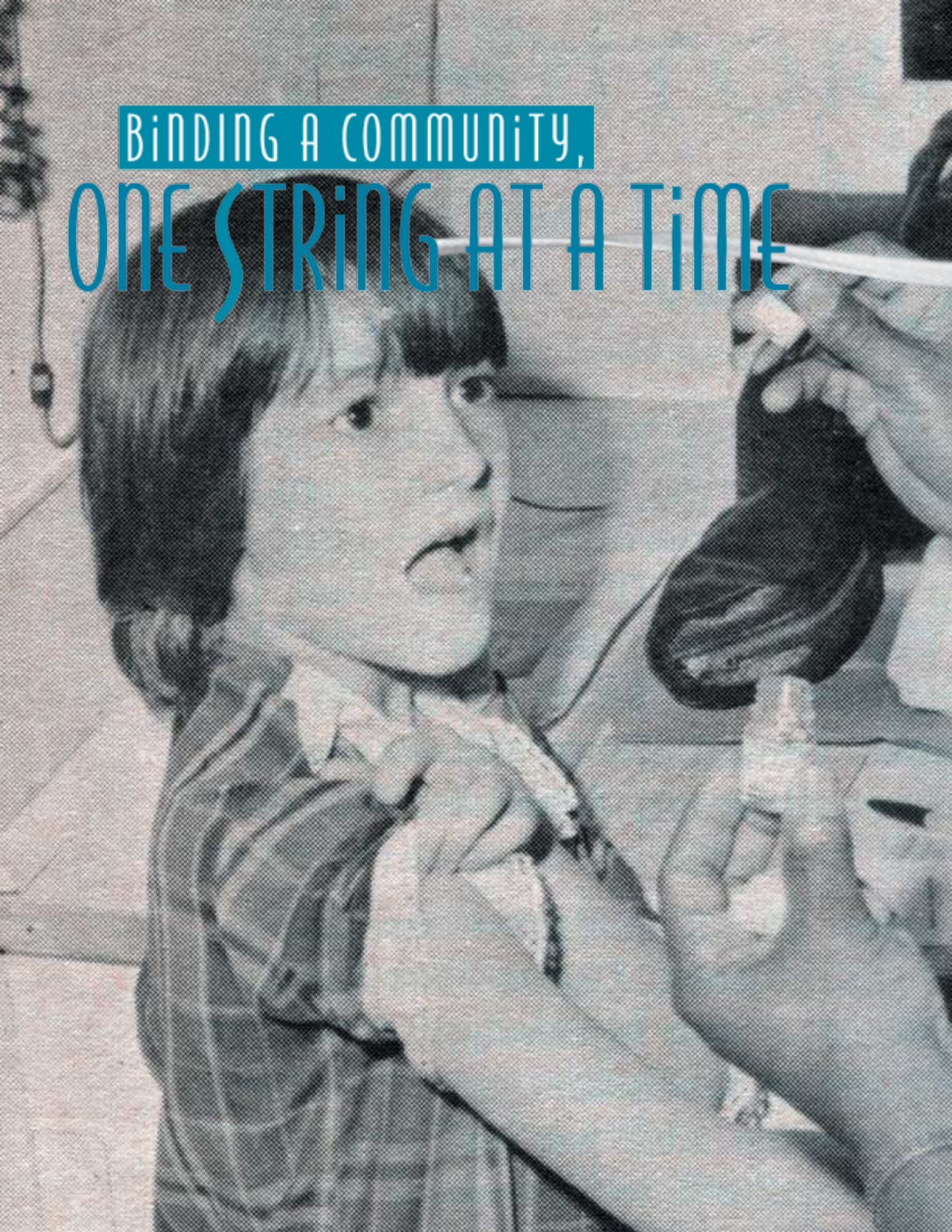


BINDING A COMMUNITY,
ONE STRING AT A TIME





In this 1969 photo, a young patient winces as a Hinds County nurse prepares to administer a shot at the Operation Shoestring medical clinic.



Nancy Gilbert, Shoestring's original executive director, fields a call.

BY SCOTT ALBERT JOHNSON

LIFE IS NOT A SOLO PERFORMANCE. It requires cooperation and, sometimes, a helping hand. Millsaps College prides itself on its emphasis on service to others, as manifested in the Faith & Work Initiative and the new 1 Campus, 1 Community program. Millsaps strives to establish healthy and mutually beneficial relationships with partners throughout the Jackson metropolitan community to give real-life meaning to the philosophical and moral lessons taught here.

One such partner is Operation Shoestring. Located on Bailey Avenue less than a mile from Millsaps, Shoestring (as it is affectionately called) serves the low-income community that surrounds it with after-school education and care, parenting and family literacy sessions, a food pantry, and more. The organization's stated mission is "investing in the hearts and minds of our community," while "serv[ing] as a ministry of empowerment and a rallying point for reconciliation in the larger community."

Founded in 1968 in the basement of Wells United Methodist Church on Bailey Avenue, Shoestring was intended to be a response to the struggles of the 1960s and the ugly intolerance that the turmoil of the civil rights movement revealed. The stereotype many still imagine when they think of the South—that of the hateful, vicious racist—was in fact confounded by the decent impulses of many Jackson residents of all races.

Indeed, it was these impulses that led to the founding of Operation Shoestring, and the connection between Millsaps and Shoestring goes back to those dark days. In the summer of 1966, James Meredith—the first African American to attend the University of Mississippi—led a "March Against Fear" to call attention to civil rights abuses and racism. Shortly after beginning the 220-mile march from Memphis to Jackson, Meredith was wounded by a sniper.

Dr. T. W. Lewis III, B.A. 1953 (*see related story, page 35*), an emeritus professor of religion and one of the College's most beloved faculty members, was among those courageous local citizens who urged a sane and humane response to the Meredith shooting.

"There were some community people who had been working in the area," Lewis recalls. He said former Millsaps student Bob Kochtitsky, Tougaloo professor John Garner and his wife, "my Millsaps colleague Lee Reiff and his wife and I went to the NAACP to see what we could do to help. They said to help with voter recruiting.

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We’re trying to accomplish some of the same community-building things in our own Midtown neighborhood, which borders the neighborhood served by Shoestring. They are an agency that goes about their mission extremely well, and they have done it for a long time.”

“But the people who actually lived in the neighborhood said that what they really needed was a place for their children to play. Mayor [Allen] Thompson had closed the city playground, Jaycee Park, to prevent its integration. So we secured the use of some vacant lots and built swing sets and seesaws.”

What began as a small, though important, gesture of good will evolved into a more sustained effort.

“The minister at Wells, Russell Gilbert, asked us if we would come there and help with some of the deeper issues that they were dealing with in the community,” says Lewis. “They wanted to create a mission to the neighborhood. So we went up there and started giving tutorials to children from Galloway Elementary School, using Millsaps students as the tutors. That was the beginning of what became Operation Shoestring.”

and Edward McLaurin, B.A. 2005, have all served as art instructors. Even the organization’s executive director, Robert Langford, has a Millsaps connection: His wife,

Betsy Bradley, B.A. 1984, recently won a Livesay Award and serves as director of the Mississippi Museum of Art.

“The respective missions of Millsaps and Operation Shoestring are similar,” says Langford. “Our work is about empowering the community and bringing folks together to create greater wholeness in our larger community. Millsaps, it seems to me, is a place where the focus is not only on academic excellence; they also teach servant leadership and civic responsibility.

“Millsaps understands this work very well, and they aren’t just talking about it; they’re doing it, and they have been doing it for many decades. It’s a perfect fit, and we’re thrilled to be working

with them, as we have been for nearly 40 years.”

Bartlett says her Millsaps education gave her a lens through which to see the real, sometimes harsh world more clearly and compassionately. “Millsaps definitely made me appreciate my childhood, and so does Shoestring,” Bartlett says. “I grew up in a privileged environment compared to the kids who come here, and my Millsaps experience was instrumental in developing my awareness of that fact. I majored in political science, and I had professors like Dr. [Iren] Omo-Bare who helped me see the inequities in the ‘playing field’ and the importance of trying to address those inequities in society.”



Sophomores Katie Collins and Emily Stewart with Shoestring kids Kalaria Thompson and Courtney Woods at the Delta Delta Delta house in December of 2005.

Today, the Millsaps legacy at Operation Shoestring shows up among its staff, its board, and its volunteers. No fewer than four current board members are Millsaps graduates; Sarah Bartlett, B.A. 2003, Shoestring’s development coordinator, Lea Barton, B.L.S. 1996, an artist profiled in the fall 2006 issue of *Millsaps Magazine*,

sponsored by the Campus Ministry Team and hosted by campus sororities. Shoestring students come to visit campus during the Easter and Christmas seasons and rotate through the various houses, participating in arts-and-crafts activities hosted by the older students.

MILLSAPS students also give their time to Shoestring on a regular basis, both through tutoring at Shoestring’s Project KIDS after-school and summer programs and through the “Bunny Shoestring” and “Santa Shoestring” events that are

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Through these activities and the on-site tutoring, a bond develops between the children and the young adults that mirrors the connection between the two organizations.

“Millsaps shares some commitments with Operation Shoestring, and there’s so much that we can learn from them,” says the Reverend Lisa Garvin, the Millsaps chaplain. “We’re trying to accomplish some of the same community-building things in our own Midtown neighborhood, which borders the neighborhood served by Shoestring. They are an agency that goes about their mission extremely well, and they have done it for a long time.

“I appreciate Robert Langford immensely as a friend and partner to our efforts. He’s a great sounding board for us as we continue to try to expand and improve the College’s relationship with the larger community.”

DR. DARBY RAY, associate professor of religious studies and the director of the College’s Faith & Work Initiative, describes how these efforts have begun to take shape in a more organized way. “We are committed to supporting the development of global citizens who care about the common good and are active and engaged in the community,” says Ray. “Through Faith & Work, we help students connect to lots of different service opportunities and internships. We touch a lot of different students, and different parts of the community that way.”

The College recently expanded its Faith & Work Initiative through a new program called 1 Campus, 1 Community, which is supported in part by a \$575,000 grant from the Hardin Foundation. This effort will deepen and broaden the College’s work with two sets of partners: the north Midtown neighborhood and the K-12 education community, which Ray calls neighbors in proximity and neighbors in mission (respectively). She cites Operation Shoestring as “a player in both worlds.”

“They have experience and wisdom in addressing the challenges that we face,” says Ray. “I see Operation Shoestring as a sort of brain trust from which the College can learn.”

“There’s a great marriage between what we are doing in the Bailey Avenue area and what Millsaps is trying to accomplish

in Midtown,” agrees Langford. “It just makes sense.”

While the College’s relationship with Operation Shoestring clearly serves the greater good on a macro level, sometimes it’s easier to see the partnership’s benefits from a more intimate point of view.

“There is one kid who stands out to me,” says McLaurin, who started at Shoestring his freshman year as a work-study aide to artist Barton, a fellow graduate and mentor, and now teaches art classes there. “He reminded me of myself when I first arrived at Millsaps. His name was Deonte, and I remembered him from working there when I was still in school. He was a good kid, but he got distracted easily, and his behavior suffered for it.

“He joined my class and started taking a real interest in art. He



Shoestring student Jacquesha Caffee and junior Tiffany Grimes at the Delta Delta Delta house.

would even do artwork at home in his spare time, then bring it and show it to me. He ended up becoming the star student in our class, once he settled down and realized that he liked it and could do it.

“He gained some self-confidence and some self-discipline. For a lot of kids these days, that’s all it takes.”