



Call Me MiSTER

Providing positive role models in classrooms and communities

Teaching elementary school was not the future that Daniel Spencer '09 envisioned as a high school senior in Swansea, South Carolina. With two brothers having dropped out of high school (one of whom served prison time) and parents who didn't go to college, postsecondary education wasn't even on his radar — even though he was in the top 10 percent of his graduating class. Fortunately, he decided at the last minute to apply to Coastal Carolina University and chose elementary education as his major.



“I didn't have a clue,” Spencer said. “I thought, ‘Well, I passed elementary school. I should be able to teach it!’”

When Spencer's English professor learned about his major, he told him about Call Me MISTER®, a program started at Clemson to encourage and place African-American male teachers in South Carolina's public elementary school classrooms. He advised Spencer to transfer to Clemson to be a part of the program. The rest, he says, is history.

“From the first day, Call Me MISTER changed what I thought would be easy into a lifetime challenge of working with people and shaping the lives of youth,” Spencer said.

Meeting the Challenge

This was a challenge observed 15 years ago by Clemson University as well as Benedict College, Claflin University and Morris College, three historically black institutions in the state.

“We found that there were more black men in jail than were sleeping in the dormitories of the colleges in our state,” said Roy Jones, Call Me MISTER director and a faculty member at Clemson's Eugene T. Moore School of Education. “There were more black men in prisons than were teaching in our state, especially in elementary education. That we saw as a problem.”

And, Jones added, in a state that is one-third African-American and where young black males were being expelled, referred to discipline and dropping out of school at higher rates than any gender or ethnic group, fewer than one percent of the state's teaching workforce were African-American males.

Leaders at the four institutions saw a connection between those figures. They determined that if you could increase the number of African-American males in the classroom, perhaps there would be more avenues for understanding and tackling the challenges that confront young black boys during their formative years.

"We got together and said, 'We can do something about this,'" Jones said.

And Call Me MISTER was born.



Clemson — along with Benedict, Claflin and Morris — started Call Me MISTER (Mentors Instructing Students Toward Effective Role Models) in 2000. Clemson provided fundraising and program support, while the remaining three colleges carried out the program on their campuses.

Housed in the Eugene T. Moore School of Education at Clemson, Call Me MISTER combines teacher education with co-curricular programs such as retreats, seminars, academic support, mentoring, a summer institute, internships and volunteer opportunities. Participants, known as MISTERS, also live and study together as cohorts and receive tuition assistance through loan forgiveness programs as well as help with job placement.

Since its inception, the program has grown to 19 colleges/universities in South Carolina, including Clemson and Coastal Carolina. That number also includes several two-year community and technical colleges, a move made to provide greater opportunity and access to the program.

As a result of these efforts, there has been a 75 percent increase in the number of African-American males teaching in South Carolina's public elementary schools. Of the 150 students who have completed the Call Me MISTER program in the Palmetto State, 100 percent of them remain in the education field.

Understanding that the issue is not South Carolina's alone — that nationally, the number of male teachers is at a 40-year low, and that African-American males comprise less than 2 percent of the teaching workforce — Call Me MISTER has expanded to include 13 colleges in Florida, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Mississippi, Georgia and the District of Columbia. Including graduates and current students, approximately 425 participants are in the program nationwide.

It's All About Relationships

Since the program's inception, Call Me MISTER leaders have found that its purpose is being fulfilled: more African-American males are entering elementary classrooms and more African-American children — especially boys — are seeing them as positive role models.

"There's no doubt about what it means for so many kids to see an African-American male in a position of authority where he is also nurturing, where he is also loving and where he is also mentoring," said Winston Holton, who leads Clemson's Call Me MISTER cohort. "Our MISTERS are filling an important void."

But the program is doing something more — it is exacting a powerful personal influence that transcends race, gender and socioeconomics.

"I believe that Call Me MISTER is making up the difference between what's not happening in our homes, schools and communities and what needs to happen — and that is the fostering of healthy relationships," Holton said. "We don't have healthy relationships across too many lines," Holton continued. "You see this playing out every day in schools and playgrounds across South Carolina — and in teacher's lounges, in businesses, in families, in neighborhoods, everywhere."

From day one, Call Me MISTER encourages — even requires — its students to pursue healthy relationships, Holton said. Through an intentional yet organic process, MISTERS learn to understand and articulate their life stories and hear each other's stories with empathy and understanding — and this skill makes all the difference when they enter the classroom and community as teachers.

"The result is that MISTERS have the capacity to empathize with their students, parents, fellow teachers and community members just as they, themselves, have experienced empathy," Holton said. "They are able to see through the differences, even the maladies, and really see another's humanity. That's how learning happens and how students, schools and communities are elevated."

"It's all about relationships," Holton summarized.

I Can Make a Difference

Countless young people have been influenced by their relationships with Daniel Spencer, including his niece and nephew, the children of his formerly incarcerated brother.

"I was trying to help raise them, and I realized through Call Me MISTER that I wasn't teaching them; I was just telling them what to do," Spencer said. "Listening to the MISTERS and learning from them taught me that I can do things differently — and that I can make a difference."

Spencer's niece and nephew, now ages 15 and 16, live with him in Seneca — happily adjusted and involved in school and community activities.

Spencer is also making a difference in his classroom at Blue Ridge Elementary, a Title 1 school with a high percentage of children from low-income families. He meets with each child individually and sets goals for the year, based not only on test scores but also the child's own aspirations. And he holds them accountable to those goals, meeting with them throughout the year.

"I get to know all the kids and strive to meet everyone where they are," Spencer said. "But I've gotten past the 'I'm here for them to like me' thing because at the end of the day, I know that they are going to love me — because they respect me, and they know I believe in them."

What results from this exchange of respect, caring and expectation is academic progress. "The kids are exceeding their own expectations, which translates into authentic learning," Spencer said.

Spirit of Hope for Change



It is clear that authentic learning is needed for South Carolina's children. The Palmetto State ranks 43rd in education, according to the 2014 Kids Count Profile, with 72 percent of South Carolina's fourth graders lacking proficiency in reading, and 69 percent of eighth graders identified as below proficiency in math. Twenty-eight percent of high school students aren't graduating on time, if at all. The same report ranks South Carolina 44th in economic well-being and child health — both factors that affect children's performance in school.

The statistics grow more dire in underserved schools and communities, where employment and other opportunities have increasingly diminished, says Roy Jones. With these factors in mind, Jones and his colleagues focus on recruiting MISTERS from underserved areas and encouraging them to return to their communities or others with similar challenges.

"Call Me MISTER teachers are at the cutting edge of a new crusade — to ensure quality education in underserved areas by creating a pool of talented teachers who are fiercely loyal to their schools and communities," Jones said. "Such teachers embody the spirit of hope for change."

I Want to See These Kids Grow Up

"Fiercely loyal" could be used to describe Daniel Spencer. Since he started his career at Blue Ridge, he has been offered many opportunities to teach in other school districts, but he is dedicated to remaining at the school and in the community where he has served as a volunteer since his days as a Clemson student.

"The first kids I mentored when they were in the fourth grade are now in the 11th grade," he said. "I want to see these kids grow up."

In addition to teaching, Spencer coaches high school basketball and middle school football in Seneca, attends his students' extracurricular activities, holds free basketball clinics and workouts at Blue Ridge during the summer, and takes students to events such as Clemson's spring football scrimmage, which many of them have never attended even though they live less than 10 miles away. When he greets former students or players in the grocery store or at school events, they avoid him if their grades aren't up to par, because they know he'll ask.

"I love being there and talking to the kids because the more they see positive people and consistently have positive people talking to them, the better they are going to do," he said.

The Intangible 'More'

What is it about Call Me MISTER that inspires such dedication and selflessness? If you talk to anyone associated with the program, you'll find that it's because it's more than a program — it's a lifestyle, a way of being.

The intangible "more" begins with the name of the program. The brainchild of Call Me MISTER founding director Tom Parks, the name is not only an acronym but also a tribute to a famous line by Virgil Tibbs (played by Sidney Poitier) in the 1967 movie "In the Heat of the Night."



While investigating a murder investigation in a small Mississippi town, Tibbs, an African-American detective from Philadelphia, is asked by the racist sheriff what people in his hometown police force call him. With dignity and assertiveness, Tibbs responds, "They call me 'Mister Tibbs!'"

It is a line that inspires, even demands, respect.

Respect is a cornerstone of Call Me MISTER, one that is seen as MISTERS receive the program's signature black blazer upon graduation — and in the way MISTERS refer to each other as "Mister" in formal Call Me MISTER settings.

“Ultimately, our hope is for each MISTER to be self-assured and know himself, and to appreciate and understand the value of building relationships across traditional lines,” Holton said.

Other Call Me MISTER foundational concepts include ambassadorship, stewardship, personal growth and teacher efficacy. “And all of these things together pour into the most important tenet, servant-leadership,” which Holton describes as “living for more than yourself.”

Perhaps no one embodies servant-leadership more than Jeff Davis, former field director for Call Me MISTER, current assistant athletic director of football player relations, and 2001 recipient of Oprah Winfrey’s Use Your Life award.

All MISTERS continue to be challenged each time they recite the vision statement Davis penned, which includes the line, “A title is only important if one’s character and integrity dictate its use.” The single MISTER who rises to that challenge most valiantly receives the Jeff Davis Spirit Award, one of the most coveted honors bestowed annually upon a MISTER.

According to Clemson junior Michael Miller, a MISTER from Orangeburg and 2014 recipient of the Jeff Davis Spirit Award, servant-leadership has been the key to his Call Me MISTER education.

“My viewpoint about education has changed from ‘What can I tell you or dictate to you?’ to ‘What can I do for you?’” he said. “I want to be an educator rather than a teacher,” he continued. “A teacher delivers content, and that is important. The word ‘educator’ comes from the Latin word *educere*, which means to draw from within. That’s what I try to do with my students — to pull out what is already within them. Call Me MISTER has taught me how to do that.”

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January 2015