

a good man says goodbye

beloved principal of 16 years to retire

When Winsley Melancon was displaced from New Orleans in 2005 by the devastating Category 5 Hurricane Katrina, her life changed. She was living in the Austin Convention Center, well aware that she could not return to her old school, her old friends.

When her mother went looking for a new school for her, a bus driver recommended McCallum. Immediately upon arriving at the McCallum campus, principal Mike Garrison, then just starting his second year as the school's principal, welcomed her with open arms.

"She tells me she took a walk to Sunshine Drive and saw the campus and fell in love," Melancon said. "When she walked into the doors she saw Mr. Garrison walking and introduced herself. She explained to him that I needed a new school to attend. He said to her, 'This may not be what your child is used to; however, we'll treat her like family!'"

Melancon started at Mac the next Monday and quickly found a home; Garrison, who had heard from her mother about how much she loved music, introduced her to the band director, Carol Nelson.

Winsley says Garrison served as a source of comfort and a mentor for the rest of her time in high school.

"Garrison and his amazing faculty made sure I got all the counseling I needed from my trauma I experienced," Melancon said. "They also never treated us different; when I did wrong, he would tell me to shape up, because he knew I was so much better. I'm forever grateful for his kindness, starting with my mother. In two short years at McCallum I made lifelong friends and amazing memories."

Garrison, who has similarly worked with other high school students in his tenure as principal, announced that he will be retiring at the end of the school year. He has spent 40 years in education; 17 as a teacher, seven as an assistant principal and 16 as principal.

"I've been eligible to retire for probably about six or seven years; I have reached that point in the TRS [Teacher Retirement System]," Garrison said. "So it is always there; it's always on your mind. [Now] I get to spend a little more time with my family. Strike off on new adventures, new opportunities, while I'm still young enough and healthy enough to do something else after education. I do look forward to that opportunity to be creative and find something new to engage in. No matter what I find, it will never be as rewarding as anything in education. Working with teachers, students, parents; there's nothing like that."

Garrison grew up in Bulverde, Texas, as the second-oldest out of 10 children. After coaching and teaching, he took his first administrative job in Pasadena ISD, then moved to Austin in 1998, where he was an assistant principal at Dripping Springs and Bowie. He started as principal at McCallum in 2003.

He said that it was difficult to send the email notifying staff of his decision, as he will miss working with the McCallum community, but he has faith in the school continuing without him.

"It's sad, because we're family here, and I'll miss seeing these guys on a day-to-day basis and working with them," Garrison said. "But I know they're going to be fine. They're all sharp people, professional people; they love students and love McCallum. It won't be the same, but it will go on, and it'll be McCallum High School. Kind of like when the senior class leaves; it's the not the same, but it keeps going on."

"Mr. Garrison is everywhere," parent Amy Hufford said. "Whether it's attending opening night of a MacTheatre show, cheering at an athletics event or personally attending to one student's needs, he unfailingly demonstrates his commitment to the Mac community with his time and attention. His model of being completely present for whatever the moment calls for is a lesson in leadership."

Parent Charlotte Sobek remembers Garrison as a calming presence during the shooting threats that occurred in February.



LOYAL BLUE: Principal Mike Garrison watches the 2017 Blue Gray scrimmage at McCallum on Aug. 19. Garrison was a fixture at the annual game played the Saturday before school starts. "I think that the Blue Gray game is a great way to kick off the new school year." The 2019 edition of the scrimmage will be the first in 16 years without Garrison as the school's leader. Photo by Dave Winter.

"The morning after a threat of gun violence at McCallum, I went up to the school out of concern for my son's safety that day; Mr Garrison was in front of the school taking time himself to calm the worries of parents and kids," she said. "I felt much better after talking to him. He is accessible, patient and kind, great leadership qualities. He is quick to let parents know what is happening at school as well as online in a way that does not drive fear deeper, but instead helps us let it go and know he is doing everything possible to keep McCallum kids safe and calm so they can focus on their education, as it should be."

Many students interviewed praised Garrison for his friendliness and good attitude.

"Although his title says principal, throughout my four years at Mac I've always seen him as a friend, thanks to the constant jokes he cracks and the good vibes he gives off," senior Paul Raper said.

One quality students noted in particular was the effort he makes to make each student feel noticed and welcomed.

"I think he genuinely care[s] about people; he go[es] out of his way to say hi to you," junior Shanta Graves said. "He always ask[s] questions about how your day was going, and it seem[s] like he [is] interested in getting to know each student he [sees]."

English teacher Diana Adamson said that while he takes a deeply individual approach to leadership, Garrison also knows when to stay hands-off.

"He supports his teachers, which allows us to support our students," Adamson said. "I don't even know the words, because he's allowed us to be the ones who are right there, but at the same time he knows every kid in the school. He can stand in the hall, and he knows names of kids that are well-behaved, and he knows names of kids that are poorly behaved. And he cares about every single one of them, and he is really great at looking past behavior and at the person."

Other teachers also spoke to Garrison's good judgment and temperament.

"He listens well to teachers as well as students," math teacher Richard Cowles said. "I think he is impeccably fair. He doesn't let the politics of life interfere with him making sound, consistent decisions. And you can tell that he genuinely likes high schoolers; he wants to see you, he wants to say hi, he wants to have a good relationship with you. He doesn't see himself as the sultan of the school; he sees himself as someone that works with the school. And I think that's a very good attribute of any principal."

Cowles also said that he feels like he can count on Garrison as a friend, not just a boss.

"Another thing that Mr. Garrison does is that when you come in, he's interested in hearing how you're doing and having a conversation," Cowles said. "He doesn't want to talk school only. I feel comfortable going to him and sharing about when my son has a good game in baseball, [or] my daughter does well in basketball, or different things like that. Whenever we get together, nothing takes 30 seconds. It always takes five minutes, because we talk about our lives. You know he's a friend, and not all principals are friendly... He has a general concern and affection for all people. And that's hard to replicate."

One of band director Carol Nelson's favorite memories of Garrison was when the principal, early on in his tenure, chased a streaker during the band's halftime show at House Park.

"He dropped his pants, and he started running through the band, and Mr. Garrison took out after him, and he chased them all the way," Nelson recalled, laughing. "Mr. Garrison ran straight through; the boy then climbed over a fence, and Mr. Garrison stopped there. After that, the parents would say [to him], 'Hey Mr. Garrison, you got your tennis shoes on?'"

Adamson said that while she will deeply miss Garrison, she understands his decision to leave, and appreciates the time he has spent as a leader for McCallum.

"This is a job that's hard," Adamson said. "It's getting harder all the time, and you have to get out when you can. I don't want to see anybody be so old that they can't enjoy it. He has been the best principal. I've worked for several; he's truly been the best, because he's allowed us to be our best."

Garrison reassured the community that he is committed to fully serving out the rest of his days at McCallum, and that even when he leaves, he is not completely abandoning the school.

"My last days are sometime in the summer, I'm still here. I'm all in until the last day," Garrison said. "Even then, from afar I'll still be in."

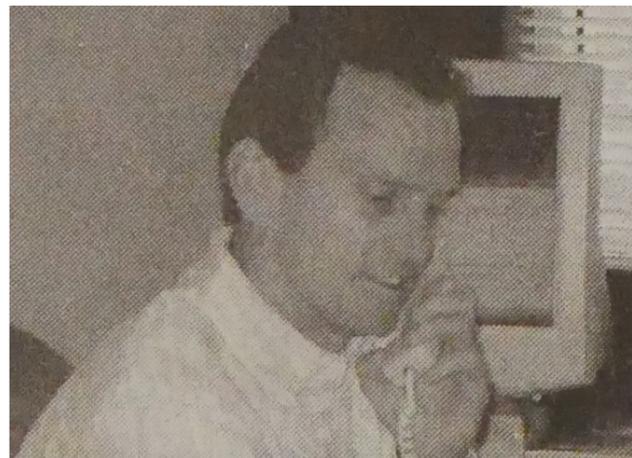
Garrison said that the hiring of the next principal is up to the district; he believes that they will consult staff and community members for feedback on what qualities they'd like to see in the next principal, but he does not know whether they will hire somebody immediately or place someone in interim. His advice for the successor?

"McCallum is a very, very unique place; lots of really great students, lots of really dedicated staff. Just make sure that you bring your love and caring attitude to McCallum, the school and the community, because it will be deserving of that," Garrison said. "And the new principal, whoever it may be, will get the support of everybody here in the community, and hopefully they have a have a good long run like I had here at McCallum."

Ultimately, while it was a difficult choice to leave, Garrison says he feels confident in both his own future and that of McCallum.

"It is just a hard decision," he said. "I'll miss it, but it's time."

—story by Sophie Ryland



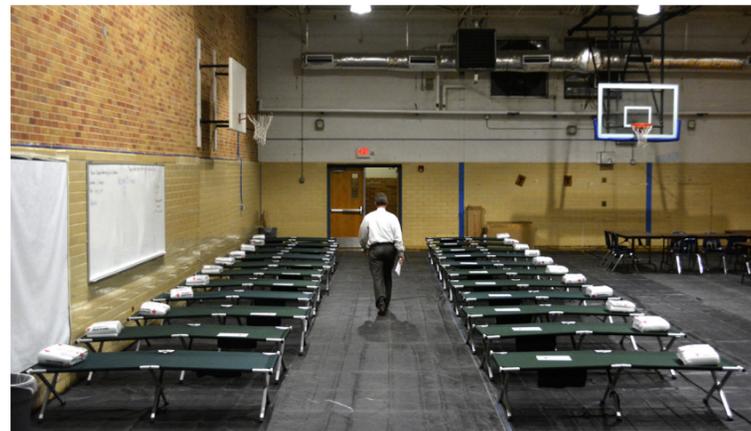
Garrison works in his office in August 2003, his first month on the job. *Shield* file photo.



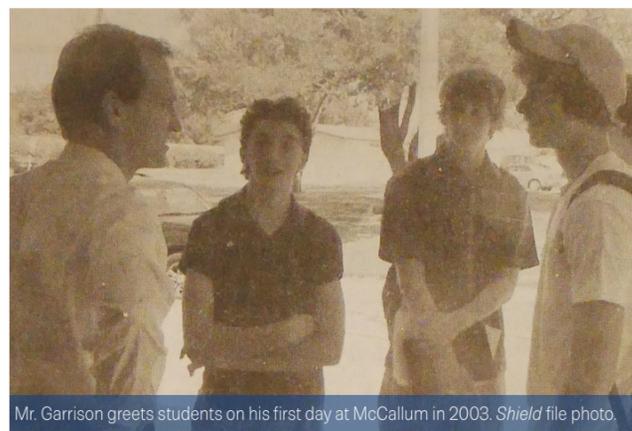
The Garrison greeting: a graduation staple for 16 years.



Garrison with the Victory Bell in 2017.



Mr. Garrison surveys the small gym on Aug. 29, 2017 in advance for Red Cross volunteers after Harvey.



Mr. Garrison greets students on his first day at McCallum in 2003. *Shield* file photo.



Garrison reads announcements on March 15 when seniors were all sick on the same day.



Ms. Murray and Ms. Cerame wish Mr. Garrison all the best.

minute no. 59,510



SATURDAY 9:00 p.m.



I sure hope he has a chance, and I'm really excited to hear what he has to say, and I think all of these people out here would agree —Sheila Berry



MARCH 30

After holding rallies in El Paso and Houston earlier in the day, Beto O'Rourke continued his campaign for the presidency in Austin. Photo by Gregory James

PEOPLE 243 Page by J. McLellan