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GRADUATED SCALES

Story by Devon O'Neil
Photos by Bob Winsett

Colorado Mountain College's humble vice president advances the school through giant steps.

ALTON SCALES SHOULD BE THE ONE TALKING. HE'S THE CEO, AFTER ALL.

This is his meeting. But instead of leading the discussion, he's eating popcorn and pretzels and drinking lemonade next to an understudy, Nicole Fazande, while she runs the show.

It's a sunny day in April on the Dillon grounds of Colorado Mountain College. Scales, who is both the CEO of the Summit campus and vice president of the CMC system, generally works out of Breckenridge but has driven around Lake Dillon for the monthly staff meeting. He asked Fazande to lead

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the meeting because he likes to "empower" his staff, he says, and prepare them to move forward in their careers.

Once a world-class 110-meter hurdler at the University of Texas, Scales looks dapper as always: bright blue shirt, red tie, black slacks, shoes like mirrors. At 53, he still cuts an imposing presence with his thick-chested, long-legged, 6-foot-3 frame—someone you can imagine blazing down a track. Plus, as usual in this snow-white community, he's the only African American in the room.

When the topic turns to the budget, Scales steps

in. "Though we've had a modicum of gain, it's only starting to move us closer to where we should've been budgeted in the first place," he says. "I'm just asking you to be conservative with what you spend. Is toilet paper essential?" He smiles for effect. "We're not quite to the BYOTP point"

People laugh, and suddenly Scales's phone rings. There is no way I expect him to answer it, not now, but he checks to see who it is. Then he jumps up from his chair and leaves the room. A few minutes later he returns, sits down, and gets right back into the flow. I later ask who called, and he says, "Ed, our IT guy. I have to catch him when he's free."

It does not occur to Scales that maybe the IT guy should work around the CEO's schedule. That has been his modus operandi since he took the job in 2007, shepherding Summit's community college through the biggest growth in its history with equal parts humility and tireless initiative. More than 3,000 people took classes at CMC Summit last year, highlighted by a 45 percent enrollment increase in Breckenridge, thanks in part to CMC's sparkling new \$14 million facility. And now, for the first time in its 44-year history, CMC is about to offer bachelor's degrees in addition to associate's degrees, a crucial step toward "educating rural Colorado," as Scales puts it.

There's a good chance Scales won't be around to see the first class graduate, however. He has always wanted to be a college president, which he considers the last step in his unlikely rise through higher education, and his goal is to become one within two years. But that's for later. Until then, he'll continue to broaden worldviews and mop floors and improvise poetry at the college he's fallen for, hard—and which has fallen for him right back.

Scales has always preferred community colleges to big universities. "They're designed to be agile," he says. "You can see results really quickly." Though he got his start at the University of North Texas, where he coordinated airport shuttles for conference-goers, he's spent most of his career at small, maneuverable institutions like CMC. You could argue that his impact is greatest in such bubbles, where, as English professor Joyce Mosher says,





On being African American in snow-white Summit County, Scales says: “I do think about it, just because when you look around and you’re the only one, it requires you to think about it. I will say this is a very affirming community. I feel very comfortable here.”

“Alton creates the optimal environment for people to function.”

It helped that he had older siblings to teach him, and that he came from little. He shared a bedroom with three siblings as a kid in Amarillo, Texas, where his dad worked as a janitor and his mother was the personal cook for oil tycoon T. Boone Pickens. Neither of his parents graduated high school, which is why they stressed education so heavily to their kids.

Scales, who spent much of his youth reading encyclopedias and a thesaurus to educate himself, didn’t learn he was dyslexic until after he’d graduated college. By then, he was on his way to working at General Motors, he thought. He earned a master’s degree in manufacturing and engineering, but instead of entering the industrial world, he took a job at a college. That one led to another, and another, and soon enough he was dean of students at a school in Kansas, then assistant vice president in Pennsylvania, then the new Summit campus dean.

He is known to arrive for work at 7 a.m. and often not leave until 9 p.m., after sitting in on a class and strolling the halls. (“I manage by walking,” he explains.) His tactics initially took

BACHELOR PAD

IT TOOK ROUGHLY 18 months of political wrangling, but in April CMC officially announced its first four-year degree programs: a bachelor of arts in sustainability studies and a bachelor of science in business administration. Classes for each program will commence this fall at CMC’s nine campuses around the state.

While skiers and snowboarders are among the winners (imagine earning your degree at the base of world-class resorts like Breckenridge, Steamboat, or Aspen), the new programs fill a crucial void in Colorado’s higher education. Until now, there existed a geographical area the size of Maryland—more than 12,000 square miles spread over nine counties—with no options for earning a baccalaureate degree.

Thanks to the college’s already low tuition rates, and the fact that the additional offerings aren’t expected to raise costs much, students residing in CMC’s district can earn a bachelor’s degree for as little as \$5,880, or \$30,720 including four years of room and board. Says CMC president Dr. Stan Jensen: “We’re looking at this as a way to increase the number of college graduates in the state of Colorado.”

A self-proclaimed introvert, Alton Scales has surprisingly extroverted hobbies. He plays the drums at weekly happy hours, he improvises poetry, and he even took to the stage to stump for CMC at Summit County's *Dancing with the Stars*.



professors by surprise. “Usually the instructional chairs will come in and observe, but to have the actual CEO come in, I can’t remember that ever happening before,” says Phil Huff, a computer science instructor. Adds Mosher: “He’ll just show up in the classroom and start improvising spoken-word poetry. It really turns on the students.”

Scales also brought a small-business development center to the Dillon campus to help locals write business plans and secure loans, and he founded a CMC lecture series that is now a strong draw for students and nonstudents alike. All of his moves are aimed at a broader goal. “I want people in the community to have an opinion of us, even if they don’t have any experience with us firsthand,” he says. “Are we of value? I want them to say ‘yes.’”

To raise the school’s profile within the community, Scales makes himself extra visible. He won the local version of *Dancing with the Stars* two years ago, and he plays the drums at weekly happy hours and at weddings during the summer. “He’s a great salesman for CMC, but that’s not his personality,” says Daniel Webster Johnson, a close friend of Scales. “He could go forever, I think, without talking to people and still be happy. But he says, ‘The more involved I am with the community, the more effective we can be as a college.’”

Scales, for his part, admits he’s an introvert. “People drain me,” he says. But you get the feeling, as Johnson hinted, that he views his job as more of a noble duty than work. He collects antiques and raises African fish in aquariums, but otherwise seems to have few indulgences. He’s never been drunk. Doesn’t eat red meat or pork. Prefers tea to coffee. His colleagues couldn’t remember him ever being angry. “One of the things I like most about me is you don’t see any great dips, and you don’t see any big spikes,” he confirms.

It’s a commitment subtle enough to be missed, but so effective that few do. “As a leader, he does something I’ve never seen anybody do,” Mosher says. “He elicits everybody’s best without trying.”

Back at the monthly staff meeting in Dillon, Fazand wraps up the agenda, and everyone gets up to leave. Scales begins rearranging the tables and chairs at the front of the room as his colleagues slip past him into the hallway. “Be blessed,” he tells them as they go.

The meeting was nothing special: two hours of planning and brainstorming, mainly. But since Scales believes the bulk of one’s success is made before an event takes place, every step has its significance, no matter how mundane. Even meetings that inch by like worms.

I follow him down to the office he keeps in Dillon, which on this day is virtually bare save for an aloe plant on the desk. (He will soon voluntarily cede the space to accommodate a newly hired professor.) I ask if he did any snowboarding this winter. Nope, he says; he doesn’t much care for snow. I ask if he runs anymore. Nope, he says, and the conversation slowly fizzles.

But then we get back on the subject of his school, and suddenly his velvet tenor voice is purring again. He talks about how much he enjoys steering CMC’s future and defers credit for many of the good ideas that have come to life during his tenure, maintaining that he simply recognized them. His brother Hurles (who played two years in the NFL) told me Alton is well aware of where he’s come from and how much he’s achieved, but you’d rather catch a whiff of that from Scales himself. He’d rather spotlight those around him.

“We have pockets of excellence everywhere,” he says. **CSM**