

# The Black Oaks Newsletter

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## Elon Change-Makers: A Black Perspective

Visitors and alumni returning to Elon in Fall 2011 notice the hive of construction activity that has overtaken the campus. New dorms and student housing are rapidly progressing, the university has broken ground on the new Numen Lumen/Multi-Faith Center and the new Barnes and Nobles bookstore has opened, with what has been noted as the first and only escalator in Alamance County. More NPHC groups will move into Greek housing and benefit from the construction boom. It's fair to say, "Change is in the air!"

Not only has campus construction signaled this change, but new faculty hires, resulting in the continued integration of some departments, continue. We feature a few of those ground-breaking hires, including Dr. Angela Ansah, the first Black Associate Dean in the School of Education and Prof. Jason Aryeh, who assumes a new tenure-track position with a focus on West African Dance in the Department of the Performing Arts. Joining these two Ghanaian natives is Sam Ndgah, an adjunct teaching Geography in the Department of History and Geography who hails from Kenya. We welcome their addition to the long-time Africanist scholars on our campus, Drs. Heidi (Glaesel) Frontani (Geographer), Brian Digre (Historian), and Bob Anderson (Political Scientist), some of our white colleagues who introduced the study of Africa's peoples,

cultures, histories, and environments to the Elon curriculum, long before it was popular to do so.

Other staff, students, and alumni are positively impacting the direction of the Elon community, especially in Goal 1 of *The Elon Commitment*, which calls for "an unprecedented commitment to diversity and global engagement." This edition of our newsletter provides a unique perspective of the Black change-makers at Elon, shaping our community and making history at the same time. The theme is borrowed from the Truitt Center for Religious and Spiritual Life's 2011-12 Chapel Series, which features staff and faculty change-makers, including program assistant Chris Esters, whose address about the change-maker in her life, she has graciously allowed us to reprint in this issue.

Yet, not everyone welcomes change. In an October 28th letter to the editor of the *Burlington Times News* entitled "Elon's new interest in diversity turns off parent," Swepsonville resident Laura Gadbery exercised her constitutional right to criticize what she perceives as Elon's unnecessary tangent on diversity, an emphasis she deems incompatible with higher education. She asks, "Have they [Elon University] not seen the myriad studies on the negative impact of bringing diversity programs into our academic institutions?" While she did not provide any examples of "these myr-

riad studies" or bother to check several of her statements, including the circumstances that prevented the university from hosting this year's production of the Walker Dance Ballet Theatre's production of *The Nutcracker*, Gadbery's letter and response reinforce the need to keep diversity education, cultural tolerance and human understanding high on the higher education agenda. To read the full letter and some of the responses, including clarifications from Vice President for University Communications, Dan Anderson, visit <http://www.thetimesnews.com/articles/new-49117-interest-colleges.html>. The negative reactions to Goal I of the *Elon Commitment*, though few, remind us that diversity and multicultural education are sometimes challenging. The adage, "If the mountain was smooth, you wouldn't be able to climb it," seems particularly appropriate here. The challenges, however, do not mean we should give up. In fact, they signal that we must keep working.

In 2011, we are still celebrating the racial integration of departments in a 21st-century American university; there is still work to be done! AAASE's role as a leader and change-maker in the struggle will continue as we seek new ways to uphold our mission: "To promote the production and dissemination of knowledge about African and African-descended peoples through advocacy, learning, research, scholarship, service & teaching."

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Student Change-maker: Brenna Humphries '13

Brenna Humphries did not intend her name to become associated with what many have now labeled “the incidents” of this Fall, one of two reported acts of racism that catapulted the Elon junior into a spotlight she did not seek. However, her courage to come forward and report what happened to her has changed the way that this institution thinks about and handles acts of racial bias and discrimination.

Brenna alleges that as she was crossing a campus street earlier this semester, a gray/silver BMW convertible sped up and attempted to run her over. As she dove out of harm’s way, one of the male occupants of the car hurled the “N” word at her. Although Brenna has provided university officials with good leads about the crime, months later, the official word is that the “incident is still under investigation” and “it is therefore inap-

propriate to comment on an active investigation.” Needless to say, many people wonder how long the investigation will remain active, how many BMW convertibles are registered on campus, what did a review(s) of security footage reveal about the event, were suspects ever questioned, what was the outcome, and will Brenna’s desire for the campus to learn from her experience ever be realized? What did we as a campus community learn? Where race is concerned, does an institutional double standard exist in what most perceive to be a haste to register vague descriptions of Black, male suspects in various crime-related alerts across campus as opposed to a protracted and very careful negotiation of Brenna’s experience when the alleged perpetrators appear to be white? These questions are appropriate and speculation will continue to abound unless the university directly addresses the concerns

and quells the speculation, especially among students who, unfortunately, will always remember this ugly incident as part of an otherwise positive Elon experience.

Nonetheless, Brenna Humphries is determined to make the most of her Elon experience and to show the world that she is so much more than “the incident” by which others might seek to define her. Earlier this year, Brenna obtained non-profit status for her organization Kids Read, Inc, which she started in 2007. The organization focuses on providing books for children in inner-city hospitals, especially those who become bored when illness forces them to remain hospitalized for prolonged periods and hopes that her book donations contribute in some small way to the alleviation of that boredom. For more information about the organization, visit <http://www.kids-read.org>

## Administrator Change-maker: Dr. Angela Owusu-Ansah



We welcome new associate professor in the School of Education and the first Black woman to hold the position of Associate Dean, not only in her school, but at Elon, Dr. Angela Owusu-Ansah.

Originally from Ghana in West Africa, Dr. Ansah comes to Elon from the Orlean Bullard Beeson School of Education at Samford University in Birmingham, Ala-

bama. While there, Dr. Ansah taught courses in Quantitative Research Methods (Statistics) and Educational Leadership courses in the Teacher Education Graduate program. Before Samford, Dr. Ansah taught Testing and Measurement at the University of Southern Mississippi and served as a Research Consultant/Assistant for both the Research Service Center at the university and the Mississippi Leadership Academy for Principals.

Dr. Ansah holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology and Sociology from the University of Ghana, a Master of Science

degree in Educational Administration of Overseas/International Schools and a TESOL certification from the College of New Jersey. Her doctorate in Educational Administration, Research (Statistics) and Instructional Technology was earned from the University of Southern Mississippi.

Dr. Ansah’s primary responsibilities at Elon include overseeing the graduate program in Education, developing educational assessment systems and teacher education. She joins the other Black faculty in the School of Education, Profs. Rohr, Dyce, and Curry.

## Faculty Change-maker: Jean Rattigan Rohr on “It Takes a Village”

It has been well argued and documented that new teachers need to learn how to effectively reach the many children in our nation’s schools who are struggling with reading. Additionally, these novice teachers also need to learn how to see parents as allies in the education process. As a result, Dr. Jean Rattigan-Rohr, assistant professor in the School of Education, developed EDU 324 - Teaching Struggling Readers as a way to invite parents into the teacher education process. Dr. Rohr adapted the West African philosophy of the importance of the “village” community because, as she says, “I know from experience that it really does ‘take a village to raise a child.’” As such, the struggling readers course has given rise to a project titled: “It takes a Village: A Collaborative Assault on the Struggling Reader Dilemma.”

The project manifests an intentional and collaborative relationship among several stakeholders

- Our village is made up of elders, young adults and children. I am an elder, some of the parents and grandparents who bring their children to be taught are elders. And as elders, we have been around a little longer so we have experienced a great deal more than our younger ones. Our pre-service teachers have youth, more energy and wonderful idealism on their side. As elders, we can help our young teachers determine how to see promise and potential in children who are struggling in school.

Dr. Rohr views the project as accomplishing four major objectives: 1) It encourages reading among children who struggle with reading. 2) It underscores the function Schools of Education must undertake in shaping teacher candidates’ views of children who struggle with reading and of the parents/families of such students. 3) It highlights the importance of community and the role universities can play

in bridging the gap between institutions of higher learning and local community entities such as the local library. 4) It involves the tutees’ public school teachers as a vital stakeholder in the tutoring process.

The project is now in its fourth year and has grown tremendously. Dr. Rohr recently received a \$200,000.00 grant from the international philanthropic organization, The Oak Foundation, to expand the course. The expansion is meant to explore the impact of this unique approach to teaching pre-service teachers by inviting two other Schools of Education to join Elon – The University of North Carolina, Greensboro and Concordia University in Portland, OR. The project also received a Phi Beta Kappa Fund for Excellent grant to expand the “Village” project internationally to work with teachers in South Africa.



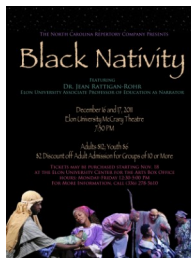
**Dr. Jean Rattigan-Rohr**  
Associate Professor

## Langston Hughes’ *Black Nativity*: Changing Elon’s Stage

When a young eighth grader, born in Joplin, Missouri at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, began writing poetry, his father discouraged him, steering him instead to more practical subjects. When he entered Columbia University, his tuition was paid on the condition that he study engineering. Soon, he dropped out, but kept writing, instead, engineering words. Thank God for that defiant, persistent little boy who believed in the power of the Word, in the power of the human family, in community, and in the celebration of Black culture. That defiance changed the world.

Langston Hughes often told Black artists that “no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself” and from the lyrical verses of his poetry, he proclaimed, “I, too, sing America!” “I, too, am America.”

The North Carolina Black Repertory Theatre Company’s performance of Langston Hughes’ *Black Nativity* makes its mark on the McCrary stage on December 16th and 17th at 7:30 pm for the company’s final performances of the season and the in celebration of the play’s 50th anniversary since Hughes first penned the production in 1961 based on the



Gospel of St. Luke;

The performance features Dr. Jean Rattigan-Rohr as the narrator of the play

and is produced by Mabel P. Robinson, artistic director of the NCBRTC. Tickets for the performance cost \$12 for adults and \$6 for children and are available from the McCrary Box office.

## 'Black in America': Diversifying Silicon Valley

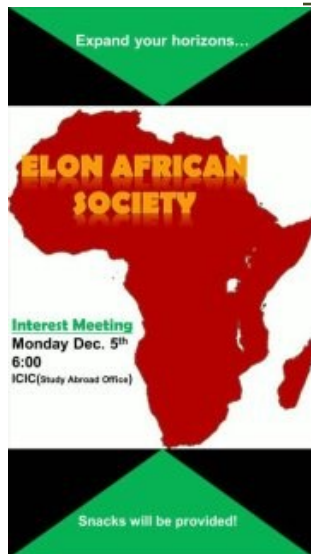


In collaboration with the 2012 Black History Month Steering Committee, AAASE sponsored a special pre-screening of *Black in America*, the CNN series hosted by Soledad O'Brien. The fourth installment entitled, "The New Promise Land: Silicon Valley," features the experience of eight Black entrepreneurs in the highly competitive, predominantly young, white and male business and technology worlds of Silicon Valley in the Southwestern United States. They live and work together as part of the NewMe Accelerator, trying to diversify the tech scene.

Following the screening, Dr. Michelle Ferrier, Associate professor in the School of Communications, moderated a skype panel discussion with three media entrepreneurs. The panelists included Mr. William Crowder, Managing Director of Comcast'd DreamIt Ventures; Kelly Virella, Founder of Dominion of New York, a new online media portal aimed at New Yorkers; and Dr. Chad Womack, Principal for the American 21 Project, formerly called The Black Innovative and Competitiveness Project. Each panelist shared value insights about creating their own avenues

for success in the media.

The panel also fielded questions from the audience that packed McEwen 011 on Friday, November 11th at 3:00 pm. School of Communications students provided coverage of the event through live tweets, while AAASE provided real-time updates via its Facebook page. Also attending the event were President Leo Lambert, Provost Steven House, and School of Communications Dean Paul Parsons, among others.



## Organization Profile: The Elon African Society

The brainchild of Omolayo Ojo, a first-year student originally from Nigeria and Nana Abena Pokua Mensah, originally from Ghana, the Elon African Society held its first interest meeting this Fall in the Isabella Cannon International Society. New to Elon University and currently in development status, the young women hope to build the minimum 20-student membership base needed to gain organizational status at the university. Jason

Aryeh, new tenure track professor in the Department of Performing Arts, will serve as the organization's advisor.

As its mission, the Elon African Society plans to foster an environment and community for learning about the African continent through engaging and hands-on activities. The organization is open to all Elon community members interested in learning or sharing more about Africa's environments, cultures,

and peoples.

Its goals are to:

- create a welcoming community for incoming African students and faculty;
- raise cultural awareness on campus about the African continent; promote intellectual insight about the diversity of African countries, their governments, peoples and environment;
- generate appreciation of Africa's cultural diversity through volunteer activities in the Elon/

## Jason Kingsley Aryeh: Cultural Change Through Dance



Jason Kingsley Aryeh

A native of Ghana and a 2011 MFA graduate of the State University of New York, College of Brockport, Assistant Professor of Dance, Jason Aryeh blends West African movement with poetry and modern, Western techniques. Prof. Aryeh received a degree in Dance and African literature from the University of Ghana in 2005 before coming to the United States. His dance style is very much an amalgam of his training in two distinctive cultures. One of the immediately

apparent benefits of training in two cultures is the ability to adapt psychologically and teach one's body to fit into a different structure, organization and style. These ideas govern Prof. Aryeh's pedagogical approach to teaching West African dance at Elon. Recognizing that many of his students will probably experience a similar discomfort to the one he experienced when transitioning to a new culture, Prof. Aryeh encourages them to be brave and to simply try. He credits the

professors and choreographers with whom he worked and trained for pushing him beyond what he thought were his limits. However, they always encouraged and helped him along the way. He wants to do the same for Elon students: introduce them to the intricacies, beauty and innovation of West African dance forms, push them beyond their perceived capabilities, and to inspire and nurture their love of culture's influence on dance and dance's influence on culture.



## Staff Change-Maker Chris Esters and “the Little Lady from St. Michael’s, MD”

*Speech delivered at College Chapel, October 6, 2011 by Christina H. Esters, Program Assistant, Office of University Advancement, Elon University.*

As I’ve pondered on the topic “change maker,” I’ve come to realize how difficult it is to create major or enduring change and only someone whose actions would impact generations would I consider a change maker. Change is hard to measure. Depending on the extent of the change, it could take years to realize results. And sometimes, change occurs as a series of small events that evolve into a major change over time...sometimes a long time. There are famous people whose actions and decisions have caused a major shift in our country—effects of which we are still benefitting from to this day. I’d like to take a moment to give some context to my story. Walk with me along the timeline of the Civil Rights movement. In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled on the landmark case of *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, unanimously agreeing that segregation in the public schools is unconstitutional. This ruling was a milestone in the civil rights movement and desegregation. Change had begun in America but not without opposition. Through the protests, the marches, the fighting, the assassinations, many change makers rose to the forefront—Thurgood Marshall, Rosa Parks, Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Lyndon Johnson all played a part in the changes that were evolving in America’s landscape. Four students from North Carolina A&T and Stokely Carmichael founder of the Student NonViolent Coordinating Committee at Shaw University brought North Carolina into the national conversation surrounding segregation and racial discrimination. Change was happening, albeit painfully slow. Change this magnitude would not happen at the blink of an eye. Changing a culture shaped by decades of discrimination was like turning a ship around on a dime. But change did come.

The public schools in St. Michaels, Maryland, desegregated in 1966, twelve years after the *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education* ruling, 12 years after I was born! At the same time, a new change maker had come on the scene. Let me tell you a little about her. She was made a widow at the young age of 43 with 6 children to raise. Her husband was killed in the county jail after being arrested for disorderly conduct. While it might have felt as though justice would have been served, she rejected the offer of a group of militant activists to seek retribution. When asked why she didn’t strike back, she answered, “if you must become a beast to beat the beast, who has truly won?” Countering violence with violence would only serve to ruin her life and her children’s future. She had great plans for her children. They would all finish school and they would make something of themselves. The first five of her children attended the segregated black school. They were burdened by discrimination. They were not allowed to sit down in restaurants. They had to use special toilets for coloreds only. Courageously, they joined in the Freedom Riders protest challenging segregation in St. Michaels. They were spat on, arrested, but they held fast and change did come.

Desegregation in the public schools was finally instituted but by “freedom of choice” the law said to desegregate the schools, but the board of education said “if you want to.” The choice to attend the white school was made for her last child, the only one still in school, because the lady from St. Michaels “wanted to.” It wasn’t popular, but she strongly believed in the importance of her decision. Too many people had fought and risked their lives for this to not take full advantage of everything it would mean. She sat her daughter down on that first day of school and told her, “you are as good as anyone else, no matter what color they are. You are as good as they are, but you’re not better than them either.” This day marked the beginning of a paradigm shift in the mindset of that young girl. She stopped seeing herself as the poor little colored girl and started to see herself as the intelligent, capable young lady who could be whomever and do whatever she set her mind to...one who just happened to be born African-American. The years and years of racial discrimination that shadowed over that family had come to an end. This lady made a lasting impact on the lives of her children and her children’s children. She broke the yoke of racism...change had come.

The events and the subsequent laws that were passed by the previously mentioned change makers caused systemic changes to occur. But the courageous steps and wise upbringing by that special lady brought change – freedom – to the family level. Sustaining change can not happen without changing the core...changing the individuals – laws alone can not do it!

Because of this mother and her older children, doors were opened for those who followed. They had the freedom of choice to attend the best schools in the country, whatever school they’d like. They grew up knowing that they were as good as anyone else and limited only by their own choices. Friends, change has come. While seemingly slow, change has come. America has not arrived, but she is constantly, steadily evolving into that great country, that sweet land of liberty.

It often takes something climactic to force change to happen. Those cowardly and insensitive racial incidences of the past few weeks on Elon’s campus has catapulted Elon’s administration, faculty, staff and students into an intentional movement towards a higher level of diversity. We are the next change makers. We have been challenged to pull back the layers of tolerance to reveal the core of diversity—the inclusion of all types of people: rich, poor, black, white, Latino, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, queer, disabled and not disabled, Christian, Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim. We may be different but we share common traits, we are all God’s children and we are Elon.

I speak this from my heart. This is what I believe and this is who I am. And I am because she was a change maker, that little lady from St. Michaels, Anna Mae Hynson born on July 20, 1917...is my mother.

## Mission Statement



The mission of the program is to promote the production and dissemination of knowledge about African and African-descended peoples through advocacy, learning, research, scholarship, service and teaching

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## The Coordinator's Corner

Growing up between and within different cultures taught me to adapt! Linguistic barriers also helped me to develop an acute sensitivity to reading the barely perceptible and subtle universal nuances of emotion and expression, a shrug, shrill, changed pitch, pause, or silence that might precede an outburst, the whispers before the roar. Amidst the buzz of a campus poised for even greater national, and dare we say it, international, recognition, we need to pay attention to the less obvious markers of our progress because they provide evidence of our destination. Change-makers, the theme of this newsletter, examines the people and organizations transforming the Elon campus and making a difference. Yet, the stories featured here provide only a snapshot of the hard work occurring all over Elon's campus

by the sometimes nameless and faceless change agents (past/present). New buildings are being erected; we see more people of varied hues' we hear their expressive cues as more of the world comes to Elon and Elon continues to go into the world. But, we, especially Elon's Black community, would be remiss if we didn't stop and question where we are going and what role we will play in getting there. Changes to the status quo and the relinquishing of power and privilege are not always easy; millions have died and can testify to the challenges and sacrifice this kind of fundamental change requires, but the freedom it brings to all humankind is worth the sacrifice. So when we think about the tangible and, in some respects, symbolic evidence of Elon's undertaking, its "unprecedented commitment to

diversity and global engagement," is this the kind of change Black people can believe in or is it 'politics as usual?'

The answers

to these and other questions may not rest in the obvious and tangible elements of change on our campus; they may be more subtle. When the interactions of our campus community, in and out of the classroom and halls, manifest in the ways we embrace diversity, link others' experiences to ours, own our individual roles and responsibilities to changing our climate, and normalize those experiences, only then will we all belong!



**Dr. Prudence Layne**  
AAASE Coordinator