

WILLIE MIMS: FROM GROUNDS WORKER TO THE HEAD OF THE CLASS



Horticultural issues are the ones that are important to elongating the survivability for humans on this planet. Specialties like addressing soil erosion, an impending fresh water shortage, invasive plant species, food shortages, and spreading pollinator friendliness are among the crucial bodies of knowledge that fall under the vast umbrella of our general purview. But each specialty requires more receptive students to learn its catalogue of wisdom and to carry it forward to its useful applications in the future.

However, the general branch of horticultural education has been attracting fewer participants in recent years. It's that fact that begs the question, "Where should the horticulture sciences find its next collection of students to cultivate?"

Addressing that question in part, Dr. Girish Panicker of Alcorn State University began mentoring Willie Mims, a grounds laborer in Mississippi who held an astute and practical knowledge of horticultural methodology as displayed through his work at ASU. Dr. Panicker encouraged Mr. Mims to formalize his knowledge base through an educational tract. So he did. And Willie Mims has thrived within that program.

First of all, Willie Mims comes from a background that has not traditionally embraced science education. He hails from the small town of Fayette, Mississippi, population just over 1600. The medium household income there is shy of \$20k per year. And the Civil Rights Movement was slow to include Fayette. So academically advancing opportunities were not to be found for Mr. Mims, and the population there overwhelmingly sought opportunities as day laborers, mechanics, and repairmen.

Willie Mims grew up in poverty and as a product of a single-parent household. His mother was strict and demanded a solid performance from his public school education through Jefferson County High School.

But there was no money for continuing his education into college. So he began work. He was handy and a hard worker. After dedicating several years to servicing whatever jobs he could find, he embarked on a career as a welder where he proved himself solidly. It was good work, and he was relieved to have it.

But in September of 2009, he started working as a Grounds Laborer at Alcorn State University. That move was the first step toward a definitive change in Mr. Mims' life. His work at ASU was so meticulous that, after a year and a half, he garnered personal notice from Dr. Girish Panicker who invited him to join the Conservation Research Center to assist the Farm Manager working within that endeavor. His work at the CRC proved extremely gratifying, and he was quite good at it.

Mr. Mims reflects that as a child, he would watch his grandfather work in his garden every day. He could see the satisfaction in his grandfather's face as he tended to his vegetables and was able to produce a substantial portion of what his family needed to eat. Mr. Mims began feeling something similar with his work assisting the Farm Manager.

Mims' duties as the Assistant Farm Manager included maintaining the field and the variety of crops grown there, monitoring the students from ASU who would rely on the farm to deepen their understanding of an otherwise 'textbook' approach to horticultural study, and helping conduct the myriad of research projects initiated there during his time of employment.

Dr. Panicker noticed two things about Willie Mims right away: 1) Mr. Mims held but a high school diploma, and he was successfully handling complex research work on horticultural crops at the same level as was being done by Research Associates who held an MS in Plant and Soil Sciences. And 2) Mr. Mims seemed to flourish as a communicator to farmers and undergraduate students who would visit the farm facility. Both populations reacted very well to his presentations. These qualities revealed to Dr. Panicker that Willie Mims could enjoy a blossoming future in horticulture, beyond his current position.

Dr. Panicker began taking Mr. Mims on farm visits whenever they were expected to present or implement their research programs in several places across Mississippi. The farmers seemed to prefer Mr. Mims in this capacity. His genial demeanor and developing talent as a communicator created an atmosphere in which his audience proved increasingly receptive. Dr. Panicker's faith and trust in Willie grew, so much so that often Dr. Panicker would send him out on these missions by himself.

Willie Mims was coming into his own.

After another year, Mr. Mims' boss decided to retire. For Dr. Panicker, the natural replacement for that position was Willie Mims. He had the skills, and he had a winning personality. But he did not come equipped with the formal education usually expected for the Farm Manager at ASU. So Dr. Panicker hired Mr. Mims anyway and then encouraged him to pursue his education at ASU under his mentorship. He continued his full-time employment, and he added this new component to his life, that of part-time student.

Willie Mims was additionally emboldened by having Dr. Girish Panicker as a mentor. He knew even before then that Dr. Panicker was a giant in his arena, a man of significant accomplishment and deserving of tremendous respect. Having him recognize Willie's potential and take an active role in honing it was an honor in and of itself. Panicker commendably kept himself available to dispense advice and guidance, taking him under his wing. It was among the components of this story that infused Willie Mims with the pride and self-confidence that spirited his dedication to do well in school.

After Mr. Mims' years of hands-on experience, applying his growing mass of knowledge to this focused academic study, seeking a degree in Agriculture, felt natural. It was a great fit. Willie excelled in the classroom. And he felt he was committing to something truly important, something of value, more than just to himself.

As a student, Willie Mims realized opportunities to travel to regional and national conferences where he shone. He attended the annual conference of the Mississippi Academy of Sciences where he was recognized for his oral presentation on the successful introduction of 102 varieties of melons into Mississippi. And he even presented at the annual ASHS conference in Las Vegas this past summer where he received accolades for his work on The Effect of Composted Animal Waste on Muskmelon (*Cucumis melo* L.) Production on a Heavy Soil.

Mr. Mims' involvement in other areas have proven indispensable. He and Dr. Panicker introduced Turmeric into Mississippi. They distributed Turmeric to more than 2500 farmers and to the general public. Willie gave many talks to people about the cultivation practices applied for organic Turmeric production.



With this effort, as with so many others like it, Willie Mims has assisted Dr. Panicker in helping to make the world in which he lives a better place. They have broadened the Mississippi food table while reducing threats posed by high cholesterol and obesity.

As Dr. Girish Panicker was a long-time member of ASHS and has personally testified to its many personal and professional benefits, he suggested that Willie Mims consider taking that step too. It turned out to be an easy decision for him. Mr. Mims has joined our ranks at ASHS and has already enjoyed mixing with some of the greatest minds in global horticulture as a peer.

Indeed, Willie Mims has come a long way on the strength of his astute nature and hearty work ethic. And the best part is that he appears to be just getting started.

Dr. Panicker declares that Mr. Mims is an inspiration to all students and other laborers who want to improve their station and benefit the world around them. “Any research project can succeed if that project has people like Willie Mims.”