

Robert McCabe, who built Miami Dade College into a major force, dies at 86

By Howard Cohen and Carli Teproff
hcohen@MiamiHerald.com

Former Miami Dade College President Robert McCabe always joked that he arrived on campus “before there was dirt.”

He wasn’t off the mark. In the beginning, back when Miami Dade College had “Community” in its name, students didn’t have a place to study for medical-related careers and there weren’t campuses in Kendall, Homestead or downtown Miami.

Kendall, in those pre-construction days, lapped the edge of the Everglades. Under McCabe’s watch, the sprawling Kendall Campus would open in 1967 on Southwest 104th Street.

McCabe, who led Miami Dade College from a single campus into the nation’s largest community college with campuses across South Florida, died from cancer at University of Miami Hospital on Tuesday night, his 86th birthday.

Related

LEADER: Robert McCabe served as Miami Dade College's president from 1980 to 1995. “It would be hard to think of an institution more important to the future of our community than what is now known as Miami Dade College, and Bob McCabe was the leader who propelled it down the path to excellence,” former Miami Herald publisher and education advocate David Lawrence, Jr. said.

He left a mark on local and national education in opening the Wolfson Campus in downtown Miami, now the annual home for the Miami Book Fair International, and the Medical Center Campus. He also founded the New World School of the Arts with Miami Dade College’s partners Florida International University and Miami-Dade Public Schools.

As a leader in the We Will Rebuild efforts post-Hurricane Andrew in 1992, McCabe felt his school should help Homestead. As a result, the Homestead campus he had envisioned and initially opened in 1985 inside First Baptist Church for 350 students was built out and opened as the fifth campus.

During his 35 years steering the college, 16 years as president, McCabe also led educational reforms, opened several branch centers and revolutionized the way teachers were rewarded by giving pay raises based on classroom performance — not degrees and research.

“He wanted to make sure the community college had credibility and he changed everything he could possibly get a hold of,” said J. Terence Kelly, McCabe’s former vice president at Miami Dade and later chancellor at the Alamo Community College District in San Antonio. “He led the college to greatness, achieving everything because he wanted it to be that way.”



When McCabe retired in 1995, more than 1,000 people showed up at the Crowne Plaza Hotel to wish him well and listen to his stories — including one about how a dead camel was once dug up on the North Campus.

“I am not easily overwhelmed, but I am overwhelmed,” McCabe said at the time. Those who loved him said he was not given to braggadocio. He’d deflect praise. But even McCabe couldn’t ignore what he had managed at Miami Dade College on the occasion of his retirement. “There is much in which I take pride that has been achieved during my tenure.”

“He was a true human being and someone who really loved Miami and gave a lot of his energy and love and passion for Miami Dade College and someone who is always a builder and who helped a lot of people along the way,” said the school’s current president, Eduardo Padrón.

“He was a dedicated alumnus who did so much for the university,” said University of Miami President Donna Shalala. “His unwavering passion for education helped to forge strong local partnerships, such as the one UM enjoys with Miami Dade College, among other sister institutions.”

McCabe’s passion, his family says, was remedial education. Back when Miami Dade College had a customarily lenient admissions policy, McCabe, an advocate for under-prepared students, insisted on testing incoming freshmen in remedial language arts and mathematics.

“He was very concerned that everybody could get in and then quickly flunk,” said McCabe’s wife, South Florida historian Arva Moore Parks. “They had to take this test, and these courses, and then when it was time for graduation they were soaring. It was a unique idea at the time and one of his major accomplishments.”

Parks, who married McCabe, a widower with no children, 21 years ago, considers his 2000 book, *No One to Waste: A Report to Public Decision-Makers and Community College Leaders*, a lasting gift in the discussion on higher community education. In the book, McCabe stresses that remedial education has to be a higher priority.

“That was his whole concept. We need to educate everybody, especially in our community,” Parks said.

“His distinguished leadership of our fine Miami Dade Community College earned him accolades. But my greatest admiration was for the family that he and Arva established together,” said Adele Graham, wife of former U.S. Sen. Bob Graham. He added: “Bob was an ‘extreme disruptor’ who made this a different community than the one he moved into. He had the courage to challenge the status quo in order for a better future.”

McCabe, born on Dec. 23, 1928, in New York, graduated in 1952 from the University of Miami and initially became a physical education teacher at Redland School. He joined then Miami-Dade Community College in 1963, straight out of a Ph.D. program in Texas. Peter Masiko, the college’s second president, hired McCabe as his assistant.

The view then was simple. There was one building, on an old naval air station near Opa-locka airport, which was supposed to hold the entire college. Some called it “Chicken Coop College” for its appearance out in the sticks.

In 1969, McCabe was tapped to be the executive vice president, after a brief stint as the president of Essex Community College in Newark, N.J. He remained executive vice president for 11 years until Masiko retired in 1980. McCabe was named the college’s third president. Miami Dade later grew to seven campuses, two centers and more than 165,000 students from around the world.

David Lawrence Jr., the retired publisher of the Miami Herald and known nationally for his work in “school readiness,” called McCabe “one of the great builders” of modern Miami.

“It would be hard to think of an institution more important to the future of our community ... and Bob McCabe was the leader who propelled it down the path to excellence,” Lawrence said.

“Bob never liked to be still,” added Winston Richter, McCabe’s former chief of staff. “There was always some

innovation under way.”

With his outside-the-box ideas to better education, McCabe was able to grow the college into the nation’s largest two-year college and helped create what is now the Wolfson Media History Center.

“Many people at the college often said to me, ‘You’ll be fired within six months,’ McCabe told the Herald when he retired.

Through McCabe’s tenure, the college’s population changed. When McCabe first started at the school, it was 80 percent white, non-Hispanic. But when he retired, the college was 80 percent minority and more than 75 percent of entering freshmen had to take remedial classes.

Miami Dade College reached out to immigrants, multigenerational poor families, older residents and middle-class high school grads to boost attendance. McCabe’s radical reforms reshaped the school’s somewhat lackadaisical approach to education in the freewheeling 1970s. He demanded more of students, structured challenging course schedules and set standards for graduation.

McCabe’s work was recognized several times. He was the first inductee into the University of Miami’s Education Hall of Fame and the recipient of the American Association of Community Colleges’ 1995 Leadership Award, College Board Medal for Distinguished Service and Harold W. McGraw Jr. Prize in Education.

For McCabe’s work to reform community colleges in the United States and Canada, he was named a MacArthur Fellow in 1992. The prestigious program, sponsored by the Chicago-based MacArthur Foundation, gave a no-strings-attached \$365,000 stipend to a select few, who make a difference in the community.

“He won the MacArthur prize on a Tuesday and we got married on the Saturday. That was quite the week, very special,” Parks said.

In 1995, the long hours got to McCabe, who said he often put in 12-hour days. Some faculty members felt the time had come for a change in leadership. The college’s board, however, was prepared to offer him another three-year contract.

Once he retired, McCabe continued to advocate for education. He didn’t “plan to linger” around the halls of the campuses he helped guide, however, he said just before stepping down.

“I have seen longtime CEOs stay around, make themselves available — and get in the hair of the new person. I’m not going to do that,” McCabe told the Herald. “But I’m only going to be 10 blocks from here.”

Credit McCabe’s demeanor, a low-key personal style.

“He had the most secure ego of anyone I’ve ever known,” Parks said. “He doesn’t need to have praise. He says, ‘I know. I did that.’ And sometimes I’ll get irritated when he doesn’t get the credit. New World School of the Arts was his concept. And it was a big thing, his requirement for remedial education. He says, ‘I know. I did that.’”

In 1997, the college dedicated the Robert H. McCabe Hall, a seven-story, \$30 million complex on the downtown Wolfson Campus.

Padrón said at the time that the building was named after McCabe because “it represents a beacon of hope for this community.”

McCabe was thrilled with the new building. “What this institution stands on is the belief in the value of every human being,” he said.

McCabe, to the end, would continue to push for the concepts he conceived as changes in the Florida Legislature — state funding cuts of almost \$19 million since the 2007-08 school year while 63 percent of high school graduates had

to take at least one remedial course upon enrollment in 2012 — put his “whole concept under siege,” his wife said. At the time of his death, he was executive director of the National Alliance of Community Technical Colleges.

“He’s a kind, loving human being and very supportive,” Parks said while her husband was in hospice care at the University of Miami Hospital — cheered by the recent visit of two of his favorite family members, Ginger and Jane, the family dogs. “My daughter and son brought the dogs in, which they allow, and that was very special.”

In entering hospice care, McCabe and Parks, worried that more than \$4,000 in unused medication for chemo therapy and the effects of cancer, would go to waste. The couple offered to donate the drugs to Camillus Health to help those who can’t afford the medication.

“These people literally changed Miami,” Camillus Health Executive Director Dr. Shed Boren wrote in an email to the Herald and others. “Miami Dade College would not be here at this level if was not for this man. If anyone deserves respect it is these two. He built a college. He welcomed all.”

In addition to his wife, McCabe is survived by his stepchildren, Robert and Gregory Parks, Carey Guerra; his grandchildren Alex, William and Isabelle; and his beloved dogs. A celebration of life is planned for 3 p.m. Jan. 9 on the Wolfson Campus. Instead of flowers, donations may be made to the Robert H. McCabe Scholarship Fund at the Miami Dade College Foundation, 300 NE 2nd Ave., Room 1423-1, Miami, Fla., 33132.

Follow [@HowardCohen](#) on Twitter.