A Tribute to Tom McDonald, 1934-2025

by his daughter, R. Robin McDonald
with son Bruce McDonald contributing

Thomas C. McDonald, known as Tom or Tommy to friends and family, died July 17, 2025 at Touchmark at Fairway Village in Vancouver, Washington. He was 91. In 2013, he and his wife, Ramona Ellington McDonald, established The Thomas C. and Ramona E. McDonald Center for America's Founding Principles and the Thomas C. and Ramona E. McDonald Fund for the Advancement of Global Education at Mercer University. They also established the Ramona Ellington McDonald Choral Fund as part of Mercer's School of Music.

A celebration of Tom's life will be held in The Newton Chapel at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia at 10:00 on Saturday November 1, 2025. All are welcome.

It *was* a long time ago.

Born on Feb. 24, 1934, Tom McDonald was raised in a rural Georgia home tied to a nursery rhyme even older than him:

"*Old McDonald Had a Farm E-I-E-I-O."*

Tom's father had the sign to prove it.

Tom's dad posted that sign – "Old McDonald's Farm. E-I-E-I-O" – at the bottom of their drive on the old Covington Highway outside of Lithonia, Georgia after he bought the homestead in 1935 - just to make sure that passers-by knew who lived there.

Tom always remembered the travelers who would sing a verse or call out E-I-E-I-O as they passed by the house built on a foundation of Stone Mountain granite on a hill above a pond.

The easiest way to make Tom's Dad mad was to inflict indignities upon that sign or, worse yet, toss it in the pond. He would hunt you down.

Tom was the second of four boys. And for the whole of their lives, Tom and his older brother Al – nearly six years his senior – were very close. Tom's earliest memories are of Al, a football, a washtub, and that pond at the foot of the hill.

More than once, Tom recalled that when he was just three years old, or maybe barely four, Al had a friend who would drop by to toss the football. And on occasion that football would land squarely in the pond. Now Al, always a rather dapper guy, didn't want to get his clothes wet. That pond was also snaky – the home of water moccasins that became very irate if a boy dared intrude on their watery home.

Al's solution for one football rescue was Tom – and a round, metal washtub. Al couldn't fit inside. But a featherweight Tom could.

Tom couldn't swim a lick. But he set sail in that washtub anyway, with encouragement and a push from Al. But when Tom recovered the sodden ball, the extra weight caused the washtub to take on water. It started to sink. Tom – rather than toss that troublesome ball overboard, instead began paddling to beat the band as Al shouted "Paddle harder!" from the shore.

For 90 years, Tom always paddled harder. His entrepreneurial spirit first surfaced at age 10, when he secured his first start-up loan from his mother so he could buy and raise chickens. Once the chicks were grown, each week Tom would walk to town where he would take orders from folks who wanted fresh chicken for Sunday dinner. Tom would kill, dress, and deliver the chickens every Saturday morning. When one batch of chicks died, he secured a second loan from his mother and made good on that promise, too, to pay her back.

That was just one of many jobs Tom had. Al had a paper route. Their mother would drive, and Tom and Al would toss papers as they balanced on the running boards.

In Lithonia, Tom hired out to scrub floors for 25 cents an hour. At the age of 13, he caught a bus to Atlanta more than 20 miles away and secured a downtown job at The Associated Press where he worked the graveyard shift from 9 p.m. to 6 a.m. on weekends - until early one morning someone asked him, "How old are you really?"

He worked weekends and summers at a downtown Atlanta clothing store stocking goods. In high school, he worked at the local drugstore, handling all sales and as a "soda jerk" behind the drugstore fountain while the druggist remained in the back room filling scrips.

There was one job Tom knew was not for him. Picking cotton for a penny a pound. He tried it. But each sack, intended to hold 100 pounds of cotton, would drag the ground before it was half full. The work was hard and hot; and the thorny cotton bolls just weren't worth the $1 a sack it paid. "I was convinced," Tom said, "I had to find a better way to make a living. It's something I call 'incentive.'"

When he was just 16, Tom graduated from a school that only had 11 grades. He played six-man football in high school then spent a quarter at Baylor Prep School in Chattanooga as an offensive guard. At 160 pounds, he could go low and take out 275-pound tackles because they couldn't bend over far enough to stop him.

Tom was good enough to win a football scholarship to Georgia Tech. But two broken fingers that delayed his ability to play football – and his scholarship - prompted him to go, instead, to Mercer University. He spent just two quarters at Mercer where he discovered he was repeating high school lessons and where he also ran track. "I wasn't fast," he said, "but I could keep going."

And keep going he did. He left Mercer that summer for Baylor University in Texas where he lasted just one quarter. His first day, he was barred from playing cards. In one class, he told a professor that if the Bible should be taken literally, drinking wine was permissible even though Baylor banned it as sinful. After administrators killed a story Tom wrote as a reporter for the college paper - he discovered Baylor's controller was mishandling university funds – he had had enough. He told his mother if he stayed at Baylor he "would lose all semblance of religion."

That fall, Tom enrolled at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He was 17. At UNC, he was elected to the student council with the slogan, "Let a Scotchman handle your money" even though no money handling was involved. And he did the near impossible: He won the support of both the Greeks (Tom was a Phi Delt) *and* non-Greek independent dorm dwellers.

Tom worked for The Daily Tarheel and as the university annual's sports editor where he did manage money, eventually handling the finances of the newspaper, the annual, and the college literary magazine.

He organized a mock UN Assembly, which led to an invitation from the U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. to sit in on a U.N. general session in New York. And he began lobbying the university administration to admit black students, which prompted segregationists to write the Lithonia newspaper to call him out as - a Communist.

He graduated from UNC when he was just 19 after winning a summer scholarship to the University of Oslo in Norway – the first of what would become multiple trips for this boy from small town Georgia to nations across the globe.

The North Atlantic crossing was a rough one with 40-foot seas. Tom, who was traveling in steerage, began leading fellow passengers nightly in a Big Band conga line known affectionately as "The Bunny Hop." Tom would lead the line of hop-hop-hopping fellow passengers through steerage, upstairs to the second-class deck and then up more stairs to first class where he soon discovered an empty dance floor - and a band. If you know Tom, any dance floor, particularly an empty one, is like a Siren call. So, whenever the seas were rough, and first-class passengers were scarce but the band played all the same, Tom would ask a girl to join him for a first-class dance. Steerage is only a state of mind.

Once in Norway, Tom discovered that Norwegian music was the perfect accompaniment for – the Bunny Hop. So, it didn't take much encouragement for Tom to successfully enlist the entire Oslo City Council to join him and his fellow students in the Bunny Hop around Oslo's brand new City Hall.

Tom returned from Oslo to join his brother Al and one of Al's buddies in a new business venture in Atlanta - buying furniture and appliances wholesale and selling them at discount prices long before the advent of big box discount stores. So successful were the McDonald brothers that Rich's and Davidson's, Atlanta's two largest department stores, went to their suppliers to stop them from selling to Al, Al's friend, Harry, and to Tom. Those pressure tactics didn't faze the McDonald boys. They simply expanded their reach to the little towns beyond Atlanta and the undue influence of the big city department stores.

But it was a Sunday dinner following Tom's return from Oslo late that summer that utterly changed his life. His Dad brought Ramona Ellington to Old McDonald's Farm. Tom may not have fallen in love with her that day. But the dark-haired, dark-eyed beauty with a smile to die for and the soft Southern accent she never lost certainly caught his eye.

And when Tom invited her to the Georgia Fair in Atlanta a short time later, and he took her hand, he knew right then he was going to try to win it. Later, the two would both call that first handclasp at the fair their magic moment. They married seven months later. Tom had spent three of them in South Carolina in Army basic training, writing Mona every night, even as his hands still bled from scrubbing

down the Army's iron stoves with bricks. He adored her until the day she died, nearly 69 years later. And for their entire life together, no matter where he was, Tom called Mona every night as long as he could get to a phone.

When they married, Tom had little to his name except a pre-owned, black 1951 Ford to which his father held title. He was 20, and in 1954 Georgia, where you could marry at 14, you had to be 21 to own a car. Mona was 23.

At the wedding rehearsal as Tom promised Mona, "All my worldly goods I thee endow," his dad's voice echoed through the church, "There goes Tom's Ford." But while Mona may have gained title to Tom's Ford when they married, she had also won his heart.

Tom was in the Army when he married Mona on leave. His insistence on a typing test the military did not want him to take – and the ability to type 60 words a minute on a battered typewriter he was ordered to balance on his knees on an outside staircase in below-freezing temperatures - led to a company clerkship instead of deployment to Korea.

After his discharge, Tom went to work as a debt collector for C&S Bank in Atlanta before winning acceptance to the Harvard Business School.
At C&S, Tom demonstrated the talents that would accompany him through a kaleidoscope of companies and business ventures for the rest of his career. An ability to think outside the box. The desire to make things work. The willingness to contribute his own considerable sweat equity – often without pay or praise. A level head in highly volatile circumstances. And a good heart in how he treated his customers and, eventually, his own employees.

At that time, the bank collected overdue installment payments on appliances or would repossess the merchandise. Tom knew that those who owed the bank usually had money available on Fridays – when most of them were paid. But once the weekend passed, the little spending money they might have was likely gone.

The bank didn't want Tom to work weekends, but he did it anyway without pay, eventually becoming one of its most successful collectors. He once faced down a woman with a pistol and was threatened by a debtor with a shotgun. He was surrounded one night in the north Georgia back woods on a dark path to a still – telling the men who made white liquor that he was simply trying to help one of their wives keep her stove, not lose it to the bank. Where he could, he sat with debtors and helped them draw up budgets so they could better pay their bills. And

he would continue to make the effort to collect from repeat offenders on weekend nights simply for the sake of their families.

At Harvard, his intuitive math skills and his business acumen allowed accounting systems surprised fellow students who believed there was only one way to do things. To compensate for his broad Georgia accent – and the bias it engendered – Tom became a fast talker. By then, he and Mona had a baby daughter, and Tom would study on the floor, reading his text books aloud to the toddler.

Tom's Harvard MBA was his ticket to the world through business: Cryovac. CustomMade where he negotiated routinely with New York City meat packers in that still disarming Southern drawl. Booz Allen. Olin. American Safety Equipment. International Paper. And finally, Avenir – the capital investment group where, once again, he joined his older brother, Al, in a series of ventures where Tom was integral to the execution of more than 100 corporate transactions that included investing in, reviving, buying, and selling companies across the nation.

Throughout his career, it seemed as if Tom was always running, particularly for planes. He had three speeds – fast, faster, and Indy 500. He routinely sprinted down airport concourses with at least one briefcase and a carry-on, the last one to board just before the flight attendants shut the door. He *never* liked to wait around.

When a business meeting in Paris ended 90 minutes before his flight was scheduled to depart from Orly Airport eight miles south of the city, his Parisian counterpart told him not worry; his staff would get Tom there in time. The driver for the firm, which had significant ties to the French government, took out a red light, attached it on the top of the car and began a race to Orly, weaving in and out of the right and center lanes and barreling headlong into oncoming traffic. Tom made that plane just before the flight attendant shut the door.

Once, after a meeting in Switzerland east of Geneva, Tom had, as usual, less than optimal time to make another meeting - in Rome, Italy. But, as luck would have it, the Swiss agent had a souped-up Mercedes and decided to show Tom just how fast it could go. The agent had connections - with Swiss police. So, he barreled down the highway with impunity, often in a driving rain, at speeds topping 190 kilometers (about 140 mph). Tom made it to his meeting in Rome in just four hours, and they even stopped for dinner on the way.

When Tom turned 65, his Avenir partners presented him with a Steuben crystal horse in full gallop because Tom, like that horse, always seemed to be running, and breaking out of any gate that held him.

Tom's international travels could be a bit *adventurous.* In China, he joined Chinese negotiators in what, if it had occurred on a U.S. college campus, one might call "a drinking game." If a Chinese host offered a toast, Tom had to show his appreciation by chugging his drink or his host would be deeply offended and call off negotiations. That night, there were four Chinese hosts, so Tom and Avenir's chief financial officer had *no choice* but to down four drinks to every Chinese toaster's one. They started with rice wine, then shifted to a rice liqueur. Tom knew they couldn't stop until their hosts called it a night, or it would be a personal affront.

Hard as they tried, the Chinese negotiators couldn't drink Tom under the table. When the primary host finally stood up, he could barely hold his ground. But he made sure to invite Tom to dinner the following night. Unlike his host, Tom was still reasonably steady on his feet, but he suspected that if he accepted the invitation, he would find himself the following night facing someone who could drink *anybody* under the table. Tom politely declined, saying he had other plans.

Those Chinese drinking games didn't hold a candle to the tendency in the Philippines to launch a coup or coup attempt every few years. In 2007, Tom was at a Manila hotel when he and a business associate were notified that rebels were occupying the hotel across the street and had their guns pointed at the front door of their hotel.

Tom's reaction? Go down to breakfast. "I didn't know when I would eat again," he later explained. While at breakfast, hotel staff alerted Tom that government tanks had arrived and were lining up on a street behind his hotel about 100 yards away. Staff told him and his associate if they "wanted to try it," they could leave through the hotel kitchen door and if he could "make it" to the tanks, someone would be waiting to take them where they wanted to go.

Tom finished breakfast - because if you don't know when and where your next meal is coming from, you better eat a good one. Then he and his associate grabbed their suitcases, ducked out the hotel kitchen door, and began making their way toward the line of tanks where they had to convince suspicious soldiers they had taken no part in the coup attempt. Then they began walking. A mile later, an agent

with the Nestle Co. picked them up and whisked them to the airport. Asked where he was headed, Tom replied: "Where's the next plane going?"

"Hong Kong in 20 minutes." When that plane departed a short time later, Tom and his associate were on it.

"McDonald," his associate told him as they left Manila, "Don't ask me to travel with you anymore."

At Avenir, Tom's mission was never to shut things down. He always wanted to make things work. He peered around corners, looked to the future, envisioned where a company might go and what it might become over the long haul if given the chance to grow.

It was not about taking advantage. It was about creating opportunities while remembering to always serve the customers.

At each of a dozen or more companies Tom was personally tasked by Avenir investors with running, he would steep himself in the details of company operations and the products that each made. He would prowl production floors, talk with line workers, scope out the competition. When he ran Grindmaster, a Kentucky coffee maker company, he once came home with four coffee makers – each manufactured by a different competitor. He made a pot of coffee in each one, then compared how the coffee tasted, whether it was hot and how it poured.

For all Avenir's successes, on occasion, a company would become distressed. When that happened, Tom was always the one man to whom the investors – and his brother - turned for help.

It was never an easy job. Sometimes it was downright heart-breaking. But Avenir investors knew that if he could, Tom would keep things running – just like him. Even when no one else could find a way.

And he would put the investors, his customers, and his employees first.

When a South Carolina cotton mill began failing, Tom tried to save it by splitting it into smaller companies. He developed a plan that would have had the smaller operations profitable within two years. The consultant for the bank that had financed the initial venture approved Tom's plan as viable. The bank just didn't want to wait that long.

That mill was also the only large employer in town. Tom persuaded investors that if they put up $600,000 to purchase some needed equipment, the mill could remain viable until they could sell it;
the bank loan could be repaid; and the town would not become an economic wasteland. The investors agreed. It worked. Another firm did buy the mill, which remains in operation today. Meanwhile, Tom refused to draw his own salary for a year from one of the venture's other divisions.

In a business venture in the Dominican Republic, Tom and business partner Joel Wildstein grew the company from 25 to 550 employees and by paying generous wages, contributed to a rare thing in the DR – a middle class. When they opened up, not one of their employees had a car, and no one owned a home. Employees commuted to work on foot, by donkey cart or moped. But as the operation expanded, a lot more employees were able to buy their own homes and could afford to buy a car. And the company ended up with an employee parking problem!

The success he shared with Joel Wildstein in the Dominican Republic persuaded Tom that he wanted to give back to the Dominican people who were so integral to the business he and Joel had built. For Tom, education was the key. But so was his vision and his determination to make what he envisioned so – with the help of people he was able to persuade with his intellect, his commitment, his passion, his warmth, and his charm to take on his challenge to make public education blossom in the DR.

At the time, he and his wife were also exploring how to revitalize teachings about America's founders and the nation's founding principles while embracing their own Georgia roots.

Ramona, a former elementary school teacher, had earned her undergraduate degree in education, with a minor in voice, from Tift College before it was incorporated into Mercer. Tom had attended Mercer. It seemed as if it might be a good fit.

What the couple found was more than a good fit with Mercer's Great Books Program, its emphasis on missions and its visionary president, Bill Underwood. They found a partner and, eventually, a university family. The result was the creation of The Thomas C. and Ramona E. McDonald Center for America's Founding Principles and the Thomas C. and Ramona E. McDonald Fund for the Advancement of Global Education.

In endowing the Center for America's Founding Principles at Mercer in 2013, Tom and Ramona said in a joint statement, "We hope this Center for American's Founding Principles will increase the awareness of many more young people in how America has become the great nation we are and that maintaining freedom and our system of government requires constant diligence."

"We have been greatly blessed by the opportunities our country, the United States of America, provided for people who are industrious, had an entrepreneurial spirit, and a strong ethical foundation," they continued. "Too few of our young people today are aware of America's founding principles and the positive impact they have had on multiple peoples all over the world."

The focus of the McDonald global education fund, established in tandem with the Center for America's Founding Principles, is, first and foremost, the Dominican Republic.

"Think about it," Tom urged in a speech to Dominicans attending an education training conference two months before his death. "If … the program can be continually expanded to the entire nation during the next 12 years, you will directly or indirectly have positively improved the learning of over 5 million children..."

At the time, Tom also wrote to Mercer officials shepherding the global education fund, "My vision is that the education of ALL students in the Dominican Republic can be raised to higher levels for the betterment of not only the students but for the country as a whole. Although I will not be here, it is my vision that once the success of improving all education in the Dominican Republic has been achieved, the program can be spread to other countries."

Tom's partnership with Mercer to promote and enhance the education of the Dominican Republic's children in programs "led and carried out by Dominicans" prompted Mercer University to invite him to deliver the 2014 commencement address to its Tift College of Education graduates and Universidad Central del Este (UCE) in San Pedro, DR to award him an honorary doctoral degree. Tom continually marveled that a boy from rural Georgia whose public school only had 11 grades could find himself the recipient of two such high academic honors.

And he was humbled beyond measure when Mercer President Bill Underwood wrote to him shortly before he died, "You're as fine as human being as I've had the privilege to know. Being your partner in pursuing this most worthy mission is a great honor," and signed it, "Your friend."

Insight. Hard work. Vision. Once, after the dean of Harvard Business School turned down an opportunity to invest in an unrelated venture with one of Tom's former Avenir investors, he said he was doing so because the investor had one problem. "You don't have a Tom McDonald."

Tom McDonald's generous, loving spirit and his zest for life will live on in the memories of his daughter R. Robin McDonald and her fiancé, Richard Sharpe; son David McDonald and his life partner Karin DeDona; son Bruce McDonald and his wife Mary; three grandchildren, Chris McDonald, Dan McDonald and his fiancé Cheyenne Carlson, Matt McDonald and wife, Ellie; two great-grand-children, Lilah and Callum McDonald; Tom's younger brother, J. Riley McDonald and his wife, Bonnie Personett; Tom's nieces and nephews and their spouses, and hundreds of people around the world who valued knowing Tom and being a part of his life's incredible journey.

Donations can be made in honor of Tom to the Thomas C. and Ramona E. McDonald Fund for Global Education or to Mercer's Ramona Ellington McDonald Choral Fund in honor of his late wife, Ramona.