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Q&A with Tony Jackson



Tony Jackson is in the business of helping people. As an emergency room physician in Los Angeles, he saves lives. As a UC San Diego alumnus and volunteer recruiter for the university, he helps students succeed. He believes it's in his genes to educate and mentor people. After all, he is the great-grandson of Booker T. Washington. Jackson has organized numerous trips for underrepresented students in Los Angeles to visit UC San Diego and he says he enjoys guiding young students to the campus that he loves. Jackson also serves on the UC San Diego Alumni Board and is co-chair of the Campus Climate Council.

Why did you choose to attend UC San Diego as an undergraduate?

Jackson: I applied to several schools and got into all of them except UC San Diego. UC San Diego was my first choice because I wanted to be a marine biologist and I knew Scripps Institution of Oceanography was the best. I turned down those other schools and attended West LA Junior College (now called Community College). I persisted in my efforts to attend UC San Diego and was admitted in the spring of my freshman year.

How did your time here as a student prepare you for your life, career and current role as Co-Chair of the Campus Climate Council?

Jackson: I got a solid education in the sciences and math, as well as critical thinking and problem solving, through the rigorous academic program at Revelle College. The social dynamics of the time augmented my education in ways that the curriculum could never have. I was here during the era of Vietnam, the civil rights movement, college campus protests and riots. It was very fresh, dynamic and rich with ideas, and I was this young, impressionable kid that didn't know anything about this stuff. All of the sudden, I just woke up, and these social awakenings opened my mind and I thirsted to learn more. Since its inception, UC San Diego has always been in the forefront of the discussion about social change and I immersed myself in the issues of the time. I saw firsthand how passionate activism could affect positive change and the lessons that I learned have shaped my life ever since. I think it's why I'm so passionate about youth, because I realize what an untapped resource youth is. And if they're guided right and nurtured with ideas, rather than implanted with ideas, they can develop their own potential and it's amazing to see them blossom.

Tell me about your educational outreach efforts and why it's important to you to bring students to UC San Diego.

Jackson: I know that I had a lot of help getting to where I am now and, without affirmative action efforts, I might never have gotten here. I have had a passion for giving back ever since leaving UC San Diego and students that systemically have difficulty with access because of multiple factors have been my focus. The number of African-American students on campus when I was there was really low, especially in math and sciences, and we stuck together and got each other through. I felt that I needed to continue to pull people through this process of higher education. So I went back to my high school in Los Angeles, Crenshaw High School, which is a math and science magnet school, and I worked with a teacher there and UC San Diego's Dean of Student Affairs Ernie Mort to bring students from my high school to campus.

Later, in addition to going back to my high school, I targeted high-achieving, underrepresented students from disadvantaged communities; I would get buses and bring them to UC San Diego to share the college with them and encourage them to apply here or to any college. I've also been involved with the South Central Gifted Scholars Foundation, mentoring students, promoting access and doing outreach work. And I was involved with creating internships for the young kids that were interested in going into the medical field.

I truly believe that diversity is a prerequisite for excellence in education. When I see a student beating the odds of generations of inequities, it makes my heart soar. There are a multitude of these students and my goal is to bring as many of them as I can to UC San Diego. It is my alma mater and an incredible school, and it needs help in the area of underrepresented students.

What led you to your career in medicine?

Jackson: My dad was a physician and I guess, in some respects, it was my destiny. As I mentioned, I started out wanting to go into research but, in my third year, my path changed and I went down the medicine pathway. I am very proud that because of this choice, I have been able to positively affect many people's lives.

What life lessons did you learn from your great-grandfather, Booker T. Washington, and other family members?

Jackson: I grew up with the knowledge that my great-grandfather was someone special and, all through my younger years, I learned those things that everybody learns about Booker. As I grow older and learn more, I start to realize how complex a man he actually was and how difficult the times were when he lived. I think that the greatest lesson I have gained from him is the lesson of compromise. You can't always do exactly what you want or take the direct path to your goals and, in the pursuit of

goals, there are always compromises. Make the decisions you feel are for the greatest good and let history judge. I know he had to make many decisions like this and I think in the end history has judged him well.

What advice do you have for young students who are just starting to think about college?

Jackson: Be persistent, believe in yourself, ask questions and learn the systems so you can compete well. Don't isolate yourself because you will have to work in the greater world at some point. And shoot for the stars; if you miss, at least you will get off the ground.

Fun Faves

Favorite place at UC San Diego:

Black's Beach

Favorite place on Earth:

I haven't seen it all yet, but I'm working on it. As of now it's Hawaii's Big Island.

Favorite hobby:

Surfing

Favorite UCSD memory:

So many, pilgrimage to Berkeley's Jazz festival

Favorite book:

Lord of the Rings

Favorite words to live by:

"If you want to lift yourself up, lift up someone else." — Booker T. Washington

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