

Tuesday, June 16, 2009

Educator and OU alum Jonathon Crawford found success despite odds

By **Dave Groves**, staff writer

In the early 1970s, a number of obstacles might have kept Jonathan Crawford from going back to school and bettering the quality of life for himself and his family.

Not the least of these was the fact that his wife had died at age 37 of liver failure, leaving him to work several jobs and raise four children alone.

Meanwhile, the onerous barrier of racism had kept Crawford at arm's length from one opportunity after another. Though he'd graduated second in his high school class and received straight A's in mathematics, he'd been told several times that he'd failed job placement exams. Each time he was told he'd failed by exactly two points, and each time he purportedly failed due to poor performance in mathematics.

So when a friend suggested that Crawford, then in his early 40s, return to school and complete his degree, he bristled at the idea.

"I said, 'Ralph, I don't have time for that.'"

But confident in his skills and cognizant of advice he'd long been given, Crawford could not dismiss the idea.

"That was instilled in us starting at age 3," he said. "Education was preached to me by my grandmother and my dad for as long as I can remember."

Within a year of returning to school, Crawford earned an associate's degree with academic honors at Oakland Community College. He then enrolled at Oakland University to pursue a teaching degree, continued working, played with athletes half his age on the OU basketball team and graduated in 1976 with dean's list honors.

What followed was a 28-year career in the Detroit Public Schools – six as a teacher at Joy Middle School and nearly all the remainder as a principal and administrator at various other buildings. Crawford also earned a master's degree in guidance counseling and administration from Michigan State University.

Though his success in the classroom propelled Crawford into the administrative ranks, he never forgot how much he loved working directly with youngsters. In fact, even as an administrator, he took every opportunity he found to do just that.

In 2002, after the building he'd been charged with running was closed, the now seasoned educator found immense joy in teaching for one last year.

"I loved it because I was back in the classroom working with children," Crawford explained. "I had the best time of my life there."

Since his retirement, Crawford has seen the East Side buildings where he taught and managed staff boarded up, vandalized, neglected and torn down. He's seen homes and businesses around them burned and abandoned. And for years he's seen youths drawn into destructive lifestyles that in many cases closed the doors to opportunity.

Despite this, the undeterred and ever-optimistic community figure continues to work with young people, not only as an academic tutor in reading and math, but as a life mentor and role model. As he did with his own children and their friends when they were young, Crawford now takes mentees assigned to him by the Michigan State University Extension Office on his beloved fishing trips, as well as to bowling alleys, roller skating rinks and to sporting events such as OU basketball games.

"All I'm doing is showing youngsters a different side of life – how to enjoy their lives without smoking, without drinking, without using drugs and without fighting," Crawford said. "I show them a positive side of life."

The avid OU supporter also serves as an Alumni Admissions Ambassador, attending college recruiting fairs and other events where high school students learn about Oakland programs designed to help them find success both in school and in life.

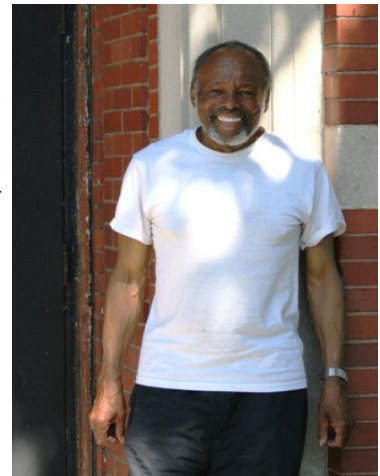
"Mr. Crawford epitomizes the word ambassador. He is a pillar in his community – a man of great integrity with an unbelievable legacy," said Luke Fleer, coordinator of the Alumni Admissions Ambassador Program. "He has spent his life empowering young minds in Detroit and is sharing his OU story as an Alumni Admissions Ambassador."

Crawford has enthusiastically embraced the responsibility. "When I talk to young people about all the things they'll find at Oakland, I tell them it's all about improving your station in life and improving yourself," he said. "I'm still trying to encourage young people to achieve at the highest level possible."

For his success as a mentor, the Michigan State University Extension recently named Crawford its Mentor of the Year. Program leaders there also nominated him for recognition in the 2009 Governor's Service Awards, and Fleer submitted a letter supporting the nomination.

Crawford has since learned he is one of five finalists in the program's Mentor of the Year category, and that he is invited to attend a June 18 banquet where Gov. Jennifer Granholm and first gentleman Dan Mulhern will announce this year's winners.

"I cried when I found out," Crawford said of his nomination. "I'm truly blessed to be recognized."



Educator and OU alumni Jonathon Crawford overcame many obstacles to achieve a long and fulfilling career in the Detroit Public School system.



SUMMARY

Already in his forties, Jonathon Crawford graduated from Oakland University in 1976 with a teaching degree and embarked on a 28-year career in the Detroit Public Schools.

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Modified by David Groves (groves@oakland.edu) on Tuesday, July 28, 2009
Article Start Date: Tuesday, June 16, 2009

Editor's Note: Jonathan Crawford was selected as the winner of the 2009 Mentor of the Year during the Governor's Service Award ceremony on June 18. Above, Crawford accepts his award from Gov. Jennifer Granholm.