MEMORIAL

In Memoriam: Michael G. McKee, PhD, BCB

Michael G. McKee, PhD, a past president of the Association for Applied Psychophysiology and Biofeedback, died on October 26, 2015. Dr. McKee served for many years at the Cleveland Clinic as the vice chairman of the Department of Psychiatry and Psychology and chair of the Section of Health Psychology and General Psychology, directing a program that focused on diagnosis and treatment of stress-related disorders and enhancement of health and performance. He was internationally recognized for his expertise in biofeedback and served as a consultant to business, health care, education, and athletics. Two of his closest colleagues provide tributes here to Michael G. McKee, the man and his work.

A Tribute to Michael G. McKee, PhD, BCB

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I am honored to provide a brief tribute for one of the pioneers in the field of biofeedback, Mike McKee, PhD. Mike began his activities in the Biofeedback Society of America in 1979 as a member of the council of representatives—the precursor to the Council of Chapters. This was no easy task as, in the early years of chapter meetings, there were often heated discussions. Many states were growing their chapters, and all had opinions, motivated by the desire to keep their own states strong. In the ensuing years, many other groups within the organization placed demands on Mike’s time, including the finance, legislative action, and ethics committees.

Mike brought his knowledge, expertise, and his sense of humor. Sometimes some of these committees had difficult decisions to make and were, according to Mike, taking themselves way too seriously! Mike deflated the tension in the air: “Come on—seriously? This is what we are worried about?” His signature laugh came out, and people responded; they stopped the bickering and refocused on what needed to be done. The mood turned, and what had started as “we can’t do this” became “let’s do this; we can look at all the facts and make this difficult decision in the best interest of the organization and the membership.”

Being the chair of the program committee as Mike was in 1988 always brought particular challenges. During the 1980s, the planning committee went to the location for the weekend and hammered out the details, the theme for the meeting, the invitations to major speakers, and, most important for many later attendees, the food for the famous Sunday morning brunch. Mike took on this responsibility, and there he was with a clear air of authority as the committee chair but also as the listener, the respectful arbiter, and by the time we left, the program had a name, a mission, and a life.

Mike was also very involved in the Biofeedback Certification Institute of America (BCIA). To have a credentialing organization, a mission, goals, and—most
important to future certificants—a test had to be developed. Writing items for the exam was difficult because the test had to contain valid items, but validation required testing of the items! In this situation, Mike’s experience with the American Psychological Association’s licensing process was an immense help in test development and an eventual solid process for certification. Mike continued to serve on the BCIA board for almost 20 years.

Mike and I were presidents of Association for Applied Psychophysiology and Biofeedback (AABP) in two succeeding years. Because we were separated by only 120 miles, we got together several times in between board meetings. When I went to Cleveland, he was gracious and welcoming, and then we worked for five hours on board business. When Mike came to Toledo, I tried to measure up to his energy, but I wanted a least a lunch break! We also kept in touch regularly for two years by phone so that the transition would be smooth and efficient. A few of those early morning conversations dealt with difficult topics, sometimes beginning with “how could all this happen in one week?” Or, “Hi Angele, how many hours do you have this morning to work on this?” Throughout those years, Mike always kept the needs and mission of AABP in the forefront.

Throughout his career at Cleveland Clinic, Mike maintained a very active clinical and research program. He was the man with the ideas, the clinician with the love of exploration who directed his strengths first to the study of headache then later to cardiovascular disorders and neurological disease. What struck me most in looking at his extensive curriculum vita was the unrelenting focus on the basic science and clinical applications of biofeedback. Many other researchers, myself included, valued their early years directly involved in biofeedback and then ventured into related fields. As one example of Mike’s dedication to the field, his recent grants included the application of biofeedback to patients with heart failure and coronary artery disease. He and his collaborators had recently submitted an institutional review board application for a project dealing with biofeedback in breast cancer patients. Mike not only used his skills as a clinical psychologist and biofeedback practitioner but also celebrated his biofeedback heritage, which is probably why there are more than 1,000 radio shows and TV appearances on his curriculum vita!

I feel fortunate to have known and worked with Mike through our AABP activities. I will miss his presence at meetings, his availability to me for consultation, and his wonderful voice, whether in serious conversations or in situations where a laugh, sometimes at himself, was the best tonic and strategy.

Michael G. McKee, PhD, BCB, Friend and Inspiration

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Mike McKee was my colleague, my research partner, my friend, my mentor, and my inspiration. I have never met anyone else like him, and I’m sure I never will. I consider myself fortunate to have enjoyed the incredible gift of his time and attention for more than 17 years. I spent hours with Mike most weeks, designing research studies, analyzing data, mentoring students, writing papers and grants, attending meetings, and sometimes just talking about life and families and Disney and looking at pictures of his adorable first great grandchild, Briar. Mike’s personality was larger than life, as you will know if you ever met him. He had a big smile, a twinkle in his eye, and a booming laugh. He loved life, he loved his family, he loved his patients, and he loved his work. In any situation, Mike brought a calming voice, an intelligent approach, wisdom about subjects you would never imagine he knew, and a degree of understanding and acceptance that warmed the room. When I thought, from time to time, how remarkable it was to have someone like Mike in my life, I always recognized that he had the gift of abundant love. The most important thing in Mike’s life was his wife, Teddy, to whom he had been married for 59 years when he died (they celebrated their 59th anniversary in his hospital room after he had complex open heart surgery last January). No matter where we were or what we were doing, his first thought in any situation was always Teddy, followed by his four amazing children and their families. As I watched him with admiration and gratitude over the years, I reflected often on the fact that Mike had such a happy life with his family, and
they loved him so well that he was able to share large amounts of unconditional love with everyone he met. How fortunate that was for his colleagues, his patients, his clinical and research trainees, and me.

I met Mike when I was 41, well established in my career as a research scientist in cardiology, with numerous publications and grants on my curriculum vita. When we met and talked, we realized we shared an interest in the autonomic nervous system, his from a psychophysiological standpoint and mine from a biological perspective. I had not heard of biofeedback, and he quickly enlightened me. My research had focused on understanding the role of the autonomic nervous system in heart disease and testing the hypothesis that abnormalities in the sympathetic branch could be reversed with various medical and surgical interventions. For my work, I used heart tissue from patients who had a cardiac transplant, which was stored in freezers in the lab. Until the last time he walked into the lab, Mike never tired of joking that he was worried about where to put his lunch! Mike and I quickly decided to join forces, asking whether biofeedback could be used to help heart patients regulate their sympathetic nervous system. We began a research program, obtained competitive funding from the American Heart Association and the Bakken Heart-Brain Institute, and mentored a PhD student and a postdoctoral fellow who taught biofeedback to heart failure patients, producing some encouraging results (described in the spring 2013 issue of Biofeedback).

We moved on to patients with multiple sclerosis, coronary artery disease, lung cancer, and breast cancer. Mike was great fun to work with, but what amazed me was how much I learned from him and how much he served as a mentor even at a midpoint in my career. He was remarkably intelligent and well-read, but he was also sensitive to the nuances in any situation, and our grants and papers were so much improved by his insight and his writing skills that I don’t know how I will do it without him. He was a tremendous public speaker, and it seemed that every news outlet wanted to interview him about everything important that came along, from psychological issues to the departure and return of LeBron James. Mike knew exactly how to craft an interview or a talk so that the audience would get the most out of it, and he was a master at combining serious topics with humor. I had always thought of myself as a good speaker and a good teacher, but my skills were improved drastically by just watching him. He was the most valuable colleague I have ever had, and I hope to honor his memory by carrying on the work we started.

A fact that may be little known to biofeedback colleagues is that Mike was an avid Disney fan and loved the Magic Kingdom, a passion we shared. Mike’s uncles were the Disney landscapers; they first worked their magic at Walt’s home and later were asked to landscape parks, not only in Anaheim but also in Orlando and around the world. Mike and his family had lifelong passes to Disney and enjoyed it frequently. When we attended the International Society for Neurofeedback & Research meeting in Orlando in 2012, I was privileged to have Mike accompany me to the Magic Kingdom and fondly describe all of the unusual plants and vegetation, despite 100°F heat and 80% humidity. When we again had the opportunity in 2013, attending a heart failure meeting, the story continued with unfailing enthusiasm, despite torrential rain the entire time we were in the park. Mike’s enthusiasm for Disney and for life was not dampened by things beyond his control. He just smiled bigger and his eyes twinkled more as he wiped the rain from his glasses.

This past summer, Mike and Teddy bought me an Apple watch. They said it was a late birthday gift, because Mike had been in the hospital when my birthday came around, and its purpose was ostensibly to track my workouts and intercept important phone calls from a silenced iPhone, but we all knew the truth—the extravagance really occurred because one of the clock faces held an exuberant Mickey Mouse tapping his foot, and Mickey would make me smile wherever I went. Now it is a fond reminder of the other “McKee” Mouse and the Disney memories we shared.