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At Milwaukee Academy of Science, McHenry wants students to find opportunity

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Anthony McHenry is motivated by the idea that kids today need what he received: an opportunity.

Since 2016, McHenry has served as chief executive officer of the Milwaukee Academy of Science. He credits being given an opportunity for taking him from his hometown in a mostly low-income community in Georgia to the helm of a public charter school focused on science, technology, engineering and math.

McHenry moved to the state after receiving a full athletic scholarship to play football for the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He planned to become a sports reporter, but some of his journalism classes conflicted with football practice.

A course in African American studies led him to complete a degree in the field.

“(It) not only was very enlightening for me but was very impactful in charting the course for the rest of my life,” McHenry said. “I started to see me and how I grew up in the community from a historical context.”

After he graduated, McHenry worked at the Neighborhood Intervention Program in Madison, running programs for kids who had been convicted of a felony. The program was intensive and included face-to-face interaction with the kids for four hours a day, six days a week.

“One by one, those young people would make all the changes we’d be asking for them,” he said.

The program built up kids’ self-esteem and self-worth. But when they went to school, McHenry said, the students would fail. Disheartened, he decided he needed to work in education to help young people reach their potential.

McHenry relocated to Milwaukee and became a social studies teacher at the alternative school at the Silver Spring Neighborhood Center. He said he got students to engage and work hard, adding that he was the only teacher to assign homework.

McHenry then served as vice principal. While he helped teachers raise the rigor in their classrooms, he said he also built strong relationships with students.

After the academy closed, McHenry moved to the youth programming side of the neighborhood center and eventually was promoted to work as its executive director. In that job, he had a focus on stu-



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dents’ engagement with their education.

“It actually became a really good training ground for what I’m doing at Milwaukee Academy of Science, which is working really hard to develop a strong academic program that functions and operates very much like a social service center,” he said. “I believe if we’re going to be successful in engaging children coming from the most difficult situations, that’s the only way to do it.”

McHenry said the board showed courage in hiring him as CEO. Although he had worked as an educator, he did not take a traditional path to school administration. Rather, his expertise was in nonprofit leadership.

McHenry said he was an attractive candidate, because the board of the academy sought someone who knew how to fundraise and develop and maintain mutually beneficial partnerships. Board members also wanted a visionary who would buck the status quo in education, he said.

“It would have been much easier for them to just go hire the next principal,” he said. “But they believed that what we needed was a nonprofit leader, and I was offered the opportunity to have this dream job.”

McHenry is now leading the school through a \$5 million expansion that is expected to give the academy capacity to grow from 1,250 students to 1,500 by 2024. In addition to the expansion, McHenry said his vision for the school is to develop unique partnerships with the business community so students are prepared for employment opportunities.

“The only way to really do that is to be working closely with the corporations to ensure that the workforce of the future is being developed today,” McHenry said.

One of the school’s partnerships is with Milwaukee Tool, a Brookfield-based tool manufacturer. Steve Richman, Milwaukee Tool’s group president, sits on the academy’s board, and the company itself is involved with the school.

Richman said McHenry created a culture in which employees are responsible for getting students excited to learn.

“The buck stops with Anthony,” Richman said. “His passion for the students and for the success of the students is what makes a difference.”

The culture McHenry fosters gives students the opportunity to thrive, Richman said.

The academy primarily serves students who are economically disadvantaged. McHenry said people are wrong to assume that children who face those dynamics are not capable learners. Rather, he said, students need to be given the opportunity and permission to learn at a pace that positions them for gainful employment as adults.

“It’s knowing that there are 1,300 more little Anthonys out there who just need an opportunity,” he said. “I’m driven to make sure that our kids have the opportunity to be whatever it is that they choose to be.”

Anthony McHenry

Title: Chief executive officer
Organization: Milwaukee Academy of Science
Education: Bachelor’s in African American studies, UW-Madison
Family: Married, three children
Hometown: Columbus, Ga.
Resides: Milwaukee
Age: 50
Boards/associations: Board member for ACTS Housing, PEARLS for Teen Girls and Teach for America-Milwaukee
Hobbies: Running a travel basketball program
First job: Working at McDonald’s
Best professional advice: “I understand that we live in a country that is built on capitalism, but I have to believe that a person’s well-being and joy is more closely connected to impacting people in a positive way than profits. My advice would be to find a way to positively impact people on your journey to making a profit.”
Surprising fact: Was drafted in the late rounds to play Major League Baseball for the Montreal Expos