

SIUE alum Hightower has impact on MJCH



Ed Hightower.

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Segue • Logan Cameron | On this week's episode of Segue, Dean of the SIUE College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) Greg Budzban, PhD, welcomes Ed Hightower, ED, former superintendent of the Edwardsville School District and current Executive Director of the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities.

A man committed to supporting the Metro East region, Hightower has maintained strong ties with the University for more than 40 years. An Alton native, Hightower came to SIUE in 1970 on a basketball scholarship. During his time on campus, Hightower was quite active in the classroom, on the court and on numerous campus committees. After receiving his bachelor's in education from the University in 1974, he returned immediately to pursue his master's in administration, and later, a specialist's degree in administration. Hightower earned a doctorate in education from Saint Louis University.

At the youthful age of 29, Hightower began his administrative career as an Assistant Principal and eventual Principal of an Alton elementary school. After spending 15 years as the school's principal, he worked as Assistant Superintendent in the Alton School District for 3 years. When faced with choosing between becoming the assistant state superintendent for Illinois or superintendent of the Edwardsville School District, Hightower decided to stay local. He remained superintendent in Edwardsville for 19 years before his retirement in 2015. Throughout his career, he also gained a reputation as a high profile NCAA Division I men's basketball referee.

Boasting an unfaltering commitment to SIUE, Hightower has continued to serve the University in various capacities – most notably as a 12-year former member of the SIU Board of Trustees. He shares, “I’ve witnessed the whole gamut of SIUE and the SIU system’s growth. From 1970 to present, SIUE has become a jewel from every aspect. The academic success over time speaks for itself. We have transitioned from a commuter campus to a residential institution. It’s just great to see the growth that has occurred.”

They discuss what maintains their attraction to the University’s campus, most heavily emphasizing the “nurturing” characteristics that are present to ensure student learning and success.

“That nurturing is something that is still characteristic of the University today and is still a critical component of what the ‘SIUE Experience’ is all about,” explains Budzban. “The potential that I see here is certainly what attracted me to this campus. In a lot of ways, our best days are still ahead. There is a great deal of potential in terms of growth, and the collaboration and collegiality is something that I’ve truly come to admire.”

Hightower adds, “Certainly, I had many opportunities to visit other universities to receive my education. But gosh, why would one need to leave when everybody is so involved here and helping you get to the level that you’re trying to achieve?”

On a hot topic, Hightower and Budzban discuss the regressive impacts that polarization is having on decision-making and policy – paying reference to the water crisis in Flint, Mich. – to explain how the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities plans to combat such ill effects through various initiatives.

“Because of this polarization, people don’t listen to each other, they don’t talk to each other, and there is negativity across leadership,” says Hightower. “We’re at an all-time low right now, as far as positive,

collaborative conversation. We're not talking to each other, and we're not trying to work together. It's upsetting."

Edwardsville native and decorated business executive Mannie Jackson established the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities to serve as a platform for people to begin conversations toward innovation and change – paying special attention to the intersection between environmental sustainability and the humanities.

The Center seeks to make an immediate impact among Madison County youth. The Center is currently working with more than 200 students from every high school and middle school in the county to identify problems and develop proposed solutions using measurable, replicable and research-oriented methodologies. This concept has already gained great traction and visibility, as Illinois Senator Dick Durbin has stated, "These types of programs are what is needed across the country."

With these projects, students will generate proposals and presentations based upon their problem solutions. Finalists will be selected and winners will be determined. Winners will be granted a two-year, \$3,000 fellowship, as well as ongoing support and mentorship toward the implementation and successful management of their problem solutions. Through this program, the Center hopes to create a product that attracts other entities throughout the United States, thus spreading similar educational programs across the country.

"I love the idea of using the Humanities to find sustainability practices that can also be universal and replicated across the country," shares Budzban. "When talking about the environment, there are so many different interdisciplinary aspects. You need the full gamut of the arts and the sciences to effect true transformation in this area, which is what makes the humanities so beneficial. Using the humanities to bridge gaps, communicate and think critically through complex processes has great potential in building the next generation of leadership."

Hightower reiterates by adding, "If we don't help these young people with these skills, they're going to miss a golden opportunity to make things better not only for those around them, but also for themselves! The students we are working with seem to have latched onto that idea."

They conclude the conversation by discussing the upcoming announcement of another national speaker to be hosted by the Center, as well as how the Center and CAS can continue collaborating to further enhance a pipeline of student educational experiences.

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By Logan Cameron, SIUE Marketing & Communications