**Mt. SAC Vault: Breaking Barriers to Black Student Success**

**Episode 191**

Jeffery Dorsey:

I met Clarence Banks and from the time that I stepped into his office, I knew that I was at home in Aspire. Every single day that I have stepped foot in that office has been a privilege. I eventually became a student worker through Aspire, and the ways in which the entire experience at Mt. SAC, but especially working in Aspire has definitely changed my life.

Christina Barsi:

Hi welcome back to The Mt. SAC podcast as we revisit one of our favorite episodes, originally released on May 18th, 2021. In this episode you’ll hear from Lance Heard and some amazing black students’s personal success stories as well as their hurdles along the way that were captured during Black Student Success Week. If there is one takeaway, let it be the question “What can we all do to break down the barriers to black student success?” Enjoy.

Lance Heard:

Welcome everyone! My name is Lance Heard. I'm an administration of justice professor at Mt. SAC and welcome to Black Student Success Week. And I just want to mention a few things about Black Student Success week. We have the black hour from noon to 1:00 PM, Monday through Friday across the state. Students, staff and faculty coming together on important issues related to black students' success. I really want to give a warm welcome and thanks to our student panel. And they're going to tell a little bit about themselves and hare their success story at Mt. SAC. And then we'll have an opportunity if you have a question for them, right, then we can ask them. And after our students share, I want to open it up to those with us present, to also share about their experience with student success at Mt. SAC, the students we have today are Aaron Evans, Amanda Frasier, Jeffrey Dorsey, and Ashley Spencer.

Lance Heard:

I truly want to thank you for being here and helping us celebrate you and Black Student Success week at Mt. SAC. I think this is the fuel that we need during this time to get us through and to help us push that much harder in the work that we do, in the classes that we teach, in the committees that we serve on. And so I hope that our conversation will be stimulating, will be challenging, and we can use this and we can build upon this. I would like to invite our first speaker, Aaron Evans.

Aaron Evans:

My name is Aaron and I was a student. I've been a student at Mount San Antonio since I think 2016. That's about when I left high school and I'd have to say my experience overall. It was pretty lucky because I had a lot of support from a lot of different organizations and people.

Aaron Evans:

So when I first came on, I was introduced to Aspire almost immediately from my friend, Ty Wright, and then from there, I also found a professor who invited me to the speech and debate team. So I found myself very active and very running around on campus. But I got to say in terms of my experience, that the main points that probably helped me the most that I feel like other students would definitely benefit from, I would say the professors in general, who would, who looked out for me during certain times when things weren't going right with my education. For example, I had some troubles I was going through during 2019-2020 at time. My professors began to notice it. And I actually had a professor who reached out to me. Normally, if a student starts off doing decently in class, and all of a sudden they took a stark turn, almost 9 times out of 10, at least the students going through something.

Aaron Evans:

It's not just because they decided, well, I'm tired of having good grades. I had professors who reached out to me and they actually helped me get back on track and get back onto some of my classes. That's why I say I had a pretty lucky experience because it happened a few times actually, when I was attending Mt. San Antonio College. And they were able to help guide me back on track when things weren't right, because it's hard sometimes when you feel like it's you against the world. And I can say that that's probably the biggest takeaway from my experience at Mt. SAC, is that a lot of professors and not only them, but staff as well I can't tell you how often I went to Aspire and it felt like I had a community to back me up, and that didn't feel like it was me against everybody.

Aaron Evans:

I actually had people who could me get through a lot of these challenging times, but besides that as well, I also went from the speech and debate team to further going to taking computer science classes and just going to living the life, a bit more normal student and not running around all over. [inaudible 00:06:12] I have to give a speech from time to time. After that, I transferred over to Cal State Dominguez Hills, where I came back to Mt. SAC now to try and get myself a communications and mathematics degree because I love math.

Lance Heard:

Aaron, I wanted to ask a follow-up question. You talked about doing forensics, and I wonder if you could share for students and also faculty, how doing that activity in addition to class, how that impacted your success to maybe encourage faculty, to get students to get more involved than just attending classes.

Lance Heard:

Can you comment on that experience? How that helped?

Aaron Evans:

I would say nothing has taught me more than speech and debate. I don't think there is anything else that could have given me the lessons that speech and debate did. Everybody's just underserved in some way, shape or fashion. You hear every single story possible, but also, speech and debate just taught me a skill set that I don't think you can learn it from anywhere else besides taking advanced speech classes. Pushing students to actually go and introduce themselves into not even just speech to debate, but just all these other clubs and organizations and places on campus. I feel all too often, students are kind of scared to go and see it through and kind of scared to go and find these places.

Aaron Evans:

So as a faculty member to just real quick after class, "Hey, like, have you ever considered going here?" Maybe you probably set up some way shape or form, now, nothing too extreme, but just a way to help introduce the students because I personally would never have joined speech and debate unless it was through the recommendation of a professor. The professor literally guided me and said, you should try this out. You seem to have a bit of a talent or seem to be good with words, good with speaking. So let me introduce you here. And from there, I ended up having one of the two best years of learning and growth that I've ever had.

Clarence Banks:

Hey, Lance, if I can add Aaron, is being modest. Aaron is a former national champion in forensics, he's just a humble person.

Clarence Banks:

And I know we're going to get to, to the other students sharing, but eventually, hopefully Aaron, before the program is over. I think sharing from just some of the financial struggles that you've had, I think would be good for the faculty and staff to sort of understand some of the things that our students are navigating. So you don't have to share now if you, if you don't want to share at all, but that aspect I think would be good for folks to know as well.

Lance Heard:

Yes, absolutely. And Aaron, yeah, you can share now or later or not at all, but one of the focuses of this week is, as you heard me mention, has been the financial hardships on some students where we can make a difference.

Aaron Evans:

Sounds good. I say for the financial struggles, how I mentioned back in 2019, and I don't mind sharing at all, by the way, I don't mind sharing it all.

Aaron Evans:

I just didn't want to go over time. But in 2019, I came to a point where I ended up having to leave my parents' house. And I went to go live with a friend. So after that, it was just okay, me supporting my own in every way, shape or format to pay for school. I had to go and buy a new car. I had to buy all these things. So as time progressed, I found myself having to work three jobs, while also attending Mt. SAC and going to school. And then even when I transferred to Cal State Dominguez Hills, at some point I ended up working like 70 hour work weeks just to make sure that I could pay for the school and still attend at the same time. And to be honest, it was the most draining experience I've ever had to do.

Aaron Evans:

So I build computers, I work building a computer while having my phone up there in a zoom class, untap the mute button, ask my professor questions, I have to tap it back, go fulfill the duties I have to do at work. It was tiring to say the least. At some point I know I did have that point to where I just couldn't take it. I just couldn't, it was hard for me to get up and go to the class in the morning. And at that time I actually, my professors, they didn't reach out to me. I know Mt. SAC professors normally do, but they didn't reach out to me. Once you feel like once you've already stopped, it's easy to continuously not go back to class and to struggle with it.

Aaron Evans:

And I know I had that with Cal State Dominguez Hills because sometimes you just run into those obstacles.

Clarence Banks:

Yeah. And thank you for sharing. I think it's important to note that when we talk about financial way and we talk about providing funding and all of these things for students that black Americans in particular, black American students finding themselves in a unique situation in the fact that most of our black students in California are not destitute. So from an income standpoint, when they're filling out their FAFSA, they're not on the bottom end so essentially not going to necessarily get everything covered. Yet their parents or their household may not make enough money to cover all of the educational expenses.

Clarence Banks:

And so for those students that are 24 years and under, because you have to be older than 24 years to file independently, unless financial aid makes some exceptions, we have students that are in the Aaron Evans situation where they don't have the educational expenses covered. So they ended up working one job, two jobs, three jobs. And then sometimes when they go into their classroom, they seem a little tired. They may not ask as many questions where there may be some reasons behind all of that. And then from a cultural standpoint, we don't always ask for help.

Clarence Banks:

And that's something that we as black faculty staff and managers can work with students and to give them that warm, loving experience and say, "Hey, you can come to, you can let me know what's going on and we're here to try to help. And so once Erin let us know and we tried to do what we could do. And that's what we have to do, not just for the Aaron Evans but for all the rest of our students.

Lance Heard:

Thank you Clarence, thank you very much, Aaron. Our next student is Ashley Spencer.

Ashley Spencer:

Hi, I'm a psychology major. And I started at Mt. SAC in winter of 2019, right before COVID hit. And then I had one semester or inter-session of normalcy and then spring started and then everything transitioned to online. And it kind of sucks because right before I started Mt. SAC, I was like, "Oh, I'm going to make my return to college triumphant. And I'm going to get involved there. I'm going to do a bunch of stuff." And I was really excited because they had cows and I wanted to meet one. But now everything is virtual. It's been a bizarre journey so far. It's definitely not one that I always appreciate, but I am grateful for the fact that I've had an opportunity to focus only on school.

Ashley Spencer:

Even when I talked to my friends, I get those weird saying this because a lot of us lost our jobs in the restaurant industry and we don't really have employment right now, but it has given me the opportunity to dedicate myself to school. Even though it was virtual, that I was able to get involved, I was able to become part of the honor society and part of Psi Beta, which is a psychological research club. I also spearheaded the reactivation of the Black Student Union. Then I took them and made them a part of something called the Black Student Union coalition, which is a statewide... well we're trying to make it statewide. We've got people like as far away as San Francisco right now, but it's going to be a black student-led organization that we're going to use as like a mobilization platform someday right now though, we're using it as a source of support and community and trying to increase our numbers and stuff at different meetings.

Ashley Spencer:

It's been fun, a really good experience so far, even though it's online. While I was on campus, it was really pretty. And I enjoyed it a lot. It's been tough financially. Mt. SAC has come in extremely clutch because they've given us the little grants every now and then. They've actually genuinely kept me afloat, even to right now, because recently unemployment did a thing and now money's on hold again. Not knowing where your finances are going to come from and then not being 100% sure if you can go out into the world safely without bringing something home and decimating your family, because they're all at-risk. It's a level of stress, but I never really wanted to have, and it's a lot to deal with. It makes every day kind of uncertain, but school has been a sense of solace for me. Meetings like this and being able to like, take my mind off of... I feel kind of emotional right now. So I'm going to stop.

Clarence Banks:

If I may, I just wanted to say what I was touched by. What you shared, Ashley is not thinking how many of my students might be essential workers and have to be out there exposing themselves to the virus and their family. Right. While I'm at home teaching and I don't know how much of it's really appreciated that. So that was powerful, you sharing that. And that's my hope that all students, we know that the typical student is working, can feel safe when they go out, and not only have insecurities around their finances, but insecurities around their health. So thank you very much for sharing that. So I would like to turn to Jeffrey, Jeffery Dorsey.

Jeffery Dorsey:

Well, hello everyone again to, God, the journey. Well, I'm going to be fully transparent. I came to Mt. SAC looking for black people. Ironically. I said, I wanted to be a part of a black program, black club, anything, right? So much so that I think my first time on campus while I was trying to get things figured out, I ended up becoming a BSU officer, didn't know the people didn't know anything about the club, but they were like, you want to be an officer? I said, yeah. And then I met Clarence Banks and I am not going to cry this time. You're not going to get me, but I met Clarence Banks. And from the time that I stepped into his office, I knew that I was at home in Aspire. Every single day that I have stepped foot in that office has been a privilege.

Jeffery Dorsey:

I eventually became a student worker, through Aspire and the ways in which the entire experience at Mt. SAC, but especially working in Aspire has definitely changed my life. Every single experience that I've had with the program has been amazing. I have been in spaces that I never thought I would be in and I am all the better for it. But some of you may know cause I've because I've had to lean on a few of you, Audrey, Francisco, Elaina's in here, ah, Enrigo, Kogi, Zelda, this is become like an honest village, if you will. My journey was not always easy. I just turned 28 on Monday, but early my early twenties to about 25, well 26 was rough too, but 25 was, was a hard time for me personally. I've had a lot of things happen. Thank you.

Jeffery Dorsey:

I had experienced a lot of hardships and as many of us know in our communities and minority communities, we don't really talk about mental health. I suffered a lot of years going through mental health struggles and I didn't really know how to navigate throughout that. And as a result, my studies suffered. My educational pitfalls at Mt. SAC had nothing to do with competency, but everything to do with learning how to balance what I was going through with the day-to-day stuff. But my village and Aspire never left me. There were days where literally, even if I didn't have class or I didn't have work, I would just sit in that office just because I needed to be around people. I needed to be in an environment where I knew I would be loved on and encouraged and edified. I am forever grateful.

Jeffery Dorsey:

I am on my way currently in transition to Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, and I will be there in the fall of this year. I told my mother, who is no longer with us, at 10 years old that I was going to Morehouse. As I just said, I turned 28. For 18 years, that has been the goal, that has been the dream that has been, even when things were crazy, and I didn't know if I was even going to stay in school. Tracy's not here, Tracy is my counselor, but she will tell you, two years ago, 2019, and I said, "I'm done. I am done. I'm done with school. I don't care," and I stayed the course. Now I'm all the better for it. That is because of the experience that I've had at Mt. SAC. The time that you all spent molding me and helping me stay the course. And so yeah, that's it.

Clarence Banks:

Jeffrey's as another one knows a young folks who's being modest. I call Jeffrey a super connector in the fact that he's connected to everybody. He knows everybody. He's also not only involved with, with Aspire, but also with the minority male initiative that we have on this campus. And he has been instrumental. He's the type of young man we want around because he's going to be very intrusive. He's going to see someone on campus and ask them how they're doing. Hey, do you know about the services? He embodies what we've done with our ambassadors and all of those types of things. For those of you that don't know, Morehouse College is and historical black college in Atlanta, Georgia it's where Dr. King and many other folks have attended, but it is a very difficult college to be admitted to. When Jeffrey says he's been admitted to Morehouse College, that means something. And Jeffrey, we couldn't be prouder of you.

Lance Heard:

Thank you, Clarence. Thank you so much, Jeffrey. I'm going to turn it over to Amanda Frasier. Amanda?

Amanda Fraiser:

Hi, you all. Thank you guys for being here and thank you for allowing me to share my story. I actually an aviation major, definitely is a challenging major itself, but something that I'm still pursuing. Just a little bit more about my background. I came to Mt. SAC, just trying to hit the floor running literally with no guidance. I was looking for black students to connect with and a black setting to be a part of my. Actually the very first time I visited campus, my mom, it was a privilege for her to come with me. So I was introduced to Mr. Clarence and then I was introduced to Ms. Bolden. And those two have been my mentor, heart, soul ever since I've been here, connected me to everything that I actually am a part of. So I have to say, thank you to you both.

Amanda Fraiser:

Where do you start with the journey? I was just hitting the floor running and then I got slowed down because Ms. Bolden being a big mentor of mine, she's like, "What are you doing? Why are you going so fast?" I guess it was just that I was excited to be in college. I knew that I had to accomplish something and it didn't matter how big of the load it was. I was willing to take it on, meaning several jobs, just to make sure that I had a living I could actually provide for myself even getting onto, I was riding a bicycle before. And I'm sure people have seen me across campus, but from a bicycle, got in a car accident and finally got a car. But under those circumstances. And so it was a challenging several parts of being at Mt. SAC, but just to shed light on just the overall support.

Amanda Fraiser:

If I didn't have that support, I wouldn't be at Mt. SAC anymore. It was hard for me to even go to a community college because I was told when I was in high school because I had some schools that I attended that didn't have the accreditation or it didn't count for college. I had to go to a community college. At first I was so discouraged. Finally, when I got to that campus, I realized that there were so many opportunities, and so many paths of opportunities that I could take advantage of. So I actually am going to transfer to Southern Illinois University and that's actually connected with Mt. SAC. I thought I would be transferring outside of the state. I'm originally from Atlanta, Georgia. So good job, Jeffrey, I'll be visiting you!

Amanda Fraiser:

I realized that there were so many resources. So that is what is keeping me at Mt. SAC. And then the support, because I needed that guidance. I didn't have that background. I come from a family that's not fully financially stable where we still experience hardships. I'm the youngest of three brothers it's the last person, all the pressures on her and then all these expectations. Trying to keep my expectations higher than other people was a lot that I was trying to take on and juggle. But it's something that now I realize I have support through. Cause I didn't have that support before. My mom, she was able to come to campus with me the first time, but hasn't been to campus after that. And so it's its own hardship, the disconnect with family sometimes.

Amanda Fraiser:

But to realize that I have a family at Mt. SAC has dramatically changed my education experience. Some financial hardships, my goodness. I've worked from three jobs to two jobs. I had the privilege of working with Ms. Bolden on campus. It was so funny because I actually had the privilege to go to an Emoji conference and I overheard some ambassadors talking about working on campus. And I'm, "How do I get my foot in the door?" And so I talked to Mr. Banks and then it was funny because he gave me a referral sheet to take to Ms. Bolden. And I'm "Right up my alley, okay! I don't have to go and discuss it with anybody else." Cause it's hard to tell your story to everybody and to expose yourself in that way. When that happened, that experience with being able to seek student support, employment and education development.

Amanda Fraiser:

And like I said, Ms. Bolden, who was on top of my tail when it came to classes, my education, the slowing down part, because I was in a hurry, nowhere without a plan of where I was going. And so I'm just thankful for that and working in SEED , oh goodness. There's so many things that was exposed to me. Just other people's hardships, other students' hardships, no matter the color of their skin.

Amanda Fraiser:

It gave me the opportunity to be there and support students the way that I wanted the support or the way that, that I know catered to me as a student, based off of the experience that I've had, maybe we were disconnected with some people or not. I just wanted to make sure that everybody had a great experience. And I went over and beyond just to make sure you're okay. You can come back to us if you need us, that kind of stuff. I have to also think this boating again, because she's, she's been that big mentor in my life to keep me going forward. And obviously Mr. Banks was like, you make sure you have her back too. So I'm just humbled to be in that space.

Clarence Banks:

Thank you so much, Amanda. I do have a follow-up question hearing what you said. A lot of college students have a traditional family network of support they can rely on during their college. And I heard you hint at it. Could you share a little bit about the traditional kind of family support that isn't, that you did not have where it really made a difference that you had on campus support?

Amanda Fraiser:

Well, I think the biggest part was being that I'm from a single parent household. Financial struggles, hardships is what we live by. What you do with it is how you come out. I didn't have the chance to choose a preferred college that I would like to go to before community college. And like I said, my mom, she only had the opportunity to come to campus once, even though that she wants to support me more, and be more involved into the campus life, there's just some things that she can't provide. And so that shed light on the support that I had on campus more because if I didn't see that, I don't think I would've felt like I had any support. And I think I would have just planned it out on my own thinking that, okay, well let me figure it out.

Amanda Fraiser:

And if I don't figure it out, then I'll do something else. Right. Just to actually have somebody to go, to talk to about my hardships and things that I was going through and give me advice, just not only professional advice, but life, situational advice, emotional advice, all specs. I think that the experience with that has dramatically changed the person that I became because it opened me up to helping a lot of other students because I know that I'm not alone. I know I'm not.

Amanda Fraiser:

I wasn't the only person that experienced being homeless. I wasn't the only person that experienced working three jobs and trying to maintain school. Just other of the few things we touched on, wherever I could extend my hand or my arm, I was willing to do that. Even just the aviation experience, nobody in my family actually has aviation as a background. And my mom wanted to, and my grandmother, she was a travel agent before she passed, but no one's ever actually pursued the pilot portion. So there's a lot of odds against me where it's "I don't really have the funds for pursuing my career. So what am I going to do with, you know, with the resources that I do have the skills that I do have to make it, have something happen for myself?"

Lance Heard:

Amanda, thank you so much. And I would just like to applaud all of our students. Who've shared. Thank you so much. I'd like to open it up to anyone who has a question or a comment, please.

Clarence Banks:

Thanks Lance, for facilitating this discussion. It's been very insightful and thank you for students and everyone for sharing and listening to your experiences here on campus. I was just wondering if you had something that stands out in your mind that you figured that the college could have done earlier or done better to help you. And also I'd like to talk about from the perspective of dealing with professors, if there's something else that you may have found that some professors are doing or something we're not doing something we could do better to help you along in this process.

Aaron Evans:

If I can mention primarily on the second question that Paul asked when he mentioned things that professors do or that they could do better, somewhere along those lines.

Aaron Evans:

I will admit, especially in a lot of STEM classes, I don't know why they tend to do this more often than not, the very first day of class, the first thing they're going to let you know is "I'm not going to help you if you're not going to help yourself," they like basically set the standard to let you know, they're not going to reach out to you. They're not going to help you. "You're on your own. You determine your own grade. Don't come to me for nothing. Cause I'm not going to help you with nothing. I set the rules there. I set the guidelines. If you can't follow it. Oh, well, tough luck." And instantly right there. It's "okay, all right, I have no allies here. I'll keep that in mind."

Aaron Evans:

And then as a black student going through STEM classes going through, especially computer science, I'm walking through that class with nobody in there to help or support, guide nothing. And then the professor reiterates and reinforces that I'm there alone. That's the one thing that I can't stand when professors do that because it's not just me. A lot of students are sitting there and they feel "okay..." Sometimes that little help and that little push can actually mean the world, or even at least believing that they might receive it, can help. But when you tell them that they're alone on day one, okay, well now they have 16 more weeks of feeling alone.

Lance Heard:

Thank you very much for speaking up.

Clarence Banks:

Special thank you to all the students hearing from you makes it real for everyone that's on here faculty, staff, administrators.

Clarence Banks:

Your voice is very important and it helps us guide what we do and in the policies and procedures that we put in place and what needs to be said, what I will be remiss if we ended this and it wasn't said would be this, we need more black faculty, we need more black counselors. We need more funding for black events and more black programming. We need funding. Audrey needs the funding so that she can hire, inreach and outreach specifically designed for the black community. And I know it's uncomfortable. I've been in Mt. SAC for 13 years. When I first got hired, I was admonished for using the word black because this campus is sometimes uncomfortable with the word black. But guess what? After everything that has gone on this is anything new, anything that's been going on for 400 years, after everything that's been going on, now is the time for us to stand and be unapologetic and say, we need more black faculty.

Clarence Banks:

Full-time faculty, tenure-track, black faculty. Now's the time to stand and say, you know what? We're going to make our assessments for counselors. We need more black counselors that have a black identity and have a universal love for black students so that we can increase black student success.

Clarence Banks:

How do we do that? We have to involve Lance Heard, I need to be involved with the process. You need to have Zelda Bolden involved with the process. You need to have the folks that are here, on this call, involved with the process so that we can ensure that we're not just hiring somebody because of their skin color. We're hiring the person that is not only competent, but someone that has the heart that is needed to help students, because look, we've helped Ashley, and we're going to continue to do that. Hopefully she'd be a Bruin. There you go. We've helped with Jeffrey and Amanda and Aaron, and that's great.

Clarence Banks:

But what about the other 3000 black students that we have on campus? Because I can't do it by myself. I can't, we need more people. We need more funding. And without that, then we've had a good week, but we didn't accomplish anything. You guys know I've done the black history month events for probably the last 10 years. That's great. But once that's over, we forget. And so Lance has provided the leadership and he said, Clarence there's something that we need to do to come together. We've done this, but none of this matters unless you're going to sit and stand with us in your committee meetings where maybe no one else looks like us and say when was the last time we had a black faculty member?

Clarence Banks:

We need to be intentional about diversifying our faculty and there's nothing wrong with saying, we need to have somebody black. It doesn't mean that we don't love everybody. We do love everybody. But historically we have not put the funds. We have not put the human resources towards addressing this inequity. And now's the time to be unapologetic about accomplishing that goal.

Lance Heard:

Thank you so much Clarence. And so I'll just close it out with this short statement. Let's all ask ourselves, what can we do? We can break down the barriers to black student success by educating ourselves, calling out systemic racism, work to de-center whiteness and named terrorism, name hate, name violence, where it is found. Be pro-black. Don't wait for the bandwagon. Stand with and support and defend Asian American, Pacific Islander communities. Love and embrace BiPOC, Latinx, Asian, Asian American, Pacific Islander, Native American, indigenous, African-American, black students, black colleagues and black communities. Call in passive dissenters, being an ally and allow space for this work that we're doing. Be a co-conspirator disrupt, interrogate, expect yourselves and others to be uncomfortable. Being an accomplice and let's act together to build and advance the work that we need to do in increasing black faculty and increasing our support for our black students.

Lance Heard:

Thank you everyone.

Christina Barsi:

Thank you for listening to the Magic Mountie podcast. Remember to subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you like to get your podcasts so you can listen in the car in your office, or however you like to listen. Once you subscribe. We'd love to hear what you think by leaving us a review, and don't forget to share your favorite episodes.