



Alumni Spotlight

Solomon Leonard '13, '16M, and Kiheem Bynum '13

As longtime friends and classmates at Millersville University, the bond between Millersville University alumni **Solomon Leonard '13, '16M**, and **Kiheem Bynum '13** has existed for over a decade. In the wake of the pandemic in 2020, their connection came full circle in providing an opportunity to mentor current Millersville University students during a challenging time of uncertainty.



Solomon Leonard '13, '16M



Kiheem Bynum '13

Although Leonard and Bynum each had a unique student experience, they met in 2010 at Millersville University as fellow students and members of the Millersville University Gospel Choir, and their connection propelled each of them and the University organizations in which they participated into an incredible period of exponential growth. Leonard is originally from New Jersey and started in 2010 as a transfer student, while Bynum, who is from Lancaster, began his freshman year in 2008. "I actually grew up in Lancaster, so I was very familiar with the Millersville University Gospel Choir. It was like something I looked forward to doing, because I grew up around church and choirs and music and that was something I loved. So, when I went to Millersville as a freshman, I automatically knew I wanted to be in the Gospel Choir," Bynum recalls.

However, when Bynum joined the Gospel Choir in his first semester on campus, the group membership was small. Bynum remembers, "When I got to Gospel Choir, the choir that I knew that used to have all these students with the flashy robes... it actually was, in rehearsal, just like five people – and when we had engagements, there would be about four of them who would show up." During his first semester of freshman year, there was an opening for the position of the Gospel Choir director, and Bynum was encouraged to audition by his fellow choir members. Following an exhilarating and successful audition, and a change to the organization's by-laws to allow a freshman student to assume the role of director, Bynum was named the choir director. He states, "So the law changed, and I became the first person to be the director of the Gospel Choir my freshman year... Gospel Choir -- it was my heart. It was like everything... It went from a choir of just four or five people to lots of students. At one time, we had about 40 students showing up places to sing, and it was a consistent base, and we developed a presence on campus that was known, and not just on campus, but all throughout the East region."



Through Bynum's leadership, the Gospel Choir expanded its membership and its scope to include a band, as well. "Gospel Choir had a band, and the band was made of people who didn't go to the University, but they were faithful. It's because I had a bunch of friends who didn't mind helping, and I was from the area... I partnered with a lot of churches in Lancaster, so we had a lot of support as a choir," says Bynum. "We really made an impact in the city of Lancaster... We did a lot with my time there... and I have to make mention of Ms. Cheryl Hodges, who was the advisor back then. She trusted me to do what I felt was necessary for the choir, and I appreciate her for that -- because we grew."

In 2010, Leonard attended Millersville University and credited his mother (Bernice Harris) as the primary catalyst. Initially Leonard aspired to become a history teacher, but transitioned his academic focus to social work. "By the time I got to Millersville, my mind had shifted to more so focus on some of the basic needs students have before you get a chance to teach them each day. So, I focused on being that liaison between home and getting them ready to learn for school," says Leonard. As a new student, Leonard joined the Gospel Choir, where he encountered Bynum as the director of the group. As Leonard remembers his experience when first joining Gospel Choir, his perspective was that "It's young, so it's alive, it's vivacious... and most people when you come somewhere new, you sit in the back -- and that's what I did; I sat in the back. And I sat there, and I felt the room just get full of life." Bynum recalls, "By the time Solomon got there, we [Gospel Choir] were kind of like an oiled machine..." Leonard would attend Gospel Choir with a bass guitar, and Bynum encouraged him to play the bass, and he was impressed by Leonard's musical talent. Bynum recalls, "We just connected. It went from that to we just became real friends, like we're brothers." Leonard proudly states, "From that point, it was an organic, seamless connection between us two and since then we've just kind of been in each other's lives, and over the years we've grown closer, but since that moment I knew..."

In addition to his extracurricular involvement in Gospel Choir, Leonard was also active in Bible Campus Ministries (BCM), which at the time when he joined in 2010, had a very small membership. Through Leonard's involvement with BCM and with Gospel Choir, the growth trend that Gospel Choir was experiencing spread to BCM, and both organizations grew and thrived simultaneously. Bynum explains, "When he [Solomon] got to Millersville, he got involved with BCM... That was where the partnership with BCM and Gospel Choir came... That's the reason we connected and when our organizations collided, we multiplied. It wasn't hard to advertise for students to come to our concerts, because we knew if you were in BCM, you were coming. And it was vice versa. If BCM was having an event, they knew Gospel Choir was going to come, and if Gospel Choir came, they were coming in numbers."

Further opportunities for growth in Gospel Choir emerged through the connections that Bynum formed during his experience working in the Financial Aid Office as a student at Millersville. Recalls Bynum, "When it came to knowing people, I was in Financial Aid, so it just worked together. Dwight Horsey and his staff, they knew how passionate I was about the Gospel Choir, so it was easy to get buy-in from the administration. They would come out and support us. They would ask us to come to their events... We had the backing of administration when it came to operations of what we did, and that felt really amazing."

Valuable connections with faculty and staff members in the campus community provided mentorship and guidance to Bynum, Leonard and the student organizations in which they participated. Leonard says, "There was seemingly a desire for people just to come together, and from that, we were able to take that momentum and build, not only amongst ourselves, but the bridges that Kiheem was speaking of, not only with Gospel Choir, but we found ourselves connecting with many organizations." These connections across campus included Millersville Concerned Men, which was led by Dwight Horsey, who provided mentorship and wisdom to the group, Cheryl Hodges and Dr. Rita Smith Wade-El. Additionally, the growth and success of the organizations is attributed to the support of key figures including Jorrel Nugent '13, Tyriq Clark '14, Ryon Freeman '14, Milan Credle '14, Anthony Stansbury '14, and Tianna Arnold '16.

Both Bynum and Leonard acquired mentorship skills through their experiences of being mentored from compassionate leaders at Millersville. Regarding his approach to student mentorship, Bynum proudly mentions, “I have an open line when it comes to students. I have an unwritten rule, no matter if I know a student or not, if anyone wants to talk about anything, when it comes to spirituality or even just development, I’ll take a call, and I kind of took that from my mentor, who was Dr. Rita Smith Wade-El. ‘Rita’ is what we called her... I’ve patterned myself that way. When it comes to connecting about school, I have an open line policy with these students.”

For Leonard, he credits Dr. Leonora Foels as playing a guiding role in his academic success, Dwight Horsey, Jan Bechtel, Cheryl Hodges, and Dr. David Johnson for the valuable assistance that they each provided throughout his student experience. “There were many great people at Millersville University – some that are still there, some who have gone on, and some who have gone on and transitioned in a different way,” says Leonard. “It takes the wisdom of elders to keep you going, and that was one of the pieces of academic matriculation that we accepted... We grew into those helpers organically, and now we’re here doing what we’re doing.”

In 2013, Bynum and Leonard each graduated from Millersville University with a bachelor’s degree. Bynum graduated in the spring of 2013 with a bachelor’s degree in psychology, and Leonard graduated in the winter of 2013 with a bachelor’s degree in social work. While Leonard continued his studies at Millersville University, receiving a Master of Social Work degree in 2016, Bynum relocated to Atlanta, Georgia, and enrolled in a graduate program at Clark Atlanta University, where he earned a master’s degree in public administration with a concentration in policy in 2017. Following Bynum’s departure from Millersville, Leonard stepped into a mentorship role with Gospel Choir from 2014 through 2016. “When Kiheem left in 2014, because I had a relationship with the Gospel Choir, although he was gone, the need for an older person to be in the mix was evident, and because I was well older than a lot of the members, I became that person,” says Leonard.

Although their paths diverged geographically, the connection between Leonard and Bynum remained strong. “We were connected, we would visit each other, and that’s kind of how we stayed, as alumni, connected,” Leonard says. In 2019, Leonard and his wife, Taylor Leonard '14, visited campus and connected with Jovan Cosby '21, Allen Chatmon '22 (Current BCM President), and Ryon Freeman '14, who was the advisor for BCM, and a program called “In Reach” was subsequently created. “The ‘In Reach’ is an extension of BCM and Gospel Choir alumni, so it’s an alumni initiative to connect with students,” explains Leonard. “The ‘In Reach’ was the opportunity for alumni to come back and to give students some wisdom and insight ... And the first speaker, ironically, was Kiheem... and from that point on, there’s been a bridge built with the current presidents, and that’s kind of what’s been maintained through the pandemic, and what we’re kind of continuing to build on now,” says Leonard.



The connection that Leonard established in 2019 during his visit to campus became the foundation for a vital reconnection between Leonard and Bynum and current Millersville students when the pandemic began. Bynum explains, “Solomon always remained connected to the students... and through Solomon’s ongoing connection, they [BCM] were having online Bible study with the current students who went to Millersville. I don’t know any of the students today – but when I was on the Zoom calls, they knew my name. It was so humbling. It took me back to the point where I remembered how much I loved what I was doing, because I knew why I was doing it.... When 2020 happened, and I was talking to those students via Bible study online, I was listening to stories and all I kept thinking about was just things that I went through, and how helpful it would have been to have some of that knowledge. So, I was like, ‘I’m all in.’”

Currently, both Bynum and Leonard are successful professionals in their respective career fields. Bynum is a Senior IT Business Analyst for Delta Airlines, in Atlanta, Georgia. Leonard is a Social Emotional Learning Specialist in Ellington Public Schools in Ellington, Connecticut. In addition to their connection as friends, Leonard and Bynum share mutual aspirations for academic advancement and professional growth. Regarding their educational pursuits and goals, Leonard shares, “There is constantly a pushing and a connecting beyond the moments that we shared from that span of time that we were together. So much so that when one decides to continue education, many others decide the same thing. Kiheem and I have spoken about it, but we’re both about to begin the journey of pursuing a doctorate of some sort.”

As the friendship connection between Leonard and Bynum continues to grow and extends to current students, fellow alumni, and to the Millersville University community, they each are eager to impart wisdom and advice to students facing the challenges that they once encountered. As Bynum states, “Your faith and your ability to keep moving, and to see opportunity is what’s going to help you get to your next level.” Leonard’s advice to students and those facing uncertainty is, “Always remember, life is not happening *to* you – but it’s happening *for* you. Although you may be facing a crisis, crisis in many other languages is more so associated with opportunity, because it’s usually an opportunity for you to grow. Anything going on mentally, physically, emotionally, academically, there is a remedy, there is an answer somewhere, but be patient enough to allow it to present itself to you. Don’t give up.”

