
From: Bernadine Chuck Fong <fongbernadine@fhda.edu>
Sent: Monday, February 28, 2022 4:43 PM
To: foothill; ASFC Elected; ASFC Elected & Appointed
Cc: centralservices
Subject: Honoring Jean Thomas during Women's History Month

Remembering Jean Thomas....

At last month's Black History Month opening event, Mama Keisha Evans offered the libation. And in doing so, she honored Jean Thomas, among others. As we now begin **Women's History Month**, I would like to honor Dr. Jean Thomas by sharing a few personal memories.

Jean was the founder of our **Pass the Torch** program, dedicated Foothill counselor, and initiator of Black History Month at Foothill. A mural painting of her hangs in the Pass the Torch area in the LRC. When I first met Jean, she was clearly a force to be reckoned with, and I was actually afraid of her. My first encounter was intimidating.

I was very energetic as a new, young faculty member and had a lot of ideas on how to improve student performance. One of them had to do with prerequisites. I noticed that students in my Psych 14 class seemed to perform better if they had already taken or were eligible for English 1A. As a result, I decided that it would be a good idea to create an "eligibility for English 1A" prerequisite to Psych 14 and all of the other psychology courses, since they are so heavily dependent upon reading and writing. I won the approval of my department and division and proceeded to take my proposal to the Curriculum Committee for final approval. This was a very intimidating body chaired by the dean of instruction. My memory of my visit to this committee is very poignant, since I later chaired that very same body for 11 years, when I was vice president for instruction. However, in my early faculty years, it was a profound experience to face that committee. I vividly recall that I had the group pretty well convinced that it would be a good idea to have the prerequisite. However, just when the committee was ready to take the vote, Jean suddenly arrived to raise her objections. She argued that it would be discriminatory to have the prerequisite, and that it would prevent less-well-prepared students, especially under-represented minorities, from taking psychology. I could almost see, literally, the votes sway in the other direction, which they did, and my proposal was defeated. I never resurfaced it again and lesson learned.

Several years later, when I was the vice president for instruction, Jean was on sabbatical at the University of California, Santa Barbara, completing a doctorate. In two consecutive years, Jean requested and received my full support for unpaid leaves of absences to complete her work. After that, ~~we~~ had what would ultimately become a very close working relationship. She would often drop by my office to talk about new ideas or issues she was dealing with regarding our students.

During the first year of my presidency (1994), Jean approached me with an idea on how to address the basic skills needs of our students. She wanted to start a study team approach after the work of noted math educator and UC professor, Uri Triesman, (who coincidentally, I worked with after my retirement from Foothill) for working with under-prepared students, primarily Black and Latinx, in basic skills, English and math. She wanted to write a FIPSE (Fund for the Improvement of Instruction) grant, to start the program, which she called "Pass the Torch" and wanted my support, which she wholeheartedly received. This began

another close partnership, growing from the bond we had formed when I had granted her, her double leaves for her doctoral studies. Later, when Jean was applying for her third or fourth grant, she wanted me to write a letter to the major universities to which she was planning to disseminate our program for replication at the four-year level. She was very concerned that these four-year institutions would either not see the need for such a program, and/or would not consider working with a community college within their purview. She got a great kick out of the letter that I wrote, which started out by congratulating the university president or chancellor for having their institution being “selected” to participate in our grant. As a result, we had representatives of the chancellors and presidents of UC, Berkeley and Davis, and San Francisco and San Jose State Universities, at our first meeting, and not ~~no~~ one turned us down!

Among many of her accomplishments, Jean’s lasting legacy will always be our *Pass the Torch* program. It is intentionally not a tutorial program, but a program made up of “study teams” and it is this team building that gave the program a rich sense of community. In my years at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (after Foothill) we focused on increasing the success rates of math students in basic skills courses. What we learned was that creating a sense of belonging significantly increased the success of all students, but especially students of color. During Commencement, the *Pass the Torch* students were the most vocal in expounding on their positive experiences at Foothill and the support they received from the program. To this day, and every day, we have Jean Thomas to thank for being the model advocate for our students’ success.

I had the greatest respect for Jean on many levels and truly miss her bodacious influence on my life and the lives of our students. My last encounter with her was when Annette and I visited her in the hospital during her final days. I am quite sure that if she were able, she would have given me instructions on my next charge.

Thank you, Jean.

Best regards,

Bernadine

Bernadine Chuck Fong, Ph.D.
Acting President, Foothill College
Senior Scholar and Director of Leadership Initiatives, Stanford University