

Mitchell shares timeless values
By Marcus Ashlock

After years of volunteerism and helping build homes for the community of Stillwater, Okla., Earl Mitchell watched as the nation raced to his hometown of New Orleans. During the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina's deadly touch, citizens of Stillwater and the nation worked together with strangers to rescue, cradle and nurture a dying city back to the "jewel of the South" it once was.

Why do people choose to help someone they've never met? Many times, volunteerism's immediate results may be transparent, but the initial work soon lays the foundation for future members of a community to take advantage of the opportunities volunteerism provides.

Mitchell, professor and head of the OSU Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, decided many years ago to lead a life of service. This lifestyle has shown itself in many ways throughout his 38-year career in OSU research and administration, including the 10 years he served as associate vice president for multicultural affairs.

Mitchell serves as the adviser to the OSU student Habitat for Humanity International, as well as past director for the Stillwater organization.

According to organizational marketing information, Habitat for Humanity is committed to eliminating "poverty housing and homelessness from the world and to make decent shelter a matter of conscience and action." It provides affordable housing for low-income families, building houses with no profit in the sale price and up to 30-year, no-interest loans.

"Deeply, I really believe we are our brother's keepers; that's a religious conviction," said Mitchell. "Secondly, we ought to share what we have."

Mitchell explained sharing begins at home with family and then stretches to sharing with friends and others. Strangers become the third and final level of sharing, he said.

"The toughest sharing we can do, the hardest sharing we can do, is with strangers," said Mitchell. "Strangers aren't always distant. There are a lot of strangers close to you. Students are sometimes strangers, too – people who need our help."

Organizations like Habitat for Humanity invite people of all backgrounds, races and religions to build houses together in partnership with needy families. The organization uses religious organizations or community groups to find solutions to the social problem of decent housing. Many times strangers are building houses for strangers.

"Earl is just one of those people who is always available to help in any way," said Ron Buck, past president of Stillwater's Habitat for Humanity affiliate. "At one time, he even donated office space for the affiliate to use in downtown Stillwater."

Actions such as this allow organizations to provide better service for those people in need. When volunteers are available to serve in any capacity, it helps the organization become more effective in serving the community, Buck said.

"Volunteerism is just one mechanism I have to provide services," said Mitchell. "That's my attitude about what I'm supposed to do while I'm here on the face of the earth – to provide service."

Mitchell's time on earth began May 16, 1938, in New Orleans. He grew up in a low-income household with a father, Earl Mitchell Sr., who worked three jobs to support his family of seven. The younger Mitchell credits his upbringing and the influence of his service mentality and ideals to his mother, Mary Mitchell, and his paternal grandmother, Priscila Mitchell.

"Earl, never think about yourself first; think about others," said Mitchell, recalling something his grandmother used to say. "That stuck with me.

"She was always telling me to think about the other fellow because sometimes the other fellow is having a more difficult time than you're having."

Looking out for the other fellow has been a value Mitchell kept within him since his adolescent years, a value helping him succeed on many different levels.

After high school, Mitchell attended Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans, receiving a Bachelor of Science degree in chemistry in 1960. From there, Mitchell left Louisiana for Michigan, earning a Master of Science degree in organic chemistry in 1963 and a doctorate in biochemistry in 1966, both from Michigan State University.

Mitchell was among the "Distinguished African American Scientists of the 20th Century" in 1996, was awarded the Oklahoma Human Rights Award from the Oklahoma Human Rights Commission in 2003, and was the keynote speaker for the Black Heritage Month program at the Medical College of Georgia in Augusta in 2004.

His most recent accolade was his induction into the Oklahoma Higher Education Hall of Fame in October 2005. His life's work has not gone unnoticed.

Mitchell's work is not tied completely to volunteerism. The Oklahoma School for Science and Mathematics is another example of his dedication to creating educational opportunities for people to grow and develop.

Formed through legislation in 1983, the school is home to some of the brightest young minds in science and math in Oklahoma. According to school information, it is designed as a two-year residential public high school for the academically gifted students in mathematics and science.

"He not only planted the seed with the right people in the legislature, he followed it through to reality," said Edna Manning, president of the Oklahoma School of Science and Mathematics,

In 1982, with help from state House Speaker Dan Draper, state Rep. Penny Williams and state Sen. Bernice Shedrick, Mitchell was the initiator of the concept of the Oklahoma School of Science and Mathematics and the Office of Science and Technology in the state of Oklahoma. Presently, Mitchell is on the board of trustees of the school.

Mitchell read an article in *Science Magazine* written by the governor of North Carolina about his work creating a school of science and math in his own state. After seeing students coming to OSU for the summer programs sponsored by the Kerr Foundation, gaining new knowledge but losing that knowledge once they went home, Mitchell sent a letter to Williams outlining his idea for the same type of school in Oklahoma.

"Earl Mitchell is a man of great intellect, remarkable vision and tremendous determination," said Manning. "He has continued to serve on the board and offers thoughts and ideas regularly at board meetings so we don't sit back on the success we've had and enjoy it. He's always thinking about where we should go next and what could we do."

His visionary work laid the foundation for future students to excel in ways never before provided by the state's educational system, said Manning. According to the school, between 1992 and 2001, 850 students graduated from this accelerated program, producing 135 National Merit Scholars, 253 engineers and 70 medical doctors, as well as 60 currently in medical school.

"I happened to be in the right place at the right time and knew the right people for this to happen," said Mitchell, explaining in his humble description the events taking place around the formation of the school.

Rather than using his contacts (he lived on the same street as Draper) for his personal benefit, Mitchell gathered like-minded folks and drove the idea of a school for Oklahoma's premier science and math students forward until the idea became a reality.

"It has gone beyond any wildest dream I ever had in what it could do," said Mitchell. "It has really been an excellent opportunity."

Creating opportunities is important to Mitchell. Mitchell said he believes his role as an administrator means more than position. Students and their search for knowledge and education should remain a priority.

"During the years I spent in administration, I came from a mentor, Dr. Norm Durham, who said our job as administrators was to make the job easier for those doing the teaching and the learning, so that's our responsibility," said Mitchell.

"We are here to give service," said Mitchell. "It's not about us. Too many times I think administrators think it is about them."

Using his position to benefit others seems to be a quality Mitchell possesses.

The opportunity to serve comes from the mind and heart of someone taking the time to look ahead.

"If we spend a little bit of time and effort to help those less fortunate by giving a hand-up rather than a hand-out, then I really believe we are doing the right thing and making life easier for the next generation," said Mitchell.

The work completed by generations of his own family occupied his mind during Hurricane Katrina.

"The family home my dad left for us is gone; it was totaled from being under water for two weeks," said Mitchell. "Five homes within the family were destroyed.

"My uncle, who is 93, and his wife, who is 92, have lived in their house for nearly 60 years. Now, everything in the world they owned is gone and has been washed away."

Being away from his family in a time of need weighed heavily on his heart.

"It drains you; it consumes you," said Mitchell, when asked about the difficulty of watching his hometown, his birthplace, in turmoil.

He said his sister-in-law could not be reached for days following the hurricane.

"To think I was the fourth generation born in New Orleans," said Mitchell, "and that everything that was there — the neighborhood — is gone and destroyed, it consumes you."

He watched the efforts of a nation rush to those less fortunate in their time of need, attempting to rebuild what was lost to Mother Nature.

"It's hard to see New Orleans being destroyed and wondering if it will come back. I believe it will come back," said Mitchell with confidence.

With the personal, inner courage and determination to seek opportunities for so many others, Mitchell's faith is not lost.

His servant's heart is with the thousands of people who have left the comforts of their own homes to help the strangers of his old neighborhood restore their lives to a semblance of what they once were, just as he's worked so many times before for those in need in Stillwater.

For information about the Stillwater affiliate of Habitat for Humanity, visit them on the Internet at <http://www.cowboy.net/non-profit/habitat/> or call (405) 377-0403.