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SV Life

Stories from the San Jose Mercury News

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LEIGH WEIMERS

Doctor, lawyer help kids and teach us all a lesson

BY [LEIGH WEIMERS](#)

Mercury News

IMAY have just met a couple of saints.

They'd deny it, of course. Dr. Michael McCullough and Ana Rowena Mallari don't consider themselves anything special. But if service to their fellow humans, unselfishly and at considerable personal and professional cost, is any criterion, then they certainly qualify in my book.

McCullough, 34, an emergency-room physician, and his fiancée, Mallari, 29, an attorney, founded and run the Quest Scholars Program at Stanford University for gifted but needy high school students. Theirs is similar to a number of other do-good, feel-good outreach programs, but with stunning results: a 100 percent record of placing students in college, with, for the past three years, 80 percent of those students getting into Stanford.

"In short," says Stephen Culp, one of the program's volunteer mentors, "Michael and Ana, while attending medical school and law school, respectively, created probably the most successful intervention program for bright at-risk youth in the nation."

McCullough, the son of an Oregon construction worker and a teacher, became involved in youth work almost from his arrival at Stanford as a pre-med student. He met fellow student Marc Lawrence, who wanted to help underprivileged kids get into medicine, and the two organized a summer outreach effort: the Stanford Medical Youth Science Program (SMYSP).

"That's where we learned what worked and what didn't," McCullough says. "If I hadn't done that, we wouldn't have the Quest program that we do now."

Not that organizing youth programs while trying to stay in school yourself was easy. McCullough, who was putting himself through Stanford, would

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work for a while -- sometimes as a stand-up comedian, poking fun at his own speech impediment: stammering -- and then go to school for a while. But being certifiably brilliant helps.

"I met him when I was a freshman and he was a fifth-year senior at Stanford," Mallari says. A native of Hawaii, she had moved to Woodside, where her father is a doctor and her mother operates a senior-care facility, when she was 13. "We started dating, and we were lucky that we've been able to coordinate our educations side by side, even though it has been tricky."

McCullough was awarded a Rhodes scholarship and was able to find enough financial support for SMYSP so that it could continue in his absence. Mallari took advantage of Stanford's program at Oxford and was able to join him there for his second year of study. When they returned, SMYSP had been fully institutionalized at the university, under the direction of Marilyn Winkleby, and the pair set about launching a similar program, but with a broader perspective.

"The first one was a medical program entirely," Mallari says, "but we picked an environmental theme, not only because that's what I was studying but also because it helps students explore a lot of other disciplines through the environment."

They got the new venture, then named the Stanford Youth Environmental Science Program, started in 1994, bringing 20 students on campus for a six-week, live-in course of study to prepare them for the jump from low-income, low-expectation surroundings to high-achievement university work.

Cash for program

That required even higher achievement on the part of McCullough and Mallari: rounding up a flock of talented teenagers and rounding up cash to support their program while also trying to juggle their own school expenses and studies.

"What really helped us was quite a few generous people at the beginning," McCullough says. "We could pay the bills. We didn't have to go from scratch."

They paid the program's bills, that is.

Mallari supported herself by working for the Environmental Defense Fund as a scientist and consultant. Later, she also worked as a researcher on science policy with former Stanford president Donald Kennedy. Like McCullough, she would work for a while and then go to school for a while, graduating three years after her class.

McCullough recalls being homeless for a brief period when his income didn't cover expenses. "I'd sleep on other people's floors or in my car," he says, shrugging. "It's not like it happened all the time."

When McCullough went on to seek his medical degree at the University of California-San Francisco, advisers cautioned him against trying to do both that and his youth work. Mallari was similarly cautioned when she entered Stanford Law School. The warnings went unheeded.

"A lot of people saw it as an unreasonable risk," Mallari notes. "But I think Michael and I can both multi-task."

"There were times when we didn't get a lot of sleep," McCullough acknowledges.

``A lot of times, our only social time together was working on the program," Mallari agrees.

While working on the Quest program helped keep them together, it also helped the program flourish. And the key to that success, they agree, lies with the students they select. They look for high school sophomores and juniors as driven toward achievement as they are -- and as altruistic.

``Our main recruiting mechanism is a PSAT search," Mallari explains. They look for students with good scores but lower incomes, students who may have been told that getting C grades is enough and community college is the most they should reach for. Prospective Quest students are given a three-page questionnaire to fill out, followed by a five-hour videotaped interview. McCullough and Mallari then review the videotapes, often following up with additional questions by telephone.

``We want kids who have that hunger, that drive," McCullough says.

``And we want those who have a sense of altruism," Mallari adds. ``So we look for more than just intelligence and more than just achievement. We want kids who are willing to give back."

The program is structured and strict. Students are not allowed to play recorded music, watch television, enter Internet chat rooms or exchange e-mail outside of the program. They are encouraged to get to know and to interact with everyone in the program and not to form small cliques. Flirting or romantic interaction is strongly discouraged.

In return, the 20 or so students get to pick the brains of volunteer professors and instructors from Stanford and other universities. They get mental stimulation, encouragement, questions answered, the sense of accomplishment that comes from seeing they can handle the work.

They also develop a sense of community, a desire to share what they've learned. The bulk of the volunteer staffers who help make the Quest program run are former Quest students.

Staffer Malachi Muhammad says, ``I believe that Michael is one of the great men of our time. Almost everyone in my family is in prison. But he would pick us students up in East Palo Alto. The drug dealers and everything would come out, and he would come in and drop us off and pick us up and he had no fear. That stood out more than anything else, because in the neighborhoods there back then, whites just didn't go in. And he went in and I was like, `Who is this guy? He took me out of the situation I was in and showed me different ways of doing things. From there, I went on and put myself through college. Currently, I'm a schoolteacher."

Fellow volunteer and ex-Quester Santiago Rizzo agrees with Muhammad's assessment. An emancipated minor since age 14, fleeing an abusive home life, Rizzo says he felt a lot of rage when he first entered the program.

``It was coming out in the way I treated the other students," he explains. ``Michael would spend hours talking with me at nighttime. One day, he took me outside and said, `Hit me.' I thought he was kidding. He insisted. `Hit me.' I didn't want to hit him; I like him. So I gave him a little tap. He said, `No, I said *hit* me -- hard.' So I actually had to hit him. And by doing that, I felt the same pain that I was giving to other kids. That just shows the type of man he is, to take stuff like that."

Operation costs

Occasional physical pain isn't the only thing McCullough and Mallari have suffered to make Quest successful. It takes roughly \$200,000 each year to underwrite the Stanford program, and a like amount to operate a clone that is now under way at Harvard, co-founded by Quest graduate Dana Gavrieli. "We're having to spend more and more of our time on fundraising," McCullough says, "and that's hard. We're not comfortable doing it."

Personal comfort also has been put on hold. Mallari is helping administer the program instead of developing an income practicing law. McCullough estimates his time spent with the Quest students would have brought him \$100,000 had he been practicing medicine instead. The couple shares a rented apartment just across Sand Hill Road from the Stanford campus -- close to the students -- instead of pursuing professional careers full-time and buying a home in Portola Valley or Woodside.

And there's the social life. "We'd like to spend more time with people our own age," McCullough says wistfully. "We do have friends our age," Mallari agrees, "but at any given time, if I have a free hour, I'm typically spending it with a student or with Michael."

The students and staff know. "They've been willing to say no to all this money they could be making to help high school kids," Rizzo marvels.

"But the thing that gives us energy is the relationship with the students," Mallari notes. "The time that we're with the students, especially when they're being very down-to-earth and really trying to make themselves better, that gives you energy."

"That makes you feel better about living and life and what you're doing," McCullough agrees. "We get that a lot."

The wages of saintliness.

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

Information about Quest is available by writing to Quest Scholars Program, Box 20054, Stanford, Calif. 94309; online at www.questscholars.org; by e-mail to questions@syesp.stanford.edu; and by telephone, (650) 725-6121.

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INFORMATION FOR LIFE