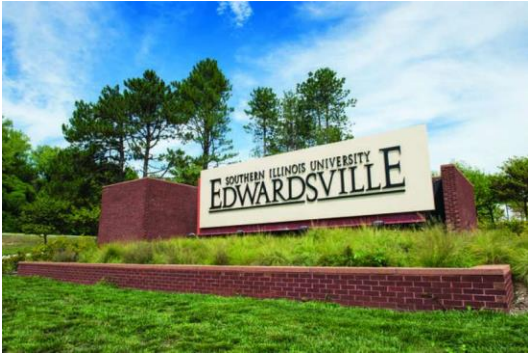


SEGUE: Edwardsville NAACP president dicusses career in education, dedication to community service

Madelaine Deardeuff

Thursday, May 23, 2019



At its core, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville works to instill the values of citizenship, excellence, inclusion, integrity and wisdom within each of its students.



Lifelong educator and SIUE alum John E. Cunningham exemplifies SIUE's values in several ways. As the guest on this week's episode of Segue, SIUE Chancellor Randy Pembroke, PhD, discusses Cunningham's career and his passion for public service, among other topics.

The episode will air at 9 a.m. this Sunday, May 26, on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound and on siue.edu/wsie.

Cunningham earned a bachelor's from SIU Carbondale and a master's in educational administration from SIUE in 1976. He devoted his career to education, and served in numerous positions between East St. Louis School District and Alton

School District before his retirement in 2009.

Throughout his career and in his retirement, Cunningham has always been an active member of various civic organizations.

With a career in education that spanned more than 52 years, Cunningham has seen the shift in technology and how it alters the way students learn, federal policies that influence students' lives, and an increased emphasis on keeping schools safe. Unfortunately, budget cuts at both the state and federal level have systemically affected school districts around the country.

"Despite the numerous attacks on the institution of public education, it is still alive and well," Cunningham says. "Public education is one of the most precious resources our country has."

"Looking back at your time as an educator, is there a particular moment or outcome that you think about as your greatest accomplishment or gives you the greatest amount of satisfaction?" Pembroke inquires.

"Seeing students I taught years ago when they are adults gives me the most personal satisfaction," Cunningham explains. "To hear them thank me for being someone they appreciated and respected is indescribable."

“Sometimes, you say the right thing or extend yourself to a person just when they need that support. I made sure I continued that with students throughout my career.”

Across the United States, school districts are currently experiencing a teacher shortage. According to a survey conducted by the Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools, 89 percent of central Illinois and 92 percent of southern Illinois districts have issues staffing teaching positions with qualified candidates.

“If we have any listeners out there who haven’t yet declared a major or are planning to go to college, what would be the strongest thing that you could say to encourage them to pursue a career in education?” Pembroke asks.

“Teaching can be personally rewarding, but for many, it may not be financially lucrative,” Cunningham says, “Sometimes, teachers are not given the pay or respect deserved for their contribution to a citizen’s life.

“Unknown to many, teaching is a demanding task that involves holding the attention of an audience or audiences for seven hours a day. The stress involved can be overwhelming. I encourage those who ask me similar questions to pursue advanced degrees or careers in higher education if they’re concerned about the profitability of teaching as a career.”

Cunningham’s passion for helping others existed far beyond the walls of the institutions he served. He has been an active member of numerous organizations, including the Boy Scouts of America, United Way, Kiwanis Club of Edwardsville, and the Illinois Retired Teachers Association.

“In the words of retired Col. Pamela Carter, ‘I have a purposeful desire to participate in and put change into motion,’” Cunningham says.

Since the 1990s, Cunningham has been involved with the Edwardsville branch of the NAACP, first serving as a treasurer for the organization. The theme of his presidency, he notes, has been focused on increasing the participation of minorities in the governance of our community.

“This is done by volunteering, serving on committees throughout the community, partnering with other organizations, attending local meetings and ultimately running for public office,” Cunningham says. “You won’t be represented if you

are not at the table or in the room at all, and it’s important for us all to be stakeholders in our community.”

The Edwardsville branch of the NAACP will be hosting its 55th Annual Freedom Fund Banquet at 3 p.m. on Sunday, June 2 in SIUE’s Morris University Center Meridian Ballroom.

The organization will recognize several members from the community, including fire chiefs from Edwardsville, Maryville and Glen Carbon. It will also award educational grants to Edwardsville High School students.

The keynote speaker for the banquet is Tasha Fox. A Madison County citizen, she attended Alton High School and was a contestant on the TV show, Survivor. She is also an entrepreneur and became an owner of a Chick-Fil-A franchise in Florissant, Missouri.

Tickets for the event are \$55 and can be purchased by calling 618-692-6610.

Pembroke and Cunningham’s entire conversation can be heard at 9 a.m. this Sunday, May 26, on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound and siue.edu/wsie.