

Answering the Call to Serve

Following the devastation of Sept. 11, the persistent calls came from different sources. As years passed, they became harder to ignore.

The calls came in recurring dreams of serving in the military; dreams of speaking Arabic in the Middle East; news reports with commanders stating, "It sure would make things a lot easier if we could just talk to the Iraqis;" and subtle messages from sermons.

Jon "Gib" McGill '68 faced a quandary: When you're blessed with a gift, is there a moral obligation to share your special skills—even if it means leaving your family and the tranquil setting of New Wilmington to serve in Iraq?

Gib, an artist by trade, had a gift for the Arabic language. His father and grandfather were missionaries in Egypt (*see sidebar*), where Gib went to school until he was 13 and learned the Arabic language.

The decision was difficult.



Jon "Gib" McGill '68 has spent more than a year in Iraq as an English/Arabic translator.

"It seemed that I ought to be able to help, even though I wasn't sure that my Arabic was of a high enough standard, or whether I was still young enough to be considered for such a job," Gib said. "On the one hand I was very happy with my no-stress artist's lifestyle and happy home and family. Only once in a while was I nagged by this kind of a sense of responsibility that I should use this language gift I'd been given for no apparent reason. But in truth, I was happy whenever the seeming impracticality of the idea allowed me to lean back in my La-Z-Boy and put it out of my mind."

In the McGill tradition, service won out over self. After passing a series of proficiency tests, Gib was shipped to Iraq in March 2006 as a translator.

"I feel I do a type of missionary work," he said. "Mine is different than that of my father's and grandfather's work, where they were connected to the Presbyterian Church. Mine is a calling to help and reach out to communicate to the Iraqi people."

"The interpreters work with the Military Transition Team (MITT) and the combat divisions of the Iraqi Army," Gib continued. "The MITT team consists of U.S. Marines. Their job is to teach and advise the Iraqi officers."

Some recent duties included translating instructions from U.S. Marines to members of



Speaking the Arabic language allows McGill to interact with Iraqis during his mission.



Lt. Matthew Hilton sent his Gib McGill original home to his mother in Fairfax, Va.

the Iraqi army who were learning to disarm roadside bombs. That assignment underlines the profound respect he has for those who serve in the military.

"Under my contract, I can quit tomorrow if I choose to, but these guys and girls have chosen military service," he said. "And serve they do, going out enthusiastically day after day at all kinds of ungodly hours to patrol around the countryside in convoys, any one of which could be their last."

Gib has shared his other special gift – painting – with the soldiers. During his stay in Iraq, he created portraits from live sittings of Col. Steven Zotti and Lt. Matthew Hilton, who sent it to his mother in Fairfax, Va.

"Painting portraits is hard here because I have to concentrate and both the subjects and I have limited free time," Gib said. "I enjoy it, but it's not relaxing and certainly not a substitute for sleep. Because of the culture here, I must work evenings and mornings. The Iraqis all quit working at 1 p.m. and don't come back to work until 6 or 7 p.m. The Marines have to work both times and in between.

"Painting is a passion, but still a job," he added. "I do not get emotionally attached to my artwork. I would rather have others enjoy and appreciate it in their homes. I am also passionate about the Middle East. If I had more time, I'd paint more here, but it's time for my other passion – to work, translate, and translate well and hopefully shorten the communications gap."

Being separated from his family and the lack of freedom are the biggest challenges he faces.

"Life is just not the same when you don't have the freedom to do what you want, when you want—when your time is not your own," Gib said.

"What's hard from my perspective is, for example, no walks on the Volant trail with Merrienne (wife), Emilie (daughter), and Moe, the dog," he said. "Not even an afternoon run up to Wal-Mart or a jaunt over to Shenango-on-the-Green to visit my dad. I'd like to wet a line in the Neshannock Creek out behind our house, or take a ride through the rolling countryside on my motor bike, stopping to talk with my Amish friends along the way."

In spite of the sacrifices, Gib recently signed up for another year of service.

"It may or may not be a calling per se," Gib said, "But the convergence of quite a few coincidences leading up to the job makes me think it was meant to be."

~ Mark A. Meighen

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The McGills and Westminster: a Four-Generation Association

The McGill family has been intertwined with Westminster for four generations.

Among the members of the founding commission was the Rev. John Anderson McGill, then pastor of the Four Mile Church and a representative from Ohio Presbytery. When moved in 1853 to Beaver, Pa., his congregation included a Mack family. The Macks had a son, John Sephus, known as "Seph," who was the same age as McGill's son, Ralph Gibson.

The two boys became fast friends. Seph went on to become a successful businessman and philanthropist, while Ralph went to Egypt as a missionary and professor at Cairo Seminary. McGill drowned in 1926 while trying to save some children from the Mediterranean.

In 1937, when the College was raising money to build the new library, the campaign stalled far short of its goal. So the College turned to benefactor Mack for help and was not disappointed. He said he would give all that was needed if the College would name the building for his friend Ralph Gibson McGill.

Ralph's two brothers also graduated from Westminster. David M. '00 became a chemist, while Milton Adair '05 became a minister. Ralph's son, Willis A., followed in his father's footsteps, graduating from Westminster in 1933 and serving for many years as a missionary in Egypt and professor at Cairo Seminary. Since his retirement, Willis has remained active in College affairs. He was the first chairman of the Friends of the Library and a member of the Cultural Artifacts Committee, as well as the donor of many Egyptian artifacts.

Willis married Anne McAuley '37 (daughter of the Rev. Harry Craig McAuley '07) and had three sons who graduated from Westminster: Willis A. Jr. '63, a doctor; Jon Gibson '68, an artist; and Gene M. (Kim) '70, a diplomat posted in Egypt. Jon, better known as "Gib," has painted portraits of several Westminster presidents as well as popular campus scenes.