

A Permanent Imprint on an Evolving Institution

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the **SEF** years



tion. With this change, SEF would add diversity, new faces and term limits for its directors. It was a step toward ensuring that SEF would be home to new ideas and perspectives.

The year 1983 was a watershed year for SEF, for it opened the Foundation up to outside involvement in dramatic ways. That year, the Foundation sharpened its focus to convene interested parties around the vital issues, and to conduct and disseminate a wider body of research. Even more important, the Internal Revenue Service gave an advance ruling to the Foundation's decision to become a public charity. No longer would SEF have to rely on its original four funds. With this ruling, we were now able to launch major initiatives and build platforms for change through outside investment. We could formalize what had been informal practices. And we could fortify an endowment that would create a larger legacy for advancing equity.

Just a few years later, SEF cemented a commitment to the historic Sweet Auburn District in downtown Atlanta by purchasing a 7,500 square foot space for our headquarters. This \$1 million investment – of which two-thirds came from private donations – facilitated both the purchase and renovation of the space. Today, 135 Auburn Avenue remains our home.

We know too well how the issue of higher education desegregation re-emerged on the national scope in the 1990s, with the Supreme Court case *U.S. v. Fordice*. True to form, SEF did not stand by. The Foundation issued a landmark report, "Redeeming the American Promise," a document that drew editorial attention nationwide for its pointed description of the continuing lack of equity among the races in higher education. The report and its 1998 follow-up study, "Miles to Go," galvanized new teams in southern states and beyond – individuals who worked to press for new reforms that would, at last, eliminate the last vestiges of segregation.

These new teams exerted influence that was both far-reaching and lasting. They also came to personify the Southern Education Foundation's impact. The Fordice decision, like the Adams decision before it, opened wide the doors of opportunity for change. But it takes people to usher in that change. In the 1990s, SEF did what it does best: bringing people to the table and shaping public policy.

A final area worth mentioning concerns the digital divide, that yawning gap between the races when it comes to accessing and using technology. In the mid-1980s, SEF secured the first in a series of grants to strengthen libraries at historically Black colleges and universities – an undertaking that heavily involved the use of technology. That project ran 12 years before prompting Gateway 21 – another initiative to address equal access to the Internet and other electronic information resources. And just a couple of years ago, SEF launched a third effort to help select HBCUs further integrate technology in the classroom.

The digital divide still exists, but it is closing. What's worth noting is that SEF recognized the divide could not close by itself. By making technology a priority, by addressing it through a series of initiatives, the Foundation demonstrated that it understood the relationship of technology to achieving equity and set out to do something about it.



Southern Education Foundation, Inc.

President

November 13, 2001

Dear Friends:

I am writing to let you know that after 33 years with the Southern Education Foundation – 23 of which gave me the privilege of serving as CEO – I will retire from SEF at the end of this year.

As I look forward to this transition, I look back on how SEF has matured as an organization over the past quarter-century. What was once an opportunity-driven enterprise is now a full-fledged voice for change. Many of you have played a prominent role in this success. So I'd like to spend a few minutes with you, not to rest on laurels, but to reflect on a few of the major events that have led to the growth and development of SEF.

The privilege to serve SEF might have been destiny, but it began with happenstance. I will never forget the day in 1968 on which I ran into John Griffin, SEF's former executive director, at the old S&W Cafeteria in midtown Atlanta. John and I chatted a moment, and he asked casually, "When are you going to come work with us at SEF?" I didn't hesitate a second before answering: "How about next month?"

Since that day, SEF has been a work of art and a work in progress. One of my favorite memories was Thanksgiving weekend, 1972. A U.S. District Judge in Washington had ordered the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare to obtain desegregation plans from 10 Southern and border states. Jean Fairfax, who then headed community services for the Legal Defense Fund, worked with SEF to convene a meeting of folks from most of the states at an airport hotel in Baltimore. Despite the holiday, about 40 people showed up to fashion strategies that would influence the states' response to the judicial order.

That Thanksgiving weekend gave rise to coalitions of individuals in every state who would press for progress on the desegregation of higher education – one step, one policy, one issue at a time. It laid the foundation for SEF's Higher Education Program, which formalized our efforts on behalf of desegregation. It clarified the Foundation's role of convening people to enact change, eventually leading to an annual continuing conference in the Fall. Today, I still give thanks for that Thanksgiving.

Another key point of transformation came in 1978, my first year as executive director, when the Board of Directors was reconstituted. This move, which had been in the works for 10 years, may sound like a modest act of internal housekeeping. But it carried tremendous implications. While SEF had been blessed with terrific directors, its Board needed to move beyond self-perpetua-

A Letter from

Elridge W.
McMillan

Endnotes

- ¹ McMillan, E.W. & Francis, N. (1996). Southern Education Foundation Annual Report, p. 2.
- ² See Stanfield, J.H. (1985). *Philanthropy and Jim Crow in American Social Science*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press; Anderson, J.D. (1988). *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- ³ See Anderson, E. & Moss, A.A., Jr. (1999). *Dangerous Donations; Northern Philanthropy and Southern Black Education, 1902-1930*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.
- ⁴ See Leavall, U.W. (1930). *Philanthropy in Negro Education*. Westport, CT: Negro University Press.
- ⁵ Gordon, B.M. (1995). The Fringe Dwellers: African American Women Scholars in the Postmodern Era. In B. Kampol & P. McLaren (Eds.) *Education, Democracy and the Voice of the Other*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- ⁶ McMillan, E.W. (1996). Promoting Opportunity; Imperatives for Philanthropy. The Fifth James A. Joseph Lecture. Sponsored by the Association of Black Foundation Executives, p. 4.
- ⁷ McMillan, E.W. (1978). Remarks from speech given during his installation as Executive Director of the Southern Education Foundation, April 3, 1978. "In A Constant Commitment: The Southern Education Foundation's Role in Regional Change" by Robert E. Anderson, Jr.
- ⁸ Southern Education Foundation. Full-Year Fellowship Program, p.3.
- ⁹ Huell's Internships in Southern Education, p. 8.
- ¹⁰ SEF Annual Report, 1980-81, p. 12.
- ¹¹ Southern Education Foundation (November, 1974). Ending Discrimination in Higher Education: A Report from Ten States. Southern Education Foundation.
- ¹² SEF Annual Report, 1992-1993. E.W. McMillan and Norman Francis message, p. 4.
- ¹³ SEF Annual Report, 1983-1984, Chairman's Report, p. 3.
- ¹⁴ Anonymous. (April, 1992). Black Movers and Shakers in Philanthropy. *Ebony*. Chicago, Illinois.
- ¹⁵ SEF Yearbook, 1991-1992. Cover notes.

the vehicles on which systemic change travels. Consequently, we are all indebted to leaders who protect and sustain them.

This retrospective journey illuminates the dynamic nature of our society and provides a glimpse of the future. Our best hope depends upon individuals like Elridge McMillan, who are idealist enough to believe in a cause, courageous enough to work toward it, and committed enough to stay the course.

*...[T]he very best thing I ever did for SEF
was to recruit Elridge McMillan.¹⁴*

John Griffin, Former SEF Executive Director

Conclusion:

The Pursuit of a Worthy Idea Continues

American schools simultaneously represent possibilities and promises, shattered dreams and unfulfilled goals. The best hope for our schools rests with those who work to make authentic educational access and opportunity a reality for all Americans. We know by name those who have most influenced our educational journey – our mothers, our fathers, our elementary school teachers, our high school principal and major college professors. However, there are others who are nameless to most, but yet have significantly impacted our individual and collective schooling experiences. Beginning with his work as an elementary school teacher through his many years at the helm of SEF, Elridge McMillan has labored on behalf of the ideal of American education.

...[F]rom my vantage point at HEW and the Office for Civil Rights and subsequently SEF, I've had the opportunity to see every aspect of education in the South, the public policy aspect, the practical, the application of it, the equities and inequities. And the one thing I've learned is while we have made Herculean steps forward, we've got Herculean steps to go. There is so much yet to be done. Black folks still do not have unfettered access to quality education.

Elridge W. McMillan

McMillan is a shining example of a model educator: one who has refused to be confined by prescribed parameters, but has instead assertively and passionately pursued a worthy idea. Leaders like Elridge embody the kind of tenacity, qualities of mind, and passion necessary for work in the trenches, a commitment not to merely facilitate change, but to struggle for change through strategic and reasoned maneuvering. Our institutions are

I was not constrained, as many people are who have to serve on Boards of Regents and things like that because of their employer. I had total support and help from SEF to do just what I felt was the right thing to do. I could take stands that were unpopular and didn't have to worry about somebody calling me on the phone and saying you can't do this or you can't hurt the organization. SEF encouraged me.

In addition to his work with established institutions, Elridge was among the original founders of the Association of Black Foundation Executives in 1971. Cognizant of the dearth of Blacks in philanthropy, its purposes are to encourage increased grant-making, address issues and problems facing Blacks and promote the status and number of Blacks in the sector. Progress has been made in this area. According to a Council of Foundation Survey by the 1990s, Blacks held five percent of trustee and board of director positions.

This reflects a major increase since the early 1970s, when McMillan was one of only three recognized Black executives associated with major foundations.¹⁴

In addition to these formal activities, McMillan has served as a mentor to many. He has paved the way for many African American professionals in government, education and philanthropy. He has established SEF as an incubator of cutting edge ideas and dedicated, talented people.

continues to lend his time and professional acumen in support of Clark Atlanta University.

Elridge's service as a Regent is unprecedented. First appointed by Georgia Governor George Busbee in 1975 and then re-appointed by Governors Busbee, Joe Frank Harris and Zell Miller, McMillan has served as Regent for more than twenty-five years, including a stint as its Chair, from 1986-1987.

*Elridge's tenure as a
Regent is legendary.*

Stephen Portch, Chancellor
University System of Georgia

According to Chancellor Stephen Portch "Elridge always provides the right question at the right time in the right manner." McMillan's influence on Board programs is obviously a current initiative. "Prep it Up," is a communication campaign to increase awareness among African American 7th and 8th graders of new admission policies at Georgia's public universities. Clearly a proactive effort to make state colleges and universities accessible to potential students, the program is in keeping with McMillan's and SEF's consistent calls for inclusion.

McMillan considers his tenure as a Regent as one of his greatest contributions to the state. He has consistently earned the respect of his colleagues and brought a needed perspective to the policymaking process. McMillan's cogent analysis of the history and contemporary status of the South's educational issues is borne out of his rich personal and professional experiences. His insight is a result of his abiding interest and active involvement in local, state, regional and national education, civic, and philanthropic activities.

Throughout his tenure as a Trustee and a Regent, Elridge emphasizes that he has been fully supported by the SEF Board.

The Marriage of Profession and Service: Regent, Trustee, and Mentor

McMillan's professional service extends well beyond SEF. His influence on education matters throughout the Southern region and beyond is underscored by the impressive awards he has received. He has served on a wide array of Boards and Commissions throughout his career. In recognition of his many contributions, Elridge

has received scores of awards and accolades, including four honorary doctoral degrees, and a Presidential Medallion for outstanding service and leadership on behalf of HBCUs from Savannah State College. He was also selected as the fifth James A. Joseph Lecture honoree by the Association of Black Foundation Executives.

McMillan's dedicated commitment to service is best exemplified by his thirty years of service as a trustee of his alma mater, Clark College (now Clark Atlanta University), and his unprecedented tenure as a Georgia Regent.

Appointed to the Board of Trustees of Clark College in 1971, Elridge's tenure has been uninterrupted. His service on the Board of this historically Black college personalizes his professional commitment to Black education. In this role, he remains abreast of the ways in which regional and national policies impact small educational institutions.

In 1988, Clark College and Atlanta University merged into a single university. Elridge identifies his service as co-chair of the Joint Board of Trustee's Committee that oversaw this historic process as one of his most rewarding and challenging responsibilities. Currently serving as Chair of the University's presidential search committee, McMillan

I embrace the totality of what the Board of Regents does and I take the position that I have to be the watchdog. I must be conscious of the Board when it comes to issues that face minorities and Blacks and the whole diversity bit because if it helps African Americans and whomever, then it has to be good for the system.

Elridge W. McMillan

tion. By building trusting relations with large foundations and corporate entities, SEF could secure adequate funds to support ideas that reflected its commitment to educational equity, opportunity and access. This posture greatly expanded SEF's presence and enabled SEF to more aggressively pursue its goals.

In 1986, the Ford Foundation granted a two million-dollar challenge grant to SEF. Ford stipulated that one million be utilized for program operation and grantmaking and one million be earmarked for SEF's endowment. The grant was the largest in SEF's history and greatly eased its transition from private foundation to public charity. In response, SEF embarked on its first capital campaign with a goal to increase its endowment by five million dollars.

*Under Mac's
direction, SEF
became a
foundation to carry out work
that other foundations
wanted to do in the South
but could not. This happened
because of the trust he built
with those
organizations.*

Jean Fairfax

The shift also involved completion of a process that began earlier to change the Foundation's organizational structure. In earlier years, SEF's Board was self-perpetuating, with members moving between the Board of Trustees and the Corporation. Because the Corporation was the primary decision-making body and selected the Trustees from its membership, it was extremely difficult to bring in new members. The new structure vested ultimate authority in the Board of Trustees, and members of the Corporation were converted to an Advisory Board. In addition, now as President and Chief Executive Officer, Elridge became an ex-officio member of the Board of Trustees.

From Grantor to Grantee: **A New Role for SEF**

In the 1980s, Reaganomics and other trickle down economic policies left established social service agencies searching for funding to support their programs. Large foundations and corporations were inundated with costly but deserving proposals. Small foundations like SEF were equally challenged. Important programs that reflected SEF's program thrusts were having difficulty securing philanthropic funds. SEF's tradition of providing small but significant funds to support innovative ideas made it unable to support these large initiatives.

In response to this dilemma, SEF decided to direct its efforts toward becoming a grantee rather than a grantor. Jean Fairfax credits Elridge's ability to secure dollars from major foundations as a key rationale for this change in SEF's focus.

An unintended consequence of the Tax Reform Act of 1969 was the development of relationships among philanthropic organizations that resulted in institutional collabora-

From Reactive Charity to Proactive Justice: SEF's Changed Status

The Tax Reform Act of 1969 significantly impacted the philanthropic world. Long concerned about the “liberal” agendas of philanthropy, Congress enacted this legislation to provide public oversight and increased scrutiny of Foundation activities. The Tax Reform Act forced foundations to closely examine their funding practices, professional staffing, and organizational structures.

In 1983, SEF received a favorable advance ruling from the Internal Revenue Service and was granted probationary status as a public charity. As a public charity, SEF could determine its own program and fund those projects closely aligned with the Foundation’s values and objectives. The new status permitted SEF to expand its public policy efforts. In addition, the Foundation was no longer restricted to its own funds, but could solicit funds from a wide range of sources, including foundations. According to former SEF Chair, Lisle Carter, “the public charity status will provide SEF with greater flexibility in program design and in relations with agencies from which it receives support.”¹³ The Foundation could also now raise money and be more responsive to the public’s changing needs.

The change in tax status prompted a reorganization of the Foundation’s work into one program with three areas: traditional interests, education and public policy, and program initiatives. In 1988, SEF was officially designated as a public charity by the Internal Revenue Service.

Through operating its own programs as a public charity, the Foundation takes a direct and active role in assuring an equal and quality education for disadvantaged students in the South. Now, rather than reacting to an issue brought to our attention by a grantee, we are able to seek out challenges in education, fashion a program to address those challenges and implement the program with assistance from organizations which are also working for equity in education.¹²

institutions concerned with the *Adams* litigation. The conference led McMillan and SEF to develop an integrated systemic set of initiatives to promote the sharing of information and ideas and tactics to advance desegregation over time. These activities established SEF as a major participant in efforts to integrate higher education.

SEF's work with LDF marked the beginning of SEF's continuing work in higher education. By the mid seventies, SEF had sponsored a series of planning and working conferences and workshops attended by Black coalitions from a variety of states. The *Adams* effort is an example of the variety of approaches utilized to dismantle segregation and other discriminatory practices. The collaboration between the LDF and the SEF is reflective of the necessity of institutions to work in tandem with each other toward a common cause. From *Adams* through *U.S. v. Fordice*, SEF has been steadfast in its support of the increasing African American access to higher education.

In 1992, with major support from the Ford Foundation, SEF initiated its Panel on Educational Opportunity and Postsecondary Desegregation Program. As chair of this Panel, McMillan was involved with the publication and dissemination of its reports: *Redeeming the American Promise* (1995) and *Miles to Go: A Report on Black Students and Postsecondary Education in the South* (1998).

The Higher Education Program has been enriched, not only by McMillan's role at SEF, but because of his knowledge and involvement in other critical roles. According to Jean Fairfax, McMillan's ability to fulfill different roles with vitality and vigor significantly enhanced the effectiveness of the higher education initiatives. "As a foundation head, Mac could leverage funds, release reports and supply funds to coalitions. As a regent, he was involved in a particular state and could anticipate and play out issues."

A Renewed Emphasis on Higher Education: *Adams* and SEF

In the 1970s, desegregation was the most critical and explosive issue in higher education, according to Jean Fairfax, then director of the Community Services program for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF). The *Adams* lawsuit filed by LDF sought to force the federal government through HEW to monitor higher education institutions and ensure their compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Adams represented a critical moment in the higher education arena. Troubled by the refusal of some schools to integrate their student bodies, LDF pushed for the adoption of specific criteria to determine adherence to federal requirements. Schools in violation would be denied federal funds. While the criteria offered hope for integrating White colleges and universities, HBCUs were fearful that such criteria would lead to their closure. In response, the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education (NAFEO) filed an *amicus curiae* brief arguing that total desegregation would endanger its member institutions.

SEF sponsored a 1973 LDF study to assess the impact of *Adams* on Black colleges and universities. The next year, the Foundation's Higher Education Program was officially launched. Its original mandate was to address critical issues affecting Blacks in the process of desegregating state higher education systems. A seminal SEF conference "Critical Issues Facing Blacks in Higher Education," convened a wide array of individuals, coalitions, and

As in the Brown case, the courtroom decision for equal rights in Adams signaled the beginning of justice, not the achievement of it. It will require the good will of the states and their higher education institutions, the persistence of the federal government and the courts, and the determined watchfulness of black and white Americans committed to equal justice and equal opportunity to make the promise of Adams v. Richardson a living reality.¹¹

*"We intend to remain open to experimentation, to new solutions, and to those who cannot get a proper hearing elsewhere."*⁷

Elridge W. McMillan

who understood and who were committed to linking education and social change."⁹

Directed by Virginia Frank Fleming from 1965-1972 and by Elridge from 1972-1974, the program consciously sought to create

conditions where individuals identified for their potential as change agents could flourish¹⁰

The internship program supported a brand of intellectual inquiry that was grounded in grassroots activism. Many of the interns had been actively involved with civil rights and protest organizations and were committed to community organizing and uplift. According to Virginia Frank Fleming, SEF hoped that the program "would keep feisty young people interested in education." The flexible selection criteria ensured that the program included both "burgeoning" and more experienced leaders. Excluding year one, approximately ten interns were selected each year.

The internship program activities included: infusing Black studies into the public school curriculum, developing after-school tutorial programs, exploring experimental classroom ideas, and other creative initiatives. They carried out their work in a variety of settings, including public school systems, higher education institutions, state and federal offices, and community organizations.

During its nine-year history, the internship program sponsored seventy-nine men and women. The participants, young adults aged 23-33, were not bound to a single-institution. Instead, they sought to infuse traditional structures with new and culturally relevant understandings. The internship program is testament to SEF's commitment to ideas and initiatives over time. Unlike some foundations that have rigid goals within prescribed timelines, SEF has historically made long-term commitments to worthy program initiatives.

ration, shared responsibility and mutual respect, McMillan and SEF have built upon the established mission of its predecessor organizations, while anticipating and responding to the changing needs of its constituency.

Elridge identifies four initiatives as pivotal moments during his thirty-three year career with SEF. These represent the depth and breadth of the Southern Education Foundation's work, and each are towering testaments to its commitment to systemic change and institutional growth. In addition, these initiatives represent Elridge's trajectory from program associate to SEF president.

SEF's internship program began in 1965, three years prior to McMillan joining SEF as a program associate. It continued through 1974, sponsoring nearly eighty young people. Second, as Associate Director, McMillan's work with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund (LDF) on issues related to the *Adams v. Richardson* litigation was the impetus for SEF's higher education initiatives. Third, as director, Elridge led the Foundation's transition from a private foundation to a public charity. Finally, as president, McMillan successfully garnered funds from outside sources to fund worthy programs and initiatives. The cumulative effect of these initiatives secured SEF's position as a formidable advocate and ally in philanthropic educational circles.

Preparing the Next Generation: **The Internship Program, 1965-1974**

SEF's internship program was introduced on the heels of the Foundation's highly successful **Full Year Fellowship Program (1957-1968)**. While the Fellowship Program was a vehicle for strengthening the faculties and staffs of Southern colleges and universities,"⁸ the internship program was "designed to set an example of leadership -- to encourage a new breed of "change agent"

“standing in the gap” between the African American schools and the school systems’ power structure.

Solidly anchored in New South dynamics, McMillan’s administration ushered in a new era of SEF participation. He and a dedicated cadre of professional and support staff and consultants intensified the institution’s advocacy voice by supporting many initiatives that would profoundly shape educational opportunities for African Americans.

Their efforts emerged from a “tough love” approach which sponsored people, initiatives, and studies that sought to dismantle outdated educational thought and practice by illuminating educational injustices and offering alternative understandings and strategies for change. This posture was aligned with a new emphasis on public policy. Elridge’s professional experiences made him keenly aware of the need for a major shift in state and federal policies from which narrow and shortsighted educational practices “naturally” emerged.

Throughout his professional career, Elridge McMillan has consistently demonstrated the nature and level of commitment necessary to transform muffled discontent to organized action. He and others with whom he has worked so closely have assertively challenged the structural barriers that prevent educational access, opportunity and equity for African Americans. Through a philosophy of collabo-

Much of what I did was still lurking around educational issues because of my having gone to an HBCU and having grown up around education. In fact, my boss at HEW asked why I would want to leave my government job, which was directed at desegregated schools, to go to a segregated organization. He said all SEF does is things for Black schools and Black folks. I explained that’s the reason I’m going, because the job is not finished.

Elridge W. McMillan

more sharp-edged. Hired as a program associate to assist historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the self-study process for regional accreditation, McMillan was the second African American hired by SEF. His colleagues were Associate Director Robert L. Cousins, a longtime fixture in the South, who had served in several capacities related to African American education, and Virginia Frank Fleming of the Washington, D.C. office. Elridge, no stranger to the field, quickly established himself as a knowledgeable, respected and trusted staff member. One year later, he was named Associate Director after Cousins retired.

Nine years later, upon John Griffin's retirement, Elridge was appointed Executive Director of the Southern Education Foundation. His appointment as SEF's first African American Executive Director represented a pivotal moment in the organization's history. While its previous leaders also had distinguished records in the area of African American education, Elridge's appointment was an impressive statement to the region and the philanthropic world. By example, the SEF unabashedly affirmed the Foundation's commitment to Black agency.

Prior to McMillan's appointment, SEF was commonly known as the quiet conscience of the South. This moniker should not be wrongly interpreted as institutional passiveness. The Jeanes Teachers and the State Agents for Negro Schools, both supported by SEF and its predecessor organizations, were critical components of the Southern school structure. Their individual and collective influence on educational matters of the region is widely documented. However, both the Jeanes Teachers and the State Agents for Negro Schools functioned in a segregated system that did not offer material equity to African American children. The Jeanes Teachers and the State Agents for Negro Schools buffered the harsh reality of the unequal dual system by

"It was simply fortuitous": The SEF Years

Introduction of a Leader: The Journey Begins

McMillan arrived at SEF in October of 1968. This was a time marked by transition. The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in April had led to urban unrest and more aggressive civil rights demands. The Black Power movement and opposition to the Vietnam War were at full throttle. Buoyed by a national sense of urgency, supporters of African American education had reason to be optimistic. The antiquated mores of the South had been subjected to national scrutiny and attack. Legal segregation had been declared unconstitutional; Black students had successfully challenged racist admission practices at public

universities; and the federal government had established various offices to monitor and enforce federal anti-discrimination laws. Change was on the horizon. This climate was ripe for institutions to take deliberate and strategic steps toward systemic change, by creating initiatives to advance systemic change.

McMillan was excited by the opportunity to further his work in this area. Despite continued and more assertive demands for justice, equality,

and equity in schools, most Southern states continued to ignore federal desegregation orders. Systemic change continued to be an elusive goal. Historically, SEF "respected" Southern cultural norms and therefore played a quiet and unobtrusive, though meaningful, advocacy role. However, the civil rights era ushered in a new era of Black agency. As a result, SEF's advocacy posture could and did become

The core problems that American society has confronted in the past, which we face today, and which will continue to challenge us in the future, demand that we continue to serve as trailblazers and pathfinders, pointing the way for those in public service willing to follow. And if we are to be true leaders, we must not only "talk the talk," it is imperative that we "walk the walk" to ensure that what we do matches what we say. ⁶

resigned three years later, he was responsible for all operations for the entire office and for the region.

This important work was followed by an appointment in 1968 as the first Chief of the Education Branch for the Southern Region of the Office for Civil Rights, an agency of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW). One of the highest ranked African American civilians in the South, McMillan was the first person to hold this new position. In this capacity, his primary responsibility was to monitor the desegregation of schools in several states in the South.

By the fall of 1968, the work of the Office for Civil Rights was in flux. McMillan remembers that "our work had almost come to a halt, and I knew that I could not work in an agency or anywhere where it was window dressing, and we were not allowed to do what we were supposed to do." Recognizing that the pending presidential election would have a tremendous impact on the direction of the office, Elridge decided to seek other professional opportunities. He was unwilling to remain in a position that could not continue to effect meaningful change. Soon after arriving at the decision to leave the federal government, but before he had actively sought another position, a chance meeting between Elridge and Dr. John Griffin, then Executive Director of SEF, occurred at the S&W cafeteria in downtown Atlanta.

Griffin had for some time courted McMillan to accept a position at SEF. On this occasion, his standard invitation was unexpectedly accepted. Initially only vaguely familiar with SEF, McMillan understood that its mission was linked to the struggle for African American educational equity. After familiarizing himself with the history of its predecessor organizations, he became even more convinced that SEF was an ideal site for the continuation of his work.

Spreading the News: Crafting a Federal Response to Desegregation

Elridge McMillan's career with the federal government began in February of 1965. He was first hired as a consultant and eventually secured a position as a program operations supervisor with the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) for the Southeastern Region. OEO was charged with traveling through the region to explain requirements and guidelines for creating community action and local poverty programs.

McMillan, still a trailblazer, was the first African American hired by OEO for the Southeastern Region. He traveled with a team from Washington, D.C. throughout the region.

Though initially not the senior staff person, as the representative for the Southeastern Region, he was most knowledgeable of the issues facing the South and therefore conducted most of the sessions and answered most questions. During these visits, he recalls the encouragement that he received from many Blacks who were unaccustomed to African Americans in positions of authority. For them, his presence was a source of pride and also evidence that the South was changing.

One occasion is especially noteworthy. During a series of workshops held at Florida Atlantic University, Elridge noticed that an elderly African American gentleman religiously attended each session, proudly sitting in the front row. At the end of the week, the gentleman approached McMillan and told him he was now happy and "could die in peace because during his lifetime he had seen an intelligent Black man in charge who knew more about what was going on than anybody else." McMillan cites this as one of his most heartening professional experiences. His presence was symbolic of the New South that reflected and was responsive to those it had most neglected. This position expanded his professional outlook, and by the time he

During this period, McMillan continued his academic studies. Segregation laws prevented him from attending graduate school in the State of Georgia, so the State sponsored his matriculation at Columbia University's Teachers College, where he earned a master's degree in guidance and student personnel administration. He also completed additional postgraduate work at Teacher's College and participated in a collaborative program between the Atlanta Public Schools and the University of Georgia prior to desegregation.

After nearly eleven years with the school system, McMillan was ready to prove to himself that "if given the opportunity, I could do something else equally well in the larger arena." Many of his friends and mentors, though well intentioned, encouraged him to remain with the school system. They reminded him that "in another year or two you'll be a principal, and you'll eventually be this, that and the other and then you can do anything." Despite their efforts, Elridge was resolute: "That's not what I wanted to be, I wanted to prove to myself and to the world that, if given the opportunity, I could be something else..."

Elridge spent five years as a classroom teacher before being promoted to a resource counselor position in the area office. Responsible for tracking student absenteeism, he was assigned to seven schools, including David T. Howard High School. He remained in that position for six years.

While his classroom experiences were quite memorable, McMillan's most troubling professional experience occurred during his employment with the Atlanta Public Schools. The system was fearful that the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision would eventually be enforced. In anticipation, all of its teachers, White and Black, were required to take the National Teachers Exam.

This strategy was routinely used by many Southern school districts to dismiss "low-scoring" Black teachers and replace them with "high-scoring" White teachers. The exam was scheduled on a wintry Saturday morning. In keeping with segregation laws, the test was administered to Black teachers in the cold, damp gymnasium at David T. Howard High School. Exam proctors distributed the tests to teachers who were dressed in full winter garb, including gloves. The teachers were given the option of remaining anonymous or writing their names on their tests. Suspicious of their intentions, Elridge wrote his name on his test. His rationale was "if this is the yardstick for whether or not I should teach school, I want to know my score." For many years, he retained the report of his score of nearly 1150 as proof of his qualification to teach. This act of professional and personal defiance symbolizes the intensity of McMillan's convictions.

Though a personal and professional affront, the experience deepened his resentment of segregated schooling, and he began to consider ways in which he could encourage broad educational change in the Southern region.

A Career Choice or a Calling: The Decision to Teach

While at Clark College, Elridge majored in English and excelled under the tutelage of professors Stella Brewer Brookes, Chair of the English Department, and John F. Summersette, English and Journalism Professor. With graduation pending, Elridge was unsure about his career direction. Though he dreamed of becoming a journalist, the Jim Crow South did not offer many professional opportunities for young African American newspapermen.

Many of my career decisions were not planned, but each turned into a very significant career move, and each was very rewarding.

Elridge W. McMillan

Each year the Atlanta Public School officials visited local Black and White colleges and tested those students majoring in secondary school subject areas. Those students with the highest scores were offered teaching positions. The year of his graduation, Elridge and two of his Clark College classmates had the highest scores in English and were each offered a teaching contract. McMillan briefly considered accepting a graduate school scholarship at the University of Colorado to study industrial relations but decided against it. As would be a pattern throughout his career, instead, Elridge accepted a position for which he never applied. So at nineteen years old, he had graduated from college, earned a teaching certificate, and accepted a professional position.

First appointed as an elementary school teacher at Nathan Bedford Forrest, McMillan remembers those days fondly:

I would have to say that of all the things I have done in my life professionally, I think probably the most rewarding and the best that I did was those years that I taught school. I was a first-rate teacher, a good teacher. That might be immodest but things happened between my students and me.

The Past is Prologue: The Transmission of a World View

Lessons at an Early Age: The Intended and Unintended Consequences of Segregation

Lessons learned in childhood are life lessons. They are likely to shape our interpretations of the world and our decisions about how we should participate in it. Early on, young Elridge witnessed his parents challenge racist laws that disenfranchised potential Black voters. His father, Marion Reynolds McMillan, Sr., a United Methodist minister, and his mother, Agnes Boatwright McMillan, along with the local Jeanes teacher, registered to vote in the 1940s.

Daddy was the local minister and she was the local Jeanes teacher. So they took the position that somebody had to do it and if anybody could do it without being beat up on, then it would probably be them. I remember the discussions they had and how fearful they were and how frightened we were that day until they came home because we didn't know what was going to happen to them.

This courageous act provided Elridge with a model for African American activism. The intention of Jim Crow laws was to physically restrict and psychologically damage African Americans. This cruel system attempted to stunt dreams and halt aspirations. But despite the probability of severe consequences, African Americans resisted. Their resistance took many forms and in the process challenged the racist myth of Black acquiescence.

Consequently, while reared in the Old South's segregated Georgia and subject to Jim Crow laws that rejected the human rights of African Americans, Elridge was exposed to a nurturing community and caring parents who, by example, set high expectations for him and his brothers.

One of the benefits of having gone through that rigid era of segregation was the strength of our parents in letting us always know that we were always as good as or better than anyone.

Elridge W. McMillan

Schools are indeed important metaphors for the ideals and principles of America. It is, therefore, imperative that those who actively participate in the schooling discourse, whether through vocation or avocation, be committed to helping America through her schools infuse these abstract ideals into concrete public policy and schooling practices.

and the Virginia Randolph Fund (1937) -- merged to create the SEF. Later, in 1987, former board member, Jean Fairfax, and her sister, Betty Fairfax, created the Dan and Inez Wood Fairfax Fund as part of SEF's permanent endowment.

Unlike its predecessor organizations, the Southern Education Foundation doesn't carry the recognizable surname of one of its founders. Instead, its name is reflective of its geographic and cultural context, its broad mission and its commitment to service.

Historians have considered the early and important work of Northern philanthropic organizations.⁴ However, evidence of these organizations and their work becomes scant by the 1950s. A casual observer would assume that this important work has either been taken up entirely by other entities or forgotten. Fortunately, neither is the case. The efforts of those who diligently worked to keep the mission of these organizations alive and relevant must be documented. SEF, under the most recent leadership of Elridge McMillan, stands as a rich exemplar of the best of philanthropy in the South.

The educational needs of Blacks in the Southern states have evolved alongside changes in society. At the close of the Civil War, newly freed African Americans were hungry for basic literacy. They wanted to read their Bibles, affix their signatures to legal documents, and assert their "humanness" in a society that routinely rejected their personhood. At the beginning of the 21st century, African Americans are still "fringe dwellers."⁵ The overtly racist practices that characterized a separate and unequal society and, in turn, schools, have been replaced with more subtle forms of discrimination. Consequently, the struggle for full access and participation in American institutions continues.

The Making of an Institution: Northern Philanthropists, Southern Culture and African Americans

Historical research on the education of African Americans in the Southern region offers several reasons for Northern philanthropic support. Some argue that the philanthropists were motivated by their own economic interests. Others contend that they were interested in curtailing Black migration to Northern urban areas. Still others insist that these wealthy northerners felt obligated to assist the Southern region achieve economic and cultural parity with the Northern states.² Recent research challenges those assumptions and suggests that the philanthropists were influenced by altruistic concerns and genuinely interested in the ascension of Blacks in the American social order.³ Whatever the reason for their involvement, Northern philanthropic organizations have been intimately involved in Black education in the South for well over a century.

Despite their complex past, most historians agree that these organizations did some good. They founded schools, funded programs, sponsored studies and in so doing—like sandpaper—gradually smoothed a small space for progressive-minded Blacks and Whites to create, support, and maintain public and private systems of education for Blacks in the region.

The names of the founders and trustees of these organizations are familiar -- Rosenwald, Rockefeller, Carnegie, Peabody -- and reflect the upper echelon of American economic and societal circles at the turn of the twentieth century. However, with the stabilization of public and private school systems in the South and the efforts to dismantle legally protected and enforced racial segregation, many of the funds earmarked for Black education were discontinued. Recognizing the need for continued attention to this important cause, in 1937 four such funds -- Peabody (1867), Slater (1882), the Negro Rural School Fund (1907)

in large part by those who labor with them. Elridge's career with SEF has been greatly enriched by the cadre of dedicated Board members and staff (past and present) who have been equally committed. Board members Jean Fairfax, Lisle Carter, and Norman Francis have all rendered service to the Foundation during some of its most critical moments. Their steadfast support of SEF, its leadership and staff are indeed commendable. Though impossible to identify all -- longtime senior staff members and consultants Nathaniel Jackson, Jean Sinclair, Robert Kronley, and Michael Fields -- contributed much during Elridge's administration. Their individual and collective efforts were a critical component of maintaining SEF's stature in the philanthropic arena. Equally important, support staff "behind the scenes" have again and again demonstrated their commitment to SEF's mission. Only one SEF staff member's length of service exceeds McMillan's tenure. Though invisible to those external to SEF, Cornelius McLucas' dedicated service is unparalleled. From Cypress Street to Auburn Avenue, McLucas has arrived early and stayed late to ensure that SEF's physical environment is pleasant and safe.

SEF is the tangible manifestation of a good idea that has historically challenged traditional thought, encouraged alternative practices and been unwavering in its defense of what is right. The interpretation of the SEF idea has been left to its leadership. From its first Executive Director, Arthur Wright, to its current President, Elridge McMillan, SEF's leaders have protected and cultivated a version of this idea for their time. Written efforts to document their professional journeys cannot fully capture the highly textured educational terrain from which SEF has emerged and in which it still stands. Instead, here, we can only hope to describe a representative slice of SEF's and Elridge's work and highlight examples of their efforts.

can educational history. Many SEF-sponsored initiatives are credited with permeating societal barriers intent upon restricting African American educational access. SEF as an institution reflects a tradition of courage, commitment and dedicated service. It is not an overstatement to say that many shifts in educational practices and policies that affect African Americans can be traced to the SEF. This observation is testimony to the critical importance of SEF to the region and its constituency.

Elridge McMillan's tenure with SEF spans more than three decades. His notable leadership has elevated the nature of SEF's participation regionally, as well as nationally. As educational access became the stage on which many civil rights challenges were played out, SEF intensified its role as a major actor. A son of the South, Elridge is intimately aware of the cultural nuances that dictate educational practices in the region. Consequently his leadership reflects a merging of the personal and the professional. By all accounts, Elridge's leadership has solidified SEF's reputation as a safe site for the generation, cultivation, and support of innovative activities that encourage educational inclusion and excellence.

McMillan's professional trajectory is not merely a chronology of impressive appointments. Such an account would minimize the experiences that have cultivated his educational and leadership philosophies. Instead this approach highlights the multidimensional character of his professional journey. It considers McMillan's career as a grand narrative that encompasses more than thirty years of broad commitment to the field of education and particular focus on African American educational access, opportunity and excellence.

Organizations are often viewed through their leadership. However, the success of a good leader is determined

A Permanent Imprint on an Evolving Institution: The McMillan Years at the Southern Education Foundation 1968-2001

To confront American educational issues is to confront America. Our system of education mirrors the larger battles that have transformed this country from a disparate group of autonomous colonies to a unified nation. Societal notions of fairness, democracy, truth, and justice that have defined and redefined our nation have always been at the core of America's educational discourse.

To be sure, the meaning given to these grand ideas largely depends upon those who actively participate in this ongoing conversation. However, structural barriers prevent universal access to this critical dialogue. For African Americans, who have historically viewed formal schooling as a means to combat racism and poverty, such exclusion has

had dire consequences. Twentieth century educational policies and practices are still most likely to reify majority perspectives, validate majority truths, and embrace majority cultural norms. Yet the valiant efforts of institutions like the Southern Education Foundation (SEF) and individuals like Elridge McMillan have profoundly impacted American educational discourse, practices and policy.

For nearly 134 years, SEF has assertively labored on behalf of the racially marginalized. SEF's long arms of service have touched every nook and cranny of the South and beyond. Its untiring advocacy has illuminated unjust prac-

tices that hinder educational opportunity and access for African Americans. SEF's influence in the region cannot be overstated. Its leadership, board membership, and staff rosters include some of the most recognizable names in Ameri-

The organization's mission, desire and goal is to become a premier center where educational equity is not only talked about, but achieved -- the kind of place where people will look to see what the cutting-edge issues are, and how we might address them. We need to continue that same trend of convening, discussing, and moving ahead.¹

Elridge W. McMillan

the SEF years



As SEF moves forward under the leadership of his successor, Lynn Huntley, whom Elridge McMillan has influenced and helped to mentor, we are confident that his goodness and philosophy will continue to guide the work of the Southern Education Foundation. In a sense, the measure of a great leader is that when he leaves an institution, it is poised and ready to continue its work without pause or disruption. The Southern Education Foundation will continue to grow, thrive and make contributions to excellence and equity in education in the future in large measure because of the stellar leadership it enjoyed in the past.

On behalf of the Southern Education Foundation's Board of Trustees, staff, supporters and friends, past and present, we acknowledge our debt to Elridge McMillan for all that he has done, does and will do. In the finest sense of the word, he has achieved greatness.

Norman C. Francis, *Chair*
Southern Education Foundation
Board of Trustees
November, 2001

educational outreach—the Southern Education Foundation has been and is a leader in education reform because it has been well-led!

In my capacity as Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Southern Education Foundation, I have had the honor of working with Elridge McMillan for many years. I have seen first-hand and repeatedly the talent, resolve and service that characterize this fine human being. He has a quality of warmth, gentility and generosity that is contagious. He leads by example and asks no more of others than he himself is willing to do.

Under Elridge McMillan's sterling leadership, the Southern Education Foundation has tackled some of the most vexing and complex issues of our time: How shall people of diverse races and ethnicities make common cause to improve the breadth of educational access and quality? In whom and in what should scarce resources be invested in order to achieve the greatest results? What types of strategies can promote the broad consensus about the need for change required to advance excellence and equity in education? What is the purpose of education in a democracy, and how do global forces interact with that purpose and our national values?

Along the way, Elridge has helped many people and institutions to move in a positive and progressive direction. He has done so without need or desire for recognition. He has worked ceaselessly, always attentive to the concerns of the "least of these" simply because he cares.

Preface

In this short volume authored by a distinguished education historian, Dr. Melanie Carter, a faculty member at Clark Atlanta University, the story of Elridge W. McMillan's singular contributions to the pursuit and achievement of equity in education in the American South is told. Issued on the occasion of Mr. McMillan's retirement from the presidency of the Southern Education Foundation in 2001, the volume provides a glimpse of his values, achievements and sacrifices. It tells the story of the power of a transformative leader with a big heart and mind to do enormous good. It is an inspiring story that challenges each of us to rise above our circumstances and, like Elridge McMillan, leave "footprints on the sands of time."

Elridge McMillan's story is intertwined with the history of the Southern Education Foundation, a public charity that traces its roots back to 1867. Few institutions can boast such longevity or achievement over time. Though small in size and resources, the Southern Education Foundation has always had big aspirations. It has been and is the constant ally and forceful voice of poor and underserved people of all races and ethnicities, especially African Americans, who have traditionally been excluded from full enjoyment of equal access to quality educational opportunity at all levels. Using an array of strategies—research, advocacy, coalition building, policy development, training and technical assistance provision, and

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