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Education

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'You're never too old to learn'

■ Lifelong educator returns to classroom as a student at ASCC

By Dee Ann Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

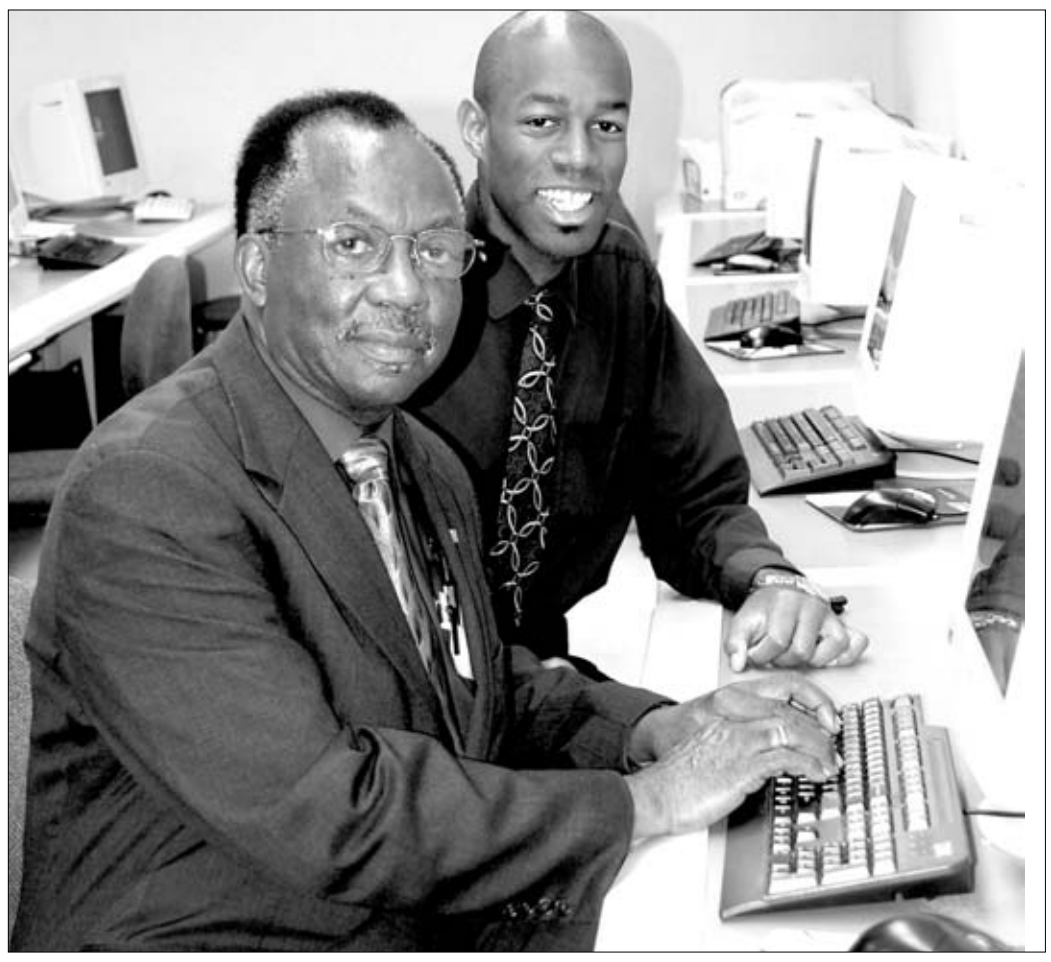
GILBERTOWN – "Most of my life I've been involved in the school system or going to school," says retired educator Johnny Dixon. "I believe learning is a lifelong process."

For 40 years, Dixon has been involved in educating young children. From his years as a teacher to the time he has spent as principal, he has devoted his life to his passion for learning.

Now at 73 and retired, he is back in the classroom – this time as a student at Alabama Southern Community College in Gilbertown.

Dixon is one of a growing number of senior citizens who are enrolled in college classes across the country. According to the U.S. Department of Education, over the past 15 years, the number of college students over the age of 60 has more than doubled. Today, about 10 million older Americans are taking part-time courses, seminars, or other classes.

And it's not just because the numbers of older Americans have increased. In 1991, 12% of Americans over age 60 took such courses. Today, that rate has risen to over 25% percent of the population in that age group.



Choctaw Sun photo by Dee Ann Campbell
Long-time educator and now ASCC student Johnny Dixon, seated in front, is taking keyboarding under the instruction of ASCC instructor Robert McWilliams.

Although many senior citizens are going to college for the first time, others are going back to school after retirement. Still others, like Dixon, are simply continuing their passion for education that has been present throughout their lives.

The learning process has been Dixon's passion as far back as he can remember, he says. Even as a young elementary school student in a Marengo County school, Dixon knew he wanted a career in education.

"I decided early in life that I wanted to teach," he recalls. "I guess I was probably in about the 3rd grade. There were really two things that I wanted to do when I grew up — serve in the Army and teach."

Dixon fulfilled both of those dreams. He entered the U.S. Army after high school, serving 2 years of active service just after the Korean War. After being stationed in such areas as Camp Gordon and, Fort Jackson in the United States, he was sent to Berlin for 2 months to serve during a volatile time in the early stages of the Cold War.

"I loved every minute of it," he says. "I was there during a time when there was division. We were not allowed to leave the base and we had to be very careful about where we went."

When he returned to the United States, Dixon knew that it was time to follow his other dream — to become an educator. He entered Alabama State University, earning his B.S. degree in education.

It was during the 1959-60 school year that Dixon began what would become 4 decades of work in the Choctaw County School System.

"I spent the first 10 years in the system as a teacher," he remembers.

> "I believe learning is a lifelong process."
>
> -- Johnny Dixon

"I taught at Shady Grove and then became a principal."

When the new Southern Choctaw Elementary School was opened in 1994, Dixon filled the chair as its first principal, serving in that capacity until July 1, 2000.

"I retired then," he says. "But I've never stopped being involved with education."

"I'm taking keyboarding," he adds. "I want to learn about computers. When I was in school, computers did not exist. But now, everyone needs to know about them. I want to learn all I can."

Dixon's interest in computers is an increasingly common pursuit among senior citizens. A Harris Poll released last year, for example, shows that of the 172 million American adults who regularly use the internet, almost 14 million are senior citizens age 65 and older, an increase of 5% since the year before.

With the enrollment of Dixon and other senior citizens at ASCC, Director Angie Williams hopes that more will follow. In order to promote such educational opportunities, ASCC offers tuition-free courses to older students. Senior citizens who enroll pay fees that total less than $60, plus the cost of books.

"This is one way we can contribute to our retirees' desire to continue their education," Williams says. "We want more senior citizens to follow Mr. Dixon's example."

"He's an inspiration to others," she adds. "You never retire your brain, and the more active intellectually that you are, the more slowly you age."

Recent research by the National Institute of Health agrees. Studies indicate that the continuing pursuit of higher education during the senior years may be linked to better health, a greater sense of well-being, and a more positive outlook on life.

For Dixon, his decision to return to the classroom is not just an opportunity to learn computers. It is a chance to stay active and healthy, to keep learning, and to remain involved in the field that has been his lifelong passion.

"You're never too old to learn something new," he says. "I've always loved being in the classroom. It's good for your mind."

And when his keyboarding class is over, Dixon says he will still not be finished with his education.

"After this, I will learn something else," he says. "I'm not finished yet. I just want to keep learning. Every day of my life, I've got something to look forward to."

CCDC partnering with school system for High Hopes program

By Dee Ann Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

BUTLER, LAVACA — Students who need assistance to pass the Alabama High School Graduation Exam (AHSGE) now have another avenue to get that help, thanks to a partnership between the Choctaw County School System and the Choctaw Community Development Center (CCDC).

For the past several years, the High Hopes program has offered assistance to students who have taken but not passed portions of the AHSGE, with the program held on school campus after school hours. This year, the program will be held at the CCDC facility in the former East Choctaw Junior High School building in Lavaca.

"We are trying to give remediation to those who need it," Accountability Specialist Rhonda Johnson said. "Many times the students may not want to stay at school in the afternoon to get help, but they will go somewhere else to get it."

The partnership with the CCDC is part of an effort by the center's director Yvonne Hampton to reach out to students in the area who might not otherwise graduate. Hampton, who serves as part of the High Hopes Advisory Board for the school system, also offers other programs through the CCDC to reach out to local youth through education and recreational opportunities.

The tutoring program at CCDC will focus primarily on mathematics,

Choctaw Sun photo by Dee Ann Campbell
Yvonne Hampton, seated in center, of the Choctaw Community Development Center, signs her intent to partner with the Choctaw Co. school system to offer the High Hopes program at her facility. Pictured with Mrs. Hampton is CCHS principal Kevin Howard (seated, left), Supt. of Ed. Sue Moore (seated, right), and Accountability Specialist Rhonda Johnson (standing).

an area where many students struggle. Assistance for other subject areas is also available.

Working with the students will be former CCHS teacher Anya Johnson, who is also on the Board of Directors for the CCDC. Johnson, who has a master's degree in mathematics, will be on hand on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. for the tutoring sessions.

The High Hopes program for CCHS students was approved to be held from February 27 through July 12. Funds for the program are allotted from the state to school based on the numbers of students who did not pass the exam during the previous year.

According to Rhonda Johnson, there are a few students who are already taking advantage of the program, with more expected to do so following the release of the results from the grad exam taken during the first week in March.

"We are expecting the results on April 2," said Johnson. "We should see more students in the High Hopes program when those results come in."

Other dates for the AHSGE administration for 2007 are July 16-20, and September 17-21, with certain dates designated for particular portions of the exam.

The AHSGE can be taken by students beginning in the spring of their sophomore year, giving them several opportunities to retake portions that they might have failed previously. The High Hopes program offers tutoring opportunities in order to help those students pass all portions of the exam in time to graduate.

"We appreciate the Choctaw Development Center for doing this," Johnson said. "It's not often that someone takes their own after-hours time to do something like this, and we know that the students will appreciate it."

Three to receive UWA scholarships

LIVINGSTON — Three Choctaw County students have received Trustees Scholarships to attend The University of West Alabama in Livingston.

These awards, which are based on academic achievement and proven leadership potential, come from the UWA Office of Admissions.

Joshua C. Patrick, of Gilbertown, was awarded a $6,000 leadership scholarship. A senior at Millry High School, he plans to play in the Scarlet Band from Tigerland.

Morgan L. Presley, of Needham, earns a $6,000 leadership scholarship. A senior at Southern Choctaw High School, she plans to major in early childhood education.

Brittany Turner, of Gilbertown, receives a $10,000 academic scholarship. A senior at Southern Choctaw High School, she plans to major in chemistry.

Two SCA students earn UM scholarships

MOBILE — Maggie Doggett of Gilbertown, and Amanda Busby of Needham, have each been awarded an $18,000 Dean's Scholarship to attend the University of Mobile.

Doggett and Busby are seniors at South Choctaw Academy.

The Dean's Scholarship is awarded in recognition of the deans of the College of Arts and Sciences and the schools of Business, Christian Studies, Education and Nursing. The scholarship recognizes individuals who exhibit the potential to develop academically and as leaders in their careers, families, churches and communities. The award is valued at $4,500 per year awarded over eight consecutive semesters and is renewable provided the recipient maintains a full-time student status per semester and a 2.50 grade point average. The scholarship includes a $1,000 room-and-board grant, dependent on the student's living in the residence halls.

The University of Mobile is a private university affiliated with the Alabama Baptist State Convention.

Gunn is AU grad

AUBURN, Ala. -- Michael Allen Gunn graduated at Auburn University December 15, 2006 with a degree in Agronomy and Sails Magna Cum Laude. He is the husband of Michele Coaker Gunn, father of Ashton, Jonathan and Joshua Gunn, son of Mr. & Mrs. Marvin Gunn, grandson of Mrs. Ena L. Gunn all of Millry, son-in-law of Mrs. Estelle Coaker of Laton Hill. Those attending graduation services were Michele, Ashton, Jonathan, Joshua, Mr. & Mrs. Marvin Gunn, Mr. & Mrs. Kenneth Johnson of Millry, Sarah Coaker and Tomeka Harpole of Mobile. Michael is currently employed with N.R.C.S. in Rainsville, AL.