



MAC Scholars: Wesley Smith, Joshua McElroy, David Pendleton, and Arlin Hill with advisors Mary Lynne McGovern, and Hubert McIntyre (second from right).

PHOTO BY KEVIN G. REEVES

mac scholar



Manning Up, the Right Way

The innovative MAC Scholars program at Shaker High – a national model – has been successfully helping young men rise up in the world for 20 years. Herein, some personal stories of high achievement.

BY JENNIFER PROE

It's an ordinary Thursday morning at Shaker Heights High School, but something extraordinary and powerful is going on in the school's Small Auditorium. A select group of African-American juniors and seniors is getting ready to dole out some tough love to their younger counterparts, many of whom are struggling with academic achievement. These members of the Minority Achievement Committee, known as the MAC Scholars, are carrying out a tradition that has been handed down to them now for 20 years.

In keeping with that tradition, the Scholars – young men who have distinguished themselves through academic prowess and leadership – are crisply dressed in shirts and ties. They stand prepared to greet each Potential Scholar with a firm handshake, as all stand to recite the MAC Pledge:

I am an African-American and I pledge to uphold the name and image of the African-American man. I will do so by striving for academic excellence, conducting myself with dignity, and respecting others as if they were my brothers and sisters.

After the Scholars remind the attendees to bring a list of their goals to the next meeting, they hear a few words from their faculty advisors, Mary Lynne McGovern and Hubert McIntyre. Both have been

with the program since its inception.

McGovern, the academic advisor known affectionately to some as “Mama Mac,” reminds them all that they have five weeks left in the semester to improve their grades. “Plan to take home all your notes over the winter break and study them. Highlight anything you do not understand, and get a conference with your teacher if you need to.”

Then McIntyre, a health sciences teacher and former coach, gives them the half-time locker room talk. “This is not a feel-good meeting,” he tells them. “This is a gut-check meeting. If you are not completing all of your assignments, or going to all of your classes, it's like taking a hit in a fight without fighting back.”

The group then launches into a discussion of what it means to “man up” in the classroom, with the Scholars ready to lend their wisdom to those who will listen. Those who don't hear the message this time may get it at the next meeting, or the one after that. As McIntyre explains, “We don't give up on them. The light doesn't shine on everyone at the same time.”

The MAC Scholars program was born in the spring of 1990, when a group of concerned faculty members solicited help from high-achieving black male students to address a troubling trend of low achievement among many African-American males – a phenomenon that persisted





Jerome Taylor

not only at Shaker, but throughout the nation. Says McGovern, “When we showed our high achievers the statistics, their immediate response was, ‘You [teachers] can’t fix this – it’s something we have to do. Let us talk to them directly.’” The idea for a student-led mentoring group was born, and has continued to thrive.

Since then, countless Scholars helped shape the model that has now been replicated in schools throughout the nation, garnering attention from *Newsweek* and *CNN* along the way. As word of its success has spread, more than 80 school districts throughout the United States and Canada have requested information about the program; many have launched initiatives of their own. McGovern was asked to contribute a chapter in sociologist John Ogbu’s 2003 book, *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement*. McGovern and McIntyre have made presentations in Minneapolis, Boston, Columbus, San Diego, Atlanta, San Antonio, and New York City, where they described the program to top lawyers and corporate executives at a seminar called “The Pipeline Crisis: Winning Strategies for Young Black Men,” sponsored by the prestigious law firm of Sullivan & Cromwell.

The national attention has had a positive effect on the Scholars, as well. Here’s what a few of them had to say about the impact the MAC Scholars program has had on their lives – and by extension, the lives of many others.

Jerome Taylor, ’92:

Assistant Professor of Surgery, SUNY Downstate Medical Center

The MAC program is what really set me on my path.

One of the founding members, Je-

rome Taylor recalls his time as a MAC Scholar with great fondness, and is proud of his role in helping to launch the innovative program.

He explains, “I came from a background of real poverty. I was pretty angry. My father left my mother, and my mother became an alcoholic. I channeled that energy into school. I was also very fortunate that my aunt and uncle (Judy and Charles Taylor, a former school board member) adopted me and raised me as one of their own.”

Taylor thrived academically, played basketball and football, and became class president. Not surprisingly, this brought him to the attention of the High School’s faculty achievement committee.

“When the program started, Mrs. McGovern put five of us [high achievers] in a room with 15 guys who were struggling academically, and left us alone to talk to them. It was tough love we gave them, but it was met with love for the most part. It’s not that they were not intelligent. They just emulated the wrong things. A lot of black men are told it’s not cool to be smart. MAC Scholars helped bring a lot of people out of their shell.”

Taylor remembers one student in particular with whom he worked closely, who started out with a grade point average of 1.2. “Eventually, he worked his way up to a GPA of 3.3. He blossomed, and his character really developed. He was so happy that somebody cared.”

The program left its mark on Taylor, as well. “The MAC program is really what set me on my path. I received a full scholarship to Morehouse College. What I took away from the Scholars program was that I was more comfortable when I was around other African-American kids who were achieving.” He believes his experience as a peer mentor is “what



drove me into academic medicine – the opportunity to teach and give back.”

Taylor came to medicine by way of the Navy, which offered him a scholarship after his first year of medical school at Case Western Reserve University. After completing medical school, he spent one year at Bethesda Naval Hospital, and then served three more years with a Marine unit that was deployed to more than 30 countries, including a six-month tour of duty in Iraq. Following his time in the Navy, he completed his residency at Beth Israel Hospital in general surgery before landing his current position at SUNY.

Taylor returns to Shaker often with his wife, Alicia, and their son, Jesiah, to visit family and to catch up with his favorite advisor. “I have such an overwhelming love and affection for Mrs. McGovern. I was in her office all the time. She is really the unsung hero. She has saved countless young men.”

Isaac Kidd, '96: Project Manager, Cleveland Clinic Foundation

You don't have to change who you are to get good grades.

When Isaac Kidd brought home a ninth grade report card filled with C's, his mother, Judy Kidd, responded with some tough talk. “What are you seeking in life?” she demanded to know. “She let me know that it was not acceptable in any way,” says Kidd.

“To be honest, I was a guy who could have gone either way. I could have been in the group the Scholars were talking to, but by eleventh grade I got my grades up so that I could become a Scholar. And once you became a Scholar, you didn't want to disappoint the other guys by losing those grades. I didn't want to be the guy who used to be a

MAC Scholar.”

Instead, Kidd applied his competitive spirit to excelling in school the way he did on the football team. “I got the names of people who could help me after school, and I went to see my teachers to get help. The funny thing was, I almost felt like I had to do it on the sly. At the time, it seemed like I couldn't do both things – be popular and have good grades. When I would bring that pink excuse slip for being late to football practice, the other guys thought I was just trying to miss sprints – they didn't know what I was really doing.”

Like many of the past Scholars, Kidd returns from time to time to speak to current students at Shaker. His message: “You don't have to change who you are to get good grades. Don't think you can't be cool and achieve. If you worry about that, you'll never get where you need to be in life.”

Kidd attended the College of Wooster, where he met his wife, Estella Anku-Kidd, a native of Ghana. While at college, he had to take time off before completing his degree due to financial difficulties. During that time, he worked in the medical records department at the Cleveland Clinic and took classes at Cleveland State University. Upon completing his independent study thesis at Wooster – for which he received honors – he worked his way out of the records room and into a management position at the Cleveland Clinic, taking advantage of the Clinic's “fast-track” program.

As a manager, he applies the same tough love techniques he learned as a MAC Scholar. “If something doesn't get done, I'm on them – but I will work with people to help them do better. I want to see them progress at work the way I did.”

Anthony Abernathy, '98:

Global Digital Innovations Manager, Nike
To be a catalyst for change – a difference maker – was very appealing to me.



PHOTO BY PEGGY CALDWELL

Isaac Kidd

Priority One: Achievement for All

Inspired by the success of the MAC Scholars program, the Shaker school district has created other programs to help advance minority achievement among both boys and girls, beginning in the elementary years.

The Woodbury African American Scholars program focuses on achievement for boys and girls in the fifth and sixth grades, and includes monthly student meetings, field trips, parent meetings, service projects, and special year-end recognition ceremonies. Woodbury staff members Samuel Kisner and Nathaniel Reese work with the boys and Jacqueline Gholson, Pat Hitchens, and Barabara Lockhart work with the girls.

The Shaker Middle School Scholars program is designed to build confidence and leadership skills among all minority students. During the first semester, meetings are led by the advisors: technology department chair Dexter Lindsey, special education aide Michele White, and librarian Dawn Sullivan. During the second semester, meetings are led by a group of eighth-grade students selected to be Scholars based on their grades and other accomplishments. Approximately 40 students attend an end-of-year field trip to a college, cultural, or historic venue.

The MAC Sister Scholars program is a student-led organization in which high achieving and highly motivated minority junior and senior girls work with freshmen and sophomores to set goals and standards for academic achievement. High School attendance officer Nicole Gardner acts as faculty advisor for the group, which meets once per month. The MAC Sisters also perform community service projects and provide peer mentoring.

The Rising Stars program offers adult mentoring for minority high school girls who may be in need of more support, both academically and socially. Intervention specialists Shana Black and Enid Vazquez, instructional aide Andrea Green, and English teacher Jewel Reid provide positive role modeling, encouragement, and motivational seminars, with the goal of raising expectations for college attendance.



PHOTO BY STEVEN GIBBONS

Anthony Abernathy

London, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Shanghai, Beijing, Seoul, Amsterdam, Manila: It's hard to name a major world city this well-traveled corporate executive has not visited during his tenure with Nike. Yet, Anthony Abernathy still carries a cell phone number with a 216 area code, a fond reminder of his ties to his hometown of Shaker Heights and to his parents, Larry and Regina Abernathy.

"We moved to Shaker when I was in fifth grade," recalls Abernathy. "My mother was an English teacher at Shaw High School in Cleveland. She and my father felt Shaker had a lot of opportunities that we should take advantage of. They pushed me and my sister to take honors and advanced classes, and to never be satisfied with the status quo."

Abernathy joined Nike as an associate producer after completing an undergraduate degree at Florida A&M in computer systems and a master's from the University of Michigan. In his current position as Global Digital Innovations Manager, he relies daily on skills he honed as a MAC Scholar.

"When I was a sophomore, I went with a friend to a MAC meeting. I knew right away I wanted to be one of those people up on that stage. To be a catalyst for change – a difference maker – was very appealing to me. The one thing that truly shaped me was being on that stage: that sense of confidence, of being comfortable in your own skin, being a trailblazer. It's a sense of mental toughness I've been able to carry with me here at Nike," he says.

Abernathy recalls how the bond he felt with many of his fellow students carried over from the basketball team. "We pushed each other in the classroom the same way we did in sports. We applied a lot of tough love in that auditorium. We had to practice what we preached, regardless of the situation. It was a brotherhood."

Newly married, Abernathy lives in Beaverton, Oregon, with his wife, Rashree. He still enjoys combining sports with mentoring,



now as a youth basketball coach. “Beyond their basketball skills, I want to see the kids develop an appetite to learn, grow, and see what the world has to offer. I know I was inspired by seeing other individuals with integrity in how they conducted themselves.”

Cullen Buie, '99:

Assistant Professor of Mechanical Engineering, MIT

The MAC Scholars really developed leaders.

Cullen Buie’s curriculum vitae leaves no room for doubt that he was always bound for success. But there was a time when his parents, Eunice Crump and Richard Buie, Jr., might have doubted his career would include public speaking.

“Growing up, I was so quiet, I think my parents wondered if I could even talk,” says Buie. “But over the past 12 years I’ve given lectures and research talks throughout the U.S., Mexico, Japan, Italy, and Turkey, and it all started with the presentations I gave as a MAC Scholar.”

Buie grew up in an environment where “it never occurred to me that college was not an option. My great-grandparents, grandparents, and parents all had college degrees. A lot of kids don’t have that situation – they have the deck stacked against them.” Accordingly, he took his role as a peer mentor very seriously. “I was definitely very engaged as a MAC Scholar. But the interesting thing was, I got just as much out of it as the students I was working with. The process of trying to take charge of this under-achievement issue did a lot for our character building. The MAC Scholars program really developed leaders.”

Upon graduating from Shaker, Buie visited The Ohio State University, where a representative from the minority affairs office recognized him from a Newsweek

article about the MAC Scholars program. “She asked me if I would be interested in applying for an engineering scholarship. I had no idea what engineering was. I had to take an intensive six-week summer program to qualify for the scholarship, and by the end of the program, I found out that I really liked engineering.”

After completing his undergraduate degree at Ohio State, Buie obtained both a master’s and a Ph.D. in Mechanical Engineering from Stanford University. He now teaches at MIT and works with a small group of graduate students conducting research in microfluidics. He and his wife, Donielle, welcomed their first child on December 29.

Despite his busy schedule, Buie makes time to actively recruit minority candidates to graduate school. “I recently met with students at a D.C.-area high school that is 99 percent African American, with a special focus on science and engineering. One of the students at the school came up to me and said, ‘You don’t look like a professor from MIT.’ It made me realize that clearly, this work still needs to be done.”



PHOTO BY DOMINICK REUTER

Cullen Buie

Through the efforts of the Shaker Schools Foundation, grants from Key Foundation and the Harry K. Fox and Emma R. Fox Charitable Foundation have helped support the MAC Scholars program for the past four years. To help meet the ongoing demand for information about the MAC Scholars’ formula for success, The Cleveland Foundation and The George Gund Foundation provided financial support to create a resource guide and DVD about the program, and the Key Foundation and Fox Foundation underwrote the production of a new video. View the new video at www.tinyurl.com/MACScholars.

