

Mizzou Weekly

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Campus worker with physical challenges devoted employee until death



IN MEMORIAM Don and Betsy Sisson of Columbia were the legal guardians of Matt Ross, who died in March at age 46 after 24 years at Mizzou. Despite his physical challenges, Ross retained his sense of humor and work ethic. Rob Hill photo

HERCULEAN STRENGTH

MU worker was a lover of books and sports

Matt Ross loved reading Greek mythologies. Hercules, who exuded godlike strength among other mortals, was his favorite character "because of his trials and tribulations," he said in March.

Likewise, Ross, an MU employee for 24 years who died March 16 at age 46, faced many trials and tribulations.

A tragic accident early in Ross' life resulted in a lifetime of surgeries and rehabilitation programs. Yet his extreme challenges were all tempered by the love of his legal guardians and his own inner strength

Tragedy strikes early

As a boy, Ross loved to sit in the balcony of the First Presbyterian Church in Jefferson City to watch his father, the Rev. Charles Dudley Ross, preach the Gospels. The 11-year-old was talkative and bright with big dreams.

But his life changed July 31, 1976, during a family vacation.

The Rosses were in their Fiat driving near the Missouri-Illinois border when a car pulled out in front of them. The family vehicle plowed into the car. His mother, Arlene, sister Rebekah, and Charles were killed. His sister Valerie, then 12, survived with a few injuries.

The accident paralyzed Ross' left side. Bones in his face shattered on impact. Surgeons picked out about 130 bone fragments from his face. He suffered severe brain damage. The precocious, energetic boy was permanently scarred. He was left in a state of physical and mental devastation.

Don and Betsy Sisson, parishioners at First Presbyterian, took him under their wings. After exactly 50 weeks in the hospital, Ross was released and would live with the Sissons for the next 35 years, first in Jefferson City and then in Columbia.

Years of grueling rehabilitation followed. "When you have a head injury like that, you have to learn to do everything all over again," Don said.

Soon after the accident, Ross started having seizures, which remained an issue until his death. No longer could he sit in the church balcony as he did before the accident. His parents worried that he might have a seizure and fall over the balcony's rail.

Although the crash stripped Ross of much potential, he still aspired to live a normal life. Betsy remembers watching her oldest son, Don Jr., attempt to teach the partially paralyzed Ross how to ride a bike.

The incident proved nerve-wracking. But Don Jr. and her other son, John, treated Ross just like a brother — with roughhousing and playful teasing.

Though a passionate sports fan, Ross couldn't play the sports he loved. So he did the next best thing. While a student at Rock Bridge High School, he worked as the equipment manager for the high school football team.

After graduating high school in 1984, Ross wanted a job. He trained with Advent Enterprises, an employment center in Columbia now called Job Point. Ross volunteered and was later hired at MU's Office of Animal Resources. His duties included preparing feed and bedding for a variety of animals.

Popular MU employee

His colleagues agree that he contributed as well as any other staff member. Jane Robinson, his supervisor at Animal Resources, said he was an exceptional worker.

"He was good about reporting any problems," Robinson said. "This was not a charitable gesture on my part." Matt studied for, tested and received a national certification for Assistant Laboratory Animal Technician, she said.

Like any hard-working employee, he impressed his employers and improved his department.

"I certainly believe that our department would not be the same without Matt and that the university is extremely lucky to have had such a devoted employee for so many years," said Jennifer Davison, fellow animal services technician.

But it wasn't just hard work and self-determination that impressed his colleagues. It was also his quick humor.

"I don't know of one co-worker he hadn't caught off guard with his good-natured wit," animal resources employee Sherrie Neff said.

When Ross' kidneys failed two years ago, he was placed on dialysis. Sister Valerie offered to donate one of her kidneys, but she wasn't a matching donor. The miraculous progress he had made plateaued. To survive he had to have dialysis four times daily. Each 30-minute treatment, which amounted to two hours of dialysis each day, sapped his strength.

But this didn't stop him from doing the thing he loved most — working at the university with his colleagues.

His university health care benefits paid for most of the burdensome surgery and treatments. Robinson even had her office sterilized to accommodate Ross' daily dialyses so he could still come to work. He later began an overnight treatment process at home.

Book lover to the end

To relax after a hard work week, Ross spent most Friday nights at the Columbia Mall. He couldn't drive, so Betsy drove him there.

While at the mall, Matt spent 90 percent of his time at Barnes & Noble, where he found peace and entertainment among the tomes of literature. In addition to his insatiable appetite for Greek mythologies, he also devoured mysteries and the Harry Potter series.

An unyielding admiration for the Mizzou basketball team also kept him busy. Ross purchased season tickets every year to cheer on the Tigers until his sickness overcame him.

Ross received the February 2012 Service Champion Award from the MU Staff Advisory Council and was nominated for the Chancellor's Outstanding Staff Award. Don told Ross of the honor and nomination before he died.

To his last breath, Ross was dedicated to his job. His final words before going into a coma: "I don't think I will be able to go to work tomorrow."

— *Trevor Eischen*

Issue

- [Campus worker with physical challenges devoted employee until death](#) MU worker was a lover of books and sports
- [Missouri Innovation Center leader helps students become entrepreneurs](#) Center's leader has years of experience running companies and assisting developing countries
- [People's contemplation of death isn't all doom and gloom, MU researchers find](#) Tragedies can lead people to altruism, study finds
- [Offices adopt summer hours](#)
- [Big gift to CSOC](#)
- [Reduce summer stress](#)
- [Workshop for health](#)

[More in the archive »](#)

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Missouri Innovation Center leader helps students become entrepreneurs



GIVING BACK Jake Halliday teaches “High Growth Ventures,” a course in the Crosby MBA program in the Trulaske College of Business. After years as a business leader, Halliday now enjoys giving back by teaching Mizzou graduate students about being entrepreneurs. Rob Hill photo

CREATING BUSINESSES

Center's leader has years of experience running companies and assisting developing countries

Jake Halliday has hopped from country to country in a quest to develop economic growth. He has educated graduate students, led successful companies and even brushed shoulders with Ronald Reagan.

At Mizzou he supports the university’s economic development mission as president and CEO of Missouri Innovation Center (MIC), which supports young entrepreneurs by providing them a network of tools to succeed in start-up firms.

He also teaches “High Growth Ventures,” a course in the Crosby MBA program in the Trulaske College of Business. Halliday instructs on the process of evaluating the commercial appeal of an invention by MU researchers, developing a business plan and obtaining financing.

He designed the course to give real-world entrepreneurial experience to graduate students.

“In several cases, the class simulations convert to real companies led by graduate students sharing ownership with the faculty inventors,” Halliday said. “This is helping Missouri retain some of our most promising graduates.”

Over the last four years, the course has helped more than 25 MU students obtain executive-level positions with start-up firms, Halliday said.

Real-world experience

As an undergraduate, Halliday attended Queens University Belfast in Northern Ireland. He obtained his PhD from the University of Western Australia in 1977. He spent the next decade assisting developing countries: first at the International Center for Tropical Agriculture in Cali, Colombia, and then with the Research Corporation at the University of Hawaii.

He caught the attention of President Reagan, who assigned Halliday and 12 others to the Presidential Agricultural Task Force to assess the economic development situation in Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

“(President Mobutu Sese Seko) asked Reagan for money,” Halliday said. “Reagan said, ‘No. We’ll send you experts. We’ll send you Jake.’”

The task force performed a total agricultural sector analysis for more than three weeks. While his colleagues remained in Kinshasa, the country’s comfortable capital, Halliday traveled into the bush to evaluate its agriculture.

He later met Mobutu.

“He was a totally corrupt guy,” Halliday said. “Our opening section (in the report) was that there would be little impact from economic development assistance until the issue of widespread corruption was dealt with.”

Halliday next joined Battelle Memorial Institute, a research and development company where he was vice president of pharmaceutical business development.

After 10 years at Battelle, he moved to Columbia to be president and CEO of Analytical Bio-Chemistry Laboratories. Inc.

In 2004 he joined the management department of the College of Business to develop a graduate course and other offerings in technology entrepreneurship.

Successful graduates

One of Halliday’s recent students in “High Growth Ventures” was Xandra Sifuentes, who had earned a BS in computer science at MU. Sifuentes worked in engineering at Honeywell and Garmin before deciding she wanted a more entrepreneurially focused career. She returned to MU to pursue an MBA.

In Halliday’s course, Sifuentes developed the business plan and later founded Adroit Motion to explore commercialization of a laparoscopic hand instrument developed by MU researchers.

As the firm’s CEO, she pitched the company at the Rice University Business Plan Competition, winning \$24,100 in funding for Adroit Motion.

After earning her MBA, Sifuentes left Adroit Motion and is now president of Metactive Medical, a start-up in metropolitan Kansas City.

Halliday is proud of his graduates and content these days to instruct on technology entrepreneurship rather than lead companies and assist developing countries.

“I now have a combination of activities that I view as giving back,” he said. “I find that particularly rewarding.”

— *Brad Fischer and Trevor Eischen*

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GRIM REAPER HAPPINESS

Tragedies can lead people to altruism, study finds

Contemplating death doesn't necessarily lead to morose despondency, fear, aggression or other negative behaviors, as previous research has suggested. Following a review of dozens of studies, MU researchers found that thoughts of mortality can lead to decreased militaristic attitudes, better health decisions, increased altruism and helpfulness, and reduced divorce rates.

The findings were published in the April edition of *Personality and Social Psychology Review*.

"According to terror management theory, people deal with their awareness of mortality by upholding cultural beliefs and seeking to become part of something larger and more enduring than themselves, such as nations or religions," said Jamie Arndt, study co-author and professor of psychological sciences.

"Depending on how that manifests itself, positive outcomes can be the result," he said.

For example, in one study American test subjects were reminded of death or a control topic and then either imagined a local catastrophe or were reminded of the global threat of climate change. Their militaristic attitudes toward Iran were then evaluated. After being reminded of death, people who were reminded of climate change were more likely to express lower levels of militarism than those who imagined a local disaster.

"The differences seen in this study resulted from the size of the group with which the test subjects identified," said Ken Vail, lead author and psychology doctoral student. "In both cases, they responded to the awareness of mortality by seeking to protect the relevant groups. When the threat was localized, subjects aggressively defended their local group; but when the threat was globalized, subjects associated themselves with humanity as a whole and became more peaceful and cooperative."

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Offices adopt summer hours

Mizzou officials have approved summer hours from 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. with a 30-minute lunch from May 14 to August 6. But offices with programs serving students will need to remain open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., with adequate personnel during lunch break to serve students.

Leaders must formerly adopt the summer hours for their respective departments or offices.

The following departments and offices have adopted summer hours:

Academic Support Center

Accounting Services

Administrative Services

- Parking and Transportation

Biochemistry

Business Services

College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources

- Animal Sciences
- Natural Resources

College of Arts and Science

- Biological Sciences
- English
- History
- Music
- Physics and Astronomy
- Romance Languages and Literature

College of Education

- Adventure Club
- Assessment Resource Center
- Dean's Fiscal Office
- Heart of Missouri Regional Professional Development Center

Learning and Performance Support

- Office of Research Support
- Partnership for Educational Renewal

College of Engineering

- Engineering Technical Services

College of Human Environmental Sciences

- Architectural Studies
- HES Extension Fiscal Office
- Human Development and Family Studies
- Nutrition and Exercise Physiology
- Personal Financial Planning
- Textile and Apparel Management

Environmental Health and Safety

Geological Sciences

Human Resource Services

Mizzou Advantage

Mizzou Online

MU Conference Office

Office of Economic Development

Printing Services

Trulaske College of Business

- Accountancy
- Business Career Services
- Crosby MBA Program
- Dean's Office
- execMBA Program
- Finance
- Management
- Marketing
- Missouri Training Institute
- Professional Development
- Technology Services

- Undergraduate Programs

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Big gift to CSOC

A \$1 million gift has been made to the Center for the Study of Organizational Change (CSOC) in the Truman School of Public Affairs.

The benefactor is Seth Allcorn, a former vice president for business and finance at the University of New England in Biddeford, Maine. He also served as a financial and administrative assistant dean at the Texas Tech School of Medicine and associate dean for the Stritch School of Medicine at Loyola University Chicago.

“I have worked with CSOC director Michael Diamond for more than 20 years on the study of organizational change,” said Allcorn, an associate of the CSOC. The school “represents a conceptual repository for this new field of knowledge and a platform for its continued development.”

The gift primarily will fund doctoral student fellowships in organization studies by establishing a permanent endowment.

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Reduce summer stress

Healthy for Life is offering an eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program (MBSR) 5–7 p.m. June 7–July 26. Orientation is May 31.

The program teaches skills for responding to stress with greater skill and creativity using formal mindfulness skills (meditation, yoga, body scan) and information about stress, communication and wellness. Participants will be asked to engage in daily practice exercises outside of class.

Cost is \$40 (with \$20 refunded if you attend seven of eight classes). All are invited to attend.

To register or for more information, contact Lynn Rossy at rossyL@umsystem.edu (<http://>).

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Workshop for health

A six-week workshop called Better Choices Better Health teaches people with chronic medical problems how to take control of their health. Benefit eligible employees, retirees and family members are eligible for an incentive for participating in a health assessment.

The free workshop is being presented twice: 6 p.m.–8 p.m. May 8–June 12 in GL 11 University Hospital, One Hospital Drive; and 5:30–7:30 p.m. May 10–June 14 123 Ellis Fischel Cancer Center, 115 Business Loop 70 West.

To register or for more information, email Amber Phelps at phelpsam@missouri.edu.

The workshop is sponsored by Healthy for Life and the Central Missouri Regional Arthritis Center.

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