

In Memoriam

John McNeil

John McNeil with two former students, Octavio Pescador ('93, B.A., Political Science; '03, Ph.D., Education, at left) and Albert Aubin ('71, Ed.D.), celebrating McNeil's 99th birthday at the Faculty Center.



John Donald McNeil, UCLA professor emeritus of education, died on April 10 at the age of 101. He had established groundbreaking school programs, led advancement efforts in literacy and math, and served internationally as a bilingual education consultant.

Professor McNeil had been co-teaching a course since 2016 on international development and on entrepreneurial philanthropy with his former student Octavio Pescador ('93, B.A., Political Science; '03, Ph.D., Education), in which UCLA undergraduates worked on projects to address issues in underserved communities. Pescador fondly remembers Professor McNeil as “life-long learning incarnate.”

Diane Childs started her professional career at UCLA in the Education & Psychology Library and recalls that McNeil was a very enthusiastic library user. He also really enjoyed the Faculty Center: “I would see him there waiting for his lunch companion or having lunch with Arif Amlani. And he took pride in driving there from his Santa Monica home until the last two or three years. I didn’t know John well, but I do think of him as a friend. There was something magic about him.”

Arif Amlani, director of Program Development at the UCLA Department of Education, got to know McNeil during his doctoral studies in the mid 1990s. When Amlani started writing his dissertation, McNeil invited him to lunch at the Faculty Center. Amlani was struck by McNeil’s “continued openness to learning, and his freshness of mind. He didn’t use academic jargon and provided real, on-the-ground advice without fanfare.”

McNeil began his career at UCLA in 1956 heading the UCLA Teacher Education Program after earning his doctorate in curriculum and instruction at Columbia University. Until very recently he could still be found

working in his office in Moore Hall. He was known for taking the stairs to his third-floor office, even at age 100. He went to the gym until 97 and, according to Amlani, kept a daily reading routine of three newspapers in the morning, followed by *The Chronicle of Education*, *The Economist* and “five or six journals of education” in the afternoon. McNeil always enjoyed sharing what he came across in his readings: “Hey, Arif, I have something for you...”

Joanie Harmon, editor of the online *Ed&IS Ampersand Magazine* and a close friend, organized his 100th birthday lunch at the Faculty Center. She met him in 2012, and felt honored to have her office next to “this little beacon in Moore Hall.” Hearing stories of his WWII service, she felt like “John was a living link to history, but always so humble.” His stellar World War II and Korean War service and six-decade career at UCLA never took away from his humility and generous nature. When asked on his 99th birthday what he was most proud of he said “It’s more like...things I’m most grateful for...It’s been the most wonderful experience. The people—that’s one thing I am grateful for at UCLA. It’s the humanity, it’s the people, that’s one reason I’m not too concerned about time. They contributed so much to my life, every one of them...It’s been a wonderful voyage—its people, its opportunities, its imagination. It’s getting into heaven ahead of time.”

Professor McNeil was predeceased by his wife of 71 years, Mary Ellen (Combes) McNeil. He is survived by his daughters, Heather Larkin, Lisbeth Ceaser, and Catherine McNeil; son Juan McNeil; grandchildren Cerena Ceaser and Donald and Kyle Larkin; and great-grandchildren Craig ('21, B.A., Economics) and Ryan Larkin.

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UCLA Ed & IS tribute to John McNeil: <https://ampersand.gseis.ucla.edu/john-mcneil-1919-2021/>

John McNeil: Professor and WWII Veteran Learned Importance of Collaboration in Battle: <https://ampersand.gseis.ucla.edu/john-mcneil-professor-and-wwii-veteran-learned-importance-of-collaboration-in-battle/>

John McNeil at 99 (video): <https://newsroom.ucla.edu/stories/99-year-old-ucla-education-professor-shares-lessons-from-a-life-well-lived>

Tribute to Mary Ellen McNeil: <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/berkshire/obituary.aspx?n=mary-mcneil&pid=179469244>