

Rotary  
Club of  
Charlotte



# THIS WEEK'S PROGRAM

April 30, 2024

## 2023-2024 Board Members

President Edwin Peacock

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Past Pres William Bradley

Secretary John Cantrell

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Exec Sec Christine Cipriano

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Foundation Joe Morris

Programs Andy Dinkin



## *The Impressive (And Super-Nice) Dr. William Downs*

by **Marilynn Bowler**

We looked to the front of the Carolina Ballroom just before our Charlotte Rotary meeting was called to order. There stood two great NC college presidents chatting, smiling and enjoying getting to know each other: former Central Piedmont Community College President, **Dr. Tony Zeiss**, and current Gardner-Webb University President, Dr. William (Bill) Downs. It was a reminder of the quality of leadership found in colleges and universities throughout North Carolina and is a testament to the education college and university students are receiving day-after-day and year-after-year in our state.

Once Charlotte Rotary President **Edwin Peacock** had called the meeting to order it was **Tony Zeiss**, one of Charlotte Rotary's excellent past presidents, who introduced his colleague and now good friend, Bill Downs. Tony shared with us Bill's superb Resume and his amazing background in research and comparative politics & international relations - and his stints as Dean of the Thomas Harriot College of Arts & Sciences, and Professor of Political Science and Distinguished Chair in Liberal Arts at East Carolina University - all of which culminated in his being named the thirteenth President of Gardner-Webb University located in the nearby town of Boiling Springs ... just a short jump away from the Queen City. As Tony turned the MIC over to Bill, Tony's last words were, "You're going to love him!" And we did.

With what we soon found out is his signature grin and an innate ability for public speaking, we learned so much that impressed us about Gardner-Webb so that all the talk after the meeting was about how excited we are to visit the campus and learn more about the history and impact the 119-year-old university has made on its own community and surrounding ones. We learned that it's a Division 1 NCAA school; it has an incredible outreach to the community; the combination of bachelor, master, and doctorate degrees it offers is incredible; and its proud 38,000 alumni boast that this heralded school has been named the #1 safest in North Carolina. In addition, Gardner-Webb has a convenient campus in Charlotte, located at 8030 Arrowridge Boulevard.

Bill Downs is not only a magnificent leader of faculty and students, he is a dedicated Christian who maintains the priorities of the school which was founded by faith-based leaders who set as their mission "to serve and enrich the western region of North Carolina while also connecting our community nationally and globally." That commitment stands true to this day as recognized by those words etched in metal signage displayed at every entry door on the campus.

Gardner-Webb sets as its goal to become the first choice for students of all backgrounds and to work to assure that those students achieve both academically and in their subsequent careers. And we learned, with great amazement, that Gardner-Webb offers post-graduate - and even Master courses - in Cybersecurity, Nursing, Public Administration and a variety of programs for careers in Government and Non-Profit agencies. And, did we mention that Doctoral degrees are also part of the curriculum?

Bill Downs invited all of us to visit Gardner Webb University to see for ourselves the superb programs it offers. In the follow-up Q&A, **Herb Harriss** shared that he and Karen will be traveling with the Carolina Alumni Association to Normandy for the June 6th ceremonies memorializing the 80th anniversary of that historic invasion and could he (Herb) relay greetings to the Gardner-Webb Band which will be part of those activities? The answer, of course, was YES! (BTW, **Tom Cottingham** will be there, too.)

**Robert Freeman** asked how prepared college freshmen are as they enter college following COVID and he inquired if Gardner-Webb has had to adjust classes in response to those issues. Bill answered that kids are definitely not as prepared now as they were pre-COVID so Gardner-Webb offers a class to help them become prepared. The university has not, however, changed any of their class requirements or agendas.

**Luther Moore** asked what percent of students are Pell Grant recipients and Bill stated that he estimates that 69 percent are on federal subsidy via Pell Grant awards. Colleges and universities across the state are comprised of a majority of Pell Grant students with UNC-Chapel Hill being perhaps the lowest at 10 percent.

This reporter was seated next to Richard McDevitt, Vice President for Marketing at Gardner-Webb University. I asked him to tell me about Bill Downs. His answer was a description of an extraordinary leader, manager, and person. Richard's words spoke volumes about Bill Downs, "His leadership here has been essential these past four years. He has advocated for excellence; has made many positive changes; and has consistently raised the bar. He may be the most visible Chief Executive on any NC campus. He's engaged with students, families, faculty, staff, and community, and always in a positive, proactive way. You can see his influence in new facilities for arts and athletics, and a renewed focus on the student experience." That pretty much describes the Dr. William Downs who wowed our Charlotte Rotary audience on Tuesday. His Dad would be proud since his Dad was a long-time Rotarian. As is Bill.

It's a short ride from Charlotte to Boiling Springs and Bill Downs made us want to make the trip very soon.

A recording of the meeting can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/941354568>

The program introduction begins at approximately 19 minutes 50 seconds.