UC SANTA BARBARA

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'Teams Win Championships'

Kudos, Mrs. Edelman.

A Chicago elementary school teacher whose first name can't now be recalled (or perhaps was never known) is getting credit today from a former pupil turned educator in his own right, on the verge of his retirement.

"Mrs. Edelman was my fifth-grade teacher, and there was something about the way she engaged me and other students," recalled Michael Young, UC Santa Barbara's outgoing vice chancellor for student affairs, who said the early seeds of his career were sown in Edelman's class more than 50 years ago. "She taught me to love school. I was always a decent student, but she really reinforced that for me and made education something that wasn't scary or boring or hokey. And in a cosmic way, I thank her pretty regularly."

Young will officially close the books on his tenure at UCSB — and on his professional life — on January 31, 2015. He joined the Santa Barbara campus in 1990, fresh off an 11-year stint at Wesleyan University, as an associate dean and university registrar.

A lifelong athlete and former college running back who said he owes his work ethic and leadership style to team sports, Young brought his Lombardi-like ethos to UCSB and made it stick. Characterizing the campus's Student Affairs unit as his professional family, he said he considers the collegial culture of the division among his greatest achievements as its leader.

“I’m a team sport guy,” Young said. “I believe in teams as combinations of people who come together with varying skills and use those skills in a synergistic way to achieve their goals. So when I got here, I began to promote the notion of teams. And I started using a phrase that people have now heard me use over and over again — teams win championships. We’re a team in Student Affairs. We collaborate, we cooperate, we work together. It wasn’t that way when I arrived and I’m proud to say I think we’ve broken that down.”

Young was born and raised in Chicago, with his two sisters, in the 1950s and 60s, “at a time when kids got to do kids stuff,” he said. “You could rollerskate in the street. You could go out and play all day and not have to show up back at home until the streetlights came on — that was the rule. We had vacant lots and fields that we played in. I was lucky enough to grow up in an era when I could just be a kid — and a pretty far-ranging kid at that.”

Baseball, football and school, school, school. Those were Young’s primary pursuits growing up; from an early age — “as soon as I was old enough,” he said — his mom made sure he stayed busy. Being in a city and attending a predominantly black high school imbued him with “a certain level of street smarts, playground rules and many other things that helped me down the road,” he recalled.

“I learned how to act, and interact, in certain situations because of things I’d seen,” he said. “I learned I could be bilingual — I could talk street and I could speak proper English. I learned those skills, thanks to Chicago, and as a result I was relatively comfortable in most any situation, or at least I could fake it. Chicago was good to me and I’m forever grateful that’s where I was able to grow up and learn. It will always be home.”

Young left that home in the 1960s, bound for Beloit College, a small liberal arts institution in Wisconsin. He played Division III football for the duration, serving as team captain in his senior year.

After earning his bachelor’s degree in history, Young went on to the University of Michigan, where he got a master’s in history. His first job post-grad school was in education administration, as the director of an educational opportunity program. A chance meeting with a university vice president at an administrators’ conference proved to be his professional light-bulb moment.

“This guy had quit his job, gone back to grad school and went on to become a VP,” Young said. “I wanted to be that guy. I applied and got into the doctoral program in higher ed administration at the University of Iowa, and by the following September I was in Iowa City pursuing my Ph.D. I’m forever grateful that I made that decision.”

Young’s first job as a newly minted Ph.D. was the gig at Wesleyan, where he discovered his passion for working directly with students. In addition to his official roles as associate dean and university registrar, he ran orientation programs and served spells as freshman class dean, senior class dean and dean for protests and demonstrations. Wearing so many hats, Young said, lent him the experience and exposure that prepared him for his role at UCSB — a much larger campus and, being a public university, a whole different animal.

“It was with some trepidation that I decided to move, but the opportunity to come to Santa Barbara to be vice chancellor for student affairs was one I couldn’t pass up,” Young said. “It hasn’t always been easy, but it’s been a wonderful, rewarding experience. I feel blessed that UCSB has been an aspect of my career and I feel very fortunate now, at the end of that career, to be able to look back and say, ‘I chose well, and I was lucky.’”

The campus has been lucky, too.

Over the course of Young’s tenure at UCSB, he oversaw Student Affairs initiatives including the creation of a student wellness program and support and response network for distressed students, the implementation of a zero-net energy plan and other innovations that have made the division a sustainability trailblazer, the construction or renovation of multiple campus facilities, and the development and ongoing enhancement of Student Affairs’ top-notch technology infrastructure. Above all else, he said, he pushed for support for student mental health, as well as for first-generation, low-income and underrepresented students.

Ask him what he’s most proud of, however, and Young will return again to the relationships he was able to build — with students as much as his colleagues.

“Students want to be treated like the rest of us — with respect and dignity, as equals,” he said. “So I always made sure they know that I respect them and understand their role. And I told them, ‘You may not like what I’m going to say but what I say to you will always be what I believe to be the truth.’

“All these years and I came to find out that what I really like the most about my job is the student life portion,” Young added. “Addressing mental health issues, working with underrepresented students, protest stuff — those are things that I enjoy. I don’t like some of the situations, but I get energized internally around those issues. And I’m proud of what we’ve been able to achieve.”

Beginning to pack up his office after 25 years, Young said he’s ready to hand off his team to a new coach. His wish for his eventual successor is simple.

“The next vice chancellor will inherit a talented, healthy organization of professionals who know what they’re doing and will perform well in any circumstance,” he said. “Hopefully that person will take the division places I could not, and lead this team to its next set of victories.”

Always with the sports metaphors.

Here’s one more: By retiring, Young isn’t benching himself so much as starting a different game altogether. After some 40 years in the workforce, his new playbook is still under development.

“I have a wife, Joanne, who put up with me all these years — I’m looking forward to being with her, doing some traveling, getting out and about and seeing the world,” Young said. “I’ll spend more time with my grandsons — that should be fun. I’m still on a couple boards here in town so I’ll be involved with those. And I plan to crank up my exercise regimen. After that, I really don’t know. So if you have any suggestions, please send them along.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.