Arnold Mitchem, Ph.D., president emeritus of the Council for Opportunity in Education, has been a voice for low-income, first-generation students and individuals with disabilities his entire career. Thanks to his work, the federally funded TRIO Programs (the largest discretionary program in the U.S. Department of Education) have expanded by nearly 400 percent and now serve more than 872,000 students at 1,200 colleges and universities.

Mitchem graduated from the University of Southern Colorado in 1965. Before receiving his Ph.D. in foundations of education at Marquette University (MU) in 1981, he studied European history as a Woodrow Wilson Fellow at the University of Wisconsin.

He began his career on the history faculty at MU. In 1969, he was named director of the Educational Opportunity Program at MU, serving in that role until 1986, when he relocated to Washington, D.C. to represent low-income and disabled students nationally. Mitchem served as president of the Council for Opportunity in Education until October 2013, when he assumed his role as president emeritus.

Mitchem is a member of the Executive Committee of the European Access Network as well as a former trustee of the College Board, and past-president of the Committee for Education Funding. He currently serves on the Board of Trustees at Marquette University.

Mitchem has been awarded honorary doctorates from eleven universities: CUNY-Lehman College in New York; DePaul University; University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana; University of Liverpool, England, Marquette University; Marycrest College; University of Massachusetts at Boston; Lewis University; St. Joseph University in Philadelphia; St. Louis University; and SUNY Buffalo State.

Virdena Gilkey

Virdena Gilkey is the executive assistant for the Mayor and Wichita City Council and has been employed with the City of Wichita for over 19 years. She was educated in the Wichita public school system. Gilkey received a Bachelor of Science degree in business administration with a minor in management from Friends University (1992), and a Master’s of Business Administration from the University of Phoenix (2006). She has also received various trainings and certifications. Her future goal is to obtain a doctorate degree.

Gilkey is a dedicated worker in both the community and is a member of the advisory board for Educational Opportunity Centers program. She is the first lady of St. Mark Cathedral Church of God in Christ. She serves as church administrator and board chair for the SMC Family Life Center, Inc., which she formed in 2008 to contribute to the needs of families and children in the community.

Gilkey is a licensed evangelist in the Church of God in Christ, first lady of the Kansas Southwest Jurisdiction of the Church of God in Christ, former director of the KSW Urban Initiatives, advisor to the Kansas Southwest State Women’s Department Executive Board, former vice chair of the Kansas Southwest Auxiliaries in Ministry Convention, State of Kansas certified mediator, a motivational speaker, and a marriage/family counselor. Gilkey is married to Bishop Mark L. Gilkey and mother of three children: Breanna, Ryan, and Ciara.