A Barrier Removed

“DOC” KELKER SCHOLARSHIP LINKS THREE GENERATIONS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN ALUMNI

In the spring of 2001, Alicia Graves ’05 knew she would be going to college, but she didn’t think she would ever be a student at Case Western Reserve University. A top-ranked senior at Cleveland’s East High, Graves had been accepted by every school she’d applied to, including several public universities in Ohio and an historically black college in Atlanta. Nearly all of these schools had offered her full scholarships. To attend Case Western Reserve, however, she would have had to take out loans. And this was something that Graves, like many first-generation college students, was reluctant to do.

It’s not that she was unaware of the opportunities she would find here. Graves had participated in a program that brought Cleveland high school students to campus for academic and enrichment activities. That experience, and the relationships she’d developed with staff in the Office of Multicultural Affairs, had prompted her to apply. But none of her friends from East High would be going to CWRU, and the other schools on her list enrolled greater numbers of African-American students.

“I was afraid to come here,” Graves admits now. “The people here didn’t necessarily look like me, and in my high school, they did. I didn’t know whether I was just smart in my high school, or whether I would be smart wherever I was.” So although the loan portion of her financial aid offer was relatively small, Graves made it significant: “I used it as an excuse to say I wouldn’t come.” She didn’t respond to her acceptance letter. When teachers, relatives and neighbors told her she belonged at Case Western Reserve, she had a ready answer: “I have to pay to go to this school, and I can go to these other schools for free.”

Then she got a call from a CWRU admissions counselor who took her excuse away. “What if I told you,” he said, “that there was a ‘Doc’ Kelker Scholarship you’re eligible to get, and that we want to offer it to you? Would you come then?” With this additional funding, her entire education would be paid for. Graves faltered a little but didn’t give in at once. She said she’d think about it. Undaunted, the admissions counselor mailed her a new award letter and waited.
At that point, Graves recalls, there was an uproar in her community. Everyone, it seemed, thought she should go to Case Western Reserve. Teachers she didn’t even know stopped her in the hallway to ask about her plans. On Sunday mornings at Sanctuary Baptist Church, members of the congregation weighed in. Graves’s father had been an advocate for CWRU all along. And though her mother had always professed neutrality, Graves overheard her telling a friend she would like to see Alicia at Case Western Reserve. For some reason, the opinion her mother had withheld for so long carried more weight than all of the outright advice she’d been given. Graves accepted the offer and became one of the university’s first “Doc” Kelker scholars.

Many Villages
Today, it is hard to imagine Graves shying away from a challenge. Planning on law school and a career as a juvenile court judge, she majored in psychology, which allowed her to study the dynamics of eyewitness testimony, and American studies, which gave her the chance to pursue her interests in history, English and political science. In her senior year, she took a research trip to the Netherlands, where she examined differences between Dutch and American criminal justice policies. She also completed a leadership development program called LeaderShape, based on a national model and instituted at Case Western Reserve by the Office of Student Affairs.

After graduating in 2005, Graves went on to earn a law degree at the University of Akron. Her field experience included eight months in the Cuyahoga County prosecutor’s office, where she worked in the divisions of juvenile justice and children and family services. Before she finished law school, Graves also became involved in two international humanitarian projects: a youth development program in Haiti and an initiative to provide economic opportunities to women in Rwanda. She visited both countries as a community service volunteer in 2007-2008.

Graves sees a thread of continuity between her public school years and her career in college and law school: “It takes a village to raise a child.” At every stage, she was fortunate in her mentors. “You know the saying: ‘It takes a village to raise a child.’ It took many villages to raise me.” At Case Western Reserve, her mentors included Renée Sentilles, associate professor of history and director of American studies; English department lecturer Terri Mester; and Marcy Levy Shankman, a LeaderShape facilitator who has since become a Presidential Fellow in the SAGES program. Graves owes part of her success to her habit of keeping such people in her life.

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It was Shankman, for instance, who first told Graves about the Cleveland Executive Fellowship (CEF), a program that gives rising community leaders hands-on experience in the nonprofit, educational, corporate and government sectors. Once she looked into the program, Graves couldn’t wait to apply. “Only a person who knows you well can suggest something that would fit so perfectly,” she says.

Actually, Shankman was thinking of CEF as something Graves could add to her list of future options; she knew that candidates usually had at least five years of professional experience. But Graves saw no reason to disqualify herself: “Let them tell me I’m too young,” she thought. Instead, the Cleveland Leadership Center chose her as one of six executive fellows for 2008-2009.

Graves began her fellowship year at Citizens’ Academy, a high-performing charter school on Cleveland’s East Side, where she created a recycling program and researched funding opportunities. In subsequent placements, she launched four regional newsletters for the Ohio governor’s office, worked with Team NEO to attract minority businesses to this area, helped the Heights-Hillcrest Regional Chamber of Commerce develop a strategic plan, and supported media outreach by All Aboard Ohio, an advocacy organization calling for improvements in passenger rail service. The year also included weekly professional development activities and a visit to Germany, where the fellows sought out lessons in postindustrial urban planning that they could bring back to Cleveland.

“Alicia has always been out there in terms of wanting to know more, learn more, observe more,” says Harold D. McRae (ADL ’65), the donor who established the “Doc” Kelker Scholarship Fund. McRae first met Graves in the spring of her freshman year, when she spoke at a luncheon for scholarship donors and recipients, and he has been a mentor ever since. “She has me on her list of people that she e-mails when she ventures to Africa, for example,” McRae
says. “So I know what’s going on in her life most of the time.” They generally meet for lunch once or twice a year—whenever Graves makes it out to Chicago, where McRae has lived since 1997.

“I’m very thankful to have been a recipient of the scholarship that Harold McRae funded,” Graves says. “I’m happy to have had the chance to meet him, learn about him and take counsel from him.” She adds, “People often wonder about scholarship recipients and what happens to them after they go on—if they really benefited from it, if they’re successful. I can certainly attest to what opportunity does for students.”

McRae’s fundamental purpose was “to remove the barriers between young scholars and their potential.”

A Spirit of Excellence

When McRae endowed the Kelker fund in 1997, he wanted to promote diversity by helping Case Western Reserve compete with other top schools for minority students. He also wanted to help these students meet the costs of a CWRU education without going into debt. But his fundamental purpose, he says, was “to remove the barriers between young scholars and their potential.”

In declaring his commitment, McRae was acting on a resolution he’d made when he was a student himself. The youngest of 12 children, McRae grew up in Youngstown, Ohio, and graduated from that city’s East High School as valedictorian in 1961. At that time, a local trust fund awarded scholarships to two Youngstown seniors each spring, covering tuition, room and board for their first two years of undergraduate study. When McRae received one of these scholarships, he became the only member of his family to go to college. He remembers meeting the donor who created the fund and being impressed by her generosity.

“She name was Sara deFord, and she was an English professor at Goucher College,” McRae says. “She established the scholarship in honor of her father, who was a judge in Youngstown. And because I was a recipient, I always felt that when I was in a position to do so, I would do something quite similar.”

At Adelbert College, McRae majored in chemistry. Looking back on those years, he mostly remembers “studying hard all the time,” but he did represent his residence hall in the student government. After his scholarship expired, the university came through with a combination of grants and loans, which he supplemented with a part-time job at the Millis Center’s science library.

McRae was planning on medical school, but in his senior year he decided against it and started taking business electives. After graduating in 1965, he found a job as an information chemist and then as a chemical salesman; by 1969, he had enrolled in a management degree program at Harvard Business School. “The workload was just incredible,” he recalls. “But certainly I was up to the challenge, because Western Reserve had prepared me well.”

McRae went on to executive positions in the financial services and insurance industries. Among other posts, he served as vice president for international operations at American Express and as head of new product development for the Travelers Insurance health care group. Later, he entered the pharmacy benefits industry, first with Chicago Caremark and then with Glaxo Wellcome’s London office. Seven years ago, he retired from what had become GlaxoSmithKline and returned to Chicago, where he does volunteer work for several nonprofit organizations.

In a letter he wrote to CWRU President Agnar Pytte in December 1997, McRae noted that the “spirit of excellence and healthy competition” he remembered from Western Reserve had contributed to his success. “It is that same spirit,” he explained, “that I would like to see continued in the development of other African-American students at Case Western Reserve University.”

At first, McRae hadn’t considered naming the scholarship for anyone. But then a trustee who’d learned of his intended gift told him about “Doc” Kelker. McRae did some research and discovered “a star athlete and a very good student” who later became a renowned community leader (see page 12). McRae felt that Kelker would be “a wonderful example” to a new generation of students: “He had gone to Adelbert College back in the 1930s, and I could just imagine the kinds of issues he had to deal with at that time.”
By 1998, Kelker and his wife Audrey (SASS ’41) were living in retirement in Henderson, Nevada, just outside Las Vegas. That spring, they traveled to Cleveland to attend the scholarship luncheon where the fund’s creation was announced, and Kelker himself became one of the first donors. “After I met them,” McRae says, “I was even happier that I had decided to name the scholarship for him. He was a wonderful man, a kind man. I could see why he had been such an influence on so many people.”

A Gift for Leadership

Once McRae became national chair of the Kelker fund, he began to assume other leadership roles at the university. As a trustee from 2002 to 2006, he led the reorganization of the alumni association and advocated further measures to increase minority enrollment. In addition, McRae has co-chaired the visiting committee for the College of Arts and Sciences, volunteered for the Alumni Fund and served as a reunion chair.

Current Kelker scholar Duwain Pinder has already begun establishing his leadership credentials. A business management student with a minor in economics, Pinder was recently elected president of the Undergraduate Student Government. He has previously served as vice president of the African American Society and of Case Western Reserve’s undergraduate chapter of the National Black MBA Association.

This past summer, while Pinder was working as an intern with Ameriprise Financial in Minneapolis, McRae gave him a call. The two men have a lot in common. Pinder is heading for a career in financial services. When he applies to MBA programs in a few years, Harvard Business School will be on his list. And it so happens that McRae once worked for a predecessor of Ameriprise Financial, Investors Diversified Services.

When Pinder mentioned that he had been elected student body president, McRae was reminded how much the world and the university have advanced since his college days. But their conversation imparted another lesson, too. It indicated that McRae himself, along with “Doc” Kelker, has become a wonderful example.

For information about contributing to the “Doc” Kelker Scholarship Fund, please contact Sharon Jordan-Davis, executive director of constituent relations, at (216) 368-6913, (800) 360-5308 or sharon.jordan-davis@cwru.edu.
REMEMBERING “DOC” KELKER

Frank Leon Kelker (ADL ’38) was born in Woodsville, Florida, in 1913. He acquired his nickname from his twin brother, Fred, who began calling him “Doc” when they were both just learning to talk. Kelker’s father, determined to provide his sons with an education that would have been denied them in the South, moved the family to Dover, Ohio, in 1918. Kelker first achieved athletic fame at Dover High School, leading the football team through two undefeated seasons and the basketball team to a state championship.

Ohio State reportedly tried to recruit Kelker, but only as a football player; in those years, the Big Ten basketball teams excluded African-Americans. Kelker knew he would face no such restriction at Western Reserve, but that wasn’t his only reason for coming here. He hoped to play for football coach Sam Willaman, who had just left Ohio State to take over the Red Cats. And his father, impressed by the university’s academic reputation, wanted him to attend Western Reserve.

Kelker enrolled at Adelbert College with a full-tuition scholarship. To cover his room and board, he worked as a janitor at Flora Stone Mather College, sweeping the floors of Haydn Hall for three hours each morning and sifting ashes in the power house at night. He was paid 40 cents an hour. Long afterward, a classmate remembered Kelker buying a five-cent ice cream and calling it lunch.

Since freshmen were not permitted to play varsity sports, the Kelker era at Western Reserve didn’t begin right away. But during his sophomore year, Kelker earned three varsity letters—one each in football, basketball and track—and he repeated this performance in his junior and senior years. He never got to play for Willaman, who died unexpectedly in 1935, but he thrived under the guidance of Willaman’s replacement, Bill Edwards.

Nearly a quarter century later, university President John Millis described Kelker’s achievements on the gridiron as if they had happened yesterday:

“Doc” played left end in coach Bill Edwards’ single wing offense and displayed such versatility as a pass receiver and runner that much of Reserve’s attack was geared to his talents. At 6’1” and 190 pounds, “Doc” was a combination of speed, maneuverability and ruggedness that was too much for the opponents to overcome.

During Kelker’s three years on the team, the Red Cats enjoyed a 28-game winning streak and were invited to the Sun Bowl. The sports editor of The Cleveland Press called him “not only one of the finest defensive ends in the history of football in this section,” but also “one of the finest receivers of forward passes who ever lived.” Meanwhile, Kelker was named an All-American in basketball, and in track he broke school records in the 100-yard dash (9.9 seconds) and the quarter-mile (49.1 seconds).

Kelker graduated with a bachelor’s degree in social administration. He was awarded an Honor Key and a Warion Society Key, and his class selected him as the Outstanding Senior Student for 1937-1938. That spring, the university mistakenly announced that he’d also been elected to Phi Beta Kappa. Appearing on WGAR radio, Western Reserve Dean W. D. Trautman acknowledged the error but then made it the occasion for a testimonial.

“No student,” the dean said, “could do all that ‘Doc’ has done, earning his board and room expenses and participating in football, basketball and track, and still keep his scholarship up to the requirements of Phi Beta Kappa.” Yet “in character,”
Tautman continued, “Frank Kelker qualifies for any organization”:

Again and again I have admired the calm under pressure, which can come only from an adjusted mind and soul… Kelker’s steadfastness, his fineness of understanding, his willingness to give all he has, not blindly, but intelligently, his perseverance, his dependability and his courage are qualities of character that are fundamental and lasting. What he has done has made a permanent impression on his classmates and a lasting impression on his college. His personality is planted deep in our hearts, and we are pulling for him.

Most listeners would have recognized this as a tribute, in part, to Kelker’s courage and self-restraint on the playing field, where he had been taunted with racial insults and even assaulted by members of opposing teams.

In later years, Kelker missed no opportunity to reaffirm his connection to the university. While serving overseas as a Red Cross field director during World War II, he subscribed to a campus magazine and corresponded with Karl Davis, Western Reserve’s athletic director. In a letter dated February 12, 1944, Kelker wrote, “It’s refreshing and stimulating to think back to those peaceful days at school and to the friends I made there. War and all of the evils attached cannot kill those memories.”

Because of the color bar in professional sports, Kelker could not advance to an NFL career. It was said that several alumni offered him jobs “with interesting futures,” but he had decided he wanted to work with young people. After graduating, Kelker was hired as a cadet teacher and assistant coach at Cleveland’s Central High School. Two years later, he accepted a position with the YMCA, the organization to which he devoted the rest of his career. He was the longtime executive secretary of the Cedar Avenue Branch, where the brothers Louis and Carl Stokes were among the youths he mentored. By the time he retired in 1981, he oversaw all of Cleveland’s urban branches.

Among his many civic contributions, Kelker served as a founding trustee and board chair of Cuyahoga Community College. In 1962, he was elected to the Sports Illustrated Silver Anniversary All-American Football Team in recognition of his achievements since his graduation. Kelker was the first African-American to receive this honor, and indeed the first ever to be nominated. After the awards ceremony in New York City, Kelker sent a letter thanking President Millis for the nomination. “It was a pleasure,” he wrote, “to represent Western Reserve University and to see the banner of our great school hanging in the Grand Ballroom of the Waldorf Astoria.”

Frank “Doc” Kelker died in May 2003 at the age of 89. Reflecting on his commitment to education and public service, he once told a reporter, “My ambition has always been to direct young people toward meaningful lives and help them become productive citizens. Many people have helped me. I’m trying to pay them back by helping others. I want the lives of these kids to be better because I touched them.”