

## **Man on a Mission**

### **S.F. resident makes it his goal for school to succeed**

#### **Retired businessman generous with time, checkbook**

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Inside Bay Area

**DALY CITY** - JUST ABOUT EVERYONE at Jefferson High School knows Spencer Holeman.

He's not a teacher or administrator, nor does he have children attending the school. But he walks through Jefferson's hallways, passing students who are sure to at least give him a "Hey, Mr. Holeman" while others stop and chat with the retired businessman.



SPENCER HOLEMAN walks the hallways of Jefferson High School in Daly City Tuesday. The retired businessman has donated thousands of dollars to the school and has helped write numerous grants for projects that benefit its students. (JOHN GREEN Staff )

Six years ago, after selling his personal care line to the GAP, Holeman walked onto the Jefferson campus and, for the most part, hasn't left.

"I fell in love with Jefferson," the San Francisco resident said.

Holeman, 66, has devoted his life to helping the school's students succeed. In addition to donating thousands of dollars to Jefferson, he has helped write numerous grants and set up programs to boost student achievement. He meets with teachers and observes classes every day, and he moved his office from Burlingame to Colma so he could be closer to the school.

But Holeman admits he hasn't always supported public schools. He used to focus his donations toward providing students in San Francisco with a private school education. Then one day a teacher from Jefferson met Holeman at a basketball game and asked him why he didn't donate to public schools.

"I used to think there was no discipline at public schools and graffiti," Holeman said. "But when I came to Jefferson, that just wasn't true."

While Jefferson is a good school, he realized it needed extra help. On the California Department of Education's Academic Performance Index, a ranking system that measures students' performance, Jefferson last year received a 2 on a scale of 1 to 10. Holeman's goal is to bring the school up to at least a 5.

"Making money is OK, but this is what I really want to do," he said.

One of the first projects at Jefferson that Holeman funded and helped start was an after-school tutoring program for seniors at risk of not graduating. The program started with just 10 students, all of whom graduated at the end of their senior year, he said. The following year it grew to 20 students. Once again all graduated, and many went on to college.

Three years ago Holeman helped establish Jefferson's School Within a School program. It started with 40 at-risk sophomores and allows for smaller class sizes so teachers can give each student more attention. Students in the program also have the same teachers for a year, allowing them to better monitor their progress. And the teachers share a prep period so they can share how students are doing in each class.

The program now includes 80 sophomores and 40 freshmen, Holeman said. Furthermore, he helped school officials write an \$800,000 federal grant that will allow the school to expand it even more.

So far, it is showing positive results, Holeman said. For example, 91 percent of the program's sophomores last year passed the California High School Exit examination, he said.

Holeman is responsible for starting a number of other programs at Jefferson, including homework centers, a college readiness program and a summer high school transition program for incoming freshmen.

"We have to dig out the perception that kids can't get a good education at Jefferson, because they can," he said.

Furthermore, he started an after-school learning center at Thomas R. Pollicita Middle School, one of Jefferson's feeder schools. It provides tutoring, educational games and self-esteem development for lower-performing students.

Because he can't pay for all of these programs out of his own pocket, Holeman has started the nonprofit Children's Empowerment to help raise donations.

Last year alone Holeman was responsible for bringing in about \$300,000 for the school of his own money and donations. This year, he expects to raise another \$300,000.

"It's OK. I'm a frugal guy and I don't spend a lot on myself. I drive a '96 Toyota," said Holeman, who is single with no children.

English teacher Marcos Cortez said Holeman provides resources for the school but never tries to micro-manage how teachers do their jobs.

"He has a presence here to ensure that the grants are being used effectively," he said. "If there's a resource I need, I feel very comfortable approaching Spencer."

World history teacher Sheelah Mercado said Holeman tries to get to know all of the students in a school program. "We talk about issues getting in the way of students' education," she said. "The kids really love him because they know he provides a lot of experiences that they normally wouldn't have."