



Mike and Shirley Stephens taught side by side for a combined 27 years at Guthrie and Chickasha high schools. (Photo courtesy of Chris Stephens)

# Mike Stephens: A gold standard to countless blue jackets

By Zed Goodwin, South Coffeyville, Okla.

**believe in the future of agriculture, with a faith born not of words but of deeds ... E.M. Tiffany**

E.M. Tiffany's words have touched thousands of lives throughout the years, and one of those lives was a man who left an impression on hundreds of young people. Mike Stephens lived by these words, pushing others to grow in the field of agriculture.

Mike, the younger child of Marvin and Margaret Stephens, grew up in the small town of Miami, Okla., where he developed a love for agriculture.

After graduating from Miami High School in 1965, Mike stayed at home and attended Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College. In 1970, he graduated from Oklahoma State University. During Mike's time at OSU, he shared a classroom with two sisters who would become the first two female agricultural education teachers in Oklahoma. One of those sisters was Shirley Jean Holman, who became Mrs. Shirley Stephens on Aug. 30, 1969.

After graduation, Mike and Shirley began rewarding careers teaching agricultural education courses and serving as FFA advisers. Mike began teaching in 1970 at Guthrie High School; nine years later, Shirley joined him. In 1985, they moved their careers to Chickasha High School and both taught there until his retirement

in 2006, said Shane Stephens, the Stephens' younger son.

"Mike and Shirley were the first husband and wife agricultural teaching team in the state of Oklahoma," said Linda Martin, assistant dean for academic programs for the OSU College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources.

Mike was a man who always possessed the finest sense of personal decency and integrity. He treated everyone he met with respect, no matter who they were, said former Chickasha student Adam McClain.

"My parents were a wonderful complement and tag team as high school teachers and FFA advisers. They taught in adjacent classrooms for 27 years and never seemed to grow tired of one another," said Chris Stephens, their older son. "They shared the closest of bonds."

Chris said Mike never sought the spotlight or personal or professional awards, but his leadership and mentoring allowed hundreds of youth to achieve state and national success in FFA and livestock activities.

Mike was recognized several times with teaching awards at the state and national levels.

McClain said Mike was voted Chickasha High School's "Teacher of the Year" twice. Some of Mike's personal achievements included National

Association of Agricultural Educators membership since 1970, NAAE Outstanding Agricultural Education Program in 1997-1998 and 2004-2005, Oklahoma Agricultural Educator Teachers Association member from 1970-2006, and NAAE Conference attendee in 1985, 1992, 1998, 2002 and 2005.

"Dad was a relatively quiet person, but he was also intensely competitive," Chris said. "He loved to see his sons and his FFA students succeed in whatever they did. He was very good at matching a student's interests with an FFA activity or contest where they could excel."

McClain said Mike was demanding of his sons and his students. He always expected them to work hard, to retain their humility when things went well, and to maintain sportsmanship when things did not go so well.

"Mr. Stephens had a knack about making you work hard, but you liked it," McClain said.

Chris said his father had a real passion for the FFA, youth agricultural activities, Shorthorn cattle and the people involved with those programs. Mike was a role model for his children and many FFA students, instructing hundreds of high school students and developing wonderful friendships with them and their families along the way. Mike and Shirley developed a wonderful network of friends through

FFA and the livestock industry, and their family has treasured those special relationships, Chris said.

"Mike was very interested in the success of his students, not only high school students; he was always on campus doing something involved with the students or the FFA Foundation," said Ed Miller, CASNR associate dean for academic programs.

Shane said his dad always had a special spot in his heart for OSU. Mike was honored to serve the college, along with his wife, on the Agriculture Alumni board of directors, and he took great pride when any of his former students enrolled at OSU, especially his two sons.

"Mr. Stephens was the single biggest influence of my life," McClain said. "I would not be where I am today if it hadn't been for his positive impact on me."

Miller said Mike Stephens was a man who spoke few words, but his example and work ethic were powerful examples to his family, students and friends.

"Dad was the hardest working person I have ever met, and he tried to instill in all of us an appreciation for hard work," Chris said.

As Shane and Chris grew up, their parents were busy with FFA activities, but they often traveled to FFA competitions, livestock shows and conventions together as a family.

Chris said his dad was proud of any success his sons achieved. Though he was always hesitant to discuss any of his own accomplishments, he was never shy to describe how his boys were doing. He was even supportive when their graduate school plans took them away from Oklahoma.

Chris graduated from OSU in 1998 with a bachelor's degree in agricultural economics. With a British Marshall Scholarship, Chris studied two years in England, earning a master's degree in land economy from the University of Cambridge and a master's degree in comparative social policy from the University of Oxford. Chris moved back and attended Yale Law School, graduating in 2004.

"After graduation, I worked two years for Judge Robert Henry on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit in Oklahoma City as a law clerk," Chris said.

Chris is now an attorney at Crowe & Dunlevy in Oklahoma City, where he lives with his wife, Amy.

Shane graduated from OSU in 2002 with a bachelor's degree in agricultural economics. He later earned a master's in economic management and policy from the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, Scotland, while studying on a Rotary Ambassador Scholarship. Shane now lives in Phoenix with his wife, Katie. He is a senior project manager for a commer-

cial real estate development company, assisting with the U.S. expansion of a British retailer.

Chris and Shane have grown to become successful young men, something they said made their father proud.

Life changed for Mike in 1993 when he was diagnosed with throat cancer, which required chemotherapy and extensive radiation treatment.

"Dad actually kept teaching as much as he could during his radiation and often times would head to Oklahoma City after his last class to take treatments," Shane said.

In the summer of 2005, Mike was diagnosed with cancer again, which required him to take sick leave for various treatments throughout the school year. He often would return in the afternoons to assist students with their FFA projects.

Mike Stephens lost his battle with cancer Aug. 8, 2006, but the impression he left will never be forgotten. His passion for the FFA and Oklahoma State University will continue in the countless lives he has touched. ☺

*The Oklahoma FFA Foundation, in cooperation with the Stephens family, has created a trust in Mike's honor. To donate, mail contributions to the Mike Stephens Trust, Oklahoma FFA Foundation, 1500 W. 7th St., Stillwater, OK 74074.*



*Left: Mike Stephens (left) joins his wife, Shirley, with Will Wheeler and Korey Schenk, students from their 2003 National Gold Emblem Chapter. Presenting the award is Tally (Stewart) Mitchell. (Photo by Jeremy Porter) Right: The Stephens family: Katie, Shane's wife (back left); Shane; Chris; Amy, Chris' wife; Mike (front) and Shirley. (Photo courtesy of Carl's Studio)*