Tributes to Geoff Giles

Geoff Giles, a member of ATM for over 40 years, died suddenly on 4 August 2005. He was a regular contributor to MT and wrote the recent ATM publication Proof in Elementary Geometry.

Geoff has been living and breathing mathematics education for a long time. When he joined the University of Stirling 30 years ago, he was already certain that children could understand and enjoy mathematics if they could access it in the right way. He began work on his own specially written booklets, and, in particular, on the use of ‘concrete’ materials. A short time later he started DIME Projects – Development of Ideas in Mathematical Education.

But Geoff will be remembered not just for these concrete manifestations of his contribution to mathematics education but also as an inspiring man who infected so many others with his enthusiasm.

Here are a few extracts from the many tributes paid by his friends and colleagues.

From Paul Andrews
My recollections of Geoff fall into two distinct but clearly related forms.

The first concerns my reaction when first I came across the DIME materials. I was a relatively youthful teacher looking for something to scaffold my students’ learning in ways that the texts around at the time did not. Someone suggested I look at the DIME materials and I was immediately hooked.

The second concerns Geoff the man and not the architect of mathematical thinking although it is difficult to separate the two. I can’t remember exactly when I first met him although I know it must have been at one of my first ATM conferences. His session was delivered in ways that shouted from the rooftops, “we are learners together and our collaboration will not only help us in our understanding of mathematics but through our working together facilitate our students’ understanding of mathematics”.

From David Fielker
Geoff was almost unique in his view of the teaching of geometry. Some pure geometry lay always in the background, which produced some unusual and surprising theorems at an elementary level: see for instance the amazing theorem in MT45, winter 1968 issue, Some Geometry Using Transformations. His Geometry for all (MT100, 1982) noted the disappearance of deductive geometry, and called for a rethink of what geometry was about, especially as a subject which no longer, he thought, should be confined to an elite section of the school population.

“There are those who will argue that the ‘Geometry’ I am advocating has no substance, no body, and thus cannot be taken seriously. But they are thinking of mathematics as static content, and their geometry is entombed in textbooks. If the mathematics classroom is to be alive, then we must allow children to do their own mathematics… It is the ‘doing’ that is important, not what is done.”

From Doug Williams
Geoff was a personal friend and a huge influence on my professional life. Our relationship goes back to the middle 70s when I was a young teacher and he was already respected around the world for his remarkable insights into mathematics education.

Sharing his expertise was all that Geoff ever wanted to do. In the closing paragraph of a 1978 Keynote Address paper written for the biennial conference of the AAMT, he invited us all to continue this process:

“If this miscellaneous collection of bits and pieces has convinced you that mathematics in school can be made more interesting, accessible and understandable I will be happy. Should it also motivate you to work with others on the improvement of mathematics education in the classroom then I will be delighted. But please don’t keep your insights to yourself. Share them and let them multiply.”

And a final thought from Geoff’s granddaughter, Rebecca
Thank you for all the kind thoughts of my Grampa, I had no idea just how important he was to others.

I was a guinea pig for many of Geoff’s materials for the past 20 years. Even up to this spring I was testing out maths puzzles. I am so very lucky that not only did I get the opportunity to use this equipment, I had the best maths tutor around, although tutoring sessions lasted hours, as Geoff never told me the answer, he guided me to it from first principles.

I am now working as an aerospace engineer, a place I would never be if it hadn’t been for Geoff. Every child in the country could have the head-start I had. You can do puzzles before you can count a number line. It is easier to see and do, than to imagine. I will use Geoff’s materials with my kids; you can use them with all kids.

Please do not only remember my Grampa, but also carry on his work. Allow more children to learn through their hands and keep making maths accessible and fun. I’m positive that is what Geoff would have wanted.

Some of Geoff’s work can be seen on the website.