



EDUCATION 101: Introduction to Leaders



The educators you'll meet on the next few pages have a lot in common: They are smart. They are determined. And they love what they do.

Dr. Gail McKinzie is the new Polk school superintendent in charge of leading an enormous district. Principal Nancy Genzel, in charge of the comparatively tiny Resurrection Catholic School, has led her school to be named a Blue Ribbon School of Excellence, a national honor.

Charlene Brinson is a principal who says educators must love to teach, and award-winning teacher Janice Gilchrest says teachers must

love to learn.

At Polk Community College, Dr. Larry Durrence is determined to change the direction of education in Polk County, and at Southeastern, Dr. Mark Rutland's goal is to change the direction of the college.

USF-Lakeland's Dr. Preston Mercer's goal is to build a new campus. Florida Southern's Anne Kerr is just trying to keep renovating her historically significant one.

From small private school to growing community college, the goal is the same: Educate the next generation.

Turn the page to meet some of the people who are making that happen.



BY JL SMITHER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL WILSON

PHIL 128:

Building Values, Making Choices

PRESTON MERCER TRIES TO IMPART VALUES
AS PART OF USF STUDENTS' EDUCATION

Preston Mercer was an academically frustrated University of Texas student in the early 1960s, when he decided to take a break from his studies to drum in a band. The Silvertones played fraternity parties and other gigs around campus.

Eventually, the band dissolved, and each member earned his degree and went on to achieve professional success — including the drummer, who got his chemistry degree in 1968 and now is Dr. Mercer, vice president and campus executive officer for the University of South Florida-Lakeland.

Mercer's family history makes it seem like it was his destiny was to move beyond rock 'n' roll and into education. As far back as 1620, Mercers have been noted educators, preachers and physicians. "My Uncle Jesse opened Mercer College (now University) in 1833," he says proudly. And a framed picture of Hugh Mercer, the Revolutionary War general and physician, hangs in his office.

Preston Mercer also relates the story of John Francis Mercer, a member of the Continental Congress, who, when asked to sign the Constitution, declared: "I will not sign this. It will never work!"

His descendant smiles and notes, "We haven't all made good decisions."

Of course, Mercer made quite a few while working his way from Texas drummer to

university administrator.

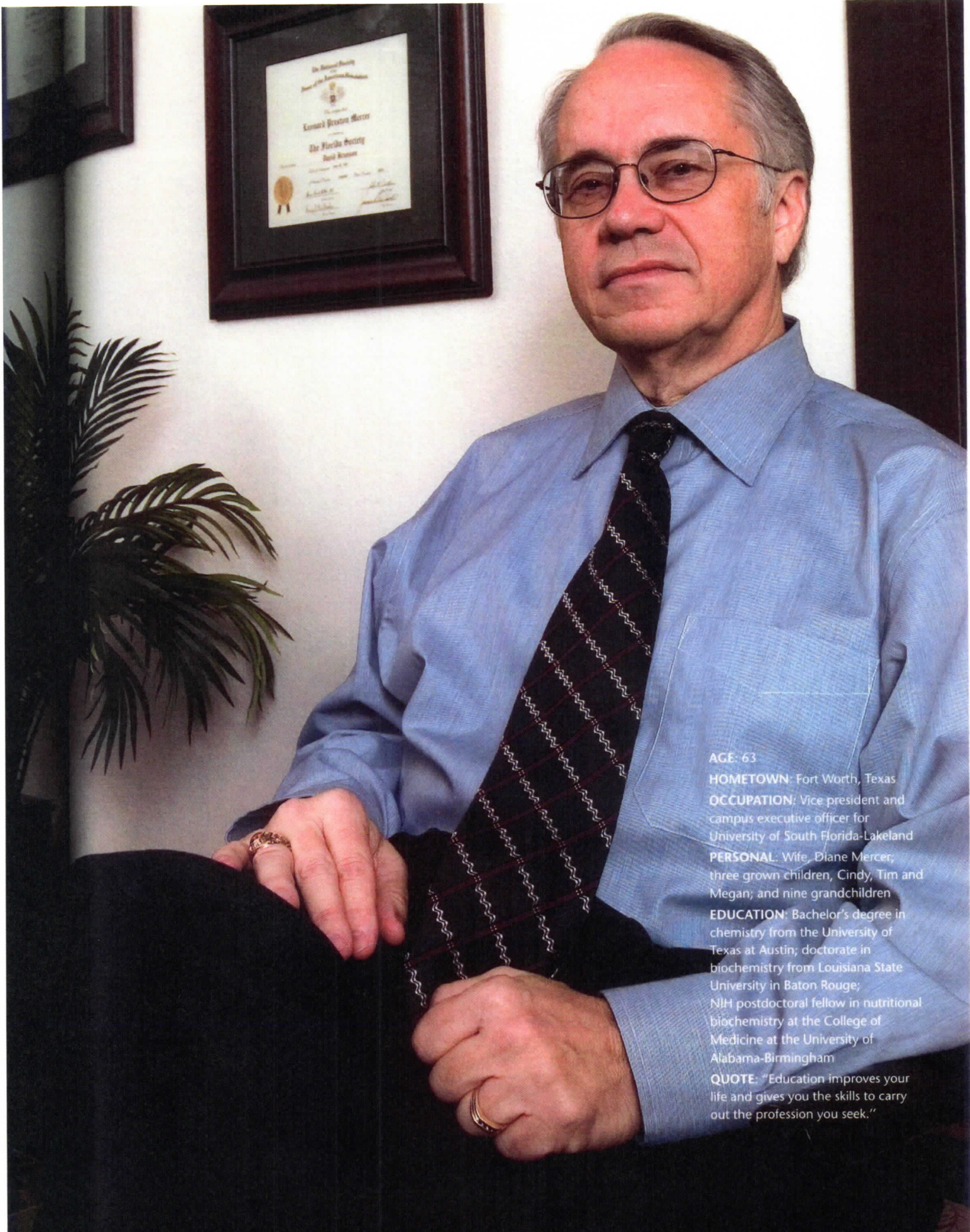
After receiving a doctorate in biochemistry in 1971, Mercer helped found the University of South Alabama's medical school. In 1977, he got involved with a school that combined his expertise and Christian faith and helped start the medical school at Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Okla. He taught medicine for many years before deciding he needed a new challenge. He became involved in nutrition and food science at the University of Kentucky in 1990 and quickly became chairman of his department. He served in that position until he took the vice president's job at USF-Lakeland in 1999.

Mercer credits his immediate family — wife Diane and their three children — with helping him to pursue his educational passions by supporting those moves. And now that their children are grown, Diane joins her husband on his academic travels, even to Giza, Egypt, where his research on iodine deficiencies gained him a 1996-2001 United Nations visiting professor fellowship. On an office bookshelf sits a framed snapshot from the trip of Mercer and his wife, astride a camel, grinning in front of the pyramids.

Mercer's Christian faith has guided his decisions, but he acknowledges that not everyone ascribes to his values. He says he aspires to provide his students not only with knowledge and degrees but also with

PLEASE SEE MERCER, PAGE 194





AGE: 63
HOMETOWN: Fort Worth, Texas
OCCUPATION: Vice president and campus executive officer for University of South Florida-Lakeland
PERSONAL: Wife, Diane Mercer; three grown children, Cindy, Tim and Megan; and nine grandchildren
EDUCATION: Bachelor's degree in chemistry from the University of Texas at Austin; doctorate in biochemistry from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge; NIH postdoctoral fellow in nutritional biochemistry at the College of Medicine at the University of Alabama-Birmingham
QUOTE: "Education improves your life and gives you the skills to carry out the profession you seek."

MERCER, FROM 88

the tools to develop a value system and make sound decisions and a willingness to give back to the community. He is hopeful that his students' work will reflect his own high standards.

Mercer glories in his students' achievements. "When I was in college, it was kind of sink or swim," he says. "Now we make a tremendous effort with our students. Their success is our success."

One of his goals is to make accessible the courses necessary for people interested in the high-tech industries moving into the Interstate 4 corridor. "Because of the increase in technology and globalization, you just have to know more to be more successful," says Mercer. "Our job is to bring educational opportunities to Central Florida."

Under his leadership, USF-Lakeland is building a new

campus at I-4 and the Polk Parkway. "This will be a big deal," he says.

Gene Engle, who works with Mercer on several committees, including the Campus Development Board in Lakeland, says Mercer has done "an outstanding job (promoting) awareness of USF-Lakeland in the surrounding area."

He adds, "Mercer has more than tripled university enrollment and the number of professors, and he's been very, very involved with the community."

Mercer relishes this work because it gives him the opportunity to be an agent for change in the community. It also offers the chance to make a difference in the lives of individuals.

"I get letters sometimes that say, 'Dr. Mercer you really made a difference,'" he says. "Making a difference is what keeps you going."

MCKINZIE, FROM 87

that his grandma took a job in Florida, McKinzie says, and he immediately started planning a trip of his own — to Disney World.

When Iowa State University awarded McKinzie the Virgil S. Lagomarcino Laureate Award for an alumnus who's made an outstanding contribution to the field of education, the whole family was there for the weekend. McKinzie insists she didn't think about work once. "There was work in the briefcase, but I didn't open it until we started home."

But Pedersen, McKinzie's friend in Illinois, says that by the time the plane landed, McKinzie probably had gone through her briefcase and had a list in her head of what she needed to do back at the office.

She has a long list.

One of her goals is to bring some of the programs offered at

choice or specialty schools — such as an integration of academics and the arts, a favorite topic — to regular schools in the hopes of getting payoffs similar to those at choice schools: well-behaved children, active parental involvement and high FCAT scores.

"There are quality schools in the county and we can access those to improve others," she says.

McKinzie first was introduced to Polk County in 2002, when she visited schools here as part of the financial audit team from SchoolMatch, an Ohio-based education consulting firm. What she saw here stuck with her.

"She's talked about Polk County for some time," Pedersen says. "I think she's got some very realistic goals in mind, and that her interest is heartfelt and that she has a lot of ideas for improving the district." ❧

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