

# Motivational speaker at Pasco-Hernando Community College calls for a war on Ignorance

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NEW PORT RICHEY — Honoring the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., renowned motivational speaker Dr. Calvin Mackie sounded a call Thursday for students at Pasco-Hernando Community College:

Get smart.

The next struggle for civil rights in the United States will be the battle to educate a generation lost to ignorance, he said.

But ignorance should not be confused with being stupid, he said. The word ignorance suggests someone who just doesn't know, while stupid intimates no hope for obtaining life's greatest gift: education.

America's youth have fallen into ignorance, Mackie said, but they are not stupid. They just need to help themselves and accept help from those willing to offer it — those parents, teachers and college administrators who have already been through the struggles they now face.

Mackie spoke to students at PHCC's performing arts center as part of the college's Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Commemorative Lecture Series. He put it plainly: They need to work harder.

"We have a moral obligation to be intelligent," he said. "We have raised a generation that views books like kryptonite to Superman."

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Mackie's own story is one of perseverance in the face of adversity. His father dropped out of high school "to pick cotton" to support his family, while his mother attended a "state-approved Negro high school" in New Orleans, Mackie told the crowd.

By the time Mackie found himself in high school, he believed his basketball skills had him on the fast track to getting where he needed to go — until a collision in a game ripped apart his shoulder. Doctors told him he would never play basketball again.

“I remember my mother telling me, ‘What are you going to do now? I told you you should have studied,’ “ Mackie said.

When a teacher advised him to take the Scholastic Aptitude Test, Mackie thought the acronym for the test, SAT, stood for the day he had to take it, Saturday. He got an 840, which he showed his teacher with pride, until she pointed out the highest score on the test was 1600.

“I was so ignorant, I thought I did well,” he said.

Representatives from the Georgia Institute of Technology laughed in his face when he inquired about entering the university’s engineering program, he said. “They saw my SAT score and wouldn’t even give me an application,” Mackie said.

It would be the admissions office at King’s alma mater, Morehouse College, that Mackie said first saw him as a “diamond in the rough.” But the college would only take him if he agreed to take a remedial reading course. He read at an eighth-grade level.

On campus, frustration welled within Mackie as his classmates began referring to him and others from his state as the “Louisiana dummies.” As he headed down into a basement for his reading class, his peers went to study world literature.

But a strange thing happened. His instructor called him Dr. Mackie on the first day and throughout the course. Mackie liked the sound of it.

“They were creating a vision for me,” he said.

The light of education shined on Mackie and he graduated from Morehouse. He eventually earned a doctorate in engineering from Georgia Tech, the same institution that had once turned him away.

Mackie returned to New Orleans, and he found the desire to motivate young people. He speaks all over the world at high schools, universities and jails.

“I didn’t come here to brag. I came here to tell you if you work hard you can be sitting with kings and queens all over the world. But the work starts here,” he said.

Mackie urged self-reliance, pointing to the horror that was Hurricane Katrina in his hometown as proof that positive help may not always appear.

“You can’t count on your government. You have to put yourself in a position to take care of yourself and your family,” he said. “So you need to find what you want to do. Find out what keeps you up at night, what you want to give to the world. It’s in every one of you.”

Mackie did not claim it would be easy. He recalled nights alone in his college room, just him and a computer, crying because the task seemed impossible.

He also touched on the violence and hate that permeates popular culture as an influence that must be resisted in everyday life.

“Something is wrong when our children would rather face bullets than books,” he told the students.

\*A look into the past\*

Mackie’s speech struck a chord with students in the crowd.

Brendan Robinson, a PHCC basketball player, is now also a mentor in the college’s Men of Excellence program, but it wasn’t always that way. The 20-year-old said that in the past he went down a wrong path and ended up in a juvenile detention center.

“I could see myself in him. I had a rough childhood and started hanging with the wrong crowd,” he said. “I took a lot of things for granted, but taking advantage of the things around me at PHCC has really turned things around.”

Mackie gave 18-year-old Lauren Cardoza a book he wrote that elaborates on many of the themes from his speech, and he signed it for the first-year PHCC student.

“Give birth to your greatness,” he wrote inside.

Cardoza said the inscription and Mackie’s speech gave her pause to think about King, who sacrificed for others to have the chance at opportunities his generation did not have.

“As minorities, not enough of us take the time to think about the past,” she said. “We know all the stories, but we treat them as just something that happened, that it doesn’t affect us today. But it does.”