

STC Announces Student & Instructor of the Year

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Family, friends, and faculty gathered in the Tattnall Auditorium of Southeastern Technical College (STC) on Tuesday, January 23, as the college announced the recipients of the annual Georgia Occupational Award of Leadership (GOAL) and Rick Perkins Awards.

Being nominated for the GOAL Award is one of the highest honors which an STC student can achieve. To be eligible for nomination, a student must have completed at least 12 credit hours, have at least a "B" average, and be in good standing at the college. In addition to this, the student must recognize the impact of technical education on Georgia's economic health, and must be willing to serve as an ambassador for technical education.

Each year, students are nominated by their instructors for this award, as a panel of judges helps to narrow down the nominations to the final four candidates. This year, those judges included Christian Burton – Pastor of the Oaks Baptist Church; Casandra Castro-Stephens – Dixon Management Group and Southeastern Technical College; Alysa Marsicano – City of Lyons Community Liaison; Natorra Moody – Branch Manager of the Dr. Mark & Tonya Spivey Library; and Steven Toole – Lead Pastor of Cedar Crossing Church of God.

The 2024 GOAL Student is Jamie Mallard, a Business Management student with a focus in Human Resources, who was nominated by her instructor Tina Jernigan. Mallard spoke to the audience about her journey to STC, including several times which she faced adversity, to inspire others to hopefully choose to

follow their dreams and make their own path.

Mallard opened her initial address with a quote, which read, "What you make of your life is up to you – every person creates his or her own reality. Authorship of your life is one of your absolute rights, yet so often, people deny that they have the ability to script the life they desire."

She explained that upon graduation from high school, she never had plans to attend a technical school, as she was always told that you had to attend a four-year college to achieve success. Mallard attempted that path, as she enrolled in two different colleges within four years, took out thousands of dollars of student loans, commuted to school at least three times a week, and even got married and delivered her first son.

Yet, after the birth of her son, Mallard began experiencing postpartum depression, and often-extreme social anxiety. Soon after these challenges arose, a new one came: in 2012, Mallard's mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, and Mallard was divorced a short time later. "My world was falling apart and I struggled daily with my depression and anxiety. Some days, when I looked in the mirror, I hated everything I saw, and some days, I saw nothing at all," she remarked.

Because of these personal issues, she made the decision to withdraw from college. "I had no time for my dreams – they would have to wait," she recounted.

Mallard worked hard for years, and ultimately was hired as an onsite manager of a local staffing agency in Vidalia in 2014. "I learned a lot about business, human resources, and myself, and I'm proud of what I built during my time there," she emphasized.

While working at the agency, Mallard met and fell in love with her current husband, and the two were eventually married. Yet, more trials came for the couple, as Mallard's mother passed away due to breast cancer in April 2015, her aunt died of

stomach cancer in June 2015, her grandma passed away in 2016, her mother-in-law died in 2017, and her first son lost his father in 2018.

Yet, 2019 brought a new wave of hope and happiness for the family. "2019 brought happiness. My husband and I purchased our first home, and in February 2020, I found out I was pregnant with my second son – a beautiful, brown-eyed baby boy," Mallard said.

COVID came, and the staffing and ecommerce industry struggled, just as many industries did during the pandemic. The company which she worked for lost many contracts and a lot of revenue, which motivated Mallard to look for other jobs – yet, every job she discovered required her to have some sort of postsecondary education. After realizing this requirement, she began to research her options to obtain a degree.

"I allowed fear and self doubt to keep me from moving forward for almost three years," she told the audience. "On a whim, in March of 2023, I reached out to Tina Jernigan, Business Management Advisor at STC, via email for her advice and thoughts on my best options. She encouraged me to apply for admission to the program. A degree in Business Management could be used in my current position, but would also open so many doors and opportunities for me in a variety of careers."

According to Mallard, while enrolled at STC, she has been accepted into the Leadership Greater Vidalia class, made the President's List after being out of high school for over 20 years, and even received a scholarship from STC's Foundation. Yet, her greatest accomplishment has been being named a GOAL Award contender, and ultimately, the award winner.

"When I say STC has changed my life, I literally mean that," Mallard emphasized. "Through technical education, I chose to rewrite my story and I hope to be an inspiration to anyone who is afraid to take that first step to fulfilling their dreams.

It is never too late to choose yourself – to be better for you, for your family, and for your community. I will be forever grateful to Southeastern Technical College for giving me a chance to pursue my dreams, for giving me hope, and for providing me with the tools and skills I need to be the author of my own life and to change my story.”

She thanked her family, friends, instructors, counselors, and classmates all for the support, help, and encouragement they had provided throughout her educational journey, and stressed that she could not have achieved this success without them. “As you get older in life, it’s hard to come by people who will stand by you through thick and thin. So, make sure when you are looking for those people, you find the people that will get down and dig in the trenches with you – that will support you and your dreams no matter how crazy they are,” Mallard said.

“I did this for myself, and I did this for my family,” she emphasized. “I’m a mom; I’m a wife; I’m a business manager; I’m a student. All of that has been made better by my time here at this college. Technical education is what makes the world go round.” Mallard will now represent STC as a contender for the State GOAL Student Awardee, who will travel the state throughout the next year to represent the Technical College System of Georgia.

STC Rick Perkins Award Winner Sadia Ajohda will also represent the college in the race for the State Rick Perkins Awardee, who will advocate for technical education at various levels throughout 2024.

The Rick Perkins Award for Excellence in Technical Instruction honors the Technical College System of Georgia’s most outstanding instructors. The award is designed to recognize those teachers who make significant contributions to technical education through innovation in the classroom and leadership in their fields. Originally known as the Commissioner’s Award

of Excellence, this prestigious award was renamed the Rick Perkins Award in memory and honor of Thomas "Rick" Perkins, an instructor from West Georgia Technical College, who received the award prior to his untimely death.

To become the Rick Perkins Awardee, instructors must be nominated by their peers within their respective department at STC. The same judging panel used for the GOAL Award nominees judged the Rick Perkins Award nominees to determine the best possible finalists for the award.

This year, Biology Instructor Sadia Ajohda took home the title of STC Rick Perkins Awardee. During her acceptance speech, Ajohda looked back on the past, reminiscing about how she first was introduced to technical education, and how her journey led her to STC.

"The year was 2018 – November 12 to be exact – and I was sitting in a hospital room, holding my husband's hand in shock and numb, just watching all the tubes and machines hooked up to him," she recounted. "I remember begging God for a second chance. You see, Derek – he's a third degree blackbelt instructor, and he's been teaching martial arts for over 20 years. There was absolutely nothing wrong – he was in good shape and good health. It was just a normal routine medical checkup and the doctors found four clogged arteries."

Ajohda said that upon finding these clogged arteries, the doctors told her husband that he was a "ticking time bomb" and refused to let him return home after his appointment, but rather began preparing him for an emergency quadruple bypass open heart surgery, which would take place that next morning.

The traumatic turn of events took Ajohda's mind back to their early days of marriage. "My mind went everywhere. One place which my thoughts went was back to Trinidad – that's where we're from, and 25 years ago, when Derek and I had just gotten married. My dad suffered a stroke, then later kidney failure.

With [her father having] no insurance, Derek and I moved in with my parents to help [them] out financially – [yet] we couldn't make ends meet," she told the audience. "This led us to Polytechnic, our local technical college. It's a counterpart of Technical College System of Georgia – same mission, same concept. We registered, and they told us, 'You are not a student at risk – you are a student at promise.'"

This statement fueled the couple's determination and motivation to gain their education, as the pair graduated from Polytechnic, took the SAT, were awarded financial aid, moved to Georgia, and sought to continue to better their lives through postsecondary education and earning their Bachelors' Degrees.

"We worked at the college cafeteria, and the best part was we could finally pay for Dad's dialysis treatments," Ajohda explained. "After my Master's program, I tried out career paths. I knew my college cafeteria days would not make me famous on Food Network. I knew I had to have something that would bring meaning to my life – I had to find a purpose."

She eventually found that purpose while sharing her knowledge with students who were just like herself. "As a product of the technical college system, I know the foundation that it paves for our future. I knew where I needed to be. Here at STC, I found my passion," she emphasized. "[And] My hospital experience [with my husband] gave me a front seat view of my very own students."

While her husband was in the hospital, Ajohda leaned on the support of both her church family and her students, as aside from her immediate family, she has no other relatives in the area. During that time, her students not only took great care of Ajohda's husband, but of all the patients. "They were confident, they were passionate, they were successful – they were nursing their patients back to full recovery – and it's not because I was one of their professors," she shared.

Ajohda continued, "When COVID hit, our students rushed into the hospital and into the danger zones. Just like our hero firefighters, they rushed in to save and serve a perfect stranger. That's our own healthcare heroes. Watching them serve at the hospital, I was just swelling with pride and joy. What an impact to our community!"

"I am so proud of our students, and this technical college system, because here is where we live our motto. We push them to succeed sooner, and we dare them to do well," she concluded. "Thank you so much for your confidence in me."

Alongside Ajohda, four other finalists were recognized – Cosmetology Instructor Linda Hairr, Air Conditioning Technology Instructor Vince Scott, English Instructor Dr. Laquanda Thomas, and Medical Assisting Instructor Stephannie Waters.

STC Vice President of Academic Affairs Teresa Coleman spoke on the excellence of these instructors and the entire faculty at STC. "Teaching and learning are the heartbeats of Southeastern Technical College," she stated. "Without our faculty, we would not exist. I know, without a shadow of a doubt, that our faculty changes lives – one life at a time."

In addition to these finalists, several of the top GOAL Award contenders were also recognized at the ceremony, and given the opportunity to share a short speech on their paths which led them to STC.

The first GOAL Award finalist to share her thoughts on her technical college experience was Associate of Science in Nursing Student Samanta Dixon, who was nominated by Ginny Ennis. During her address, Dixon explained to the audience that she was born in Jamaica, but moved to Vidalia at a young age.

Dixon said she was inspired to work in healthcare – specifically, nursing – by two nurses who helped care for her

in two of her most vulnerable moments in her life – an appendectomy and during delivery of her first child after the child unfortunately passed away. “Nurses were always my role models,” she told the audience.

She graduated from the Practical Nursing program and is currently enrolled in the ASN Bridge program. She works at the local Memorial Health Meadows Hospital, and even earned her first Daisy Award for excellence in patient care this past September.

GOAL Award Finalist Pricila Ortega, Cosmetology student nominated by Linda Hairr, also spoke to the audience about her path to technical education which is enabling her to pursue her passion while inspiring her daughter.

Ortega began by asking the audience a question. “Has there ever been a time that you wished you could escape reality?” she remarked. “Most people offer books, movies, or reality television – for me, it has always been school.”

Ortega loved school and learning, and knew it could give her the one thing she desired most: independence. Growing up, Ortega watched her mother be financially dependent on her father. “It was hard watching such a strong woman doing the best she could for her four kids. I knew I wanted to be the change,” she commented.

To be that change, Ortega moved out on her own in high school. Soon, life on her own became difficult, as she became pregnant during her senior year. “I hated the thought of proving my parents right. I was a teen mom, and nowhere near leaving the town,” Ortega explained. Yet, it was becoming a mother that inspired her to push her limits so that she may be a future inspiration to her daughter.

“Technical education has opened me up to new opportunities and showed me so many pathways. I have become more self-confident, resilient, and motivated. There is no stopping me now,” she

said. "I am proud to be one of the 34% of first generation Latinas to attend college, and I am proud to be someone that little Pricila would be proud of."

The last student to address the audience was Eric Wright, a Welding student who was nominated for the GOAL Award by Michael Crumpler.

During his address, Wright emphasized the character traits which STC had helped him learn, including how to lead others. "I'd never really considered myself as much of a leader – just more of a person that was always fine with helping those in need. Throughout the years, I learned that you should always be there to lend a hand and you never know who may need it," he told the audience. "STC has made me and others become great leaders and even better people. This school has changed many lives, and I'm proud to call the few I've met friends. The impact technical education has is tremendous and can change a community for the better."

Wright said he knew that welders were highly paid workers, so he initially sought to learn to weld for the financial benefit. Yet, after many hours of working on the craft, he fell in love with the task.

So, when a job ended and Wright was laid off, he turned to technical education. "As my parents told me, if you love something so much, you should go to school for it and become something. I did take this advice," he reminisced. "When the day came for orientation, I knew this was a choice that I was going to have to give 100% on – there was no turning back."

He spoke of his anxiety on his first day at the college, as he was nervous at the thought of doing something new. Yet, the staff and atmosphere of the school soon calmed his worries, and he fell into place. "Southeastern Tech made me feel like this was my second home. You end up in a class full of people that have the same interest, passion, and drive as you," he

emphasized. “I thoroughly enjoyed coming in to get my assignments done – I guess it is true that if you love what you do, you won’t work a day in your life.”

Wright credited the one-on-one experiences with his instructors for helping him to grow tremendously in his field, and thanked STC for empowering him to continue further in his career.

After hearing all of the speeches, STC President Larry Calhoun commented on the excellence of the students. “All the students are winners – especially these four this evening, but also the 2,500 that attended STC in the last year, and the 135,000 across the state that attended other technical colleges – because you are all making a difference in your lives and in your families’ lives,” he concluded.

Photos

2024 STC Rick Perkins Award for Excellence in Technical Instruction Winner Sadia Ajohda, STC President Larry Calhoun, and 2024 STC Georgia Occupational Award of Leadership Winner Jamie Mallard