those skills began.



Don spent a lifetime in underground coal mines.

Technical instruction from faculty members, including David Klingensmith, Frank Hart, James Davis, Claude Dalton, Ralph Ratliff, and George Featherstone, proved invaluable. Their teaching provided the groundwork for certifications he earned early in his career, including mine foreman certifications in three states, electrical repair and maintenance foreman certifications, a shot firer card permitting the use of explosives, EMT credentials, and company designations such as Fundamentals of Supervision I and II.

His career spanned an impressive range of leadership roles: section foreman on a continuous miner unit, long-wall supervisor, shift foreman, seal development manager, ventilation manager, and conveyor belt coordinator. Managing two underground bunkers and more than twenty miles of main line conveyor belts requires extensive technical knowledge. As ventilation manager, he oversaw intake and return air systems serving five continuous miner units and a long-wall system at one of the largest shaft mines in southwest Virginia.

While experience came with time, he notes that Bluefield State exposed him to the general theories

that made mastering complex underground systems possible. The combination of management training and technical expertise enabled him to excel and earn promotions throughout his career.

The difficult lessons, Don says, paid off.

Beyond the classroom, mentorship also shaped Don's journey. While working for two years in Inventory and Receiving under the late Terry Brown, who was then the assistant basketball coach at Bluefield State, he found guidance that extended beyond employment. Brown encouraged him to tutor basic math and Fortran programming for two semesters. He also assisted with filming home basketball games. Though they eventually lost touch, he remains grateful for the mentorship and opportunity.

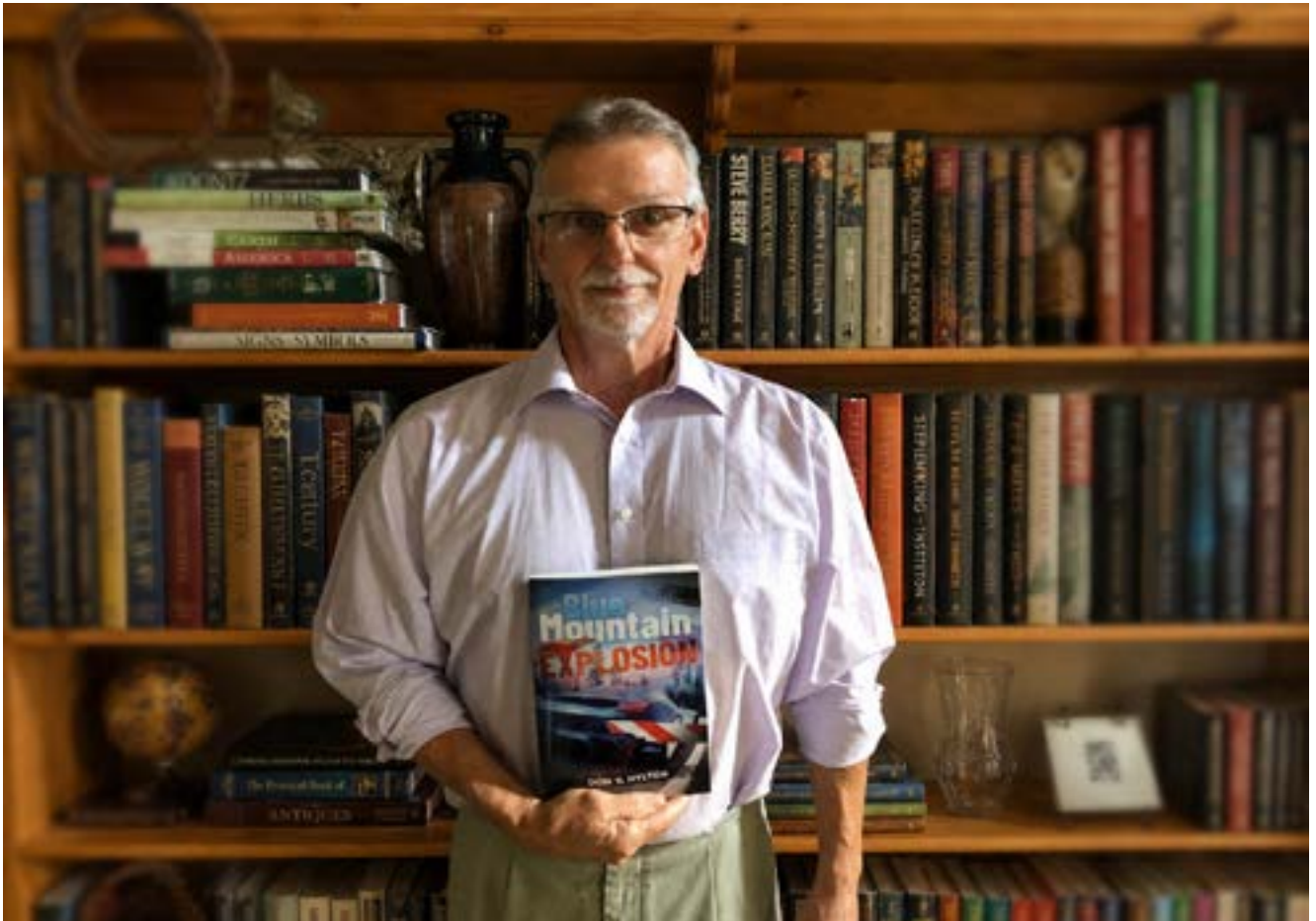
Don reflects fondly on the friendships formed during his college years and acknowledges one regret: allowing those connections to fade over time. His advice to today's graduates is simple. Maintain those Bluefield State bonds, both professionally and socially.

Retirement did not mark the end of Don's accomplishments. Drawing from decades of underground experience, he wrote his first fictional novel, *Blue Mountain Explosion*, which won first place in the Genre category at the Hollywood Book Festival in 2024. He is currently writing his second novel.

The seeds of his writing career were planted decades earlier at Bluefield State. He credits the late Dr. Allen Lackey for developing his foundational writing skills and recalls the demanding standards of Adam Sorkin's class. Though challenging at the time, he now looks back with appreciation.

While he has several interests, one dear to Don's heart was his involvement with Second Chance for Cats in Bluewell, to which cause he still contributes occasionally. Don has been a frequent guest in Dr. Jammy's BSU's Creative Writing and Regional and Ethnic Literature courses, thereby impacting BSU students.

From managing underground mining systems to crafting award-winning fiction, his journey stands as a testament to the enduring impact of a Bluefield State education and the lasting value of preparation, mentorship, perseverance, and community-mindedness. ■



Don's first novel, Blue Mountain Explosion, weaves Bluefield State into the narrative.



Don is a popular guest speaker at local venues and meetings of area civic organizations.

FROM CLASSROOM CONFIDENCE TO CAREER READINESS:

JOSEPH BOADI'S BLUEFIELD STATE JOURNEY

By Honors Scholar Shyiana Francis



Joseph was one of five 2026 valedictorians – the text of his speech is included at the end of his story.



Joseph at AfroTech in Houston with fellow Ghanaian BSU Honors Scholar Sampson Anaba.

Joseph Boadi's time at Bluefield State University wasn't just about earning a degree; it was a master-class in growth, discipline, and purpose. Looking back, the skills defining his professional path today were forged in the trenches of BSU's classrooms, campus organizations, student employment, and a community that constantly pushed him to excel.

Like many students, Joseph had to build his confidence from the ground up. The turning point came in his honors and core classes, where frequent presentations forced him out of his comfort zone. Standing in front of his peers and delivering sharp, consistent presentations transformed public speaking from a source of nerves into a core strength. Over time, those classrooms became a testing ground, preparing him to command much larger professional spaces.

That foundational confidence caught fire when Joseph stepped off campus. With BSU's backing, he attended major industry events like TMCF DevCon and AfroTech. For Joseph, these weren't just networking trips—they were a revelation. Standing

among top-tier professionals, innovators, and peers with identical drives, he realized he didn't just want to be in the tech industry; he belonged there. The experience replaced abstract ambitions with a crystal-clear vision of his future.

On campus, Joseph applied that vision directly to his work. He started as a tutor in the Academic Success Center, a role that demanded patience and the rare ability to translate complex, technical ideas into accessible concepts. It was a dual lesson in empathy and mastery: teaching others forced him to recognize his own knowledge gaps and meet people where they were.

Later, he transitioned to an IT Technician role on campus. Getting his hands dirty with real-world troubleshooting and technical support gave him a massive head start. By the time he stepped into corporate internships, the workplace environment felt entirely familiar. He already knew how to communicate under pressure, take ownership of a problem, and deliver solutions.

Joseph's impact also stretched deep into campus life. He poured his energy into student leadership, becoming an active voice in the Computer Society and the International Student Organization (ISO). One of his favorite milestones was organizing the ISO's UN Day meals, a vibrant celebration of culture, food, and community. Balancing these organizations with a heavy academic load taught him how to lead with empathy without letting his responsibilities slide.

Perhaps the defining trait of Joseph's journey was his refusal to take the easy route. He deliberately sought out demanding coursework that aligned with his highest ambitions. That academic discipline paid off in a big way, giving him the rigorous foundation needed to land a role at Ford, where he gained cutting-edge experience in AI and machine learning. Today, that same foundation has carried him to his next massive milestone: acceptance into a PhD program at the University of Alabama.

Balancing life as a full-time student, a campus

leader, and an IT Technician required a high level of grit. Constantly shifting gears between academic research and live tech support built an adaptability and focus that still serves him today.

To the students currently walking the BSU campus, Joseph's advice is grounded and real: Keep going. There will absolutely be moments when the pressure mounts or doubt creeps in, but there is immense power in sheer persistence. Finishing what you started matters. Your best is always enough when you refuse to give up.

Joseph's chapter as a student may be closing, but his relationship with the university is just beginning. He plans to dive straight into the BSU Alumni Association, eager to pay it forward. Through mentorship and support, he wants to ensure the next generation of BSU students feels the same encouragement that lifted him up.

Joseph Boadi's story is a powerful reminder of what happens when preparation meets opportunity.



At the Kroger Stop the Hunger – Zero Hunger/Zero Waste Challenge.



Joseph at the Google tech invitational.

Bluefield State didn't just give him a piece of paper, it gave him the confidence to discover his purpose, master his craft, and step fearlessly into the next chapter of his life.

Joseph Boadi was one of five valedictorians invited to address the Class of 2026. Here is his graduation speech:

Good morning, President Martin, faculty, staff, family, friends, and the Class of 2026.

My name is Joseph Boadi. A few years ago, I came here from Ghana not knowing exactly what to expect. Today, it is truly an honor to stand here as part of the graduating Class of 2026.

First, I want to thank God for bringing us this far.

I also want to thank Bluefield State University and for the Honors College scholarship that made my education possible.

To our faculty, thank you for your guidance, patience, and for challenging us to grow both inside and outside the classroom.

To the staff, thank you for the work you do behind the scenes every day to support students and make this university feel like home.

To my family, thank you for your love, encouragement, and sacrifices. I would not be standing here today without you.

Class of 2026, one thing I have learned is that failure is not the end. At some point, all of us will struggle or feel like we are not good enough at something. But there is power in continuing, learning, and finishing what we started.

As we move into the next chapter of our lives, I hope we continue to use our talents, our knowledge, and our kindness to make a positive impact on the world.

I wish all of you success and happiness in whatever comes next.

Congratulations, Class of 2026.

And as always, Go Big Blue! ■

BREAKING BLUE:

Chance James Leaves a Lasting Legacy at Bluefield State

By Chance James, Valedictorian, Class of 2026

When Chance James walked across the stage as one of Bluefield State University's 2026 Valedictorians, he didn't spend his speech talking about GPAs or accolades. Instead, he thanked the people who helped him get there, made the audience laugh, and reminded everyone of the impact civil engineers have on everyday life.

"Being named one of the Valedictorians of the Class of 2026 is a pretty cool honor," he told graduates. "But this title is not an indication of the person I am. Rather, it's a reflection of the many incredible people I've had around me throughout my life."

That mindset has defined Chance's college experience.

Throughout his time at Bluefield State, Chance immersed himself in the Civil Engineering program, where classroom lessons were paired with real-world problem solving. Rather than simply memorizing equations, students tackled the same types of engineering challenges they will encounter in their careers. Learning from professors who are licensed Professional Engineers gave him practical knowledge and confidence long before graduation.



Chance James and his family at graduation.



At internship site, Chance James put theory into practice.

Outside the classroom, Chance was actively involved in the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE). As a member of the Geotechnical Team, he helped earn second-place finishes in regional competitions two years in a row against 15 nearby regional colleges. Through ASCE, he built lasting friendships, participated in service projects, and learned that networking can open doors long after graduation.

His advice to current students reflects that experience.

“Networking is everything. Every opportunity you get to exchange a phone number, email, business card, LinkedIn connection, or even a Facebook friend request — take it. You never know when those connections may help you in the future.”

Earning the distinction of valedictorian required years of focus and discipline. Chance credits consistent effort not perfection for his success. He encourages students to stay organized, take

thorough notes, and put in the work outside of the classroom, where much of the real learning takes place.

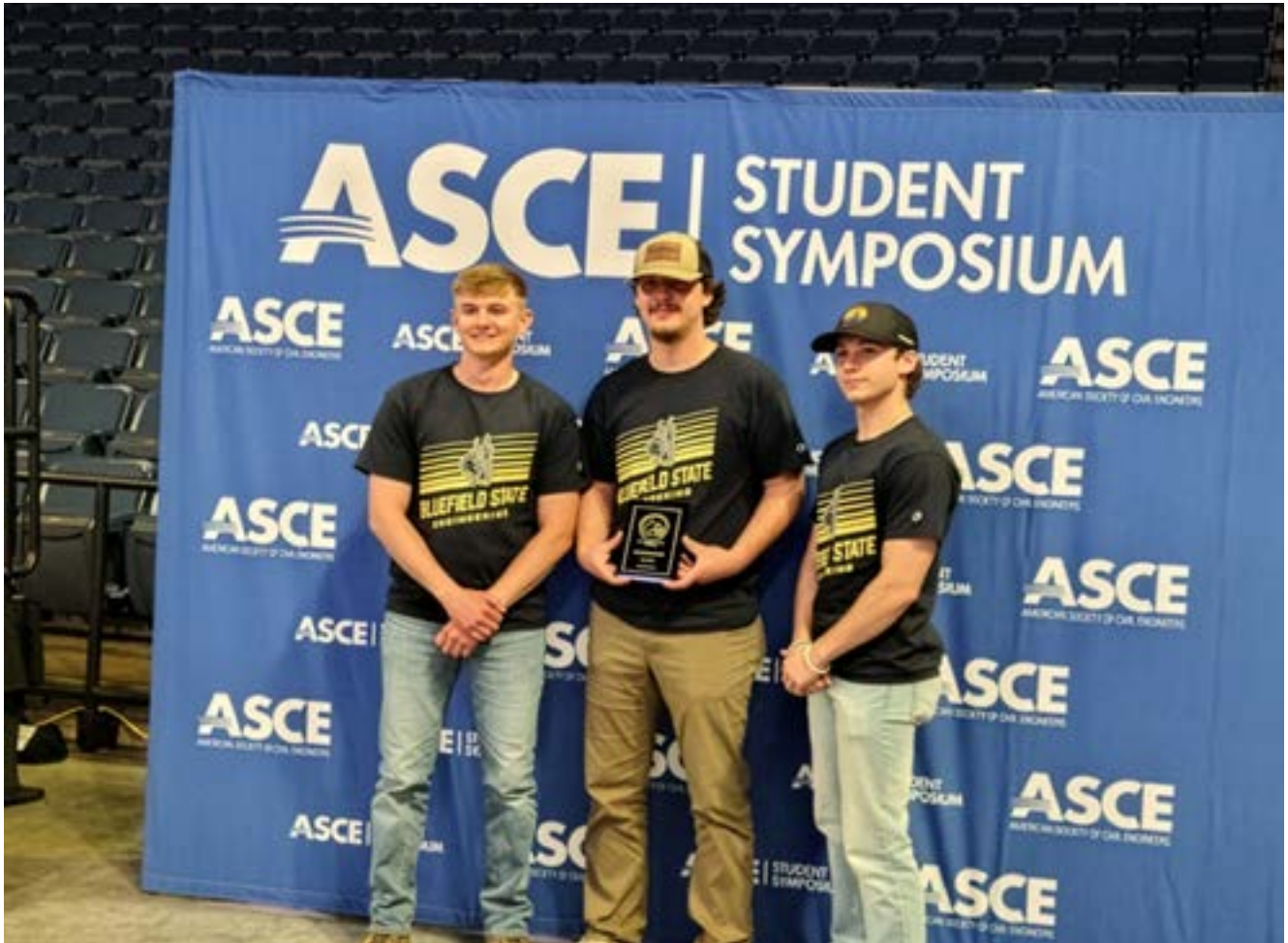
One of the defining moments of his college career was the Civil Engineering Senior Capstone Project. His team spent countless hours researching, developing multiple design concepts, performing earthwork calculations, addressing stormwater management, planning utility installation, and preparing cost estimates. Their presentation received praise for both technical excellence and professionalism— a moment that reinforced the value of persistence and teamwork.

Although engineering is serious work, Chance’s valedictorian speech showed another side of him: his sense of humor.

After thanking his family, professors, classmates, and mentors, he turned to the audience with a lighthearted reminder of how much civil engineers



Chance enjoyed an internship with Michael Baker International, getting his hands dirty but learning much in the process.



Chance James (extreme left) with his teammates—BSU has always fielded winning teams!

contribute to everyday life.

“The road you drove on this morning to get here, thank a civil engineer. The building around you not collapsing, thank a civil engineer. When you turn on the faucet and water magically shows up, thank a civil engineer.”

Then, with perfect comedic timing, he added:

“The traffic and road work you complain about every time you’re on the interstate... unfortunately you have a civil engineer to thank for that too. But we’ll try to overlook that.”

The joke brought laughter to the audience while perfectly capturing his personality — confident, approachable, and never taking himself too seriously.

As he concluded his address, Chance challenged his classmates with three simple pieces of advice: be proud to be Bluefield State graduates, represent the university well wherever life takes them, and keep

their priorities in order.

“We may not be the biggest school,” he said, “but we produce people who can compete anywhere.”

Following graduation, Chance will begin his career with American Electric Power (AEP), where he hopes to represent Bluefield State with excellence and help create opportunities for future graduates. Long term, he hopes to give back to the university that helped shape him by supporting future students.

Chance James leaves Bluefield State not only as a valedictorian, but as an example of what dedication, humility, leadership, and a genuine appreciation for others can accomplish. His story serves as a reminder that success is rarely achieved alone and that the strongest foundations, in engineering and in life, are built together. ■

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