

# Hightower reflects on dynamic career

Segue • SIUE



**Friday, March 2, 2018**

Segue, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's premier radio show, outlines the ideas and lives of the people on campus and beyond.

On this week's episode, which airs Sunday, March 4, on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound, SIUE Chancellor Randy Pembroke, PhD, interviews notable alum Ed Hightower, PhD, executive director of the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities Foundation (MJCHF).

Hightower earned three degrees from SIUE, including a bachelor's in physical education in 1974, an MEd in 1997, and a specialist degree in 1991. He went on to receive his doctorate of education administration from Saint Louis University. While attending SIUE, he refereed intramural basketball on campus and eventually worked his way up the ladder to become an NCAA Division I men's basketball official.

Hightower refereed 12 Final Fours and in 2014, he was inducted into the Saint Louis Sports Hall of Fame. While officiating, he also taught and worked as an administrator. He served as a principal and superintendent for the Alton School District and eventually became the Edwardsville School District's first African American superintendent. After 16 years in that position, he became the executive director of MJCHF.

"Your 40-year career in education has spanned numerous positions," Pembroke says. "How did you get started?"

"I was raised in a family of eight children, and my mother placed a high importance on education," Hightower explains. "SIUE was always my choice, because I was able to stay close to the community and assist my mom with my siblings.

"After I graduated from SIUE in 1974, I was fortunate enough to return and receive my master's at a time when jobs were really tough to get. My superintendent in the Alton School District at the time, Dr. Robert Lynn, took a liking to me and took me under his wing, and I became a principal at Eunice Smith Elementary School."

Hightower eventually advanced to the superintendent position at the Alton School District and made the decision to look at other opportunities. Having been offered a position as the assistant state superintendent of education under Dr. Joe Spagnolo, he looked for guidance from another one of his mentors, the late Bob Wetzel.

"He had been somewhat of a father figure to me," Hightower says. "He told me that he wanted to see me become the superintendent of the Edwardsville School District.

"I asked him the most profound question, and he responded in a way that I have never forgotten. I said, 'Bob, is Edwardsville ready for an African American superintendent?' and he looked at me, without hesitation and said, 'Edwardsville is ready for a leader who just so happens to be African American.'"

Hightower went on to become the Edwardsville superintendent. During his tenure, the district thrived in academics, athletics, and performing arts, and watched the surrounding community blossom into the bustling municipality it is today.

In 2015, shortly after retiring from the district, Hightower took the helm as executive director of the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities Foundation.

On Wednesday, March 28, the MJCHF will welcome humanitarian and human rights activist Naomi Tutu as its special guest for its annual Speaker Series. The fundraiser will be held in the Morris University Center's Meridian Ballroom at SIUE. Daughter of South Africa Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the young woman has dedicated her life's work to social justice on a global scale.

In the event's third year, the Speaker Series has previously featured General Colin Powell, former United States Secretary of State, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Famer and former Los Angeles Lakers legend, to SIUE's campus.

"I've had the opportunity to attend those dinners, and the quality of speakers and messages they have about the work we can do together as a society is exciting," Pembroke explains.

Currently, Hightower and the MJCHF are working with SIUE's Interdisciplinary Research and Informational Scholarship (IRIS) Center on the creation of an innovative curriculum focused on digital storytelling. By building digital narratives about what it means to be a child, a teenager and an adult, the project will create conversations about how we can value differences and speak across generational divides.

"All of this goes back to Mannie Jackson's main ideologies: he wanted to emphasize the humanities, for other people to treat each other with respect, dignity, understanding and forgiveness," Hightower says. "He is the reason why we are all here today."

To hear the rest of Hightower and Pembroke's conversation, which also includes a look into the former college basketball referee's venture into professional officiating, tune in at 9 a.m. on Sunday, March 4, to WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound.

*By Madelaine Gerard, SIUE Marketing & Communications*