



ARVARH STRICKLAND BRINGS JEFFERSONIAN PRINCIPLES TO THE CLASSROOM

By CAROL AGAIN

"Enlighten the people generally, and tyranny and oppression of the body and mind will vanish like evil spirits at the dawn of day."

THOMAS JEFFERSON

MORE THAN 150 YEARS after Thomas Jefferson crusaded for public education, Arvarh E. Strickland began his high-school studies in the heart of Dixie. "I could not praise the city fathers and citizens of Hattiesburg, Miss., for providing a first-class school," he says of the building set aside for black students during the 1940s. "They did not intend that."

Nonetheless, Strickland says he had every advantage. "We had dedicated and committed teachers who took us and, you might say, demanded that we succeed according to their formula for success: to do the best we could with what we had. They were always after us to do better."

Today, nearly 40 years later, it's obvious he learned these lessons well. This spring, Strickland, a professor of history, received a \$1,000 Thomas Jefferson Award, given annually to University faculty members who best exemplify Jeffersonian principles and ideals "through personal influence and performance of duty in teaching, writing and scholarship, character and influence, devotion and loyalty to the University."

Dr. Patricia A. McIlrath, curator's professor of theater at UMKC, also received a 1985 Jefferson award.

Jefferson's original headstone, which he designed, stands on Francis Quadrangle. The marker was given to Missouri because it is the first state university in the Louisiana Purchase, which Jefferson negotiated during his presidency. The epitaph Jefferson wrote neglects his two presidential terms, but includes his founding of the first state university in Virginia.

"I think there is some relation to what I would consider to be Jeffersonian principles and my career," Strickland says. "In teaching, I like to bring students to see the great people in history, not as plaster saints, but as human beings who were able to rise above the common run."

"I relate to Jefferson in that category. Even though he was a slave holder, he also saw the dangers in that, and it worried him. He was looking for ways to get from the society that was, to the society that ought to be. When I have played a part in moving any portion of society, I can relate to anyone who thinks in that way as an American."

Strickland arrived on Campus in 1969 to become, unwittingly, UMC's first black faculty member. "I had never thought of the fact that there weren't any other black faculty here. It had not dawned on me that I would be in any way pioneering." The first black students had arrived more than a decade earlier, most to pursue graduate or professional degrees.

In the role thrust upon him, Strickland became a catalyst for all students, says Dr. N. Gerald Barrier, professor and chairman of the history department. "He professionally has been a role model for minority students, and spends much of his time interacting with them, giving them help and encouragement."

"He's challenged non-minority students intellectually, and besides raising the normal issues, has forced them to look at their values and to look at aspects of the black experience as an American experience they may not have encountered," Barrier says. "I've spoken to several non-minority students who said he opened up new vistas."

Strickland began teaching UMC's first Afro-American history course at the high point of the civil rights movement. Ninety percent of his students were white, a reflection of low black enrollment. "Some were quite disappointed when the course was reduced down just to plain, old, dull history. It was the only way to keep it from becoming Rap I and Rap II."

Still, he says, "It was an exciting time. Students had questions and very strong opinions." In the Jeffersonian



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tradition, Strickland was, and remains, tolerant. "As a teacher, I have to be able not only to respect but to deal with and work with people of many shades of belief and opinion, people who think diametrically opposed to what I think. I

try to get students to examine critically the way they think, not get them to think the same way I think."

However, he does not tolerate an idle mind. "It's much more comfortable not to think. Students will resist with



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all their being. So I try to work at it. Any person who counts himself an educated person must be able to think critically."

In addition to undergraduate and graduate classes in Afro-American history, Strickland usually teaches an American history survey course to incoming freshmen. "It's interesting to see students when they first get to Campus, before they become so sophisticated and collegiate," says Strickland, who was the first history department chairman elected by colleagues, serving from 1980 to 1983. "I like helping them in the first few months on Campus."

As an undergraduate at Tougaloo College in Mississippi in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Strickland remembers, "I was expected to succeed from the day I walked on campus. Everything there seemed programmed on the assumption that I would succeed." Strickland graduated summa cum laude with a bachelor's degree in history and English and went on to complete master's and doctoral degrees at the University of Illinois.

"I often get the idea, particularly with minority students, that at UMC sometimes we give them the feeling that we expect them to fail. Many who could succeed don't because, as human nature, we live up to the expectation people have of us, especially those in authority.

"Many of us have been trying to change that kind of image and feeling. I think in many ways in some areas we have been successful. In a large place it takes longer. Then there's the history (of segregation), too."

Memories of that era boiled two years ago when arts and science faculty considered a proposal to increase the standardized-test score required for admission to Mizzou. Supporters quoted statistics relating test scores to academic success; opponents showed that the proposed score would have excluded 40.3 percent of black freshmen admitted in fall of 1981.

Faculty squelched the proposal after hearing an impassioned speech by Strickland: "We can do more with our pseudo-intellectual data here at the University than a hundred Klan members wearing bedsheets and throwing stones, because the only hope for striving forward is to come here and get an education."

In retrospect, he says, "I don't think an activist needs to be out yelling. I would rather have had a group of intelligent academicians see this as discriminatory, rather than one of us having to get up and rant and rave and call them racist to make them wake up. I would prefer rational methods."

For minorities, Strickland says, standardized tests are no more than barriers. "You cannot take one of these tests and accurately gauge the potential of the minority population. It does not predict for certain groups of whites, either."

Potential financial barriers also cause concern. "We all understand the necessity for continuing increases in student fees, but I would hope that the Legislature would come through in ways that this trend will not have to continue.



"I feel a great accomplishment in seeing students' eyes light up with new understanding."

If we are becoming more attractive to minority students, we must find some ways to help them support their education financially. It won't help if we become a place where they feel welcome, and then put up financial barriers so they can't attend."

Also important is hiring black professors, says Strickland, who in 1972 served as special assistant to the chancellor to help recruit minority faculty. "This University has a lot to offer. Many of the things that make this University attractive to white faculty make it attractive to black faculty, too."

The national reputation of UMC's history department lured Strickland from Chicago State College 15 years ago. Another attraction was the Columbia community. "I felt it would be an ideal place for rearing children." One of his sons, Bruce, will be a senior at Mizzou next fall. Duane, a graduate of Syracuse University, is a captain in the U.S. Army.

The prospect of teaching at a major public university also affected Strickland's decision in 1969. "I determined that I needed to either go to a predominantly black institution and work with black students, or go to a PhD-granting institution and work with all students and have the opportunity to train some black PhDs in history who would, I hoped, teach in predominantly black schools."

Strickland's first PhD student, who was white, chose a teaching career at a predominantly black college in Georgia. His other three PhD students were black; two teach at predominantly black schools, one at a predominantly white university. "They have assisted very much in the recruiting process through their loyalty to UMC."

Working with doctoral candidates has been the greatest satisfaction of his career, says Strickland, author of three books and winner of numerous honors, including a 1983 Faculty-Alumni Award. "It's my way of paying some dues, and helping the University to pay some dues. We can't sit around and talk about needing black faculty if we're not producing any."

Other accomplishments, he says, are more diffuse. "I could say that I am proud of being involved in creating the Black Studies program, but as a teacher, I feel a greater accomplishment in seeing students' eyes light up with understanding something they didn't before, or coming up with some kind of formula they didn't think they were capable of. I feel good every time a student says to me, 'I got something from having this class with you that has made me a better person.'" □