

Second Glance

Sam

BY RON HADFIELD



It just doesn't add up, at least at first.

Seventy-nine-year-old Samuel Everett McReynolds Jr., professor emeritus of mathematics, died in an Abilene nursing home during the Centennial year, leaving behind carefully calculated gifts to others, including the university where he explained math to students for more than 40 years.

He was eccentric by many people's standards. He was kind to others but kept to himself. Painfully humble, he was named ACU's Outstanding Teacher in 1981, but you'd have to find a copy of his resume to know it. He was frugal to the *n*th degree, a number only a lifetime mathematician such as he might figure. But he was generous in stunning ways even his closest friends are now beginning to understand.

He was born in May 1927 in Morrilton, Ark., a small city 51 miles northwest of Little Rock. It was a quiet location in which to grow up for a boy who never outgrew his own shyness. His mind was never far away from his home in the Ozark mountain foothills.

Sam was the son of S.E. McReynolds Sr. and Opal Childress McReynolds, and he adored them. As their only child, he inherited their home and belongings, but could never bring himself to sell them. He returned to check on things each summer, and for years, paid a local man to start his father's car regularly, just to make sure it would still run.

He was a toddler when the Great Depression began in 1929. Although his father was a banker during those financially disastrous times and probably endured it better than others, Sam never lost the urge to save things, just in case they might be needed one day. His office in the Foster Science Building was "stacked to the ceiling with old tests and quizzes and math journals," as one co-worker recalled. "I don't think he ever threw out a single piece of paper," said another, and Sam's apartment looked much the same.

Sam never owned a house other than his parents', living for years near campus in a one-bedroom furnished apartment. He moved in 1997 to an unfurnished two-bedroom one, soliciting help to shop for furniture, then buying some for the first time in his life. He used the extra space to collect more things.

"I don't think you could have slept on his second bed even if you wanted to," chuckled Roy Shake, associate professor emeritus of biology who was Sam's closest friend and later, executor of his estate. "It was stacked with all kinds of things. Sam was apparently a soft touch for anyone needy who was selling something, especially veterans' groups. I thought we'd never stop finding light bulbs in there. And grocery bags."

He never married, and although he occasionally found a lady who caught his eye, his reserved nature proved a deterrent. "I was just too slow, and I guess she just gave up on me," he confided in a friend.

Without someone to cook for him, he never cared to learn the skill. He ate every meal at a local restaurant or cafeteria, many times alone. On Wednesday nights before church he enjoyed eating out with couples he befriended at South 11th and Willis Church of Christ.

His idiosyncrasies were known by many: where he sat in church and at basketball games in Moody Coliseum, breakfast at 6 at a local restaurant and lunch at Luby's, how he asked longtime departmental secretary Ruby Rutherford to type all his tests long after he had a computer on which to do it himself. He refused to hire graders, insisting on reviewing each quiz and exam he ever gave in an effort to understand how well his students were faring.

He was a good teacher, an explainer of subjects that confound and create fear in many students. He taught foundational math courses for business majors as well as advanced calculus classes for those on their way to careers in physics, engineering, and those planning to teach math themselves.

"Sam was patient," said professor of mathematics Dr. David Hendricks ('87), who like many faculty in the department, had sat in Sam's classes as a student. "He would spend long hours with you if you had trouble understanding concepts. There were students lined up outside his door at the start as well as the end of each semester, wanting to know more."

In 1994, the department had an opening for one faculty member. It also had two strong finalists: Dr. Carol Williams and Hendricks. Department chair

Dr. Bo Green ('64) was wrestling with a decision when Sam approached him one day with a startling suggestion.

"Bo, do you think that Dwain Hart (academic vice president at the time) would be open to the idea of me giving up half my salary if it would help us hire both these people? We sure could use them both," said Sam.

Green was floored. "Sam, it's not like you have an overwhelming salary yourself," said Green. "Are you sure?"

"I have plenty of money, Bo," said Sam. "I would like to do this for the sake of the department. Let's go see Dwain."

"Are you sure?" echoed Hart, and after discussion, all parties agreed to McReynolds' selfless offer. Half of Sam's salary was nowhere near large enough to hire another professor, but it helped, and Hart was able to find funds for the balance. Sam had one stipulation: neither Hendricks nor Williams could find out as long as he was alive. The circle of those who knew was small and sworn to confidentiality. For more than 20 years, the secret was kept.

Even Hendricks, who is now chair of the department, was in the dark. "I found out at Sam's funeral," he said. "All those years we worked together ... I never knew. He never let on. I am very humbled to know that he saw some potential in me as a faculty member at ACU. It's really something."

"I was very grateful," said Williams, professor of mathematics and now dean of the Graduate School and associate provost for distance education and service. "But I was not surprised. He lived very simply, a quiet, servant-type person. It was a very gracious and giving thing for him to do."

McReynolds' demise began in the months following a car accident, when a raging infection in his shoulder forced him to bed and accelerated the onset of congestive heart failure and eventual confinement to a nursing home. He would fall 20 years short of outliving his father, something he always thought he would do.

With Shake's help, Sam used his remaining months to determine who would benefit from his estate: land back in Arkansas, vehicles and cash for the few cousins who would survive him; Morrilton High School in honor of his parents; an Arkansas church; a children's home; and scholarships for ACU math majors. His gifts alone to ACU made him one of the Centennial Campaign's major donors, a surprising figure for an easily embarrassed professor who didn't draw an exorbitant salary nor display a lifestyle reflecting anything other than a person who humbly lived day to day.

Oh, and one last gift to his home congregation.

Sam was a longtime member of South 11th and Willis' missions committee, taking an active role in that congregation's aggressive approach to help further the kingdom in faraway places.

Church secretary Eileen Stephen estimates they have supported more than 100 missionaries and missions efforts through their first 50 years, often instead of paying a preaching minister's salary. Willis also is home to Abilene's only deaf congregation, holding separate classes and worship for those who require signing, or for those who want to practice it themselves. Half of the elders can preach using sign language, and another 100 members are either fluent in it or know enough to help greet deaf visitors and members easily.

Willis has an intense interest in helping the deaf in western Kenya, a place where the ailment affects large numbers of people and governmental programs are nonexistent. Orphaned deaf children are routinely tied to a tree in the forest and left for animals to eat.

The Willis missions committee decided that Sam's sizeable endowment gift to them would be used to help start Sam's Place, an orphanage for outcast deaf orphans southwest of Kisii where they will receive love and nurturing and learn the language that is a key to their future. Land has been purchased and fences have been built.

The sum of Sam McReynolds' life grows day by day as additional stories are discovered, such as his kindness to children and his quiet philanthropy to widows who, with his help, experienced the joy of short-term missions work, something he was quick to tell others: "Oh, I could never do that. I could never do that; not me."

Actually, Sam, you can. And do, and will. ▲