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Veteran educator, researcher recognized for character trait of curiosity

- [By DIONNE GLEATON T&D Staff Writer](#)

Dr. Gloria S. McCutcheon, a biology professor and interim chairperson of the biology department at Claflin University, is the Orangeburg County Community of Character honoree for demonstrating the trait of curiosity.

Dionne Gleaton, T&D

"Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose."

That quote from African-American folklorist and author Zora Neale Hurston pretty much sums up the foundation upon which one veteran teacher and researcher has built a stellar career.

Dr. Gloria S. McCutcheon is a biology professor and interim chairperson of the biology department at Claflin University in Orangeburg. As an entomologist, she has enjoyed making sure that students see the connection between public health and the environment.

Having received the Endowed Faculty Award for Innovative Scientific Research, the university's highest research award, McCutcheon has made

significant contributions in public health with a focus on research strategies to address health disparities and decrease pesticide usage.

She has mentored students at all educational levels. Even as an accomplished researcher, she still enjoys learning from her students.

McCutcheon's strong desire to know or learn something has led to her designation as the exemplification of curiosity as part of the Orangeburg County Community of Character initiative.

"I was curious and excited," she said of the designation. "It's certainly an honor to be labeled curious. It certainly does indicate that I enjoy learning. I just don't feel like my day is complete if I don't learn something."

McCutcheon was the first African-American to earn degrees in entomology from both Clemson University and the University of Georgia. She retired from Clemson as a professor emerita after 33 years of directing master of science- and doctorate-level students who are making their own contributions in environmental entomology.

She is in her second year as interim chairperson of Claflin's biology department.

"I've always thought that that was not something that I would want to do, but I was curious enough to give it a try when I was offered the opportunity. After I started with that, I went, 'Oh, what an impact I could possibly have on the lives of young faculty members and the students at large,' both biology majors and non-majors. It's just been an interesting journey both being a teacher in the classroom and an administrator Education is so very important to all of us," McCutcheon said.

She credits her late mother, Hattie Mims Sanders, for helping hone her curious nature and love of learning.

"My mother used to always tell me that education is certainly one thing that no man can take away from you. So I've kind of lived with that principle in mind," McCutcheon said.

McCutcheon, whose research interests include community health, said curiosity has played a big role in her professional life.

"Curiosity is something that just drives me. I just enjoy learning about almost anything. That's why I like to travel. I learn more about people and their cultures, and it's just always so interesting to learn and be engaged with different topics," she said.

McCutcheon also gives back to her community, doing much of her work with Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Inc. and The Links Inc. She is chairperson of the sorority's Stork Nest initiative for young mother and babies and works with The Links' Healthy Lifestyle Program in Orangeburg Consolidated School District Five.

"I also enjoy my work with the Faith and Nutrition Program at Camden First United Methodist Church, where I am extremely blessed and honored to be the First Lady," she said.

McCutcheon is the wife of the Rev. Larry McCutcheon, and they are the parents of two daughters: Dr. Priscilla McCutcheon, a professor at the University of Connecticut, and Carmen McCutcheon, an attorney with the S.C. Legislative Audit Council in Columbia.

"Both, of course, are very curious, and I know that because both of them have integrated research into their own professions," McCutcheon said.

The Community of Character honoree is a principal investigator of a Research Initiatives for Scientific Enhancement, or RISE, project at Claflin, which is funded by a five-year, \$1.3 million grant from the National Institutes of Health. She is also leading a team of 12 researchers at Claflin to increase opportunities and career development for undergraduate students in STEM majors as well as the humanities.

"This year I'm honored to speak at the National Entomological Society of America conference in Denver on the issue of diversity in our discipline in November. We'll also be joining some other faculty as we take our students to the Annual Biomedical Research Conference for Minority Students in Phoenix in November," McCutcheon said.

She said she is delighted to expand her curious nature in her role at Claflin and to make more contributions in the area of public health.

"I've learned since I've been here that the students are really interested in public health as they learn more about how it can impact the lives of an entire community and how we might not have to spend so much time and energy on individual health care if the community is more aware of how to prevent disease," McCutcheon said.

"I also truly enjoy talking to the people in the community and being sure that they understand what's being said in the scientific journals and those types of things and how that impacts our lives."

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