



Recent alumna finds niche helping others through the justice system

As a teenager, Grace Cooper, '22, was intrigued by the "X-Files" TV series. She thought it would be cool to work with the FBI. When she took her criminal justice classes at Georgia College & State University, she quickly learned the fiction behind the television series depicting law enforcement.

"I once thought it would be so cool to be an investigator," said Cooper, transitional case manager for the Continuum of Care program at Riverbend Correctional Facility in Milledgeville. "Then, I learned the big differences between TV and real life in the justice system that I never expected."

In Dr. Alesa Liles' Inside Out class, 15 Georgia College students met with 15 incarcerated students at Riverbend Correctional Facility to discuss the different aspects of the justice system and share their perspectives.

"I loved this class, because I saw prisoners are not like what movies and TV shows portray," she said. "I truly believe that some of the best individuals I've ever met were in that class as incarcerated people."

Cooper now works at the same facility with many of the incarcerated students she worked with as a student. She enjoys her duties so much that she even got the Employee of the Month Award after being there for just four months.

"It felt really cool to get that recognition," Cooper said. "I'm doing my job, and they recognize that. It made me feel more confident in what I'm doing."

"It's absolutely mind blowing how our experiences differ," she added. "My involvement with my Inside Out class made a big impact on me and in getting this job."

Liles, an associate professor of Criminal Justice, holds a special place in Cooper's heart. When Cooper was indecisive about her career path, Liles was supportive and talked her through it.

They still keep in touch today.

"Dr. Liles helped me figure out what I felt my purpose is," Cooper said. "She also showed me how to stick up for myself in a respectful way. In this profession, that's something I really had to find my footing with." It's inspiring for Cooper to see the change in these students.

"They come into my office, often soft spoken and polite. They each have their own story to tell." And it's clear to Cooper one mistake does not define a person. It's all about who they've become while incarcerated.

Working with her clients, Cooper sees the hope many of them have for the future.



Some say, "When I get out, I have so many dreams, plans and ways to stay out of prison again." Many find religion in prison.

"That's just really cool for me to see how they found a purpose while incarcerated," Cooper said. "It's very fulfilling, because eventually, I want to work with at-risk youth. So, now I'm intervening, only at a later stage."

Her responsibilities include checking in with every student at least once every 90 days. She enters parole addresses and updates client information. She also helps with releases, transfers and getting information on work details.

Cooper applies different intervention techniques. Her clients use workbooks, roleplay various scenarios and conduct motivational interviews.

These actions help them see through their problems so they can improve themselves.

"As it gets closer to their release, I help them find housing and employment, to set them up to be successful and to reduce the overall recidivism rate," she said. "I cannot tell you how many hours I've spent on hold with the IRS, because an inmate needs me to help them get their stimulus checks."

Although she enjoys her profession, there are times when she exercises her patience and grit. The biggest challenge Cooper faces in her role is a few of her clients have lost hope for their future.

She tells them, "Why can't you like see yourself the way I see you—as someone who's competent?"

"There's not a whole lot I can do," Cooper said. "But it feels good to see people who see themselves as having the potential to be successful. That helps me know I'm doing something that matters."

She wants for her clients to get out of prison and learn from their mistakes. But she also hopes others will see past her clients' mistakes and give them a chance.

"I want for them to know—just because they've messed up doesn't mean they're stuck," Cooper said.

"They can keep going. There are a lot more opportunities these days for previously incarcerated people, where they really have the ability to be successful if they will go out and find it."

To learn more about how Cooper's experience from Liles' Inside Out class has carried over to her career, check back to listen to Dr. Liles' podcast—Episode 1 of Season 2 titled "Thunder goes to prison."

It's a tribute to Cooper's time in the famous fur suit as Georgia College's Bobcat Mascot "Thunder."

GCSU names Wesley Hardin new director of Public Safety and Chief of Police

Georgia College & State University welcomes Wesley Hardin as its new director of Public Safety and chief of Police.

Hardin will join GCSU's Department of Public Safety Dec. 1, after 28 years of law enforcement at Tallahassee Community College (TCC) in Florida, where he currently serves as chief of police.

"I am very excited about naming Wesley Hardin as the new director of Public Safety and chief of Police," said Lee Fruitticher, vice president for Finance & Administration.

"The extensive experience in law enforcement and community policing that he brings, coupled with his extremely positive attitude, will fit well with not only our campus community but also the Milledgeville community at large," Fruitticher said.

At TCC, Hardin was responsible for the safety and welfare of 12,000 students, as well as multiple properties and campuses in three counties.



Wesley Hardin, new police chief at GCSU.

Prior to that role, Hardin served in diverse capacities in local, county and K-12-based agencies in Georgia.

He was a deputy sheriff in Cartersville; a police

officer in Duluth and Lawrenceville; and a police lieutenant in Doraville, Georgia. He also worked as a school resource officer in Suwanee, Georgia.

Hardin got his BA in criminal justice from St. Leo University in Florida and his master's in public administration from Columbia Southern University in Alabama.

He is currently enrolled in the School of Police Staff and Command at Northwestern University in Illinois.

Hardin has a reputation for community policing and positive engagement with the public to improve police and community relationships.

He's skilled at conflict resolution, behavioral intervention and emergency preparedness.

Hardin replaces former Chief of Police Brett Stanelle and Nikki Renfro, who has acted as interim director of Public Safety at Georgia College since February.

Did you know?

Dr. George Kieh, Georgia College & State University's 2023 Coverdell Visiting Scholar in the Department of Government & Sociology is hosting a symposium on "Democracy in the World" in the Pat Peterson Museum Education room in Ina Dillard Russell Library.

Friday's symposium is 8:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 2 to 4 p.m. Saturday's event is 8:30 to 10:30 a.m.

Kieh is an expert on foreign policy, conflicts, civil wars, global terrorism and genocide. He learned firsthand about autocracy and oppressions, while growing up in Liberia. He was imprisoned twice for organizing social-justice movements and protesting against his government.

For the symposium, Kieh invited 13 professors from Georgia College, University of West Georgia, North Carolina Central University and as far away as California to speak about the challenges facing democracy in the world today.

"In an autocracy, you got to go with the program," Kieh said. "There's no room for independent views."

GCSU Theatre's "Leveling Up" is an emotional rollercoaster about growing

Georgia College & State University's coming-of-age production, "Leveling Up," explores the fears, hesitancy, obstacles and sometimes courageous rites-of-passage into adulthood facing today's youth.

The production opens Wednesday, Nov. 8, and runs through Sunday, Nov. 12, in the Campus Black Box Theatre.

Written by Deborah Zoe Laufer, the play explores the stagnant lives of three roommates who graduated from college two years earlier—but still spend their time on the couch playing video games.

While transitioning into adulthood is never trouble-free, upheavals like the 2008 financial crisis and COVID-19 pandemic made jobs and opportunity particularly scarce.

"I remember that period vividly. All the work just dried up. Even the entry-level and part-time side jobs were scarce for a while," said Director Jeremy Lee Cudd. "Survival mode became the new normal."

Video games are the primary mode-of-escape for the group, who get into a fight and then compete to see who can get 'a real life' first.

Their frustration and loss of inspiration, coupled with a feeling the world's working against them, creates a "heaviness" of motionlessness at the beginning that will make audiences "love watching these characters kickstart their lives, fall flat and then still improvise their way forward," Cudd said.

Four students make up the cast. About 30 other students worked behind the scenes on stage

construction, scenic painting, sound, light and make up.

Stage manager and sophomore theatre major Hannah Zdanczewicz of Roswell appreciates the realistic nature of the play's characters. Everyone, especially students, will be able to identify with them and learn something about themselves, she said.

"This is one of the most authentic productions I have ever been a part of," Zdanczewicz said. Shows are at 7:30 p.m. Nov. 8-11 and 2 p.m. Nov. 12 in the Campus Black Box Theatre, downtown Milledgeville.

General admission is \$15; \$10 for senior citizens and non-GCSU students; and \$5 for GCSU students.

For tickets, visit: www.tickets.gcsu.edu.

Leveling Up poster with cast and crew information

What's going on in Bobcat Territory?

Visit frontpage.gcsu.edu/events

Tuesday

7

7:30 p.m. "Voice and Piano Recital" with guest baritone Marcel Ramalho and pianist Martin David Jones in Max Noah Recital Hall.

Wednesday

8

6:30-7:30 p.m. GCSU Creative Writing Program's Visiting Writers Series with Poet Laureate Chelsea Rathburn in Russell Auditorium.

7:30 p.m. GCSU Theatre presents "Leveling Up" in the Campus Blackbox Theatre.

Thursday

9

5 p.m. A reception for senior art students and their capstone exhibit, "Ephemera," in Leland Chelsea Rathburn in Russell Auditorium.

7:30 p.m. GCSU Theatre presents "Leveling Up" in the Campus Blackbox Theatre.

Friday

10

8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. 2023 Coverdell Visiting Scholar symposium on democracy in Pat Peterson Museum Education room in Ina Dillard Russell Library.

7:30 p.m. GCSU Theatre presents "Leveling Up" in the Campus Blackbox Theatre.

7:30-9:30 p.m. Open house at Pohl Observatory in Herty Hall.

Saturday

11

8:30-10:30 a.m. 2023 Coverdell Visiting Scholar symposium on democracy in Pat Peterson Museum Education room in Ina Dillard Russell Library.

3-4 p.m. GCSU Volleyball vs. Flagler College in Centennial Center.

7:30 p.m. GCSU Theatre presents "Leveling Up" in the Campus Blackbox Theatre. Tomorrow at 2 p.m., there will be a matinee performance.