

Farewell Dr. Yamba: A Giant In Higher Ed Retires

During his undergraduate years at Seton Hall University, A. Zachary Yamba would often visit Queen of Angels parish in Newark, where Monsignor William J. Linder was the parish priest.

“He was always extremely intelligent, friendly and a pleasure to be around. Whenever world issues were discussed, Zach was right there in the middle of it,” recalled Linder, saying Yamba would take part in activities sponsored by the young adults in the parish, which Yamba considered a home away from home.

Over the years, the two have enjoyed a close friendship that extended throughout Yamba’s long tenure as the president of Essex County College. Yamba is credited with single-handedly rescuing the school from closure when he took over in 1980.

“He really saved Essex County College from its demise,” said

CEO, with Essex County College President A. Zachary Yamba, who is now retired after serving 29 years at the helm of the school.

Linder, founder and CEO of New Community Corporation and now the priest at St. Rose of Lima in Newark.

After nearly three decades at the helm of the institution, which experienced unprecedented stability and growth under his stewardship, the 71-year-old Yamba retired on December 31. A visionary known for his keen intellect and humble, gentlemanly demeanor, Yamba is recognized as the longest serving college or university president in New Jersey and one of the longest serving academic chief executives in the nation.

More than 600 well-wishers turned out on December 4 to celebrate his many years of leadership and contributions to New Jersey’s higher education community during a gala retirement affair held at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark.

“I’ve had the best and most fulfilling job,” Yamba said in his remarks at the end of the evening, which were met with a standing ovation.

Noting that in life each one of us is called to a special task, citing Martin Luther King, Ghandi and Nelson Mandela as examples, Yamba said: “In my own small way, I too have aspired to be a drum major for quality education and a servant leader at Essex County College.”

Even President Barack Obama issued a statement for the occasion, dubbed “Celebrate the Legacy,” with the President’s message appearing in the journal dinner guests received. A proclamation from New Jersey Governor Jon Corzine was also read.

“It is a pleasure to join your family, friends and colleagues in offering congratulations on your retirement. As you celebrate this milestone, I hope you take pride in the many accomplishments and contributions you have made over the course of your career,” said Obama in his letter to Yamba.

During the event, hosted by Sandy King, the longtime executive producer at New Jersey Network television, Yamba was described by those who celebrated him in phrases like a “giant of a man” to a “servant leader” who always put the needs of his students and the college first.

In the late 1970s, Essex was a college plagued by a high turnover in leadership and its academic accreditation was also in jeopardy. In stepped Yamba, then a highly-respected dean at the school, who had been on the faculty since it opened in 1968, serving first as an English professor before ascending to the position of Dean of Faculty.

Linder said Yamba brought to the president’s position three important ingredients---integrity, independence and commitment.

“He has an ability to look issues staring him in the face and get them under control,” he said.

Guests who spoke included Newark Mayor Cory Booker, Council President Mildred Crump, Rev. Reginald Jackson, chair of the board of Essex County College, Mamie Bridgeforth, a professor at the college, Rep. Donald Payne (D-10th District), Essex County Executive Joseph Divencenzo and Sheriff Armando Fontoura.

Two of Yamba’s fellow countrymen also paid tribute to him, Leslie K. Christian, Ghana’s ambassador to the United Nations and Alhaji Asoma Abu Banda, a prominent Ghanaian business leader, former university chancellor and member of the Council of State for the Republic of Ghana. The evening did not end without Yamba being awarded the keys to the County of Essex, City of Newark, the city’s medal of honor and the distinction of having the intersection where the college sits re-named in his honor, along with the main building in the Essex County College complex.

When it was Yamba’s time to speak—and in his usual spirit of humility—he called the event “an incredible, incredible evening.” After thanking everyone, including his wife, Trish Morris Yamba, children, other family members, colleagues and friends, he later quoted the biblical passage from Ecclesiastes, which begins, “To everything there is a season.”

“The time has come to pass the baton to another leader to finish the race,” he said.

“...After 45 years, it’s time for me to move on.”

But don’t expect Yamba to disappear. The college board has bestowed on him the title “President Emeritus” and he expects to still be involved in the school, which has a search committee looking for a new president.

nsignor William J. Linder, New Community founder and



lesson,” recalled Gamble’s grandmother, Amelia, who raised him from the age of four months. “Through the years, I continued giving him a larger keyboard to encourage his apparent gift. It was amazing to see him master the keys at home.”

During last month’s retirement tribute to Essex County College president A. Zachary Yamba, Gamble played “The Impossible Dream,” from the musical, “Man of La Mancha,” before an audience of more than 600 gathered in the New Jersey Performing Arts Center.

“I didn’t feel worthy,” said Gamble, 20, a second-year liberal arts major at Essex County College.

He recalled it was around seventh grade when he started watching friends play the piano and he began mimicking them.

Anyone listening to Gamble play today would be hard pressed to believe that he did not take his first formal piano lesson until age 17. He is now a classical piano student at the Newark School of the Arts.

“Nowhere in my mind would I think that a young man could grow so quickly as both the musician and a human being in such a short time. David is a remarkable person in every way. His level of pianism now is one of a person who has been studying for a good 10 years,” said Karina Bruk, piano department chair at the Newark School of the Arts, where David has been studying for the past two years.

Gamble graduated with honors from East Side High School, was awarded a math scholarship and enrolled in Essex County College. Initially he majored in engineering, but would later change his major to liberal arts. The Newark School of the Arts immediately accepted him on scholarship as an advanced piano student once the piano teachers heard him play.

“The instructors there were amazed that he had never been professionally taught,” said his grandmother, a volunteer in NCC’s Family Resource Center.

After graduating from Essex, Gamble plans to attend Montclair State University and major in music education.