



ILLUSTRATION KYLE GANDY/MIDJOURNEY

A gifted teacher and researcher, OU George Lynn Cross Research Professor Sherril Christian excelled in every aspect of academic life.

# Sherril Christian:

## ONE OF A KIND

By Roger Frech

**MY INTERACTIONS** with Sherril Christian began in 1970 when I arrived at the University of Oklahoma's Chemistry Department as a new (and very inexperienced) assistant professor. My only teaching experience was as an assistant at the University of Minnesota, where I earned my Ph.D. I realized that I didn't know what I was doing in the classroom and decided that the way to address this problem was to observe "the best in the business," as Sherril was described to me. I became a faithful attendee at his physical chemistry lectures.

I knew most of the substance of his lectures, but what

I found fascinating was how he got that substance across to students. I quickly understood that I was watching a truly gifted teacher at work.

First and foremost, he deeply cared about what he was doing in the classroom; and because he cared, it was worth doing as well as possible. An important part of his teaching gift was his ability to recognize the "sticky stuff," those concepts encountered by the students for the first time, often gift-wrapped in messy equations. Sherril's talent as a teacher was to acknowledge the "sticky stuff" and smoothly guide students through it. He

slowed down and gently pulled it apart, walking the students through with carefully chosen examples. I asked him how he came up with those brilliant examples. He laughed and said that sometimes you choose an example that turns out not to work; if you pay attention to the students' expressions and questions, you can usually figure out what went wrong and build from there. He made it clear that teaching is a learning process for the instructor, just as mastering new concepts is a learning process for the students.

Sherril was a prodigious researcher, with 211 articles and

chapters on the thermodynamics and properties of complex solutions. His articles appeared in the most prestigious journals in the fields of physical and solution chemistry. Whenever I had a question related to thermodynamics, I knew that Sherril was the very best source of insight into my problem. He was always quick with his friendly smile and eager to talk about any topic, related to chemistry or not.

Born Nov. 28, 1931, in Estherville, Iowa, Sherril was educated at Iowa State University. He received his B.S. degree in 1952 and his Ph.D. in 1955. As an undergraduate, he was a varsity letterman in tennis and a member of the band and orchestra.

Sherril began his career at OU as an assistant professor in January 1956 and received tenure in July 1958. In 1961, he was honored with a Fulbright appointment at the University of Ceylon. Very early in his career, an evaluation noted that he was, "the most productive of our younger staff members" and that, "he works only on significant problems and has already made a number of highly original contributions to the field of solutions." High praise, indeed, for a beginning faculty member.

Only one year after receiving tenure, he served on the University Committee on Academic Standards, the Departmental Graduate Studies Committee, the AAUP Economic Status Committee and the Faculty Senate. He was also chair of the American Southwest Regional Meeting Education Committee. These were heavy additional duties for so gifted a teacher and so accomplished a researcher.

The promise that Sherril Christian displayed in his earliest years was amply realized for the rest of his illustrious

career. There was no aspect of academic life in which he did not excel. He was a trusted adviser to countless students and sponsor of an organization of young student chemists. His colleagues across the University respected his values and his judgment, and they entrusted him with critical positions on important institutional and AAUP policy-making committees. He tried his hand at administration—assistant dean of Arts and Sciences (1964-1966) and interim chair of Chemistry (1968-1969).

But in the end, he would be best remembered for his important scientific research and his splendid teaching, which he continued to demonstrate until his retirement in 1995. These culminated in Sherril's appointment as a George Lynn Cross Research Professor, the University's most prestigious honor for exceptional research, in 1969. His international reputation was marked by extensive collaborations and appointments in Sweden, Norway, Thailand and Turkey. It is no wonder that his contributions to the University and his field are memorialized by a bust in the Chemistry Building.

Sherril was also well known (and beloved) for the parties that he and his wife, Dee, held at their home for graduate and undergraduate students, post-doctoral fellows and colleagues. Wonderful food, games and a good time were had by all. Sherril was an excellent scientist, a gifted teacher, a thoughtful friend, and an all-around good guy ... one of a kind. 🍷

*Roger Frech is professor emeritus in the OU Dodge Family College of Arts and Sciences Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry.*



TRAVIS CAPERTON

### Put a Ring On It

*Amidst the whirlwind of classes, activities and “final everything” leading up to spring Commencement, OU seniors pause for April’s OU Ring Ceremony and receive a memento that will mark them forever as a member of the Sooner Nation.*