

Jeff Smith Apperson Tribute

The Richard L. Apperson Award, named in honor of PCACAC's first president, is the association's highest honor presented to a PCACAC member. It is awarded annually to a member whose career embodies the ideals of the association - providing extraordinary service to students, to PCACAC, and to the college counseling profession.

This individual has dedicated almost 40 years to the admissions profession across multiple colleges. Small, large, public, private, community college, 4 year. He's also served as PCACAC President; a friend and mentor to dozens of professionals, many are here in this room today.

He's never one to seek the spotlight. Always the first to volunteer. Last one to leave the college fair. Now he does wear the "old man, get off my lawn" hat proudly but, as his current colleague, Amanda, describes it always comes from "a place of wisdom, love, passion and a genuine investment in his students and making the process more equitable."

Jeff Smith not only personifies The Apperson Award but truly embodies what it means to be an admissions *counselor*.

It was quite a challenge to pare down all the comments, stories, and praise for this tribute. But I am going to try my best.

Sue Rexford describes Jeff as the consummate professional:

"For all the many years that I have known Jeff, he is always one to go the extra mile for his institution, the high school counselors he partners with and, most importantly, the students who come his way. I have seen Jeff stay long after a school visit to meet one-on-one with a student whose schedule conflicted with Jeff's visit time. Jeff has a way of making everyone he meets feel as if they are already friends and that they have his undivided attention. He truly cares about others and it shows."

Jeff Smith was one of the first people **Jayne Fonash** met when she became involved in PCACAC 25 years ago.

She says "I am grateful to Jeff for his role as a mentor, a colleague, and a friend, and for his ongoing dedication to our organization and the students we serve.

During his time at St. Mary's College of Maryland, he was one of the first reps to visit us at newly opened Potomac Falls High School in Loudoun County. He was always available to brainstorm about student access and applications, always willing to remain after visits to speak with individual students, and as a colleague, always available to high school counselors to mentor us through the ever-changing search and application process. He was always willing to open his campus to groups from

my high school, providing an experience that went beyond admission information sessions to a glimpse into student life in Southern Maryland.

On one of our visits, we were able to attend a Biology class taught by a former student of my principal. What a great moment for all of us to see the inter-generational connections we often find in our profession.

Ever the optimist, Jeff's choice of the PCACAC conference theme for 2009, Be The Rising Tide, focused on the vital work of our profession to help all students achieve their educational goals. The following year, I joined Jeff in the PCACAC Presidential cycle, during his time as President. Jeff served as PCACAC president in a time of financial uncertainty but led us to more solid ground. I am grateful to Jeff for being my mentor as I prepared to follow him in the President's role. During a year of challenges, we survived the shutdown of the PCACAC web page due to a hacker just as we were getting ready to roll out the Dover conference registration. More importantly, we grew as an association in our commitment to the college admission profession, and I felt more prepared to lead.

Jeff has always said yes to a call for volunteers for association events and projects. More often he would initiate the call with an offer to serve, even if it meant wearing a crab hat yet again!"

Amanda says:

"We tell our students to be boastful on their applications and tell us about all the amazing contributions they have made, but Jeff would most certainly fail at filling out his own college application because he never seeks recognition or boasts about his involvement or accomplishments. He truly loves what he does and doesn't want even a simple pat on the back for a job well done. When I arrived at the NACAC Conference this past fall, the first thing I saw was Jeff in his crab hat welcoming guests to Baltimore. He never mentioned he was going to volunteer for the conference, but at this point I know that if there is some way he can lend a helping hand that he is going to be there."

I might add, over two Baltimore NACACs Jeff may have log more crab hat hours than anyone else in the association.

I first met Jeff during my sophomore year at St. Mary's College of Maryland. He stopped my friends and I on the path and asked could we help with a group visiting campus. I didn't know who he was or where the group was coming from but he offered up free pizza so of course I said yes. For those of us who've solicited help from students, you know that is a tried and true pro move. A couple years later, upon graduation, I started my career in the St. Mary's Admissions Office and it didn't take me long to realize that bus trip, the one that peaked my interest in admission work, was one of many Jeff orchestrated each year. Those

windows into college life, opened the door for deep pipelines into communities around the state.

Ask any St. Mary's student or alum about how they found out about the school. They usually beam with pride as if they found a hidden gem. What I appreciated most about my experience at St. Mary's was the diversity of the students, most being the only student or one of a few from their high school. However, it did seem strange to me that there were a handful of seemingly random high schools with large cohorts enrolling each year.

These were pipelines that Jeff had built. Supported by his dedication; authentic relationships, and one hell of a group visit experience.

Jeff has not only been a mentor, friend, and an inspiration to me, he was the architect of a community that has such a profound influence on the person I am today.

15 years later, Jeff continues to be the Rising Tide he encouraged us all to be in 2009. I asked him recently what keeps him in this work. He said:

“the ability to lay my head down at night knowing I've done good in this world”

He also credits the influence of our former Director, Rich Edgar, had on his approach to this work.

Now, Rich really wanted to be here today but is running another event. So, I wanted to end with some gems from our conversation about Jeff (maybe some fun facts you all didn't know) and a message he wanted to share with Jeff. Ok, fun facts:

- Jeff is probably the only PCACAC president that has written an admissions rap
- At one time, he was one of the best dancers at the NACAC fair after party....before his knees went out
- Jeff received the College Bound Foundation's Counselor of the Year award
- Probably the only member of PCACAC that lived in his boss' house for the first 6 months of his work life at St. Mary's
- Jeff loves his family dearly and is proud of his son Edward (They are here tonight!)
- During his early years at St. Mary's, Jeff admitted the now Mayor of Baltimore City
- Jeff would often drive and personally pick up students who had no other means to visit campus. 4-5 hour roundtrips in the same day. He did this type of work not because he was asked, but because he knew it would make a difference in the students lives.

To close with some words Rich wanted me to pass along:

"Before Jeff joined our team at St. Mary's College of Maryland, I had the privilege of witnessing his incredible dedication and passion firsthand as he worked tirelessly with high school students. Watching him work at other colleges and seeing

his dedication to our PCACAC organization, it was evident from the start that Jeff possessed a special gift—a unique ability to connect with others, inspire them, and make a meaningful difference in their lives.

When the opportunity arose to bring him on board, it was not only a professional decision but also a personal one, rooted in deep admiration and respect for his exceptional qualities. Jeff's journey from admired acquaintance to esteemed colleague and lifelong friend has been nothing short of inspiring.

Congratulations, Jeff, on this well-deserved recognition. Your unwavering commitment to excellence and compassion is truly commendable. I wish I could be there to celebrate with you but you know I am in spirit.

Your lifelong friend, old boss, and fellow past PCACAC President, Rich Edgar.

Everyone please join me in congratulating Jeff Smith, this year's Apperson Award winner.

Calvin Wise
April 14, 2024