

MC Forward Podcast  
Season 4, Episode 3  
Beverly Coleman  
Transcript

[Music]

**Mike**

Welcome to this episode of MC Forward, a podcast that focuses on Montgomery College individuals who are leading from where they are. I'm your host Dr. Michael Mills. Joining me today is Beverly Coleman, Director of the TRIO Educational Opportunity Center. Beverly, I appreciate that you're joining me today. Thanks,

**Beverly**

Thank you for inviting me, Dr. Mills.

**Mike**

So, you were recently honored by Montgomery County and the Maryland Business and Professional Women as a 2022 Woman of Achievement. That recognition was for your outstanding contributions to opening educational opportunities to people in different circumstances. What does it mean to you, and tell me a little bit about it?

**Beverly**

Well, thank you. I have been working with low-income and first-generation middle school, high school students, and young adults. And what that has enabled me to do is to serve that population, um, that population that may not have seen post-secondary education as an option. Um, who may not have times, even been encouraged to pursue it. And so, when they recognize me, it kind of surprised me because this is my passion and my purpose. And it's like I'm being recognized for doing what I love to do, um, which is assisting those who may not have considered a post-secondary education with the process. Um, whether it's, you know, helping adults particularly understand that you might be able to afford college if we see what's on your FAFSA. Um, you might be able to go to college, and there would be resources there to support you. I recently was... we've partnered with an apartment complex Waterford Tower apartment in Burtonsville, and one of the young men there was saying, you know, he didn't know because he has trouble learning. I said, you know, what, there are resources at colleges for people who learn differently. We're not going to call it trouble to learn. You just learn differently, and so, there are resources, and just informing and educating and then assisting them. And so, that's where I am, and the recognition, as I said, kind of surprised me to be recognized for what I'd love to do. And as I said is my passion and my purpose. And the organization annually recognizes a Woman of Achievement, a woman that they feel that has contributed in some way, um, particularly to women. And the reason they recognize me, you may be familiar with the Single Parent Conference, which I started in 2017, and we just had our sixth conference in August. And that was the premise, that was what

really prompted them to recognize me because of the population and the single parent. It's not just for single parents, but it's really geared towards low-income single parents and helping them want to empower them, to educate, inform them about the different resources. What are my rights if my child has... For our first conference, we had someone from MCRPS Special Education come and talk about what happens during IEP. What are your rights? What are your responsibilities? And I recall running into the parents who attended it after conference, and they were talking about how they never even knew that they could take someone with them, that they always felt so anxious that, you know, you have all these people who, you know, you have a psychiatrist there. You have what they perceived as very well-educated people and how intimidated they felt by that. And so, that just reminded me that once we give people the information and the knowledge, they are then empowered to do things in their lives for themselves and for their children. Then, it's not our role to tell them what to do but we need to show them how it can be done.

### **Mike**

For many of us this passion of education is rooted in something that happened to us when we were younger or something was developed in us when we were younger. For you helping individuals who are in difficult circumstances... where did the passion develop?

### **Beverly**

The passion developed I believe early on... um in seeing... I did well in school from elementary on... but seeing how those who were having more challenging experiences in school were treated. They were treated as less than. They were treated as if they weren't able, and so that made me want to do something different. I started out in juvenile probation because I had seen in my own family how making one wrong decision could lead you into a path of incarceration even though it was just one wrong decision. What you really needed was some guidance to go in a different direction. And so that's where I started was with, uh, with juvenile probation and then I realized I wanted to do something more. I wanted not just to keep them from being incarcerated in the adult system because that was really my goal was to keep them from the adult system. I don't know if that was always the role of the juvenile probation office but that was my personal role... uh my purpose. And then I realized I wanted to do more than that, what was needed was for education and for those young people to see opportunities and that's where I started working with minority retention. And then I got into really helping middle and high school students. And I think that was the path that I took that led me to where I am now. Always wanting to provide opportunities and helping people to see their options and their opportunities

### **Mike**

Well it's obvious that that passion comes through, that leadership comes through. Describe for me if you can what type of leader you see yourself.

**Beverly**

Okay, I see myself as one who wants to empower others in their in the role that they are. To take ownership of ideas, and to share their ideals and to create different ways of doing the work that you're doing. And then taking the lead on that and the implementation because I believe that if it's your idea, I want you to own it and I want you to develop it and design it so that you can see how your ideals can come through fruition. Um... and so, that's one. Um... and also meeting people where they are. Um... because whether you have a staff of three or you have a staff of 300. Um... people grow different. And so, trying to see how they grow and getting to know them as an individual so that I can see how they grow. So that I can provide them opportunities to grow. And encourage and support those opportunities because sometimes we're encouraged to pursue those opportunities but then we're not supported. And so, providing them with the tools or the training or whatever is needed so they can be successful. Because you know, you want them to outgrow the position they're in.

**Mike**

Were there individuals in your life who helped you develop those leadership traits, those leadership skills?

**Beverly**

Vivian Nix Early was the director of the Equal Opportunity Center at Westchester University when I was there as a grad student. I had the opportunity to be a grad assistant with her and I've remained connected with her. Her leadership was really always...even though I was a lowly grad assistant, she wanted me to create my own ideas. She wanted me to think about what my vision was for education and then she gave me the tools and the guidance. Because I was a grad student and there was a lot I did not know, she gave me the guidance and the tools in order to bring those ideals into fruition. I was able to even develop a training, I guess a training for college students, a co-ed training for date rape prevention.

**Mike**

Your idea of providing individuals with ownership of ideas and having them take that ownership and see those ideas come to fruition, how does that play out in a population of individuals who may not see themselves as having ideas, or a society that doesn't think their ideas are worthwhile?

**Beverly**

It's not always as easy as I'd like it to be. However, what I find is that if I am encouraging and supportive and more importantly a good listener, that I listen to not only what their ideas are but what their concerns of are, whether why they might be hesitant, what they're anxious about. If I'm listening to that, then I can hear their concerns and give them the resources and tools to help them to address and hopefully alleviate those concerns.

**Mike**

When you look at your leadership skills what do you still need to work on?

**Beverly**

Probably patience.

**Mike**

Why?

**Beverly**

[laughs] I find that sometimes I want things to change now. I want people to get on board now. Um and I'm not always as aware as I think I should be as to why they're not.

**Mike**

The system moves slowly, right?

**Beverly**

Yes, it does and that's sometimes... it's like why are we still doing it that way when one, the population that we're serving... don't... they don't function that way. You know, we're doing things in the 90s style or a 2000, no 22 population, that weren't even born in the 90s to be perfectly honest, um and so yeah that does, it does move slowly, and um and I find that challenging. I'm not always as strong as I believe I need to be in negotiating the hierarchy. Particularly of higher education and that hierarchy we know exists in every business and organization. How to... how to navigate through that in an effective way. I always feel like I'm trying not to get myself in trouble.

**Mike**

Well I think it it's important to understand that as we try to navigate the hierarchy of organizations and it doesn't matter which organization or which institution you're part of there are individuals who are being impacted at the ground level, individuals that you're trying to help that maybe can't be helped because the system gets in the way,

**Beverly**

Yes, yes, and that and that can be frustrating. I do...we work... a lot particularly with persons who are homeless. Persons who have been Justice involved and involved with the criminal justice system and sometimes assisting them in navigating through things can be challenging. I am grateful that the federal student aid has taken off the question in relations to possession, or a conviction of possession, or selling of narcotics, because I always thought that was a crazy one... that... that's the only crime that you have to... um that could impact your eligibility for federal aid. And so, just really giving people another chance.

**Mike**

Well let's be honest. Decisions that we've all made at 17 or 18...

**Beverly**

Yes!

**Mike**

... are not the decisions we would make at 30.

**Beverly**

That is correct... yes... yes and giving people the right, because it...you know some of the decisions I made at 17 and 18... I'm just so grateful that the consequences weren't as severe as they are for others.

**Mike**

As I've shared with a number of individuals over the years, growing up in in the Dundalk area Eastern Baltimore I had two paths to take, and fortunately I took the right path, but I had friends who did not take the right path, and 40 years later, they're still impacted by that decision they made at 16 or 17 years old, which I think is unfortunate.

**Beverly**

Yes. Yeah, it is it's... you know...and because we know that the brain is still developing at that age anyway, so you know you are impulsive and not always able to make the best decisions.

**Mike**

Well, if you'd listen to my parents, my brain wasn't developed hardly at all at that age. Well, the other thing that I think is important for the work that you do, is that you're trying to break, in some cases, generational cycles of this. Talk a little bit about that.

**Beverly**

Yes. Yes, I find that particularly with...one of the organizations we work with is HOC. And the generational poverty in which I've worked with... students who... they're the third generation of the family living in HOC housing, that they've never been able to escape low-income housing in order to have their own place. Um and how challenging and frightening... that was the other thing... is how frightening it can be and I know that from personal experience. I was the first of 10 children to go to college. I was the first of my parents five girls not to get pregnant before I was married. And so I, you know, I broke a mold that sometimes made me not fit in the family. Because I had a different life experiences than my family, than my siblings did, and I also, so I can relate to that when I'm working with clients where they're a little anxious about where will this place me now. When I start having these different experiences, when I start taking psychology classes, and I start learning things about development and who I am and why I am, where I am and why my family is where they are, um and particularly as I learn about history and things like that. How do I still stay connected to my family? Because that can be, you know, and your family and your community. When I say family, I'm also talking about our community as well. How do I stay connected and when it's been

generational, it can be challenging to end that. You know, to end that that struggle, that generational struggle.

**Mike**

They're seen as outcasts within their own family, within their own communities

**Beverly**

Yes. Yes. You may be familiar with the Lansdowne Community? The program I ran for CCBC, served the Lansdowne community. And the students would tell me, if I go to college I can't come back here. I was like what do you mean you can't come back here? They said I can't come back here because I will no longer fit in, because I would have learned things that will make me want to function differently. And so I won't hang out with my friends anymore because there's stuff they're doing I realize is detrimental to me. And they'll think I think I'm better than them. That I can't come back here because it will pull me back in. So, so yeah, so I get those students when they went away to college they never came back.

**Mike**

That must make your job difficult but at the same time exciting to see them break that mold.

**Beverly**

Yes, is exciting to see them break that mold and looking at the opportunities that that has provided them and just um all the things that they thought possible... that they hoped were possible. I should say realizing that... yes ...they are possible. But at the same time knowing that if they go to visit their family or you know they go to visit friends, they can't stay there long, you know. They go in for a couple of hours and then they leave because they don't feel they fit there anymore, and that I know is painful for them and so they try to create almost like a new family.

**Mike**

Well, Beverly I appreciate your taking time out to talk to me about this. I can see why you were recognized as a Woman of Achievement. Congratulations. And just keep doing the great work that you're doing.

**Beverly**

Thank you. Thank you very much for inviting me. It's been a pleasure chatting with you.

**Mike**

If you know someone who you think would be a great fit for this podcast, have them reach out to me at [michael.mills@montgomerycollege.edu](mailto:michael.mills@montgomerycollege.edu). Meanwhile, keep moving MC Forward.

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