

Passing the torch of hope

New college head has a small goal: Change the world

William Pollard was pretty familiar with Medgar Evers College long before he took over as its president last week.

He was a member of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education committee, which evaluated the Crown Heights, Brooklyn, college two years ago.

Yet a week into the job, Pollard, 64, said what he finds most remarkable is how much of himself and his history he sees in Medgar students.

"My parents were probably like a lot of parents of the children who come to Medgar Evers College," he said. "Both of them, like many of the parents in Brooklyn, valued education and they pushed it.

"They inspired us like the parents of today's Medgar Evers students are inspired because the students who come to Medgar, the few I have met so far, are students who seem to be inspired.

"My sense is, like my parents, these parents want their children to have a better life. They also want them to make a contribution to the community. That's what links me with this population and with this school."

Pollard joins Medgar Evers after a more than 30-year academic career which has included six years as president of the University of the District of Columbia in Washington, a 10-year stint as dean of Syracuse University's School of Social Work, and four years as dean and founder of the School of Social Work at Grambling University.

Most notably, while studying for his doctorate at the University of Chicago, Pollard worked with noted African-American historian John Hope Franklin, and with historian and educator Benjamin Mays, the Morehouse College professor whose students included Martin Luther King Jr.

Born in Raleigh, N.C., Pollard grew up in the Walnut Terrace public housing project, the oldest of eight children — seven boys, one girl.

His late mother, Bette, and father, Linwood, did a variety of jobs — Pollard recalled his mother, who died in 2005, working as a maid, cooking in a deli and grading tobacco in a warehouse. His father was a laborer and cabinetmaker before he got a job with the local gas company.

Though neither parent finished school, they fervently believed in educating their children.

"My mother got us a library card early. We lived in public housing projects about two blocks from the library. They kept books in the house and they bought books for us."

After graduating from Ligon Junior-Senior High School — "where the core of my academic preparation started," and



New president of Medgar Evers College, William Pollard, says he's "thrilled" with job, the culmination of years of community organizing and education. He regrets that many "positives in the African-American educational experience" got lost. Photo by James Monroe Adams IV

"where I was first mentored by men and women teachers who got me to look beyond the here and now" — Pollard went to Shaw University, also in Raleigh.

It would turn out to be a seminal decision in his life.

"I spent four wonderful years at Shaw," he said. "It's the place where I learned how to be a black man and an engaged citizen, and it's the place where I met my wife."

(Pollard and his wife, Merriette have two sons, William Jr. and Frederick.)

This was the mid-1960s, when the civil rights movement was at its peak — the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC, was founded at Shaw in 1960. Pollard remembers joining fellow students as they gathered at the school before marching in various protests.

"I could not just live in Raleigh and not be a part of this revolution that was sweeping the nation," Pollard said.

Pollard sees many parallels between his education in the segregated South in the '60s and the atmosphere at present-day Medgar Evers.

"When you come to a place like Medgar, students have an opportunity to experi-

ence teaching that can be provided by a community of people who look like them and represent the diversity of the black experience," he said. "It's a powerful influence, something I wish we had been able to capture from my day because there are so many children who grew up in Raleigh after the early '70s who did not get that.

"There were a lot of positives in the African American educational experience that got lost," Pollard continued. "And for that reason, Medgar becomes that much more important, because you not only have an appreciation for the African-American experience, you have an appreciation for the Caribbean experience and all that that brings to Brooklyn," he said. "We have such an opportunity to transform the world because our students are transformed by one another in this kind of environment."

Still, Pollard said he did not so much choose a career in academia as academia chose him.

Though he planned to be a social worker when he entered Shaw in 1963, he did some community organizing for a local group that helped him perfect his ability to work with others.

"I wanted to change the world, and in the process I found community organizing was just a part of that," he said. Pollard enrolled in the master's program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill,

majoring in community organization.

By the time he graduated, he was given a choice — enlist in the armed services or teach.

Pollard chose to teach. Thanks to an incredible list of mentors urging him on, Pollard completed his masters degree, then moved to Chicago to complete his doctorate. Franklin, then a University of Chicago professor, was on Pollard's thesis review committee, and Mays helped him refine his dissertation topic, "Black Welfare Developments in the Southeast, 1890-1915."

Pollard said he is "thrilled" to "step into the shoes of someone like [20-year Medgar Evers President] Edison Jackson, who has contributed much to the institution.

"I want this to be a student-centered institution," he said of his vision for the school. "Everyone who takes a check from Medgar has an obligation to contribute to student success," he said.

"While the faculty plays a vital role, there is another obligation for the remaining members of the family to lessen the stress of being a student, from financial aid to keeping the building clean.

"Ultimately, it's all about what we each do to ensure student success."

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