Lyle McNeal, Cowboy Professor

Inspiring students in Utah. Words by Morgan Russell. Photo by Holly Broome-Hyer.

Open the door to his office and you find Navajo rugs, sheep hides and even golden buffalo chips. Most importantly, you find a man who considers animals and agriculture students members of the family. Beneath the wide-brimmed, silver-belly cowboy hat is an honest, original, enduring cowboy. His wholehearted country grin is as contagious as his enthusiasm in the classroom.

Lyle McNeal, an animal-science professor in Utah State University's College of Agriculture, is the eighth USU professor in 13 years to be named Carnegie Professor of the Year in Utah. The award recognizes an outstanding professor in every state and the District of Columbia for their influence and outstanding commitment to teaching undergraduate students.

McNeal was the first person in his family to go to college, and his parents weren't able to help him much financially. After 38 years of teaching, he can still sympathize with students who face similar hardships.

Doc, as his students know him, keeps to the old ways—in and out of the classroom. While most professors wear suits and ties, he prefers his Stetson, pearl-button shirts and wool vests. He also strives to preserve the western, sustainable traditions of agriculture while still positively moving forward. Too often, McNeal says, we look at life with tunnel vision and ignore other inputs.

"Agriculture encompasses so much more than what our blinders allow us to see," he says. "If I can teach my students to look to the old ways for the new and to become that driving force for success, then I have done my job."

Full of a quiet strength and subtle pride, McNeal knows cattle, horses, sheep and students. He loves the land he works hard for and possesses the ready, ironic humor of the range, which he uses to connect to his students from all walks of life. As his student, every time I step into his classroom I smile because of the constant delight I feel in learning from him. Because of his influence, I live each day largely satisfied with who I am. It has not yet occurred to me to be concerned about improvement. It is a trick of college life, this contentment I find in each moment. Memories of stepping onto the backs of big boulders on my family's Texas ranch engulf me as I enter Doc's world and once again hear my boots scuff against the black and rust and corn-yellow lichens that cover them.

Doc learned the trade working on his family's ranch in Montana, and he says the desire to produce food was ingrained in him early. He worked his way through college as a ranch hand for 35 to 75 cents per hour. He lived in barns and traveled to the nearest gas station to clean up before class. He often woke up around 3:30 a.m. to clean manure out of stalls before going to class. A few of his professors refused to let him into class because of his odor. He completed his bachelor's in animal husbandry at Cal Poly University in 1964 and later went on to complete his master's in animal genetics from the University of Nevada, Reno.

Doc's love for family runs deep. Nancy, his wife of 45 years, says USU is their home and always will be. "We came to Logan when Lyle completed his doctorate at USU in 1978. It's a good place to raise a family and share a passion for agriculture's promise."

Lee Scott, a junior in animal science, grew up on a cow-calf operation in southern Wyoming and had difficulty making the

transition to college life. "I just missed home. I was ready to leave USU, go home and run the ranch, but then I had my first class with Doc and everything changed. I had found my haven within USU, sitting in Doc's intro-to-animal-science class."

McNeal has the power to take each student's desires, likes and dislikes, and potential and transform the totality of all that into a beautiful work of art, says Ranae Crowley, a sophomore in agricultural communications. "His voice speaks from the heartland of country and weds today's students with vulnerable western traditions and the promise of agriculture. Doc is as passionate and unequivocal as the land and life that inspired him."

Ask any of his students and they will all tell you the same thing. Doc is more of a friend than anything. His open-door policy is known throughout the college. Whether the topic is current hay and beef prices, family or school, Doc takes the time to listen, to look you in the eye and to offer a helping hand.

"As a professor, you don't give lectures and tests, you give lessons," he says. "I look at my students, and I see minds ready to be enhanced. Sometimes you wonder if you're getting through to them, but the gratitude often comes back later when they are alumni. This relationship doesn't end at commencement."

Doc has given many students, including me, the tools for success. From freshman year on, he provides a home away from home. He provides the smell of sage and pine and loamy soil. He reminds students of the creak of saddle leather moving against its wooden tree and the witness of the sun breaking on a clear, crisp country morning. He stirs my memory of what it's like to be on a horse at home again, feeling the cool air tighten my flesh, the gelding skipping into the air where rider and ridden are afforded the sight of God.

Becoming a sanctuary for his students is a prideful tradition he learned from his Navajo family while completing his Navajo Churro Sheep Project. He folds his hands, leans back in his wool-covered chair and rubs his forehead as if trying to find the perfect word to begin the story of the man who was his hero and his inspiration. "My grandfather was attacked viciously in the Yukon by a wolverine. He would have died had it not been for the Athabaskan Indians who saved his life and nursed him back to health."

When Doc's grandfather shared this story with him, he made Doc promise to help Native Americans in any way he could. While teaching animal science at Cal Poly in 1972, Doc led a field trip to Salinas County. He came across some Navajo sheep there that tugged at his heartstrings. He researched the sheep and discovered only 435 existed in the world. Recognizing the genetic and cultural significance of the Navajo Churro, he set out to bring the breed back from the brink of extinction so it could be reintroduced to the Southwest. This is what his grandpa would have wanted him to do. Five years later, he made the trip again, but this time with two donated rams and six ewes. The Navajo Sheep Project was born.

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In 1979, McNeal moved his Navajo Sheep Project to USU. It flourishes there. He and his students have come to appreciate the intimate relationship between sheep, wool, weaving, land and traditional cultures. In essence, he helped create culturally relevant economic support for the continuation of the Navajo culture.

Since 1977, the Navajo Sheep Project has placed many breeding stock with Navajo families and has helped form the nucleus of Ganados del Valle flocks in Los Ojos, N.M.

"To this day, we deliver sheep to the Navajos every year," Doc says. "We formed a national breed association in 1986, and currently we have close to 5,000 registered and 3,000 unregistered Churro sheep." The project has received national attention, including major articles in *The Smithsonian, RANGE* and *National Geographic.*

Through his work with the Churro, Doc met his adopted Navajo family. "I was closer to the elders than I was to my own parents. I am so blessed to have met my family through something so incredible as the Navajo Sheep Project."

His Navajo mother trained him in the ways of a medicine man, and the tribe adopted him as well. Tribal herbs and medicines saved him at least twice from diseases such as hantavirus.

"The Navajo sheep have touched the lives of so many," he says. "I know my grandpa is pleased."

McNeal believes that higher education is becoming unbalanced, with too narrow and specialized a focus, depriving students of a clear understanding of how agriculture works in the big picture. From the Navajo, McNeal learned about true sustainability. "It is imprinted on my spirit that Mother Earth takes care of us; therefore, we need to take care of her. Everything has its special place, its special order in farming, ranching, animals and people. Everything is a circle, and we need to keep this eternal circle moving in order to perpetuate life."

In Doc's new class, Sustainable Agriculture Systems with Animals, he focuses on holistic range management and biodiverse farming and ranching. Before Doc left for Washington, D.C., to accept his Carnegie award, he handed over the reins to his sustainable-ag students. He asked them to brainstorm ideas about how to improve agriculture and had them draft a resolution so he could personally hand it to Utah senators Bob Bennett and Orin Hatch.

"The story of agriculture needs to be told. Who better to do that than the students?" he asks.

Julie Ung, College of Ag ambassador and senior in animal science, says Doc let the students decide what should be addressed with the senators. "We signed the resolution and Doc delivered it for us. That's the thing about Doc. He is always doing something extra. He didn't go to Washington, D.C., just to receive an award; he went on a mission for his students. Now both senators Hatch and Bennett realize how the students at USU feel about agriculture's future."

Still spry and sparkling, his crackling cornflower eyes never missing a beat even after 38 years of teaching, Lyle McNeal is nowhere near the end of his journey. A student once said, "Freshmen enter his world and passionate agriculturists leave it." Doc is the West's diamond in the rough—a cowboy fulfilling his duty to combine old and new. He has the ability not only to shape and mold students, but to inspire an attitude of living life to the fullest.

Doc changes every one of his students, including me. He has taught me to ask more of myself, to pay less mind to small encumbrances and to forge a life out of raw material and live it. Perhaps most importantly, I learned from Doc to greet life with humor, orneriness and spunk. ■

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