

# Ronald W. Mitchell: A tribute

The untimely death of IRA Executive Director Ronald W. Mitchell on November 17, 1989, came as a shock to all of us at IRA—especially to those of us who had worked closely with him over the years. Ron had served IRA for more than 20 years, joining the Headquarters staff in 1966 as Assistant Executive Secretary. In 1974 he was named Director of Conferences, and in 1984 he was named Executive Director. Ron devoted nearly his entire professional career to IRA.

Here are just a few of the key accomplishments made by IRA during Ron's five years as Executive Director.

- Membership increased by 56 percent, from 57,778 as of July 1, 1984 to 90,211 as of November 1, 1989.
- *The Reading Teacher* and the *Journal of Reading* were redesigned to improve appearance and readability. A new editorial team has begun its work with *The Reading Teacher*. IRA's other journals, newspaper, and books continue to be evaluated.
- There has been continued advancement in quality and innovation in the area of books. In 1987, IRA published *Children's Literature in the Reading Program*, which appears destined to be IRA's best-selling book of all time.
- The size of the *Reading Today* newspaper virtually doubled.
- Numerous Headquarters improvements were made, including a new printshop, new telephone equipment to better handle incoming calls and serve members, a renovated reception area, and new systems for more efficient filling and shipping of publication orders to the membership. Ron also initiated advance planning for land acquisition and a new building so that the Association will be ready to accommodate the new space and staffing requirements that will accompany anticipated growth.



- IRA increased its activity in a variety of special projects designed not only to enhance the Association's public visibility but also to make important professional contributions to the literacy movement. Some of these projects include the Mott's Apple Awards, the *Family Circle* "Leaders of Readers" project, the Family Focus program (carried out in conjunction with the American Newspaper Publishers Association, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and the PTA to encourage family reading via newspapers), advisory assistance to programs such as Pizza Hut's Book It!, and a series of smaller projects, all of which involve encouraging the private sector to work with IRA on behalf of literacy education.
- Public relations activities have increased, and better information flow has been established to other professional organizations, as well as to key national and international government and nongovernment agencies.
- The first North American Leadership Conference was held, establishing a new format for gathering leaders of IRA state/provincial affiliates.
- Board resources were improved for the support of IRA councils, and encouragement was given for the increased participation of Board members and Officers in council meetings at the local and state/provincial levels.



- Priority was placed upon continuing the improvement of IRA's professional and financial health.
- Loyalty and support for the IRA staff remained a priority; this loyalty translated into better service to the membership and the profession.
- International activities were strengthened, including participation in the planning of the upcoming World Conference on Education for All.
- IRA's tradition of fine professional conferences was maintained, and the notion of IRA special institutes and seminars was nurtured and expanded.

Ron would be quick to give the credit for many of these accomplishments to IRA members and volunteers, officers and members of the Board, and members of the Headquarters staff. However, he was the guiding force behind all of IRA's activities, and his energy and dedication led all of us to greater accomplishments on behalf of IRA.

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I would like to close this President's Message by sharing the two eulogies that were given at Ron's memorial service. I gave the first one, and IRA Past President Roselmina Indrisano gave the second.



Today we all grieve. We grieve the passing of a dear friend, a respected colleague, a cherished and loved father and husband, a good man.

Ron Mitchell has left us with a lasting legacy — a proud and strong professional association working hard to improve literacy for all humans.

For more than 20 years, Ron has been one of my closest personal and professional friends. I have traveled widely with him — from Brisbane to Billings, from Manila to Miami, from Dublin to Denver, from New Orleans to Newark. And everywhere I saw him work so hard and give so much. I saw the love and loyalty and great admiration so many people all over this world feel for Ronald Mitchell.

We will miss him so much, and we will never forget his wisdom, his sensitivity, his keen intellect, his energy, his common sense, his delightful wit, his patience, his tolerance, and his calm. And most of all, his kindness and goodness. Have you ever known anyone as good as Ron?

And now we must all be strong. We must carry forth his visions, dreams, and plans for an ever more literate world. We must be strong, for that is what Ron would want.

On the day, nearly two decades ago, when I was appointed to the Regional Conferences Committee of the International Reading Association, the Lord smiled upon



me, for it marked the beginning of my friendship with Ron Mitchell. The qualities that were constant over the succeeding years were quite soon apparent – the intelligence and the insight, the caring and the compassion, and the capacity to respect each person with whom he worked, whether in supporting a young member on her first voyage into the intricacies of conference planning, in mentoring talented Headquarters staff members, in sophisticated negotiations with a convention center manager, or in winsome conversation with a school-age child waiting with other members of the chorus to sing at the opening session of a conference.

As Executive Director of the International Reading Association, Ronald Mitchell gave to every officer and member his unfailing friendship and his total dedication. Each person who is given the privilege of office, from the international to the local level, serves for a time, and then the privilege passes, as it should, to the next person. No one could be more eloquent or generous in his poetic motions of praise for retiring officers than Ron Mitchell, who, with gentle hand, magnified accomplishments, diminished errors, eased transitions, and kept the good of the membership and the quest for universal literacy at the center of attention. And, by his example, he gave us as well the gift of the support of the extraordinary Headquarters staff.



Thinking of all of Ron's gifts to us, I am reminded of the words of poet William Butler Yeats, and I ask to be permitted a minor adaptation:

Think where man's glory most begins and ends  
And say my glory was I was such a friend.

During these past few days, in the shared pain of great loss, we are again aware that "memory is the heart's gratitude." At the conclusion of my presidency, I reserved my final and most heartfelt gratitude for Ron Mitchell. On that evening, I quoted the words of the Bard of Stratford-on-Avon. Today, on behalf of all of us, and the unknown numbers of people throughout the world who are closer to the dream of literacy through the efforts of Executive Director Ronald Mitchell, I quote them again:

I can no other answer make but thanks, and thanks, and ever thanks.

And now, dear Ron,

May the family you cherished so deeply find solace in your abiding love,

May the international family you served so gently be renewed by your inspired leadership,

May the Headquarters family you nurtured so kindly be sustained by your confidence, and

In the eternal family, beyond our view, but within reach of our love, "may God hold you in the palm of His hand."

*by Dale D. Johnson*