

Presidential Preview:

New Collin College President Sets Course

By Kirk Dickey



Photos by Nick Young, Collin College Photographer

Collin College is celebrating its 30th year in 2015.

Inside a beat-up old Ford Explorer, a woman sat crying in a college parking lot.

Startled by a knock on her window, she looked up to see Dr. Neil Matkin, then president of San Jacinto College near Houston, standing next to her car. Although neither had met before, he had stopped to ask why she was crying. She told him she was afraid to go into the building because she didn't think she could do the work college would require.

After talking for a little while, he convinced her to come inside, where he helped walk her through

enrollment and financial aid, assuring her she would be OK.

Three years later, she graduated with two associate degrees and safety certifications that opened the door to a great-paying job at a nearby manufacturing plant. A few months ago, she emailed Matkin excited about the launch of her own safety training business.

This is the type of success that Collin College's new district president enjoys the most.

"She started off her career, the mother of two adult



Dr. Neil Matkin brings many years of educational experience in a career that has spanned many regions of the United States.

children, crying in the parking lot because she was worried that she couldn't do the work," Matkin says. "And now, not only is she successful, she is branching out on her own. That's a story a lot of community college presidents can tell."

Talk to Matkin for just a little while and he will tell you a success story. He has collected a lot of them over 25 years of teaching and administration in four states, and he's eager to add new ones for Collin College as well.

Whether it is the one about overcoming major obstacles to bring 428 schools into Illinois' telecommunications network in just under two weeks or experiences he's had helping students one-on-one, the stories all come down to a few things: empathy, collaboration and vision.

Those are all qualities he returns to time and again when discussing higher education.

Growing up in the small town of West Orange,

Texas, Matkin was the first member of his family to go to college. However, he joined the Navy first, which he says was "the right medicine at the right time." He got his first taste of teaching while serving as an electronics technician at the Naval Submarine School, helping sailors learn the ships' systems and the other material they needed to know.

When he got out of the Navy, he came home to Texas and went to college at Ambassador College, where he earned his associate degree. Later, after earning his bachelor's degree and two master's degrees, Matkin returned to teach at Ambassador University. He later completed his Doctorate of Education at East Texas State University (now known as Texas A&M University-Commerce).

His early experiences as a student stuck with him, and today he is determined to put students first, listening to what they have to say and creating an environment where they can excel. He also is determined to propel the college forward as an economic engine for the region.

Mac Hendricks, a McKinney resident who chairs the college's board, calls Matkin a remarkable leader. "We know he will do the best job for Collin College because he has the background to take the college to the next level."

Matkin and his wife Janyth moved to Collin County from Louisiana, where he had served as the executive vice president of the Louisiana Community and Technical College System. Previous roles included the presidency of the Central Campus of San Jacinto College and a variety of faculty, administrative and staff roles with the Virginia Community College System, the Illinois Board of Higher Education and Ambassador University.

"My wife and I are still pinching ourselves," Matkin says. "Collin College is recognized throughout Texas and nationwide as an institution of the highest caliber. We feel like we've gone to heaven being in Collin County. This is such an amazing community."

Coincidentally, Matkin started his new job on the day of Collin College's first-ever Founder's Day celebration, which marked 30 years since Collin County voted to establish the college. As he stood next to students and employees making a giant "30" on the lawn of the college's Central Park Campus in north McKinney, he was moved by the significance of the moment, as he became the third president of the second youngest community college in Texas.

Much has changed in 30 years and big plans are ahead. In the fall of 1985, about 1,500 eager students stepped into classrooms the first time. This year nearly 52,000 students will attend Collin College's seven campuses and locations.

If there is one thing Matkin would like neighbors and friends in the community to know, it's that the "deal of the century" is right in their backyard because students have the benefit of new campus facilities and top-quality academic programs that

transfer to universities for the lowest tuition in the state.

He is excited about new buildings opening at the Central Park Campus in the next few months and is planning a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the new conference center and classroom building that will open this fall. Matkin is also delighted to welcome back the college's second president for the dedication of the Cary A. Israel Health Science Center, which will be open by spring 2016.

With campus expansions on the horizon and large businesses like Toyota, Barclays Bank, Hisun Motors, FedEx Office and State Farm making investments in Collin County, the college is planning new programs and degrees to meet a multitude of shifting workforce needs. Matkin has been meeting personally with key community leaders and stakeholders such as business executives, legislators, superintendents of schools and city leaders to begin charting a direction for the college with trustees that will serve the region decades into the future.

"We are here to serve our entire community," he says. "We're here for our community and our students. When folks rally together around students as their primary mission, we can do some pretty powerful things."

As the college grows, student success isn't just a matter of offering the right program, he says. It is also a matter of empowering students as individuals. He notes his affection for the J.M. Barrie quote, "Be kinder than necessary because everyone you meet is fighting some kind of battle," as he talked about his ideal environment for any college.

"The truth of the matter is that everybody we meet is facing a battle," he says. "Why wouldn't we be in the business of making everyone's load a little bit lighter?"

Building on the success of the college's first 30 years and the strength of the local economy, the welcome mat will definitely be out for students and the community at Collin College with Neil Matkin at the helm.

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