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THE BUILDER

**Engineer Mike McMeekin puts the full force of his firm
behind volunteer efforts**

By Cindy Gonzalez / World-Herald staff writer Updated 8 hrs ago

If it's Saturday morning in winter, you'll most likely find Mike McMeekin at South High Scho helping students of immigrant families perfect scholarship essays that can open the door to college.

Lately, the seasoned engineer also has been darting from school to corporate meeting room, setting up a mentoring program for aspiring inner-city engineers and architects.



And as Omaha refugee Buey Ray Tut attests, McMeekin will go the distance for those kids at projects he believes in — even when that means (as in Tut’s case) fielding frantic middle-of-the-night phone calls from a young entrepreneur seeking free guidance on building a clean water system in his native South Sudan.

“He didn’t just look across the table and dismiss me as a young, idealistic kid,” Tut recalled of first encounter with McMeekin. “He listened.”



“It’s inspiring to have your president out there swinging a hammer with you,” Joe Zadina, a civil engineer on Lamp Rynearson, says of McMeekin. “He is walking the walk, not just talking it.”

MATT DIXON/THE WORLD-HERALD

McMeekin, 64, holds the top spot at Omaha’s Lamp Rynearson & Associates engineering, planning and surveying firm. But friends and colleagues say he’s the kind of guy who would volunteer time to youth and community betterment programs even if he weren’t in charge of a 163-person company that’s engineered infrastructure for icons such as the CenturyLink Center and Midtown Crossing.

Because the Columbus, Nebraska, native does have that platform, though, he's able to put he behind his heart. He sets a tone that's inspired others, both inside and outside the company.

Take Joe Zadina, a civil engineer on Lamp Rynearson's community involvement team. Zadina said it's a largely McMeekin-led company ethics and civic engagement philosophy that has kept him at the firm for 14 years, since he was an intern.

His boss encourages staff to take an hour of their workweek to tutor Boys Town youth in math or to hang out with a TeamMates mentee. He's open to service of all kinds, even if unrelated to a client.

McMeekin backed, for example, the pro bono design of earthen dams to ease flooding into a local park's picnic area. A running club had called to request the help, and a group from Lamp Rynearson also volunteered on a Saturday to help build the structures.

McMeekin joined in, as is typical for him. To Zadina, that's a motivator.

"It's inspiring to have your president out there swinging a hammer with you," Zadina said. "I walking the walk, not just talking it."

A World-Herald reporter sought to check out that walk, trailing McMeekin on a recent afternoon. Those around him describe the 1974 graduate of the University of Nebraska-Linc now 20 years into his firm's presidency, as having sharp focus.

They say McMeekin is far more interested in results than recognition for himself. Indeed, McMeekin deflects attention to others in his circles. He said community service, along with you treat employees and clients, makes good business sense.

"If you do all those things you'll be successful — whether you measure it in profit or satisfacti



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Lamp Ryneason & Associates President Mike McMeekin, left, meets with Jay M. Palu and Denise Powell at Alley Poyner Macchi Architecture about participating in the ACE Mentor Program of America.

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First stop on that recent afternoon: Alley Poyner Macchietto Architecture, where McMeekin made a pitch for the firm to participate in the ACE Mentor Program.

Set to start in January at North, South and Benson High Schools, ACE (Architecture, Construction, Engineering) matches teens with professional mentors and hands-on projects expected to cultivate local talent and open fields in the construction industry to more minority students — something city leaders have been urging contractors to do.

McMeekin explored options and got input before hitting the pavement to drum up support. (Alley Poyner, along with numerous others, has signed on.)

Monica Worheide, ACE's central region director, said she's not seen an affiliate as prepared in Omaha before it even launched, with a formal strategic plan and governing board co-chaired by McMeekin.

Spencer Danner, City of Omaha human rights and relations director and local ACE board member, attributed the quick formation to McMeekin's deep dive.

"He doesn't glorify what he is attempting to do," Danner said of McMeekin. "He's a driving force from behind the scenes."

Several South High guidance counselors for years have watched McMeekin on Saturdays help seniors organize and edit scholarship essay applications but weren't aware of the power behind his daytime position. They knew he was some sort of engineer, but remember him more for his faithful attendance with wife Maggie. The couple also take essays home to review during the week, said counselor Antonio Perez.

Since the workshops started six years ago, South students have earned about \$50 million in scholarships, Perez said, giving huge credit to the workshops. The McMeekins have been going since the start, originally to support a relative who is a South teacher. Now they personally supplement a Lamp Rynearson scholarship that last year went to Misael Lozano.

The teen said he otherwise could not have afforded Metropolitan Community College, where he is studying welding.

The image shows the Amazon logo, which consists of the word "amazon" in a lowercase, sans-serif font with a curved arrow underneath it, followed by ".com". The logo is centered within a rectangular frame.

"I was, whoa," Lozano said of the \$5,000 scholarship. "I got excited, my parents got excited, a

they started making phone calls to other family members who got excited.”



Mike McMeekin, left, meets with Buey Ray Tut of Aqua-Africa. McMeekin's firm helped engineer the system Tut's nonprofit created to bring clean water to South Sudan.

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Second stop on the afternoon with McMeekin: The Omaha Aqua-Africa office, where founder Buey Ray Tut, 29, offered an update on the water system designed by Lamp Rynearson and built last year in Nimule, a village near the Nile River.

Next for the nonprofit Aqua-Africa, Tut said, is a more ambitious water-distribution system to serve a new pediatric hospital in South Sudan. McMeekin said Lamp Rynearson, whose annual revenue among four offices is in excess of \$20 million, is on board to design that solar-powered well project, too.

While McMeekin is impressed with Tut's dedication, he also saw a human need. "And we have the skills to be able to directly help."

Tut said McMeekin personally accepted phone calls at inopportune hours and talked via Sky project partners in Africa. Tut recalled getting GPS equipment (imagine something that look like a weapon case) past officials and into a war-torn country — because of McMeekin's meticulous three-page letter explaining the Aqua-Africa mission.

“Without them this couldn't have been done,” Tut said.



Mike McMeekin, right, attends an Omaha by Design "10-speed" program meeting at the Pizza Shoppe Collective in Benson in October. To his left is his wife, Maggie. The monthly gatherings allow architects, planners, landscape architects, policy-makers, activists, developers, investors and designers an opportunity to work together to make Omaha better.

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By the time McMeekin made the day's final stop, he was with wife Maggie. The community meeting, hosted by Omaha By Design at a Benson pizza parlor, drew urban planners, lawyer architects, engineers.

It was a crowd more familiar with McMeekin's professional accolades. Among those: this year's Charles Durham Achievement Award honoring leadership in engineering and civic involvement and a Laurel's Award, Omaha By Design's top honor that in 2010 recognized his role in creating the environmental piece of Omaha's master plan.

McMeekin said some of his civic involvement is more personal, like at South High, where he was inspired by immigrant and refugee youths. "These kids have the potential to be incredible assets for our community, and you just want to help them succeed because of the motivation they exhibit."

But it's all about investing in a community, he said, be that people or infrastructure.

As he said when asked about Tut's water project: "I want to make sure that what we've contributed to is long-lasting."

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