

Carlos McLean Retires After Years of Helping At-Risk Students Find Success



If Carlos McLean had been better at chemistry, he would have followed his dream to be a veterinarian. But luckily for thousands of at-risk youth and adults who became successful despite all odds, science was not his thing. Instead, armed with a bachelor's degree in psychology from UC Davis and eventually a master's in counseling psychology, McLean found his calling: helping troubled youth, middle-schoolers, adult job trainees, and college students to believe in themselves when no one else did.

Next month McLean will retire after a long, 45-year career. He says it was a tough decision to leave a profession that has brought him so much satisfaction. But, at 66, he also feels fulfilled by the contributions he's made.

After his first few jobs as a juvenile probation officer and a counselor for both a middle-school and a job-training program, he zigzagged among community colleges gaining more and more experiences. At different times, he was an EOPS counselor at City College of San Francisco; psychology instructor, Dean of Instruction, and VP of Student Services at Laney; and instructor, counselor, and project director at Merritt.

"Each job helped me grow and develop and increase my expertise by working with people of all ages and backgrounds," says McLean. "I call myself a lifelong learner because I learn from who I serve. It's been both rewarding and humbling."

It was as a counselor at Merritt College where he felt he could help the most and where he will finish his tenth year when he retires. "This is the real world," he says. "There are so many obstacles for some of these students to overcome, including homelessness and incarceration, and many of them don't think they can even pass one class. "It's challenging to learn how to help them," says McLean, "but it's just what I do, I don't think about it. I say, 'We have something to do, let's get to it.'"

In 2008, McLean and others became part of a program that would do something to dramatically change the lives of many students at Merritt. With a 2-year, \$1.1 million grant for from the Department of Education, he served as Project Director of the Maximum Achievement Project (MAP) designed to increase the graduation and matriculation rates of African-American males and other at-risk students. "It was a very successful program," says McLean, who credits colleagues Audrey Trotter and Anika Toussant-Jackson for writing the grant. "Working with Ernie Crutchfield and Johnny Burks, both counselors in the program, I was able to work with students who needed guidance the most, and then they were like birds who took off from there."

With close to 300 African-American males during the duration of the program, McLean says, "At one point it seemed like everyone wanted to be part of MAP, so we branched out and anyone who wanted to be included. We said, 'We will make it work.'" One of the early supporters of the program was Congresswoman Barbara Lee who ultimately invited McLean to give a presentation about MAP at the annual Congressional Black Caucus in Washington D.C., a crowning glory for the program.

“It was the first time we had been invited, and I went with then-Merritt President Dr. Bobby Adams and Eric Gravenberg, who was a consultant for MAP, and was able to bring two students who told their stories to a packed audience. There weren’t many dry eyes in the house. It was a beautiful thing, just a wonderful experience, and the highlight of my career.”

Recognition of his contributions spread far and wide, eventually getting the attention of the editors of the national *Essence Magazine* where McLean was interviewed and featured in its March 2010 issue among the “Best and Brightest” educators in the nation. He excitedly points to a copy of the magazine cover on his office wall, noting that President Barack Obama and his wife Michelle are on the cover. “I was floored,” he says. “I had people calling me from all over the country, people who knew me when I was a kid. I couldn’t believe it. It was really something to be proud of.”

Though MAP ended because of a lack of funding, the dreams for many of the students did not. Of the students who gave the presentations, one received an academic scholarship and graduated from Howard University. The other MAP student, who had barely graduated from high school, ended up receiving a full academic scholarship to the University of California, Berkeley, and recently graduated. Other students, says McLean proudly, are going to law school or to work on MBAs, while some have landed in lucrative careers. “I run into them all the time. Sometimes they recognize my voice in a crowd, and they’ll say, ‘McLean is that you?’” he says. “I’ve seen them in stores, at childcare picking up their kids, I’ve even seen them on TV being interviewed. It’s gratifying to know I played a role in their lives.”

In his own life, McLean has raised three children whom he is also proud of: Jason, 39, who works for Apple; Troy, 36, director of a Sylvan Learning Center, and Jene’, 26, an independent film producer who also works in retail. “I always talked to them about college, so they knew that going to school and finishing was not an option but expected,” he says. “And they also knew that they had to share me with my students.” McLean says they didn’t mind because “they were very proud of the work I was doing. In fact, when Jene’ was in college, she was always referring me to her friends who were on the verge of getting into trouble, and then they would refer me to their friends until I had to say, ‘Stop!’”

But even in retirement, he won’t stop. He says he will always find ways to help students in need. He’s also planning to travel with his wife, Kathryn, and spend time with the rest of his family, including his 95-year-old mother.

So what will life be like without Merritt? Though McLean will miss his colleagues very much, he will miss his students even more. In fact, he is dreading to have to give them the news about his departure. “I love Merritt,” says McLean. “I’ve had a chance to interact with wonderful students and see them become successful in ways that they never thought they would. When I see someone getting acknowledged, I remember when they walked through the door and they didn’t think they could do anything. And now there they were strutting across the stage with the world in their hands. For me, there’s no greater accomplishment!”

—*Susan May*