



**Transcript of keynote address given at the Arnold L. Mitchem Fellowship Luncheon
By Arnold L. Mitchem, Ph.D. on May 8, 2013 at DePaul University**

I can't tell you how privileged and honored I am to be with you this afternoon.

Not everyone has the opportunity to be born twice. Seventy-four years ago, I was born down the street—14th and Indiana, St. Luke's Hospital—Arnold Lee Mitchem.

And here on this campus, at DePaul, the Arnold Mitchem Fellowship Program was born about two years ago. And, I remember its birth. I was in the mountains—Colorado—and I got a phone call from this gentle priest named Dennis Holtschneider. And he said, "Mitch, we have this conception, this idea, this vision. There's something we want to do here in Chicago and I think you're going to like it. Let me talk to you about it." And I said, "Sure, Father."

And he laid it out; it was very comprehensive, in great detail. And he said, "What do you think? May we? Can we?" And I said, "My God, man, yes." And he said, "We'll send you the paperwork. You can look at it again." And I said, "It's a done deal, Father."

Again, it is a real honor to be here. To see all of you. To see the students. To talk with Brian [Spittle]—he and I spent the evening together last night—and hear about your accomplishments and achievements. And not just the students, but the university.

One of the things that I have valued and witnessed in terms its power and importance, is the whole notion of Catholic higher education and how seriously, how seriously Catholics associate [college] access with the moral imperative. And this school is an example of that. As I move about the land, I often talk, Father [Holtschneider], about your example. Not you as a man, but about what you have done with this school, what this school represents, and the statement you make about American higher education. It's very important work and you all are at a great place.

Let me tell you a little more about myself and make a few points this afternoon.

I see myself as a sociological miracle. At the time I was born and in the social conditions of where we lived—I lived on the west side of Chicago, right between Roosevelt Road and 16th Street, right there by Loomis and Racine, Robert H. Brooks [housing] projects—very few, if any, of the children in that project in the 1940s and 1950s went to college. Very few. And I happened to be one of the very fortunate ones. Now, it's a miracle because there really weren't any programs, or any coordinated or systematic efforts, to find the little Mitchems and move them to college. And that was really demonstrated by the fact that when I did go to college, it took me nine years to finish. Not because my parents didn't support me, not because my parents didn't love me (they did), but they couldn't give me a certain kind of motivation and

information and the kind of grounding that I certainly needed given my immaturity, in many cases, that would have gotten me through a lot faster. But I did get through.

And along the way, I had an experience at Haverford College that was to prepare me for a competitive graduate school. And it was that experience that gave me a template that I was able to apply to a phrase that Sen. Paul Simon of Illinois inserted into the Reauthorization of Higher Education Act in 1986. Paul wanted to do something. He wanted to extend the TRiO concept from just high school, undergraduate, and wanted something to move low-income, first-generation, minority Americans into graduate school. Because he recognized and appreciated that what I do, what Brian does, what Fr. Holtschneider does: the importance of creating leaders, the importance of creating intellectual capital in low-income and first-generation communities so better decisions can be made, so there are people who can lead and have followings, men and women of integrity. And you can get that if you can get people through the academic process. You have to get them through graduate school.

So, I was very pleased to be in on the ground floor of putting together what later became the Ronald E. McNair Post-baccalaureate Achievement Program. And I'll never forget the morning I was sitting in my office in Washington, and my secretary said, "You have a phone call from Sen. [Strom] Thurmond's office." And I was in shock. If some of you know anything about Sen. Thurmond, Sen. Thurmond was an arch segregationist who led the Dixiecrats in the 1940s and walked out on the Democratic National Convention. And I picked up the phone, and a man with a rich Southern accent said, "Dr. Mitchem, Sen. Thurmond would like to name this new initiative which you all are moving through the legislative process, this post-baccalaureate achievement program, the Ronald McNair Post-baccalaureate Achievement Program to memorialize the astronaut who had been killed that January in the Challenger incident in Florida. Would you have any objections?"

And I said, "No, sir. I'm honored that we'll memorialize this man for his sacrifice." And that's how the name came to be.

This is a tough program—as Father pointed out—to keep alive. And, ironically, we had a very tough battle last year which was noted in a very difficult and competitive competition. Two years ago, there were 200 McNair programs. This morning, there are only 155. We lost about 27 percent of the program because the Department of Education made an administrative decision to transfer \$10 million from the McNair program to another TRiO program, Math-Science Upward Bound, based on a statement: the rationale was a statement President Obama made in a speech, the State of the Union address, when he put an emphasis on science, technology, engineering and mathematics, and this was one of the ways the Department of Education was trying to deliver on the president's emphasis and promise. And, it was a shame. It was a shame. And we fought and we fought and we got Sen. Simon's daughter, Sheila, who is the lieutenant governor here in Illinois and everyone else involved, but we weren't able to convince the administration to reverse that decision.

So, as Father pointed out, there is a challenge and there's challenges. Just this morning, I woke up, looked at my email that included a proposal from the Brookings Foundation to consolidate all the TRiO programs into one \$1 billion program (plus GEAR UP), and make it a competitive program that school districts, colleges and community-based agencies could compete for to work with what they describe as disadvantaged students. A shameful proposal that was predicated by a discredited study on Upward Bound that was done back in the 1990s. But that study is probably going to get serious attention in the Congress, particularly as the Congress looks for cost-cutting, because the study says that these programs

don't meet the highest evidence standards; and implies that we have been wasting, in the last 40 years, a lot of taxpayer dollars.

I can't agree with that. I know you can't agree with that. I was looking at some of your literature—in this McNair program, close to 100 percent of your students graduate from DePaul, and over 80 percent of them go on to graduate school. You're more than meeting your objectives. And there are a lot of other programs in the country—not just McNair, but Upward Bound, Talent Search, Student Support Services, Educational Opportunity Centers—that are meeting theirs. All of this is being ignored by the Institute of Education Science and Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill and by the way, Ron Haskins enjoys going around and dismantling programs that aid low-income Americans. He was one of the folks involved in “welfare reform.”

Let me just make a few comments about some other things going on in Washington in the last few weeks, and this word called “sequester.” You all are familiar with the sequester. Well, that is a blunt instrument—it's one way to look at it—it's also a government by automatic pilot. No one has to decide anything—it automatically makes the decisions. But unfortunately, the decisions are anti-people, they are anti-humanity and they don't favor any of us. However, that's the law of the land, and don't expect it to go away, unless, it would inconvenience folk like me. Now, if I go out to O'Hare this evening and I can't get on my airplane, and I send an email to someone, and Father sends one, and Brian sends one, and Eric [Williams] sends one, and Michael Jeffries sends one, and Luciano [Berardi] sends one, I'm sure Congress would do something about it. In fact, they did! Which makes it possible for us to fly out on time. At the same time, mothers who need milk, children who need Head Start, kids who need Upward Bound and folks who need to be inspired and motivated to go to graduate school like in the McNair program, they don't get any services.

And this isn't going to go away. It is going to be with us for a while. This is the price, of what I describe it, of hypocrisy. We've never seen such inequality in America than what we're experiencing right now. Maybe if you go back to the 19th century, you'll find it. But it is going to be hard to find in the 20th century. And it is also the price to pay for another phenomenon that I call “southernization.” There's a creeping political, ideological movement that has come out of the South that is being carried by one of our political parties. And as I say to my friends in Wisconsin and Minnesota, who won the civil war? Let me say again, it is wonderful to be here with you. I'm so proud and pleased by the development of your students. I was talking to a young woman from Florida and she was telling me about the legislative accomplishments there and it reminded me of things we used to dream about back in the 1960s, in the progress era, when we moved out to create opportunities and resources for other people's children, and that's what you all are doing here.

Thank you, Father. Thank you, Brian, for inviting me.