A Family Affair: The Lester Family Graduates

Meet the Lester family: Mrs. Jean Saffold-Lester, 55, her daughter Temeka Saffold-Cabs, 38 and her son Charles A. Lester, II, 22. They are three generations of family graduating with a college degree – at the same time.

The family is nearly California home grown. Jean, who was born in Isola, Mississippi, arrived to Los Angeles in 1962 and later moved her family to Compton where she currently resides in 1972. She graduated from David Star Jordan High School in 1975. Temeka graduated from Washington Preparatory High School in 1992, and Charles graduated from Morning Side High School in 2008.

For three consecutive years, Southwest has added a member of the Lester family to its roster. Charles enrolled in 2008, Jean in fall 2009 and Temeka in spring 2010. Jean is returning to Southwest, having taken courses in the 90s with a plan to pursue a business and accounting degree. Upon her return to campus, she focused on criminal justice.

The Lester family has a strong family bond rooted in faith. They are as close as you can get.

Since Jean and Charles are pursuing careers in criminal justice through the Administration of Justice program, they’ve taken all, but one of their required classes together. And, at some point during their years on campus, all three family members have shared a class at the same time. It helps to have kids in school when it comes to homework. When mom needed a little extra help in Math 112, Temeka and Charles tutored her.

Education has remained important to the Lesters. Reflecting on her student success, Jean says:

“I have had a strong desire to further my education and get a degree before I left the earth. I spent so much of my time dedicated to my children, my nephews, my nieces and my grandchildren. I spent the majority of my younger years raising my children and children from my family. I never pursued my own education, so I had a goal and desire to get a degree. I wanted to be complete. I wanted to do something for me – this is just for me.”

Temeka, who is receiving an Associate of Arts degree in Liberal Studies, Natural Sciences, also talked about her success and her proudest moments in school.

“I’m most proud of making it to this point, because for a long time I would really beat myself up for not staying in school and not finishing when I should have. Being able to come back and finish, I’m proud of myself for being able to do that, and to hear my 12-year-old tell me how proud he is of me for this accomplishment. Last year, I graduated from a CNA program. That was one accomplishment. Now, I’m applying for the nursing program, so I’m not stopping. Just seeing that I am
moving forward is what I am proud of.”

Charles added that he was proud that he “Graduated from high school and having the opportunity to go to college.”

The road to Southwest wasn’t easy for the family, especially for Jean.

Of her nine siblings, two of her sisters went to prison, so she raised their children in addition to Charles and Temeka. In total, Jean has raised 11 kids. Over the years, she has faced incredible loss, with the death of three of her brothers and two sisters. She lost one of her sisters this past February, and last year in March 2012, one of her nephews who she was raising, was killed. Since she’s been a student at Southwest, she also lost her brother and sister-n-law in 2011.

To stay grounded, Jean attributes “Prayer and staying active in the church, keeping busy with the kids and sharing in other people's lives.” She's also had grief counseling.

In her own words, she affirms, “I’m strong.” Indeed, the Lester family has a lot to be proud of.

According to Jean:

“I’m proud of the positive impact that I’ve had on my children and the nine other children that I’ve raised. We are a very large family and we are a family of people who jump in and take care of one another. My two sisters were in prison and I took their children and grandchildren in. I love children and something inside of me wants to help people make it. I believe that as a race of people, we are not doing as much as we could be doing potentially. Too many of our young men and locked up or dead. Our young women are having children and not pursuing education, so I just want to be a positive force, a mentor who helps people be the best they can be.”

Southwest faculty and staff also added to the family's success.

“Professor Reed has been a big motivation. He was so inspiring with his passion for law enforcement and wanting people to succeed in life. I loved the motivation that he had [in class], it kept me going. There were a lot of times when I wanted to quit because of so many obstacles within my family, but because I enjoyed his teaching so much, I persevered,” said Jean.

“Professor Cifarelli also encouraged me. He told me that his writing skills took him all the way through his master’s, so he encouraged me to continue to follow through with my studies.”

The love between the Lester family is evident. Their story is an inspiration to many. As they reflect on their journey together at Southwest, Jean shares:

“I am excited that both my son and my daughter are walking the stage and that I am with them. I believe that I have been an encouragement to them. When my daughter made up her mind to go back to school, that was one of the proudest moments for me. Even though Charles didn't want to go to school, I had some impact [on him] when he did go [to Southwest]. It's made me really, really proud that he stuck it out. As he continues to mature, I believe that he will further his education.”

“I thank God that I made it.”