



# A Sense of Place

Steve McKinney

by Sean Flynt

*“For many years, our mantra around here was ‘making a difference,’”* geography professor Greg Jeane said. *“Steve McKinney could be Samford’s poster child for that part of our mission. He is hands down one of the finest people I’ve ever worked with, both in and out of the classroom.”*

As someone who trades in the details of place, Steve McKinney '97 needs only a few words to create a vivid image of his hometown of Tusculumbia, Ala. “It was 15 minutes to the nearest stoplight, and that’s a four-way flashing light,” he said.

Now settled in Birmingham, with enough stoplights on any given street to make up for a deprived childhood, McKinney helps students, governments and corporations understand the complex interconnectedness of geography, economy, culture and the natural environment.

In addition to his full-time job as assistant director of Stormwater Management Authority, McKinney manages his own consulting business (SICS Consultants) and teaches in multiple academic programs at Samford. He’s also finishing a doctorate in environment health engineering at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, enjoying a

newborn son and has even been known to play in a rock band with Samford biology professor Larry Davenport. *Birmingham Business Journal* recently included him in its prestigious annual “Top 40 Under 40” list. It is no wonder, then, that geography professor and longtime friend Greg Jeane offers high praise for his busy former student.

“For many years, our mantra around here was ‘making a difference,’” Jeane said. “Steve McKinney could be Samford’s poster child for that part of our mission. He is hands down one of the finest people I’ve ever worked with, both in and out of the classroom.”

After graduating with a degree in environmental geographic information systems, McKinney returned to Samford to earn a master’s degree in environmental management. He got more than he bargained for in that program, however, because it



Steve McKinney, top left, foreground, calls the chance to map an African game preserve with Samford professors “the most incredible experience of my life.”

lacked faculty to teach a course in geographic information systems [GIS]. Biology professor Paul Blanchard persuaded McKinney to teach the course, and persuaded the dean of arts and sciences to approve the unique arrangement.

“I had not finished the master’s program at that time,” McKinney recalled. “I was in the program! So, I was teaching on Monday night and taking a class on Thursday night.” Six years later, McKinney is widely respected for his professional expertise and continues to serve Samford.

Through his work with the quasigovernmental Stormwater Management Authority, which he was instrumental in developing soon after he earned his master’s degree, McKinney makes a strong economic argument for informed environmental stewardship. “We typically have preached conservation and restoration, but in the context of environmental quality,” he said. “We haven’t really brought it over to environmental economics, because environmental economics is a new term.

“What is the impact on your overall economy when you impact your natural resources?” McKinney asked, and in answer, described a scenario familiar to the residents of most suburban areas. “You go into a small city, and in its initial stages, it’s undeveloped; it’s mostly residential. As it matures, it becomes progressively more commercial and industrial. The land is stripped of the trees, and you end up with greater quantities of impervious surfaces and more water runoff.

“The idea,” he continued, “is that there is actually a dollar value that you can assess to every rain event, to every tree. It’ll tell you what that tree is worth, because if you cut that tree down, you have to build culverts, you have to build retention ponds, you have to build treatment facilities. So you can translate that into construction costs.”

This commonsense approach, which is catching on internationally, is the subject of McKinney’s

doctoral dissertation. But McKinney is no ivory-tower academic. Promoting practical, innovative application of geographic information seems to be his professional mission, and he follows his own advice. As a private consultant, he completed an ethnicity and diversity study for a chain of 2,200 stores in only 11 days. In 2000, he traveled to Africa with Samford students, and biology professors Blanchard and Bob Stiles for a GIS mapping project. The group mapped 173,000 acres of nature preserve in only 16 days. In the evenings, they taught faculty from a Kenyan university how to use GIS in resource mapping. “It was the most incredible experience of my life,” McKinney said.

McKinney seems to thrive on such daunting projects, and Blanchard confirms that his colleague and former student “has a can-do attitude and is always ready to help others with the complex technology. Steve is one of the most resourceful and brightest people I know.”

McKinney reflects such praise back onto the faculty of Samford’s geography and biology departments. He is especially close to Jeane, Blanchard and the biology faculty.

“That’s the most incredible group of professors I can conceive of,” McKinney said of the biologists. “You just don’t meet a group of people who care that much about what they do, and have that much outside interest and bring it home to students. That inspired me to want to teach.”

McKinney said he will continue to teach at his alma mater, sharing his expertise with new generations of students. “Samford has been very good to me,” he said. “I hope to call it home for a long time to come.” ■