

Shelley Jefferson Hamler empowers young people

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Dr. Shelley Jefferson Hamler wants every student to have experiences they will always remember and cherish.

Inspiring young people has been her passion for more than 32 years. The life-long educator has dedicated her life to motivating and empowering students through unconditional love, support, consistency and positive reinforcement.

"I wanted to give students the experiences that would last a lifetime," she said.

Those who know Jefferson Hamler call her an inspiration and a leader who is always present and supportive.

"She is a model leader who makes everyone feel important and who values diverse points of view," wrote Cincinnati Councilwoman Jan-Michele Lemon Kearney, in her nomination.

It takes a village

Early in life, Jefferson Hamler saw the power of community and how it shapes young adults.

She grew up in Avondale on Forest Park Drive, where neighbors looked out for each other's children and kept them on the right path. Her family was one of the first African American families to move to that street, she said.

Her mother and father were both educators.

"It was so wonderful to be able to grow up in an environment that was loving and caring," she said. "They treated us like we were their own children. It truly takes a village. That was the beginning of seeing how important it was to give back."

So Jefferson Hamler continued the tradition of giving back to the community by becoming an educator.

She started her teaching career at Cutter Junior High School before transitioning to Woodward High School as an English teacher and reading specialist. Jefferson Hamler knew she could make a difference at Woodward.

After Woodward, she became an assistant principal at Dater High School. This position led to one of her most rewarding experiences: Becoming principal of Peter Humphries Clark Academy from 1988-94.

Clark Academy was for students unable to make it in a traditional high school setting.

Day after day, Jefferson Hamler would make sure students did not give up on themselves and kept an open door policy. Students had their own door to her office, she said.



2020 Enquirer Woman of the Year Dr. Shelley Jefferson Hamler.

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"These were students on whom society had given up," she said. "They needed someone who believed in them more than they believed in themselves."

Parents needed an environment where their children would be safe with unconditional love, she said. Parents needed the school's support, as well.

Jefferson Hamler held elaborate graduations for her Clark Academy students. She believes in thinking outside the box.

For the first graduation class, which consisted of 12 students, the reception was held at the Peterloo Mansion in Indian Hill, where she hired caterers and had the mayor as a keynote speaker.

"It was really nice," she said. "I wanted to expose them to as much as I possibly could. That was important. Some of these parents never thought they would see their children graduate from high school. They did that day."

It was Jefferson Hamler's tough love and openness that led Clark Academy staff and students to nominate her for Principal of the Year for Ohio in 1994-95. She won the designation.

"I had the most wonderful staff, student body and parents," Jefferson Hamler said. "You have to set boundaries and

give tough love. Eventually, the students saw that was real love and that someone cared."

She appreciated the community support, especially from John E. Pepper, former president of Procter & Gamble. He was always there to lend a helping hand, she said.

After Clark Academy, Jefferson Hamler went on to create and direct the Careers Path Program for Cincinnati Public Schools. She redesigned the vocational education program with an emphasis on academics.

She also became assistant superintendent of Princeton City Schools.

After she retired, she became an adjunct professor at the University of Cincinnati.

Her love for motivating the youth didn't stop there.

Jefferson Hamler is currently president of the Cincinnati Chapter of The Links Inc., a philanthropic service organization.

"Two years ago, she founded the Links Leadership Academy for Girls to mentor, motivate and encourage young women from junior high school through college," Kearney wrote in her nomination letter.

ABOUT DR. SHELLEY JEFFERSON HAMLER:

Birthplace: Cincinnati

Current residence: Amberley Village

Family: Sisters Noel E. Jefferson (Hendersonville, N.C.), Bari Jefferson Jenks (Houston) and Cherie Jefferson Lawrence (Brooklyn, N.Y.)

Education: Walnut Hills High School; Ohio State University, B.S. secondary education in English and French; Xavier University M.Ed in counseling, reading and educational administration; University of Cincinnati, Ed.D in educational administration and superintendent's certification.

Occupation: Retired educator and partner with The Wellness Company. Currently president of the Cincinnati Chapter of The Links Inc., a philanthropic service organization.

WHAT SHE SAYS:

What inspires you to give back?

"Giving back to your community and others is one of the most rewarding experiences one can have. When you've been blessed, it's your civic responsibility, I feel, to pass those blessings on to others. There is such a need, especially during this pandemic, where we can all lend a helping hand. There's always someone worse off than you or I. This is the time to show compassion more than ever."

What needs in the community would you like to see addressed?

"(They) are numerous. Unfortunately, there are far too many disparities. We need equity for all in race, ethnicity, education, economics, health, criminal justice, affordable housing, environmental justice, voting rights and its representation, pay and wages between men and women. We, as a city, need to have equitable and diverse committees working on all of these needs in order to close the divide."

Who most influenced or inspired you to care about others?

"My parents, Browne and Elizabeth Jefferson. My sisters and I were blessed to have phenomenal parents who believed in reaching back to help others and pull them up. My parents were educators, thus, the reason I became one. We were by no means wealthy but we had the richness of family love. Therefore, it was no sacrifice to give someone the shirt off our backs to help another human being."