A Legacy of Educators
By Lisa Joy Inniss

Introduction

Many families have a plethora of police officers, lawyers, or firefighters, but the family of Clarence Inniss not only has a plethora of educators, it has made history. As the son of a sailor from Grenada, his father hoped to provide better opportunities. Education, although important early on, was not always easy: “Textbooks were made available in black schools after they had been discarded by white schools. In some instances, this was of no great consequence. However, there was a psychological affect that mitigated against the notion that one held his destiny in his own hands” (personal communication, July 26, 2005). From his parents and the mixed neighborhood where he lived in New Orleans, Clarence learned to forge friendships, bonds, and respect where others were not able to in this post-Reconstruction period.

By the end of his elementary school experience, Clarence was reading Zane Gray Cowboy Books and discarded True Detective Magazines. However, the problem with continuing his education would lie in the nineteen-cent-a-week bus and lunch costs to cross town to the junior high. His mother, with a second grade education, and father, with an eighth grade equivalent education, thought he should look to the work force. With the help of his older brother and his friend, Clarence decided that continuing his education was important and with the help of a bicycle and family, he was ready to achieve. By high school, his priorities had changed and with a half a year left in the program, he decided to quit. “My parents were content to know that I had at least tried, the brother who had such high hopes in me cried.” Soon after, Clarence met and married his wife Irma and left his job as a warehouseman to answer his call from the draft board. After returning from World War II, Clarence and his brother opened a business together with the money Irma had saved while he was in the Army. A daytime job at Dillard University led to him taking the GED as a means of getting a high school diploma and then entering Dillard as a freshman on a part time basis with no tuition as long as he was employed there. With a transfer to the Department of Education at Dillard, his new boss suggested he continue his studies with education as a focus. “And it was she who suggested that [he] later apply for a Ford Foundation Scholarship to study at Harvard or
Cornell. She was positive [he] could do it… She encouraged [him] to take a heavier class load during the day” (personal communication, July 26, 2005). He became one of the first three applicants from Dillard to receive the Ford Foundation Grant.

He left his wife and young children behind to travel from Louisiana to Cambridge, Massachusetts to study at Harvard University thus setting a precedent for his family. The Chairman of the Department of Elementary Education immediately made him and a fellow Dillard student welcome. Unlike students today, Clarence was not allowed to live on campus and took residence at the local YMCA. While working on his Master’s in Education, he created a bond with the other young men at the Y as well as countless others who helped to make his experience memorable. Returning to New Orleans, Clarence took a job in education. As an elementary school teacher, he and his wife Irma provided their five children with opportunities to soar. “Brain researcher after brain researcher maintain that to make the most of the brain is to give the brain rich experiences in a context that is meaningful and interesting” (Carroll and Wilson, 1996).

It is no wonder that anyone who has had contact with this type of person could not be on a path to success. Clarence says, “I have said many times that I consider myself a failure. Therefore, I have been quick to counsel my children and my grandchildren not to make the same mistakes I made. Sometimes they listen; sometimes they do not. The real beauty of life is that it is a ‘Do it yourself kit’” (personal communication, July 26, 2005).

With this mentality, Clarence has provided a nurturing environment in which his children have been exposed to multiple experiences and given the ability to make informed decisions. In *The Brain Book*, Russell (1979) said, “A child is born with a natural insatiable curiosity to explore and find out more about the world… Yet too often in trying to help children we hinder them. We don’t give them problems to solve so much as answers to remember.” Clarence and his wife not only practiced this philosophy before it was recorded by Russell, but also continue to live it today. Today they research, read, and discuss issues of interest to not only them but family members as well. They take time to discover what makes each of their children tick and engage in correspondence with all of their grandchildren.
Leslie B. Inniss: Daughter-in-law and Sociologist

For Dr. Leslie B. Inniss, integrating her Catholic high school in New Orleans would be just another notch on the belt as she moves through her career in academia. When she found herself raising two children alone in the late 1970s, the door was open at her mother and father-in-law’s house. Clarence and Irma welcomed the family in and provided her the opportunity to go back to school and finish her undergraduate degree.

After finishing a degree in communications at the University of New Orleans, Leslie moved her family to campus housing as she pursued her master’s degree in sociology. Leslie (personal communication, July 26, 2005) said, “When I finished my undergraduate degree I had been working for the only Black female in the department and she encouraged me to go on for a graduate degree. She also was good about alerting me to all the opportunities that were available to Black scholars at that time.” Besides working as a teaching and research assistant while at the University of New Orleans, Leslie had two young children to care for. With the help of Clarence and the rest of the Inniss family, childcare was available and family dinners were enjoyed. In 1986, after completing her master’s in sociology with a thesis entitled Effects of School Racial Composition on Adolescent Self-Control, Leslie headed to Austin, Texas, to begin her doctoral studies. At the University of Texas, with the help of the Graduate Opportunity Fellowship, the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health Evaluation Research Fellowship, and an American Sociological Association Minority Fellowship, Leslie worked on her dissertation Relationship Between Class Level and Political Attitudes among Black Americans: 1974-1977, 1982, and 1987.

After graduation in 1990, when her son was heading off to college, Leslie took a job at Florida State University. During her five-year stint, she received the Best Teacher Award in 1994, published seven articles, and wrote a chapter in Global and Local: New York/London Through the Prism of Race, Ethnicity and Class. The article “The Price of Pioneering: Long-term Effects of School Desegregation” explored not only her own career as a desegregation pioneer but that of countless others. In 1996, she made a move to Florida A&M University. Today, she continues to focus her research in the areas of school desegregation and success for minority students.
Tasha R. Inniss: Granddaughter and Mathematician

Early in life, Dr. Tasha R. Inniss’ love of math and its challenges developed when she was entered into contests. “As a fourth grader, Tasha saw math as a puzzle waiting for someone to put it together” (Moffitt, 2001). One person who was there from the beginning and in attendance at the contests was Grandpa Clarence. He would always provide opportunities for her to expand her mind through mini-lessons, question and answer sessions, and discussions. From him, she learned how to put critical thinking skills into play.

Tasha graduated from high school one year before her mother finished her Ph.D. She returned to New Orleans to attend Xavier University. She spent summers conducting research and the school year working closely with her mentors Dereck Rovaris and Lestor Jones. Her undergraduate career was not all academic, though, as she was also voted Miss Xavier in 1992. After graduating summa cum laude from Xavier in 1993, Tasha found her way to Georgia Institute of Technology where she earned a M.S. in Applied Mathematics in 1995.

Although education experiences may not have always been positive for her as a young Black woman, Tasha found strength in family. She turned to her mother who had already gone through the experience and her brother who was just entering his journey past undergraduate studies. She also found strength in conversations with her grandfather. He listened to her struggles, offered not solutions but questions for her to consider as she thought about new ventures.

In the fall of 1995, with the help of the David and Lucile Packard Foundation Scholarship, Tasha made her way to the University of Maryland at College Park (UMCP). Here she worked under the guidance of her advisor Michael O. Ball, Ph.D., on her dissertation entitled Stochastic Models for the Estimation of Airport Arrival Capacity Distributions. This research, with its practical application, led to her receiving the FAA’s Centers of Excellence Student of the Year Award in December of 2000. She also went on to present her research at over fourteen venues by 2003. While in Maryland, besides being a tour guide to her brother who would come to the D.C. area on recruiting missions for the University of Notre Dame, Tasha served as a panelist for discussions as well as helped coordinate different activities at conferences. The moment that made her entire
career at the University of Maryland at College Park unforgettable for all in higher education was in December of 2000. At the December graduation, the UMCP graduated its first ever Black female with a Ph.D. in mathematics. The most exceptional aspect was that it was not just Tasha; there were three Black females who graduated together with Ph.D.s in the three different concentration areas of mathematics. Articles about this feat ran in the Washington Post, The Chronicle of Higher Education, Associated Press, Black Issues in Higher Education, and aired on both BET News and National Public Radio (NPR).

Tasha’s first job after graduation was as the Clare Booth Luce Professor of Mathematics at Trinity College in Washington D.C. Living in the area allowed her to work as a researcher at the FAA, where she was able to see the immediate effect of her research. Desiring to share her love of mathematics Tasha continued her often tri-yearly returns to Xavier University to speak to young people thinking about post-college studies. These trips allowed her the opportunity to visit with her grandfather and grandmother. She also visited schools and colleges across the country to talk about overcoming obstacles and reaching success; she even traveled to South Africa to present “Tips for Success for Women in Mathematics”. In January of 2004, Tasha was given the opportunity to return to Atlanta and continue to work with female students as she accepted an appointment as Assistant Professor of Mathematics at Spelman College. She took time during the summer of 2004 to attend the Quality Education for Minorities (QEM)/National Science Foundation (NSF) CAREER Workshop and currently she serves as the Chair of the Association of Women in Mathematics (AWM) Committee on Student Chapters. From that first math contest to the start of another semester, Tasha still enjoys the puzzles that math and math professorship offer.

Enos C. Inniss: Grandson and Engineer

Building forts with sheets and furniture and constructing cities with blocks was more than a game for Dr. Enos C. Inniss, it would serve as a prophecy of where he would be today. Constructing and discussing his design with Grandpa Clarence and anyone else who would listen was something Enos enjoyed from such an early age that family members have a hard time remembering when he was not doing that. When he was
placed in the gifted and talented program early on and bused across town to another elementary school in New Orleans, Enos claims to have been more of disruption than anything else. With a creative mind and an energetic spirit, he was not afraid to tell you the answer to any question, and still is not. Although not always right, he was always ready to go and do the research to find the answer.

When he arrived at Texas A&M University in the fall of 1990, it was no wonder that he completed undergraduate research all five years and was a Minnie Stevens Piper Scholar. During his career as a civil engineering student, Enos worked with the Freshmen Adjusting to College Experiences program and served as an officer in Chi Epsilon, the civil engineering honor society. In the summer of 1992, he worked as a staff assistant for the Texas Pre-College Engineering Program (TexPrEP) at Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio. When he graduated from A&M in 1995, Enos embarked on a new endeavor at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana.

Along with working on his dissertation entitled *Dechlorination of Perchloroethylene Through Coupled Anaerobic and Aerobic Periods in a Single Sequencing Batch Reactor* under the guidance of Dr. Lloyd H. Ketchum, Jr., Enos worked as a distance learning instructor/teaching assistant for the Ameritech PreCollege Minority Engineering Program. He also traveled around the country recruiting potential graduate students at universities and at the Society for the Advancement of Chicanos and Native Americans in the Sciences and the National Society of Black Engineers national conferences. In April of 1999, in addition to working on his dissertation, Enos found time to get married in Louisiana and receive the Distinguished Graduate Student Award from the Alumni Association. During this time, he found solace in notes and words of encouragement his grandfather sent him. Luckily, in addition, Enos had his mother to talk to and to help him realize that there was an end in sight. He and Tasha also found they had so much to share about their similar experiences in the dissertation process.

After completing his Ph.D. in environmental engineering, Enos returned to San Antonio, a place where he had worked in the summer as an undergraduate, to become a visiting and then assistant professor at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA). Besides teaching courses in his area of specialty, he also began serving as an advisor and committee member for graduate students in the department. The local community
immediately benefited from his service. Enos served as a guest lecturer at TexPrEP sites throughout the city over the years and served as a mentor to four high school students working on independent research. He was back to building trebuchets, RC cars, water treatment models, and looking at the effects of cleaner burning engines in San Antonio.

From October of 2000 until August of 2003 when the first doctorate student arrived, Enos played an active role in the proposal of a joint doctoral program with environmental sciences. He also served the university as a member of several committees. In 2003, the trend of low female students in his classes led Enos to work with one of his undergraduate researchers to examine what attracts and keeps female students in the sciences. The initial results, based on UTSA, were presented at the Women in Engineering Programs and Advocacy Network annual symposium. After attending the QEM/NSF CAREER Workshop, Enos has focused his immediate research interests on improved analysis of water and wastewater treatment process parameters. Even with a research and classroom focus, the building desires from his youth provided Enos and several of his students the opportunity to collaborate and build a part of the World of Water exhibit currently on display at the Witte Museum in San Antonio.

**Conclusion**

Today Drs. Leslie, Tasha, and Enos Inniss find themselves in a unique situation. They are all approaching tenure within a year of each other. Leslie will turn in her packet in the fall of 2005, Tasha will submit her early tenure packet this year, and Enos will provide his in August of 2006. With the dates quickly approaching, all three recognize they are in a remarkable position to do some research together. The first project is to look closer at Enos’ issue of women in engineering and sciences. With the help of his mother, Dr. Leslie Inniss, research will expand and the sociological influences examined and his sister, Dr. Tasha Inniss, will assist with data analysis. More important than them working together is that today, with the influence of Clarence Inniss, all three are educators. All three are educators at minority serving institutions and take pride in their ability to help shape the lives of young students today.

Clarence’s influence did not stop here. The environment he and his wife Irma provided for his family has led to a son who is a professor at Our Lady of the Lake
University in San Antonio, another grandson who is finishing up his doctorate in physical therapy from Boston University, and yet another granddaughter who completed a Master’s in Education and is now working as a school teacher in New York City. The Inniss family is indeed a legacy of educators. And most definitely, Clarence Inniss is not a failure; he is a shaper of the future.

References


Lisa Joy Inniss, a graduate of Texas A&M University and the University of Texas at San Antonio, is a secondary teacher in Columbia, Missouri.