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Georgia Southern graduate student's presentation, '23 and 1,' at national conference draws from personal experience, advocates for reform for young, black men

November 18, 2019



While Georgia Southern University College of Education alumnus Nehemiah McClendon ('17,'19) was working to complete his M.Ed. in Counselor Education, he partnered with classmate John Holt to present a case study and counseling philosophy during the National Cross-Cultural Counseling and Education Conference.

"In the multicultural counseling course, students are required to complete an assignment where they identify a social justice issue for which they want to promote systemic change and write a comprehensive analysis including advocacy steps," said Kristen Dickens, Ph.D., assistant professor of counselor education. "Nehemiah and John were in separate sections of the course, but wrote about similar topics that are quite meaningful to them. The common thread was wanting to advocate for young black men in K-12 settings who often are stigmatized and fall into the school-to-prison pipeline stereotype. Knowing how passionate they were about this topic, I invited them to

collaborate on creating a presentation for the conference, and I served in a mentorship role."

Their presentation was titled "23 and 1," jargon used to describe prison time where incarcerated individuals spend 23 hours in solitary confinement and only have one hour outside of their cell.

"I started thinking about the term 23 and one, and I realized how that mirrors an individual who is working with a counselor," said McClendon. "The client is out in the world battling their problems for 23 hours and only has one hour with the counselor or therapist."

McClendon decided to present a case study of Aaron, an individual who has been incarcerated for 20 years. Aaron was the oldest of five children in a single parent household in which their mother worked two jobs two try to provide for the family. Aaron's father was abusive and no longer in contact with the family.

As McClendon described the case study and how to approach this situation, he never revealed to the participants that Aaron was his brother.

"The case study was our life," he said. "A lot of the decisions my brother made were predicated on providing. We didn't have a male provider, and with five mouths to feed, there had to be another source of income."

High school was not kind to Aaron. He received multiple write-ups for dress code violations, in-class disturbances and excessive absences leading to suspension. These suspensions made Aaron ineligible to play basketball, which kept him engaged and provided him a sense of belonging. The need for income for the family and the lack of support from school led to Aaron's involvement in a gang.

"We didn't have mental health professionals in our schools at that time," McClendon explained. "And, in our minds, we couldn't afford services like that. He never received the mental health services he needed."

“I was really proud of the work they put into the presentation,” said Dickens. “Their message was important to share, and the presentation made an impact on all who attended.”

McClendon’s story is his own but not unique. Recognizing that he could make a difference, McClendon has set out to be the individual that his clients need to help them make the right choices.

“I even talk to teachers and administrators about how this all relates to school culture,” he said. “Students are targeted early. Taking students out of the class and putting them in in-school suspension and silent lunch may not always be the best way. We have to consider the root of their behavior, and in today’s generation, trauma is very prevalent.”

McClendon is currently a counselor working with elementary school children in Jacksonville, Florida, and says that, after working with this population closely for the first time, he realizes how impressionable they are.

“I met with a student recently, and he told me he aspired to be a manager at McDonald’s,” McClendon explained. “This student is eight years old. That age is a time when children dream big, yet his imagination could only stretch down the street from where he goes to school.”

McClendon plans to continue to work as a counselor, but his long-term goal is to become a professor of counselor education, as he constantly works to research and grow the counseling field.

As a clinician, he emphasizes several strategies to work with populations facing adversity and trauma.

“Patience. You have to have patience and understanding that students are not going to come out to you immediately no matter if you look like them or different from them,” McClendon explained. “With trauma, it takes a long time to unpack those stressors and build trust.”

He also stressed the importance of establishing rules early and setting goals.

“It’s about helping to set smart goals for them,” McClendon said. “I ask them to look at long-term goals and the small steps they can take every day to reach those goals, ensuring them that the situation they are experiencing is not forever. It is really a lesson in delayed gratification, which is very difficult for youth to understand.”

For McClendon, there is a motto that he shares with his students, clients and himself: Discipline creates structure. Structure creates success.

Thanks to personal discipline, McClendon continues on the path to help others.

“I’m grateful to advocate for those who are chained inside their 23, whether that is a solitary confinement cell or a broken home, and it is a blessing to be somebody’s one,” he said.

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