What I’ve Done With My Life

Gene McClelland ’71 (chemistry), ’78M.S. (metallurgical engineering)

In 1986, Gene McClelland ’71 (chemistry), ’78M.S. (metallurgical engineering) started McClelland Laboratories with $10,000 borrowed from his MasterCard. Twenty-six years later, he remains president and CEO of Sparks-based McClelland Laboratories, Inc., which has 100 employees, including a number of University of Nevada, Reno graduates, and serves the mining industry throughout the world.

Like many students, Gene juggled work, life and academics. His plate was particularly full with plans to become a dentist, two full-time jobs, a full course load of credits, and a family at home that included his wife, Patricia (Smith) McClelland ’93 (English), ’99M.Ed. (secondary education), and their young daughter.

Before graduating, Gene changed his major to chemistry, taking a job as a laboratory technician at the U.S. Bureau of Mines, Reno Research Center. He thought having one full-time job would improve his grades, but his scores still suffered in the midst of his juggling act. So he decided to take two additional years of Army ROTC at Nevada and was awarded an Army scholarship, enabling him to fully focus on his studies. He was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Army in June 1971 and served as an infantry officer from 1971 to 1975.

After his military service, Gene returned to work at the U.S. Bureau of Mines as a metallurgical research chemist. He earned a master’s degree in metallurgical engineering from the Mackay School in 1978. Gene managed a metallurgical laboratory for Bateman Engineering N.V. from 1983 to 1986 before establishing McClelland Laboratories.

Through his career, Gene has authored more than 100 publications and obtained several metallurgical process patents. He is a distinguished member of the Society for Mining, Metallurgy and Exploration; a director of the Mining & Metallurgical Society of America; chairman of the Mackay School of Earth Sciences and Engineering Executive Advisory Board; a member of the College of Science Advisory Council; and this year, he became a trustee of the University of Nevada, Reno Foundation.

In 2009, Gene was named Mackay Alumnus of the Year and received the Nevada Alumni Association’s College of Science Distinguished Alumnus Award.

Gene and Patti have four children and six grandchildren.

What is your fondest memory from your days at Nevada?

I have many memories, even though the first three years of undergraduate study was somewhat a blur because I was working two full-time jobs. I remember fondly my professors giving their knowledge and time to help me complete my bachelor’s degree, and being selected as a tutor during my senior year to help younger chemistry students. I remember everyone at Nevada helping me develop a “can do” attitude. Most of all, I remember my graduation and commissioning with my wife and 4-year-old daughter by my side.

There may be no truth to the rumors that my Volkswagen Bug was on the stage in the chemistry and physics lecture building (I didn’t put it there, but did drive it out), or that Dr. Frank Baglin wanted to expel me for riding my racing motorcycle in the basement halls of the chemistry building.

What advice would you give someone just starting out from college?

It’s all right to become discouraged, tired and frustrated, but never give up on achieving goals you’ve set. Remember: If it were easy, anyone could do it. Always treat others with respect and be humble and you’ll gain respect. Don’t plan to start your career at the top unless you plan to dig holes. Knowledge gained at the University provides the basis for a good career, but experience is gained during your career. Be honest and ethical in all that you do. Your honor is the only thing that truly belongs to you and only you can give it away. Remain engaged with the University and your community and you’ll enrich the lives of others.

What have you done that you are most proud of?

I am proud that my wife and I raised wonderful children and are watching their families and careers develop. I am proud that I could balance family, the highest priority, with career and community activities. Running a successful business for more than 25 years is a pretty good feather for my cap. I am honored to serve the University on various boards and remain involved in volunteer community activities. I am proud that the University has grown in number and reputation. There were about 4,000 students when I graduated in 1971. Now enrollment is at 18,000 and Nevada is a Tier 1 University for programs and research.

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—Roseann Keegan

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