



“OF ALL THE PROFOUND PROFUNDITIES . . .”

Reflections on the Life of “The Godfather”

by Geraldine E. Graham

The death of Dr. Manuel H. Pierson in winter 2006 marked, without question, the end of an era in the annals of Oakland University history. From the day he was first hired as a counselor until the day he retired as an assistant vice president, Dr. Pierson had one primary goal for being here: to increase the number of African-American students earning degrees from OU. This was not an exclusionary goal, anyone could come along for the ride. But his focus was on helping his people.

As the prefix on his name evolved from Mr. to Dr., so the progression of his career advanced from counselor to dean. And while there were other deans on campus, he’s the only one for whom no surname was necessary. When you said “Dean,” everyone just knew you were talking about Dean Pierson.

Dean was “old school.” Having been raised and educated in the south, he had a firsthand understanding of the Civil Rights Movement and the attendant sacrifices that made his deanship possible and that, likewise, created educational and career opportunities for disenfranchised people of color all across America. (How ironic that some 40 years later, there is a movement underway to throw away the master key that selectively opened the spring-loaded locks to closed doors.) Having

experienced the struggles of being a first-generation/low-income student himself, he was prepared to provide the significant extra nurturing he knew would be needed by a population of students whose family heritage included no history of bachelor's degrees but was fortunate if it included high school diplomas; a population of students whose parents had no lofty careers but were blessed if there were two parents at home, one of whom had a job; a population of students who had never been on a college campus and who were painfully aware of society's expectation that they fail.

The first order of business was to get the students enrolled. So Dean recruited in Pontiac and Detroit making presentations at schools, churches, and community gatherings. He patiently eased the minds of concerned parents who were excited about the potential opportunities being opened up for their children yet fearful of what it meant for their children to be living away from home in a predominantly white suburban environment. Dean took personal responsibility for the students' well-being and, once they got on campus, became their "Godfather." This nickname emanated from his knack of showing up in the most unexpected places just in the nick of time to save someone from him- or herself, and his uncanny knowledge of everything going on in the academic and social lives of each African-American student on campus. As he regaled us with stories such as how in undergrad school he used texts on hold in the library because he couldn't afford to purchase texts, he made it clear that no excuse was acceptable for not succeeding.

Dean was determined that, along with an academic education, these students would walk away with well developed personal characteristics and values that would serve them well in their professional careers. Accountability was key; so it was not unusual for him to show up at a party on Sunday night and call someone out whom he knew needed to be studying for a Monday morning test. What the students didn't realize is that Dean had established a solid support network of faculty members who would let him know when a student appeared to be

headed for trouble. So, students were totally in awe when he showed up knocking at dorm room doors knowing that they were skipping class to get in a few extra winks.

Dean authored (and later helped to computerize) the OU Academic Standing and Honors Policy to assure that all students had a chance to “get it right.” The Policy integrated challenge with opportunity so that the students’ own behaviors would not be self-defeating. Inherent in the Policy, he created the Dismissal Option Program because he understood that these students’ experience on campus would be so very different from anything to which they were accustomed and that the freedoms may be too much for them to handle responsibly. Each student who opted to continue definitely had to march to the beat of “The Godfather’s” drum. For instance, it was mandatory that they attend his Human Potential Seminar. Aside from goal-setting, I don’t know what Dean did in those seminars. But afterward, students’ improved academic performance, self- and social responsibility, and student-life involvement were evidence of increased accountability and a greater appreciation of the opportunities that they had been afforded. And then there were the “F.O.G.’s.” This was the group of students who Dean identified each semester to put the Fear Of God into before they slipped into dismissal status. One brief meeting in the Dean’s office usually did the trick!

Dr. Pierson leaves an active living legacy at Oakland University. The decade of the 70’s was a time of social change and volatility. The campus climate reflected the tenor of the greater community in that African-American and female students were angry about the disparities perpetrated between them and the majority. Dr. Pierson helped them to channel their energies to negotiate positive outcomes with the administration. He was the impetus behind the development of the OU Women’s Center, Association of Black Students, African-American Awareness Month Celebration, Human Relations Committee and Award, Black Alumni Association, and Greek-lettered organizations. As time went on, he was instrumental in the development of the OU Archives and computerization of

the master records system; helped to bring the first King/Chavez/Parks graduate fellow to campus; was instrumental in increasing the numbers of African-American faculty and staff employed by Oakland University; and made Oakland University a household name because of his extensive, creative, and unique pre-college community outreach approaches (Project 20, Project Upward Bound, Summer Support Program, Cadet Engineering, Upward Bound Fine Arts Institute, Forward Bound, Detroit Compact, McCree Scholars, Visions Unlimited, and King/Chavez/Parks Program).

Dr. Pierson represented Oakland University on many fronts locally, regionally and nationally. Consistent with his life's mission, he was a founder of what is now the Council for Opportunity in Education (COE), a Washington, DC based organization that protects the educational access rights of TRIO-eligible and other low-income, first-generation, and disabled populations. In 2006, COE celebrated its Silver Anniversary; Dr. Pierson convened one of its first organizational meetings at Meadow Brook Hall in the late 70's.

When Dr. Pierson retired from Oakland University, he didn't want a party or any type of celebration. He was simply ready to leave because his obligation was met; no one had to acknowledge or validate that. He had been true to his commitment and spent his entire career helping black youth to access and to succeed in higher education just as others had helped him. Many would agree that he more than met this obligation.

Because he was different things to different people, others may have known another side of Manuel Pierson; but this is the man that I knew as my supervisor, my mentor, and my friend. We didn't always agree, but we could disagree and move on. So, I know I speak for hundreds when I say that my life changed for the better because I knew Dean. And Oakland University would have been a very different place had not Dr. Manuel H. Pierson chosen to become a principal contributor to its early growth and development.