

2021 Carmen Powers Legacy Lecture

Prof. Jim Coffey, Communications, VAPA

My retirement from MCC was a “Bookend” for me. I attended MCC for one semester in the fall of 1966 and now, 55 years later, I am retired. The College wasn’t even in Brighton then and was located in the old East High School. I wasn’t quite ready for college and quit school after one semester. I lost my student deferment and served my one-year in Vietnam several years later. I went to college after the military and in the fall of 1978 began teaching interpersonal communication skills at MCC as an adjunct. I taught every semester as an adjunct for 12 years. In that time, I was a tenured reading professor at SUNY Brockport and left to take a full-time, teaching position at MCC in September, 1990. I was thrilled. While I enjoyed teaching reading, I loved the interpersonal skills.

One of my first challenges was to develop two new courses to me, Small Group Communication and Communication and Crisis as well as the Introduction to Interpersonal Communication class which I had taught for the 12 years. These were skills-oriented class and I had to adjust to the Small Group class which had a class size of 56 students.

When I had returned from Vietnam and went to college I had no idea what to do or be. On a fluke a good friend suggested I be a kindergarten teacher. It hit me like a ton of bricks and following graduate school I took a two-year teaching position in Australia where I taught kindergarten my first year. I share this because of the influence teaching kindergarten had on my thinking. I became very interested in early childhood and the development of infants in the first years. This interest played out in a big way in my time at MCC.

From the late 1990’s until present I was the College’s de facto connection to Rochester’s early childhood community. I developed a Liberal Arts Degree with an Advisement Sequence in Early Childhood. I started “292-BABY” a communication network that combined the Internet, television and telephone into one seamless system all in support of early childhood. 292-BABY is a telephone number where a caller can talk with a registered nurse 17 a day about concerns one might have with their baby. We have had over 16,000 calls to date. I hosted a live, morning television show called, “Parent Talk” for two and a half years. Many of those shows are currently on the website at www.292baby.org and are also still shown for 33 hours a week on the cable company’s Educational Channel reaching 220,000 homes in Rochester. This project fit well with MCC’s “Cradle to Grave” philosophy which is connected to our Strategic Plan. Lastly, I represented MCC in a partnership with Rochester Childfirst Network, Rochester’s oldest and well-respected childcare center. Called “Nurturing Community” we opened a center on the first floor of the Sibley Building when the College had a presence there. Poor moms could work with their babies and attend classes upstairs. We addressed intervention with two generations at once.

I must commend the College for its support of me in these early childhood projects throughout my career there. From the start, with then-president Tom Flynn who helped get 292-BABY off the ground, I was happy to bring the strength of the College to the community in such a worthwhile way.

I have thoroughly enjoyed my 42 total years of teaching communication skills. When students let me know that their relationships have improved because of skills they learned in class, I gain a level of satisfaction I rarely find in other areas of my life. I plan to continue my involvement in early childhood in retirement. I have incorporated a non-profit called, "BabyCorps," that I plan to launch in late 2021 or 2022. It involves the formation of nurturing teams whose purpose will be to nurture infants through the critical first stages of their life. A career teaching at MCC was the perfect one for me. Being able to connect communication skills with early childhood development while at the College was simply a blessing.