

Mr. John E. Smith and Charlene Smith Gaines Vesper Choir Endowment

UAPB Alumnus Gives \$300,000 for Vesper Choir Endowment

The headline in the December 1, 2015 Edition of the Pine Bluff Commercial announced a major gift to the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff Vesper Choir. The headline did not accurately state that the amount of the gift, nor did it identify the donor. The donor was Mr. John E. Smith, '61, who established "The John E. Smith and Charlene Smith-Gaines Vesper Choir Endowment Fund" with a gift of \$334,000. Following is the article that accompanied the announcement. It provides insight into the motivation behind the magnificent generosity of the benefactor, Mr. John E. Smith.

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Before the Christmas season began, the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff Vesper Choir received a \$300,000 donation to establish the John E. Smith and Charlene Smith-Gaines Vesper Choir Fund. Donated by John E. Smith, a 1961 graduate of AM&N College (now UAPB), the fund will assist in taking the choir to all corners of Arkansas and the nation through a variety of outreach activities. "We are very much grateful for the incredible generosity of Mr. John E. Smith," UAPB Chancellor Laurence B. Alexander said. "His remarkable contribution will have a profound and sustained impact on our university and, more specifically, our internationally renowned Vesper Choir through the establishment of the fund."

Dr. Michael Bates, director of the ensemble and interim chair of the music department, said current and former Vesper Choir members are overwhelmed at the gift. "Knowing that this gift will enable the Vesper Choir to have the capability of addressing needs in the future that we don't have any idea of today is exciting," Bates said. "This is a lesson to current students in the Vesper Choir, to choir alumni and to all alumni of the importance of giving back to the future of 'Dear Mother.' This gift is a blessing that we are enormously grateful for. We thank Mr.

Smith for his generosity and we want him to know that he has planted 'seed' in fertile ground. God is good and He continues to bless the Vesper Choir and our mission of service in so many ways." During a recent gathering of Vesper Choir alumni, Smith reflected on his experience at UAPB and the trailblazers of the music program at UAPB — Grace Wiley, Harold Strong, Shelton McGee. He joined the Vesper Choir his in 1957, his freshman year and performed throughout his matriculation at AM&N until his graduation in 1961.

"I always had the desire to give back," Smith said. "I was fortunate enough in the last few years of my career to earn a couple of extra nickels and chose to share it with [my alma mater] and one of my favorite organizations, the Vesper Choir." He also encouraged current members of the ensemble to remember from whence they came and make it a point to give back as well.

"Mr. Smith has given our choir something to sing about!" Director of Development Dr. Margaret Martin-Hall said. "His generosity will afford them opportunities that may have otherwise been unattainable and will benefit our students for many generations to come."