Emergency units set to test capabilities with campus exercise

Auburn University will have an emergency preparedness training exercise the morning of Wednesday, Dec. 16, so university personnel and local first-responders can practice dealing with a campus emergency or disaster.

Authorities said they selected that date for the exercise because classes will have ended for fall semester and there will be minimal impact on other activities that day. The exercise will begin at 7:45 a.m. and continue for most of the morning.

In the center of campus, perimeters will be established around the area of the Student Center and Haley Center for the multi-unit exercise that will include role playing and emergency response by public safety agencies.

Participating agencies will include the university, Auburn Police Division, Auburn Fire Department, Lee County Emergency Management Agency, Auburn University Medical Clinic and East Alabama Emergency Medical Services.

The exercise will include activation of a joint information center on campus to enable the university’s Office of Communications and Marketing to test procedures for gathering and disseminating information.

Gingerbread Auburn

The Hotel at Auburn University is celebrating the holidays with a model railroad and a chef-made gingerbread display featuring Samford Hall, the University Chapel and Auburn Depot.

National organizations honor Fulford for service to state

Four national organizations have jointly recognized Sherri Fulford, Auburn’s executive director of government affairs, for her service as an advocate for Auburn and higher education in Alabama.

Fulford, an Auburn staff member and administrator for more than 25 years, received the Marvin D. “Swede” Johnson Achievement Award in Orlando on Dec. 3 during the 2009 Higher Education Government Relations Conference. The conference and the award are sponsored by the American Association for State Colleges and Universities, the Council for Advancement and Support of Education, the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities and the American Association of Community Colleges.

Sherri Fulford

Created in 1995 and named for a leader in government relations for more than three decades at universities in Arizona and New Mexico, the Swede Johnson Award annually recognizes an outstanding state government relations officer who, over the course of his or her career, has made an extraordinary contribution to the advancement, quality and effectiveness of state relations on behalf of that person’s institution.

Auburn Montgomery Chancellor John Veres nominated Fulford for the award with supporting letters from Auburn University President Jay Gogue; State Sen. Vivian Davis Figures of Mobile; Speaker of the House Seth Hammett; James L. Sumner Jr., director of the Alabama Ethics Commission; and Marcus B. Paramore, chair of the Council of University Governmental Affairs Representatives.

“Although a few women have served as higher ed lobbyists in the years since she began, they have stayed only a short time,” said Auburn Montgomery Chancellor John Veres. “Sherri currently is the only female. It’s a testament to her skill that she is taken seriously and highly regarded in this virtually all-male profession.”

In addition to her efforts in Montgomery on behalf of the university, Veres said Fulford is especially deserving of the Swede Johnson Award because of the leadership she has provided to her profession and to the cause of higher education. “Years ago, she served on the state’s Higher Education Steering Committee and was one of only two people who ever led that group,” said Veres.

Under Fulford, the committee set a common legislative agenda for the state’s colleges and universities and then turned it over to be implemented by the Council of University Governmental Relations Affairs Representatives, a group for which she has served in leadership positions repeatedly. Among the latter group’s work was the creation of an annual Higher Education Day at the State Capitol to bring students, faculty and staff to the Alabama State House during annual budget negotiations.
Leader of fight against breast cancer receives IQLA honor at UN building

Auburn’s College of Human Sciences presented the 2009 International Quality of Life Award Monday to an American diplomat who is leading a global movement to help medical science find a cure for breast cancer.

Ambassador Nancy G. Brinker, founding chair of Susan G. Komen for the Cure, was honored as the 2009 IQLA laureate in a ceremony at the United Nations Building in New York. The movement founded by Brinker is known worldwide by the pink ribbons its participants display to symbolize the universal appeal of the campaign against breast cancer.

Fulfilling a promise to her dying sister, Brinker launched a comprehensive fight against breast cancer in 1982, leading to a worldwide movement that has had a positive impact on the lives of millions of women and their families for almost three decades. Today, the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure is the world’s largest and most successful education and fundraising event for breast cancer.

“The successful track record of the global campaign Ambassador Brinker has launched — how it started and where it is today — is a phenomenal and empowering story,” said June Henton, dean of the College of Human Sciences. “The ultimate goal of the awards is to open minds and broaden the worldviews of our students who have the opportunity to see firsthand that people from all walks of life can make a huge contribution to humankind by their actions.”

Brinker is Goodwill Ambassador for Cancer Control for the UN World Health Organization and is a member of the Kennedy Center Board of Trustees. In addition to her role as founding chair of Susan G. Komen for the Cure, Brinker served as U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Hungary from 2001-03 and U.S. Chief of Protocol from 2007-09. She was named one of TIME magazine’s “100 Most Influential People” in 2008 and this year received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Obama.

Robots competing at BEST event

Auburn will host the South’s BEST regional robotics championship on Saturday, Dec. 12, from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. at Beard-Eaves-Memorial Coliseum. Gov. Bob Riley will speak at 11:30 a.m. BEST is an acronym for Boosting Engineering, Science and Technology. BEST Robotics Inc. is a non-profit, volunteer-based organization headquartered at Auburn.

At this year’s South’s BEST, the top five teams from each of 11 local competitions this year will compete for the chance to advance to the BEST national championship in Dallas in April.

Auburn to award 1,509 degrees at graduation

Auburn University will award 1,509 academic degrees during fall graduation at 2 p.m. Friday, Dec. 18, in Beard-Eaves-Memorial Coliseum. The ceremony can be viewed live through the university’s Web site at www.auburn.edu/graduationlive. The broadcast begins at 1:45 p.m.

Auburn will award 1,169 bachelor’s degrees, 266 master’s degrees, 69 doctorates, four specialist degrees and one professional degree.

The College of Business will award the most degrees with 312, followed by the College of Liberal Arts with 288 and College of Education with 125. The Samuel Ginn College of Engineering will award 123 degrees; College of Sciences and Mathematics, 83; College of Human Sciences, 72; College of Architecture, Design and Construction, 71; College of Agriculture, 61; School of Nursing, 23; and School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences, 11. The James I. Harrison School of Pharmacy will present one doctor of pharmacy degree.

Campus Calendar

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 11
Final Auburn Report of fall semester and 2009

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 18
Graduation 2 p.m., Beard-Eaves-Memorial Coliseum

MONDAY, DECEMBER 21
Holiday Break Offices closed through Christmas, New Year’s Day and other holidays 2010

MONDAY, JANUARY 4
Offices Reopen University administrative and support offices resume normal schedule

THURSDAY, JANUARY 7
Meeting Administrative & Professional Assembly, 2 p.m., location TBA

MONDAY, JANUARY 11
Classes Begin for spring semester

TUESDAY, JANUARY 12
Meeting University Senate, 3 p.m., auditorium, Broun Hall

FRIDAY, JANUARY 15
First Auburn Report of spring semester

MONDAY, JANUARY 18
Holiday Martin Luther King Jr. Day, no classes, offices closed
Somewhere along the line, Mary Mendonca’s parents finally accepted her decision to change majors in college, but it took a while. Even after she earned a Ph.D. in the biosciences from the University of California, Berkeley, her parents were disappointed that their daughter was not a “real doctor.”

The parents eventually came around as they saw their daughter becoming successful as a postdoctoral researcher and biology professor on two continents. Meanwhile, the newly minted scientist never had any doubts that she had made the right choice.

Mendonca had been accepted to medical school during her junior year at Rutgers, when she joined several other volunteers on a research field trip one of her professors was conducting in South Carolina.

While other students were hitting the beaches for spring break, her group was exploring coastal marshes on a mission that combined research, learning, hard work and fun, an experience the New Jersey resident found exhilarating. “That was an eye-opening experience for me,” she recalls. “I decided then that I wanted to conduct research and teach science, where I could explore and share what I learned.”

Changing her career path from pre-med to biology following her return to campus, Mendonca went on to earn a master’s degree from the University of Central Florida and a Ph.D. from the University of California. With those degrees, she went to Australia and Texas on post-doctoral fellowships before coming to Auburn in 1991 in the College of Sciences and Mathematics.

Mendonca says her parents gave up on their ambition for her as a medical doctor between the time she earned her doctorate and settled in at Auburn. “They kept thinking it was just a phase I was going through, but they finally came around.”

It did not take as long for professionals in her field across the nation and students at Auburn to recognize that she had made the right career choice. Her Mendonca Lab has been widely praised on campus and within her field for its published studies of small vertebrates such as bats and toads and as a prominent training ground for undergraduate and graduate researchers.

She has also earned college and university honors for the quality of her teaching, most recently, with Sushil Bhavnani in Engineering as a recipient of the 2009 Gerald and Emily Leischuck Endowed Presidential Awards for Excellence in Teaching, the university’s highest honor for quality of teaching.

In recommending her for the Leischuck Award, colleagues, students and administrators repeatedly cited her knowledge of the subject matter and empathy for students as distinguishing factors. All were unanimous in citing her enthusiasm.

Mendonca said she finds it hard not to be enthusiastic about both science and teaching. “Teaching is just plain fun,” she explained. “I just want everyone to be as fascinated about science as I am. I love finding a way to explain something to a person so they can understand it. When they grasp the concept, you can see it in their eyes. It is a great feeling when that happens.”

Sprinkling her class presentations with examples, questions and humor, Mendonca tries to draw students into a discussion about the subject matter, with particular attention to why things happen the way they do.

She frequently reminds students that science is not an abstract subject but something that has a direct bearing on daily life. Memorized, textbook definitions have little meaning to students until it sinks in and they make the personal connection, she says. Whether discussing something as innocuous as the popping sound of cracking knuckles or as deadly serious as rigor mortis, she says, the purpose is to get her students to think differently about things instead of just repeating the textbook terms.

Teaching is not something you just walk into a classroom and do, she says. In preparing for each class session, she tries to find ways to break complex material into simple concepts and ideas that everyone can grasp. “The big thing for me as a teacher is knowing the material well enough that I can do that,” she added. “I could not imagine just standing there and lecturing. I have to connect with the class as a whole and with each student as an individual.”

In her biology classes, Mendonca teaches majors in the sciences and many students in a variety of related fields, such as pre-nursing, pharmacy and kinesiology. Beyond the College of Sciences and Mathematics, she teaches freshmen and sophomores from across the university spectrum as part of the Human Odyssey faculty.

Mendonca noted that the small size and diversity of Human Odyssey classes provide opportunities for teaching that differ from those of large classes, especially those in which most students already have a background in the sciences. Small class sizes make it easier to get all the students to discuss the material, and the diversity of interests and academic majors can be a learning experience for the professor as well as for the students, she explained.

“I am not there to fill an empty receptacle,” she said, citing discussions of reading assignments. “Instead, I try to help them bring their thoughts out.”

She continued, “The learning has to go both ways; it has to be a two-way discussion. They get me to think about things in a new way, too. These discussions help everyone to learn.”

On a broader level, Mendonca divides her teaching between undergraduates and graduate students. “Because I am a scientist first, it is important to me to teach and mentor graduate students,” she said. “They are the next generation of scientists, and I want to challenge them to become innovators in science for their generation.”

— Roy Summerford
Spirit of Excellence
Each month Auburn University presents Spirit of Excellence awards to four staff members in recognition of exceptional performance. Awards recently announced by the Division of Human Resources for July, above left, went to, standing from left, Margaret Kay Stone of the Environmental Institute, Matt Caudle of the University Bookstore, Ginger Ware of Aerospace Engineering and, seated, Reaco Echols of the Automotive Shop. Winners for August, above at right, are, standing from left, Ellaine Miller of Human Development and Family Studies, Lynn Rhoden of the University Bookstore, Kynthia “Kat” Stofer of Naval ROTC and, seated, Mary Avery of Building Services.

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**Auburn Report**

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