



SUBMITTED/SPRING VALLEY TRIBUNE

Wendell and Georgeanna McKenzie

Genetics 'intensely personal experience' for Kingsland 2017 Wall of Honor nominee

By Gretchen Mensink Lovejoy
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"Teaching genetics, for me, is an intensely personal experience," shared retired North Carolina University professor and Spring Valley native Wendell McKenzie, of Boone, North Carolina, the 2017 Kingsland Wall of Honor recipient who will be recognized during a reception at Kingsland High School on Friday, Nov. 3.

The ceremony will begin at 7 p.m. in Kingsland Cafe. School officials said it will be a casual social gathering with dessert served to those in attendance.

McKenzie's research in North Carolina involved evaluating genetic damage due to chemical and radiation exposure.

"It is impossible to overstate the importance of learning about and protecting our most precious natural resource, our own DNA. I want my students to learn genetics with a similar level of passion, to be immersed in the subject matter and to appreciate its personal and societal significance," said McKenzie. "Developments in human genetics are occurring at record rate. Not only is the science of human genetics exploding, the potential applications and the issues they raise are as well. I find it is exceedingly stimulating to be in the middle of such an expanding and vital discipline... human genetics, the academic

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discipline we get to share, is thoroughly dynamic and incredibly relevant."

McKenzie's beginnings were with where he got his own genes, right here in southeastern Minnesota. He was born in Wykoff in the home of a Mrs. Shepherd, a midwife, on Nov. 23, 1942. Although it was not Thanksgiving Day that year, his birthday this year falls on Turkey Day. The week he was born, his parents, Lloyd and Lena McKenzie, purchased a farm roughly halfway between Spring Valley and Ostrander. That farm was home for him until he headed off to college in 1960. His parents continued to live there for 40 more years, so that "special place has been home to me for most of my life," he said.

McKenzie attended a one-room country school south of Spring Valley for his first six years of school before moving on to town school for grades seven through 12.

"Since I was usually the only one in my grade in country school, I like to say I was able to finish in the top half of my class most years," he joked.

He graduated from Spring Valley High School in 1960, received his undergraduate degree in biology at Westmar College, LeMars, Iowa, in 1964, and received his master of science and doctorate in genetics from North Carolina State University, Raleigh, North Carolina, in 1969 and 1973, respectively.

He is now retired, following a "wonderful career in public education," he noted, first as a high school teacher and

coach at Albert City-Truesdale High School in Iowa and as a university professor at North Carolina State University.

He stated that his greatest influences and earliest memories were of being on the family's farm.

"Oh, my goodness, there were so many influences. Obviously, my parents — my dad, especially. But there were others: my sisters and other relatives, great neighbors, teachers, coaches, classmates, teammates, friends, pastors and more. I was richly blessed," said McKenzie. "My earliest memories were of feeling loved and trusted. There was never a time I did not have significant responsibilities...on the farm, in school. That said, I don't think that was unique to me. In some respects, I started out as a farmer. More accurately put, I was my dad's right-hand man. That was from the time I could first drive a tractor, milk the cows, load bales and a whole lot more."

He was active in FFA and rented part of his grandparents' farm, earning enough money -- together with relatively small academic and athletic scholarships -- to pay his way through college.

"I loved sports even more than academics and was fortunate to play football, basketball and baseball at Spring Valley High School and Westmar College," he said. "Summer Sunday afternoons were times for baseball, first watching my town-team idols, later pick-up games at the McKenzie farm. Whenever possible, I

was listening to major league baseball games on the radio and later watching on TV."

In high school, he was active in sports, served as a class officer and was in the National Honor Society. In college, besides sports, he was active in student government and various other leadership positions.

"Understandably, teaching and coaching in high school followed. Then came graduate school and university faculty position opportunities," said McKenzie. "More so than setting career goals, my MO has been to discover what I love and pursue those things to the best of my ability."

McKenzie has served as undergraduate teaching coordinator for the North Carolina State University Department of Genetics. The department has, since 1989, provided a minor in genetics for undergraduate students as an average of 40 graduates leave North Carolina State University each year with a minor in genetics. The vast majority of them take jobs in genetics research laboratories, enter medical school or graduate school in genetics.

"It has been my great pleasure to have shepherded the genetics minor from its inception," he said.

He has also spent time in the University of Georgia's office of instructional development, on leave from the University of North Carolina, to expand his own education. He enjoyed research study leaves with the Environmental Protection Agency, Research Triangle Park

in North Carolina; Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, Sweden; and the U.S. Army in San Francisco, California. He has served as an elected member of the National Board of Directors of Phi Kappa Phi since 1992, and in August 2001, he was installed as Phi Kappa Phi national president. Phi Kappa Phi is the country's oldest, largest and most selective college and university honor society recognizing excellence in all disciplines, he noted. He served for 15 years on Phi Kappa Phi's national board of directors, including three as national president.

"We accomplished a great deal recognizing, celebrating and promoting academic excellence and in engaging the membership in service to others," said McKenzie. "On my retirement, an endowment was established to provide a Phi Kappa Phi Study Abroad Scholarship annually."

Additionally, he served at least six years on the editorial board of Innovative Higher Education, a scholarly journal that focuses on pedagogical research, a participant in the Conferences on Undergraduate Science and Mathematics Education; has served twice on the North Carolina State University Academy of Outstanding Teachers Executive Council helped establish the university's Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning and has given of his time to the center's advisory committee; served six years as a member of the university's Council on Undergraduate Education, has been a member of the North

Carolina Medical Genetics Association, and has addressed in speaking engagements high school science clubs, radio and television audiences and honors convocation audiences at major universities.

"Although retired now, I continue to give several talks each year to civic groups on various aspects of human genetics, including its ever-increasing personal and societal significance," he said. "Also, it pleases me greatly that many of my former students continue to keep in touch with me, sharing their family and career news. I've been fortunate to have taught 20,000-plus students at North Carolina State, most of them in the course genetics in human affairs. I like to think that they are all better citizens as a result...I am so very proud of them, my academic 'offspring.' I was instrumental in establishing both the undergraduate genetics minor and major at North Carolina State University, and on my retirement, a McKenzie Undergraduate Genetics Scholarship endowment was established to support a North Carolina State student majoring in genetics annually."

McKenzie is proud to share his days with his wife of 53 years, Georgie, whom he met in college — "in the library, no less," he said. "Georgie has excelled as a wife, mom and grandmother, not to mention nurse and child development staff member in a local college."

They have two daughters, Belinda and Jodi. Belinda and Jodi and their families are the "pride of this little twig of the

McKenzie tree," he said.

McKenzie spends his spare time playing golf, watching sports on TV, hiking, traveling and enjoying music.

He credited "pretty much everyone who has ever been" part of his life growing up and throughout his years in education as being continuing influences in his life. "For example, although my parents have been deceased for more than 10 years, they continue to be with me. The same holds for the many mentors throughout my life. Put another way, one never leaves the past behind. I am still a 'Spring Valley boy.' Always have been, always will be. This area was indeed my beginning, but despite living more than 1,000 miles away for most of my life, this is still home."

McKenzie will speak during the ceremony, and he has plans for his speech that he hopes will inspire others.

"I am honored and humbled," he said. "I accept this recognition, fully understanding it is a shared one. I will speak on gratitude, pride, humility and a few brief highlights from my career. It is fair to say my values, commitment, common sense, etc., were largely shaped here. Therefore, this award is about you, every bit as much as it is about me. I am greatly honored to be chosen for this recognition, to be named a member of the Kingsland Wall of Honor. Thank you for believing in me then, and now. So, please understand hearty congratulations go to you, too."