Town Manager Hardin Watkins ’88 Leads Garner to All-America City Award

by Ashley Brown ’14

Under the leadership of Town Manager Hardin Watkins ’88, Garner, North Carolina, was one of 10 recipients of the 2013 All-America City Award. Each year, the National Civic League recognizes cities that demonstrate a high-level of civic engagement and cross-sector collaboration to solve community-wide problems.

The award is an open competition for neighborhoods, towns, cities, counties, and metropolitan regions. Applicants must submit a narrative describing three projects that illustrate how the community has worked together to create change.

“Ultimately, the award is about citizens coming together to solve problems,” says Watkins. Garner wanted to showcase projects that were innovative and could be successfully replicated in other communities. “With this award, we have had the opportunity to tell our story on a national stage—and there is a great story to tell about Garner.”

The Town of Garner included the following projects in its All-America City application:

- Garner Veterans Memorial, which was made possible through funds raised by local grassroots efforts
- Community of Hope Ministries, which provides services for Garner elementary schools’ at-risk youth and their families
- Cultural development highlighted by a partnership between the community’s nonprofit theater group, Towne Players, and the Town of Garner

After weeks of rigorous preparation, 44 members of a citizen panel, convened by the Town of Garner, traveled to the National Civic League headquarters in Denver, Colorado, where they gave a presentation about their community and participated in a Q&A session.

“It was an all-hands-on-deck process where citizens, local government, nonprofits, and many others came together to share the projects they had been working on to improve their community,” says Watkins. “The citizen panel was our booster club throughout the whole process.”

The panel returned to Garner with the 2013 All-America City Award and a boost of confidence in their successful collaborative work.

“People help people in Garner, and we want everyone to know that we are a great community,” says Watkins. “It’s a good place to live and a good place to grow. Now we have national credibility to back it up.”

The experience also allowed the Town to reflect on the positive steps it takes each day to improve the local standard of living and cultivate meaningful partnerships between the town government and its citizens. For Watkins, the All-America City Award also reflects many of the same public service values that were ingrained in him while earning his MPA at UNC-Chapel Hill.

“My MPA education gave me an appreciation for collaboration and civic engagement,” said Watkins. “Remembering that government does not have to do all of the work by itself is a message I got loud and clear in the MPA program.”