

**KINO LORBER**  
i n c o r p o r a t e d

presents

# THE REVISIONARIES

Directed by Scott Thurman

A Kino Lorber Release  
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### **Logline**

The theory of evolution and a re-write of US history are caught in the crosshairs when an unabashed creationist seeks re-election as chairman of America's most influential board of education.

### **Synopsis**

In Austin, Texas, fifteen people influence what is taught to the next generation of American children. Once every decade, the highly politicized Texas State Board of Education rewrites the teaching and textbook standards for its nearly 5 million schoolchildren. And when it comes to textbooks, what happens in Texas affects the nation as a whole.

Don McLeroy, a dentist, Sunday school teacher, and avowed young-earth creationist, leads the Religious Right charge. After briefly serving on his local school board, McLeroy was elected to the Texas State Board of Education and later appointed chairman. During his time on the board, McLeroy has overseen the adoption of new science and history curriculum standards, drawing national attention and placing Texas on the front line of the so-called "culture wars."

In his last term, McLeroy, aided by Cynthia Dunbar, an attorney from Houston and professor of Law at Jerry Falwell's Liberty University, finds himself not only fighting to change what Americans are taught, but also fighting to retain his seat on the board. Challenged by Kathy Miller, president of the Texas Freedom Network, and Ron Wetherington, an anthropology professor from Southern Methodist University in Texas, McLeroy faces his toughest term yet.

THE REVISIONARIES follows the rise and fall of some of the most controversial figures in American education through some of their most tumultuous intellectual battles.

### **Director's Statement**

A few years ago I was inspired by an article by physicist Brian Greene called "Put a Little Science in Your Life." The article encouraged educators to communicate science in ways that capture the drama and excitement of new discoveries mixed in with the standard technical details. My fifth grade science teacher created this energy, sparking my imagination and interest in science and so I sought to produce a short portrait of a science teacher in Texas that's also moving minds with an intense and electrifying message.

At the time, I discovered a survey stating that half of the American public did not accept the theory of evolution and so I decided to focus my film on a Biology teacher and the lessons on evolution. Not long after I started following these classroom discussions, I learned about the political debate on the State Board of Education in Texas over how evolution would be taught in science and later how the concept of "separation between church and state" would be understood in social studies, among other controversial topics.

I became more interested in the political issue over time, but remained focused on having a character driven story. As I continued to seek intimate access to a few people that were heavily involved, I was drawn to the magnetic personality of Don McLeroy, chairman of the board, and outspoken creationist on a mission to convince the public and next generation of students that evolution is not sound science and that America is exceptional in part because it was founded on Christian principles. After a year of efforts to gain access, Don slowly opened up to me, eventually allowing me full access to his personal life at work, in his fourth grade Sunday school class and in his home.

I'm grateful for Don's willingness to have shared such exclusive aspects of his life for the documentary and my goal is for the compassion and complexities of Don's character to be appreciated and understood beyond the stereotypical persona that's been given to this small town dentist in the past.

**CREDITS**

*Director*  
Scott Thurman

*Written By*  
Jawad Metni  
Scott Thurman

*Producers - Pierson Silver, Orlando Wood, Scott Thurman*

*Executive Producers - Jim Butterworth, Vijay Dewan*

*Co-Producers - Chandra C. Silver, Daniel J. Chalfen*

*Directors of Photography - Zac Sprague, Scott Thurman*

*Music By - Mark Orton*

*Edited By - Jawad Metni*

*Consulting Editor - Michael LaHaie*

*Participants*

David Anderson  
Connie Barlow  
Jessica Beckham  
Kimberly Bilica  
Heidi Boles  
Chris Comer  
Bob Craig  
Michael Dowd  
Cynthia Dunbar  
Raymond Eve  
Laura Ewing  
Kevin Fisher  
Barbara Forrest  
Julie Fry  
Steve Fuller  
Michael Hudson  
Lee Hughes  
Stephanie Klenzendorf  
Norman Lear  
Gail Lowe  
Arturo De Lozanne  
Don McLeroy  
Kathy Miller  
Ken Miller  
Matthew Ogilvie  
Thomas Ratliff  
Jonathan Saenz  
Steven Schafersman  
Gary Scharrer  
Eugenie Scott  
Gerald Skoog  
Srinivasan Srivilliputhur  
Bill Talkington  
Ruthanne Thompson  
Ide Trotter  
Amanda Walker  
Ron Wetherington

## **Background**

The Texas board of education is the most influential group of educators in the USA and they hold enormous political and financial sway over textbook publishers. They are using their influence to inject a more Christian perspective into the curriculum and the nation's textbooks. Texas is one of the nation's largest textbook markets because it is one of the few where the state decides what books schools can buy rather than leaving it up to local districts, which means publishers that get their books approved can count on millions of dollars in sales. Further, publishers craft their standard textbooks based on the requirements of the biggest buyers. As a result, the Texas board has the power to shape the textbooks that children around the country read for years to come. Varying estimates claim that between 45% and 85% of American classrooms use Texas state textbooks (Univ. of Texas Study, Keith A. Erikson).

Over the course of the current review, the board has been focusing on infusing the school curriculum with broader conservative and religious themes. In Science, there has been an insistence on questioning the theory of evolution. And during the review of the history standards, the more conservative members have attempted to define the United States as a Christian nation governed by Christian principles, and emphasize the concept of "American Exceptionalism."

After the 2006 election, Republicans claimed ten of fifteen board seats. Seven of those seats were held by the ultra-conservatives, and one by a close ally, giving them an effective majority. THE REVISIONARIES shines a spotlight on the key players effecting the US high school textbooks. The main characters in this film represent a wide array of personalities and desires. Some see the Board as a stepping-stone to future political success. Others see it as their ordained quest to preserve the teachings of the Bible.

Still others see it as their duty to ensure that their children, who are in the public schools, have access to the best possible education that will prepare them to compete for jobs in the global marketplace. In all of this, one thing is assured, these board members are in the right place at the right time. They have the opportunity to affect a generation of Americans. And as Abraham Lincoln said, "the philosophy of the classroom in one generation will be the philosophy of government in the next." Texas is ground zero for the textbook wars across the country. Our film confronts the critical issue and key players in the Texas State Board of Education's textbook standards revision process and how this impacts the entire US education system.

The goal of our film is to illuminate the political wrangling behind the board that has gone on since the '80s, and bring attention to this largely overlooked, yet vitally important group of people. The Texas State Board of Education is a modern, moral battleground in the national debate between conservatives and liberals in this country.

THE REVISIONARIES gives a face and a personality to these political fights. Filming for over three years, Scott Thurman has captured on film all of the intense debates, vote trading and compromises amongst the board members. Showing the back room discussions between the board members and the experts. He is with them as they make their decisions. But, first and foremost, this film is about people, those few passionate citizens who are fighting to shape the course of American education, and the future of America with it.

**Filmmaker Bios**

**Scott Thurman- Director**

Scott Thurman, born in Lubbock, Texas is an M.F.A. graduate in documentary film from the University of North Texas. He has worked as a news photographer for 4 years and has produced 3 short films at the University of North Texas, including "Smokey" a short documentary about an Elvis impersonator that has been selected by film festivals around the U.S. including AFI Dallas, Los Angeles Film Festival, Hot Springs Doc Festival, and Austin Film Festival, among others. Scott originally conceived of a documentary film about the Texas Board of Education for his thesis project "Standing Up to the Experts."

**Pierson Silver- Producer**

A founding partner of Silver Lining Film Group, Pierson Silver has worked with cinematographers such as John Lindley ("Reservation Road" 2001), Philippe Rousselot ("The Brave One" 2007), John Bailey ("When in Rome" 2010), Janusz Kaminski ("Munich" 2005) and Matthew Libatique ("Inside Man" 2006). Pierson has also performed specialty camera work on several other major motion pictures, as well as New York based television, and commercial productions such as "The Other Guys" (2010), "Shutter Island" (2010), "The Ghost Writer" (2010), "Fast Five" (2011), and "Men in Black III" (2012). Most recently Pierson shot and produced the film version of the rock opera "Screen Test" (2009), which premiered at the Museum of Art and Design.

**Orlando Wood- Producer**

Since starting Magic Hour Entertainment, Orlando Wood has produced two documentary features - "One Big Lie" about Bernard Madoff's massive ponzi scheme and "The Revisionaries." He also developed the feature "Welcome To The Punch" with Eran Creevy and Beat Films. The film stars James McAvoy and will release in summer 2012. Orlando's background is in advertising production and he's produced over 100 ads for some of the world's most recognizable brands. Orlando runs Biscuit Filmworks UK, the international arm of renowned LA production company Biscuit Filmworks.

**Jim Butterworth- Executive Producer**

Jim Butterworth is the founder and president of Naked Edge Films, where he has served as executive producer for films including "The Revisionaries," "Gone", "Donor Unknown," "War Don Don," "The Disappearance of McKinley Nolan," and "Cape Spin." Jim's own film "Seoul Train," which he produced, directed and shot, has been translated to more than twenty languages and broadcast on TV globally. In 2007, "Seoul Train" was bestowed the Alfred I. duPont - Columbia University Award for excellence in broadcast journalism and investigative reporting, and also was runner-up for the National Journalism Award. Jim also is a successful technology entrepreneur and investor, and an advisor to a number of nonprofits, start-up companies and investment funds. He was one of the pioneers in the streaming of audio and video over the Internet, and holds 12 issued U.S. and foreign patents in this field.

**Vijay Dewan- Executive Producer**

Vijay is currently a litigation associate at a large New York law firm. After graduating Columbia University, Vijay worked in the regulatory group at the law firm of Davis Polk & Wardwell for two years. At Notre Dame Law School, Vijay focused on constitutional law issues, including Freedom of Speech and Freedom of Religion. Vijay graduated Notre Dame Law School with honors in 2008. After graduating law school, Vijay has played an active role in New York and national politics, including co-organizing Young Lawyers for Obama during Barack Obama's successful presidential campaign. More recently, Vijay worked on Cy Vance's successful campaign for Manhattan District Attorney and Kirsten Gillibrand's successful senatorial campaign.

**Filmmaker Bios (cont'd)**

**Daniel J. Chalfen- Co-Producer**

Daniel J. Chalfen is a founder of and producer at Naked Edge Films. His most recent documentaries include "Code of the West" which premiered at SXSW 2012; "Cape Spin" which premiered at IDFA 2011; "Donor Unknown" (produced with ARTE, More 4 and VPRO), which premiered at the 2010 Sheffield Doc/Fest then went on to screen at IDFA, Tribeca and Silverdocs (the latter two at which it won an Audience Award), and broadcast in the U.S. on the PBS series Independent Lens; "GONE," which premiered at Tribeca in 2011, and was broadcast on Discovery ID in the U.S.; "War Don Don," which premiered at SXSW, where it won a Special Jury Mention, and was broadcast in the U.S. on HBO, and was nominated for two Emmys; and "Budrus," which premiered at Dubai then screened at Berlin, Tribeca and Silverdocs, among other festivals, each of which where it won an award. Earlier credits include "The Disappearance of McKinley Nolan," Executive Produced by Danny Glover; "Meeting Resistance," which won the Golden Award at the Al Jazeera International Documentary Festival; "Encounter Point"; "39 Pounds of Love," which was produced with HBO Documentary Films and was short-listed for an Academy Award; and "Pulled from the Rubble," which became an ABC Special. Daniel's non-fiction television series include "Happy France" for ARTE and "Ordinary People," which was broadcast worldwide. His forthcoming films include "Pretty Old," Executive Produced by Joe Berlinger and Sarah Jessica Parker, "The Revisionaries," and "The Life and Mind of Mark DeFriest."

**Chandra C. Silver- Co-Producer**

After graduating from NYU, Chandra began her career in film at Hart Sharp Entertainment ("You Can Count on Me" (2000), "Boy's Don't Cry" (1999)). Chandra then worked in the independent featurepackaging department under Arianna Bocco at The Gersh Agency in New York where she aided in the foundation of the film sales department. After her time at Gersh, Chandra began her work with Mary Jane Skalski ("Mysterious Skin" (2004), "The Station Agent" (2003)) on Tom McCarthy's film "The Visitor" (2007), which earned an Oscar nomination for Richard Jenkins. Since beginning her work at Silver Lining Film Group, Chandra has developed and produced the short film "Trophy Wife" (2010), which premiered at OutFest 2010.

**Jawad Metni- Editor**

Jawad Metni has worked in documentary film and television since 1995 as a producer, editor, cinematographer and director. He co-produced and photographed George Ratliff's feature debut "The Plutonium Circus" (1995), which won best documentary at South By Southwest. He also photographed the acclaimed documentary "Hell House" which premiered at the 2001 Toronto Film festival and has become a cult classic. His other films as a director include "Downwind" (2001), "Trading with the Enemy" (2003), "Rumble in Mumbai" (2004), and his latest "Remnants of a War" (2009), about unexploded cluster bombs in Lebanon. Since 2004, he has worked as a producer and editor for clients such as PBS, the History Channel, Babelgum, Glamour Magazine, Southwest Airlines, Google, IKEA, Kohler, Oprah's OWN Network, Pepsi and MTV. He lives and works in New York.

**Michael LaHaie- Consulting Editor**

Michael LaHaie is a longtime editor for film and television. He collaborated on George Ratliff's feature, the acclaimed documentary "Hell House" which premiered at the Toronto Film festival and has become a cult classic. He also worked with Chris Eigeman on his feature debut "Turn the River" starring Famke Janssen and Rip Torn which was nominated for the Indie Spirit Awards in 2009. Most recently, Michael collaborated

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for a second time with George Ratliff on "Salvation Boulevard" starring Jennifer Connelly, Ed Harris, and Pierce Brosnan, which premiered at Sundance this year and sold to Sony Picture Classics. Michael moves from the narrative, documentaries and reality worlds and some of his other work includes the CW show "Life is Wild", the documentary, "How's Your News?", the first season of Bravo's landmark show "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy", and most recently the Adult Swim comedy, "Delocated".



## Character Bios

### **Don McLeroy**

Don McLeroy was born on June 3, 1946. After growing up in Dallas, Texas, he graduated in 1969 from Texas A&M University with a degree in Electrical Engineering. He then served two years in the U.S. Army after which he attended dental school in Houston, Texas. While in dental school, at age 28, Don became a Christian after an intellectual examination of the claims of Christianity. He later married, moved to Bryan, Texas where he opened his dental practice and he and his wife raised their family. After his conversion, Don examined the claims of evolution and found them surprisingly weak. He also further examined the claims of the Bible and Christian doctrine and found these amazingly coherent and strong. On the basis of both these examinations, he accepted the label of a "creationist" without apology. For the past 24 years Don has taught fourth grade Sunday school at Grace Bible Church, College Station, Texas. Additionally, after briefly serving on his local school board, he was elected to the Texas State Board of Education where he has served for the past 12 years.

### **Kathy Miller**

Kathy Miller is president of the Texas Freedom Network, a nonpartisan organization that advances an agenda of religious freedom and individual liberties. The organization has been instrumental in defeating initiatives backed by the religious right in Texas. Kathy has appeared on Texas and national broadcast media and has testified before the Texas Legislature, State Board of Education and Congress. Based in her deep belief in the tremendous strength of the grassroots, Kathy has focused her career on mobilizing support for progressive issues, training community leaders on the political process and inspiring activists to combat the religious right in Texas. Before joining TFN in 2005, Kathy served as communications director for the Texas Council on Family Violence and National Domestic Violence Hotline and as public affairs director for Planned Parenthood Federation of Austin. Kathy earned a degree in political science from the University of Texas at Austin and attended the University of Texas graduate school, studying philosophy. She is the mother of two daughters, both attending public school in Austin.

### **Cynthia Noland Dunbar**

Cynthia Dunbar is a lawyer and author from Richmond, Texas. Cynthia graduated from Pat Robertson's Regent University School of Law in 1990 and during the 2009-2010 academic year, she commuted from her home in Texas to teach Constitutional Law at Jerry Falwell's Liberty University School of Law. In 2006, Cynthia was elected to the Texas State Board of Education, in part, because of her support for the teaching of intelligent design in science classes. ("Dunbar wins party's nomination," Dallas Morning News, Mar 8, 2006.) In her 2008 book "One Nation Under God: How The Left is Trying To Erase What Made us Great," Cynthia argued that the country's founding fathers created "an emphatically Christian government" and that government should be guided by a "biblical litmus test." In the book, Cynthia also referred to public education as a "subtly deceptive tool of perversion" and stated that the establishment of public schools is unconstitutional and even "tyrannical." According to Dunbar, her book was not written for the general public. Instead, she wrote it as "an educational tool to the body of Christ," and to serve as a "wake-up call [for Christians] to be informed [and] to be involved." ("Educator ripped for her book criticizing public schools," Houston Chronicle, Dec. 4, 2008.) In early 2008, Cynthia ran for the Republican nomination for the United States House of Representatives representing Texas's 22nd congressional district, the district formerly represented by Tom DeLay, but she eventually withdrew and endorsed Shelley Sekula-Gibbs.

### **Ron Wetherington**

Ron Wetherington is a professor of anthropology in SMU's Dedman college of Humanities and Sciences and director of the University's Center for Teaching Excellence. Ron is an expert in evolutionary theory, and his research interests include population genetics, human paleontology, science pedagogy and the historical archaeology of the U.S. Southwest. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in human evolution and forensic anthropology, as well as a noncredit required course for departmental graduate students, "Learning to Teach - Teaching to Learn." He is the author of Understanding Human Evolution and 4 other books on anthropology and archaeology. He was appointed as an expert reviewer in 2008-09 by the Texas State Board of Education to evaluate new science curriculum standards. The Texas Freedom Network has awarded him the "Grassroots Hero" award in 2009, stating: "Whether working behind the scenes to patiently educate board members or in front of the cameras making a vocal case for science standards free from creationist ideology,



Dr. Wetherington has worked tirelessly to ensure Texas students have a rigorous science curriculum that will prepare them for the 21st century."

### **Additional Materials**

*"My Testimony"* by Don McLeroy, November 22nd, 2011

Sunday night, September 28, 1975, in Houston, Texas, at the age of 29, I placed my trust in Jesus Christ as my Savior. This came at the end of a four month process that began after I met my future wife-to-be in early June. I was finishing my first year of dental school with not a care in the world. Life was not just good; it was great. I introduced myself to her--an artist working at the dental school--by commenting on a poster she had in her art cubicle. "So you believe all that stuff--huh?" The poster was of a country daisy with the words: "Wow! That's beautiful!" And, "I know, I made it." Jesus Christ.

This conversion was the culmination of an intellectual investigation. One hundred years ago religious faith had been shaken by modernism. For years, the modern, thoughtful, intellectual believed that science rendered religious faith untenable. There was no certainty God was the Creator, that he even existed and that the Bible was His word. I was not thoughtful or an intellectual but had gone along with the modernist thinking of the times; I was content to just paddle down the stream of life throughout the 1950's and into the 70's. Our family went to church every week; my brother and I were active in our MYF (Methodist Youth Fellowship). At college, I went to church for a semester until it became easier to sleep in on Sunday mornings. Throughout this time of my life I was basically good; I was the one that drove home. College life was great. I was a Singing Cadet, Junior Yell Leader, and an officer of the Student Senate.

Up until 1975 life was spiritually pretty bland; there were no serious thoughts about God or the Bible. I did, however, have two noteworthy experiences during those years that impacted my future conversion. First, when I was a senior in high school, I had the new Dallas Cowboys football coach Tom Landry and his wife as Sunday school teachers for one semester. Not only was it noteworthy because of Coach Landry, it was also noteworthy because the Landrys did not use the Methodist curriculum; they actually taught us a book of the Bible--the book of John. While I cannot remember anything Coach Landry taught, I do remember him. He was a thoughtful--though not a modernist-- intellectual; he was serious; he was a true believer. You do not forget Tom Landry.

Second, after graduating from Texas A&M University with a degree in electrical engineering, I served two years in the U.S. Army and four months travelling around Europe. When I returned to the United States, in 1971, I decided to go back to school. But with another four months on my hands, I decided to visit some friends that I made while in the Army. During these travels, I spent a few days with an aunt and uncle who lived just outside of Washington DC. My aunt was well known to us cousins as being a sometimes "pushy" but serious Christian. For instance, for my high school graduation gift, she gave me Lewis Sperry Chafer's Salvation. Dr. Chafer was the founder of Dallas Theological Seminary. In college, I had tried to read the book but never came close to getting into it; it was difficult reading. During my visit in 1971 I was a little apprehensive of being pigeonholed about religion by my aunt but she was the perfect hostess. She cooked great breakfasts and she and my uncle took me sightseeing around Washington. The night before I was to leave she asked if she could show me something. My Mom and Dad had trained me to be polite and I remember thinking how much my aunt had done for me on my visit, so even though I said to myself, "Oh no, here it comes, all that Bible stuff!" I actually said, "Sure, show me."

Boy was I surprised! Instead of pigeonholing me down and preaching to me, she pulled out several big scrapbooks full of Washington Post yellowed newspaper clippings and her Bible. In Deuteronomy 28-30, she showed me Bible prophecy concerning the state of Israel that had been fulfilled including the dispersion, and the regathering. The kicker was she had the Washington Post stories and headlines from May 1948 telling of the founding of the state of Israel. Here, according to the Bible, was the probable fulfillment of a 3400 year old prophecy about God's chosen people becoming a nation again after being out of the land for over 1800 years! I was impressed. From her point of view, she had seen the Bible literally come alive! No wonder she was such a strong believer. I never forgot those scrapbooks.

Coach Landry and those scrapbooks had prepared me for the poster in the art cubicle that summer of 1975. This then became the time for me to finally decide what I really thought of Jesus Christ. My conversion was not an emotional process; it was a serious intellectual investigation of the Bible, of Christian doctrine, and of closely observing Christian peers. I attended Bible studies; I attended church; I read and reread Paul's arguments, especially in the book of Romans. I could explain why Christians sing "Washed in the blood of the Lamb"; I could explain the gospel; I could give you the rationale for God becoming a man, for dying on the cross for my sin and why I must trust in Jesus' death to pay the penalty for my sin. I understood it all. My only problem was I didn't believe it. When asked, "Why don't you believe?" I always answered, "How can I believe something I don't believe?"

At some point, I began to write down, in a little shirt pocket spiral notebook, the specific reasons why I did not believe. I would ask some of my new Christian friends "How do you explain this? What about that?" My list grew to over 40 or 50 items spanning 15 to 20 pages in the book. If I ever did get a satisfactory answer to an objection, I would draw a line through it. What made this list really important was that I had also promised God, if He existed, that I would trust in Him if I ever crossed out every objection. But, I wasn't worried about this happening because I knew I could always keep adding objections and that there were some that were clearly unanswerable.

For example, one objection I specifically remember was from Psalm 22. This is a prophetic Messianic Psalm about what seems to describe a crucifixion even though it had been written centuries before crucifixions had been invented. In verse 14, it states: "...all my bones are out of joint..." Christians claim that muscle spasms, accompanying the dehydration of a crucifixion, pull the skeletal bones out of joint and that this was fulfilled when Jesus was crucified. You may think this is silly, but I knew that the cranium was made of many separate bones physically interlocked and held together by sutures not muscles. Crucifixion did not pull those bones apart. Therefore, the Bible was wrong; it could not be God's word. One Sunday, when visiting a church with a fellow dental student; I asked the pastor about the issue with the cranium and Psalm 22. He wisely answered that I probably was just a little too picky. How was David supposed to write the psalm? Was he to say "...and all this bones were out of joint except of course, the cranium and the other sutured bones?" I agreed that I was being too picky and I drew a line through that objection. Finally, in late September, I went to Austin to visit some friends. During that weekend I asked them what they thought about the supernatural; did it exist? To my surprise, they admitted to accepting some things that to me were clearly supernatural. After finding nonbelievers who said that they believed such things, I decided for myself that the supernatural possibly existed.

That Sunday night, on returning to Houston, I went through page after page of my notebook crossing out any objection that was now invalidated if the supernatural possibly existed. I then went back through the notebook to see how many objections I had left. There were none! I now had a dilemma; I had thought of some other objections but had not written them down in my notebook. Should I write them down and keep the process going? What would you have done? For me, a promise was a promise, especially one made to God. I took my leap of faith and believed what I had never believed before. Since that day, I have done a lot more reading and studying and thinking about what is the truth. I am now totally convinced that the Bible and Christianity are true. Are there intellectual and rational difficulties to my faith? Yes. But, I have come to see that all people have rational problems with what they believe. Even the most dogged atheist is left with "something from nothing." That certainly is not rational. For me, Christianity brings everything together, in thought, in science, in history, and in life.

*The Curious Faith of Don McLeroy* By Saul Elbein, Texas Observer, Thursday February 19, 2009

What inspires the man at the center of the Texas creationism controversy?

The man at the center of the fight over science education in Texas is a 63-year-old dentist from Bryan, an ardent religious conservative with little educational or scientific training. But Don McLeroy's story, and his thinking, are more complicated, and more telling, than those bare facts suggest. McLeroy, as you may be aware, is chairman of the Texas State Board of Education. He is an avowed creationist of the "young Earth" variety, meaning he believes that God created the Earth some 6,000 years ago, in accordance with the biblical account in Genesis. But McLeroy is not a stereotypical true believer. He reads widely on theology and evolutionary biology. He is willing, even eager, to have his views challenged. His favorite evolutionary biologist is fundamentalist atheist Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*. He listens to podcasts released by the Center for Inquiry—a nonprofit devoted to "Science, Reason, Free Inquiry, Secularism, and Planetary Ethics"—while mowing his lawn. ("You should listen to them," he says. "You'd love them.")

Now he's a key player in the brouhaha over a proposed overhaul of the state curriculum, known as Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, or TEKS. At issue is a line about students being required to understand the "strengths and weaknesses of evolution." With the debate attracting advocacy groups from all over the country, from the creationist Discovery Institute to the evolution-defending National Center for Science Education, Texas is the current battleground in the long-running national fight over creationism in the schools.

The stakes are high. In textbook terms, as Texas goes the nation follows. Texas is a big state with a big population—along with California and New York, the state drives the national textbook market. The Texas board has the power to keep textbooks that don't meet its standards off its "approved textbooks" list—meaning that school districts would have to buy them out of their own pockets rather than getting them from the state. Being left off the list would be devastating to the offending textbook companies' market shares. So if textbook publishers have to insert evolution's "weaknesses" into their books to sell to the Texas market, they will, and those changes will be reflected across the United States. As board chairman, McLeroy is in a unique position to influence the direction of science teaching across the country. Aside from soundbites from contentious board meetings, relatively little has been written about him. So who is this man, and what does he want?

McLeroy didn't grow up a creationist, or even particularly religious. His family in Dallas belonged to a mainline Methodist church, but they didn't attend services often. "If I believed in anything," he says, "I believed in science."

He was "religiously uninvolved" at Texas A&M, where he studied electrical engineering. From there, he went into the Army, served a couple of years in Germany, then spent time bumming around the country, unsure of what to do with himself. In Washington, D.C., as a "young idealist," he tried to work for George McGovern's doomed presidential campaign, but, he says, it wasn't accepting any more volunteers. So he came back to Texas and enrolled in a summer teaching course at UT-Austin. He had a vague idea that he would be certified and teach high school. The class, a method course on how to teach math, was "horrible," he says—far too easy, concerned with minutiae. Leaning back in his chair, he shakes his balding head at the memory. "I said, Lord, if this is what teachers are learning, what's going to happen to our children?"

So McLeroy scrapped his teaching plans and went to dental school at UT's medical branch in Houston. There he met Nan Fleming, a medical illustrator who worked in the same department where he held a summer job. He asked her out, but she turned him down.

"She would only date me if I was a Christian," he says. "And I wasn't one. But I guess she liked me, because she said I could go with her to church and Bible study."

It's not clear why McLeroy, who was "no Christian" and slightly leery of "Jesus freaks" to boot, accepted that offer. Maybe it was the challenge. When I ask why he bothered dating a girl who would only let him take her

to church, all he can come up with is that he'd had some positive experiences with Christians in high school and college-he'd found they were "good people, and I was curious what they were about." McLeroy started studying with Flemings' Bible group. He was skeptical at first. He kept a notebook in his shirt pocket with dozens of reasons for not "accepting Christ." He told himself that when he had resolved them all, he would convert. Finally he did. At first Fleming didn't believe him-she thought he was doing it for her, that he wasn't really sincere. Gradually he won her over, and they became engaged. "I was a Christian well before I was a creationist," he says. "People say you have to be a creationist to be a Christian, but my life is proof of the opposite." This is a nice point, but it's also true that McLeroy sees a certain lack of consistency in religious people who advocate evolution. One of his favorite tenets of Christianity, the one that underlies all his policy ideas, is the principle that man is made in the image of God. Take evolution to its logical conclusion, he says, and you destroy that idea.

"I mean, if evolution is development of life through unguided natural processes," he asks, "how can we be made in the image of God? How can humans be worth anything?"

That might be a straw-man argument, but it would be a mistake to think that McLeroy doesn't believe it. He does. His mind works in an orderly, black-and-white fashion, moving from point A to B to C. He has little respect for scientists like Ken Miller, an orthodox Catholic and popular writer on evolutionary biology who argues that there's no controversy between evolution and religion. They, McLeroy believes, are inconsistent, and he values consistency above all else.

"I would never say that Miller's not a real Christian," he says. "I don't think you have to be one to be the other. But I don't think he's very consistent.

"That's why I like Dawkins so much. He at least takes evolution to where it has to lead-atheism." Soon after they were engaged, Nan handed him some books explaining geological phenomena from a creationist viewpoint. McLeroy was initially skeptical-"I thought, goodness, I'm engaged to a crazy woman"-but he read them, and then he started going with her to seminars on creationism. They presented a world different from any he had thought possible, one that-despite its foreignness-felt right. He challenged creationist experts with his doubts about the supposed young age of the Earth-what about the dinosaurs? what about radiometric dating?-but slowly, calmly, he says, they answered his objections. Fleming and McLeroy were married in 1976, and McLeroy started his dental practice in Bryan. He never forgot his desire to see a better educational system. As he read and learned about creationism, he became convinced that evolution was wrong-not just for biblical reasons, but for intellectual ones. He saw it as an unquestionable orthodoxy, a crushing independent thought.

The story McLeroy tells about why he eventually ran for the state education board has the polished quality of something he tells a lot, a sort of personal origin myth. It's worth recounting, because it shows how McLeroy's faith informs his policy decisions in surprising ways.

As he tells it, he was working one morning at his practice. A black woman-a single mother-brought in her young daughter. "The girl was 8 years old," McLeroy recalls, "and just smart as anything. She came in, I cleaned her teeth-they were in bad shape-and they left, and I never saw her again."

He pauses. "But after they left, I thought for a long time. I thought, Lord, that little girl is a child of God. She deserves a good life. Well, what's to guarantee that she's going to get as good of an education as my sons [who attended Bryan High] got? Who's going to make sure she has the opportunities to do something with her life?"

McLeroy felt the calling, so in 1998, having already served as a trustee for the Bryan Independent School District, he ran for the state board on a platform of textbook reform and "closing the achievement gap" between rich and poor. In 2006, after McLeroy won his third term (against Democrat Maggie Charleton, whom the teachers' union had endorsed), Gov. Rick Perry picked him to be chairman of the state board. (On Feb. 6, Perry reappointed McLeroy as chairman for two more years; he stands for re-election in 2010.) To understand how an obscure line in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills became a national issue, you have to go back to 1981, when the Texas Supreme Court ruled that creationism is a religious philosophy that has no place in the classroom. Subsequently, as a sop to the creationists, the school board voted to leave a

line in the TEKS stating that students would be required to evaluate the "strengths and weaknesses of evolution." During the last 20 years, the fight over creationism in schools has shifted to a battle over that one line. Liberals and most science educators want it out. The creationists-McLeroy among them-want to add specific weaknesses they feel the TEKS should address. They defend their agenda with the reasonable-sounding argument that, as McLeroy puts it, science is all about evaluating the "strengths and weaknesses of different theories."

"How could you not evaluate the weaknesses?" McLeroy asks. "Don't we want our kids to learn to think for themselves?"

Of course. But the scientific consensus says that's dodging the issue-that the argument isn't about ensuring a reasoned discussion of evolution. The real aim, in the words of David Hillis, a UT biologist and prominent critic of McLeroy, is to shoehorn in "bogus weaknesses."

"There are a couple they like to play with," he says. "One is the missing link argument-they say there aren't enough 'transitional forms' between the fossils we have."

McLeroy, as it happened, said exactly that to me a couple of days before I spoke with Hillis. "Come on," McLeroy says. "They want us to believe that there's a consistent fossil record, but all they have are a bunch of different species that they say are related. Until they can show us missing links connecting those species, I don't think we can accept what they say about fossil evidence."

Hillis says, "The thing is, it's a ridiculous argument, because every additional fossil you find means you need two new 'transitional forms' to connect it to what we already have-one before and one after. By definition, you can never have enough."

On Jan. 22, a measure to keep the "strengths and weaknesses" line narrowly failed by an 8-7 vote. This was hailed by many Texas newspapers as a victory for science education in Texas, but less noticed was McLeroy's success in slipping a line into the TEKS mandating that students "describe the sufficiency or insufficiency of common ancestry."

Regardless, the board will have another chance to vote on the "strengths and weaknesses" measure in March. There's no guarantee it won't pass then.

McLeroy insists he doesn't have any desire to have creationism taught in classrooms. "It's a religious philosophy," he says. "It doesn't belong in schools. Same with intelligent design. Evolution is the scientific consensus, so we'll teach that."

But McLeroy believes that at some point, perhaps in 10 years, perhaps in 50, a new scientific revolution will reveal that "the creationists' crazy ideas" are actually right-just as quantum mechanics and relativity overturned the tidy world of classical physics. McLeroy professes a willingness to keep teaching the scientific consensus until the day comes when it jibes with his beliefs. Still, he supports "teaching the controversy" of evolution, though that's a controversy nearly all scientists say is resolved. McLeroy insists that we're lying to our kids when we say that evolution is "proven beyond reasonable doubt"-and that inflexible certitude, not intelligent design, is turning them off science.

This is a line of argument that scientists find frustrating. "Well, if he feels there's such a controversy," says Eugenie Scott, executive director at the National Center for Science Education, "then he should address it at the university level. That's where new science is made. To expect high school students to evaluate 'controversies' in cutting-edge evolutionary biology before they have a solid grounding in science is ridiculous.

"We don't do that with any other science. Would you teach kids about the controversies in string theory before they learned basic physics?"

This line of thought reduces McLeroy to near-speechlessness. "But ..." he sputters when I call him



for comment on Scott's point, "It's not ... it's not true. There are real problems with it. How can we teach our kids something that's not true?"

What McLeroy doesn't seem to understand is that science education is all about teaching kids things that, strictly speaking, aren't true. When I learned about relativity and quantum mechanics in college, I learned that the classical chemistry and Newtonian physics I had been taught in high school were, at best, approximations. That they really didn't do that great a job of describing the way the universe works. That, in a sense, they were lies.

McLeroy is convinced that teaching evolution leads to atheism. There's not a lot of room for negotiation in that position.

In this sense, says Michael Zimmermann, McLeroy's thinking illustrates an important point about the culture war over evolution and creationism. An evolutionary biologist and committed atheist, Zimmermann is the father of The Clergy Letter Project, a nationwide petition signed by over 11,000 Jewish and Christian clergy who believe that evolution is no contradiction to their faith. "It's not about science and religion," Zimmermann says. "That's a popular misconception. Instead, it's about one strand of Christianity versus another. It's the liberal wing, who believes there's nothing wrong with theistic evolution, versus the fundamentalists, who can't accept it.

"This is a case of one fringe group of Christians trying to paint themselves as the voice of all Christians," he says of creationists. "And in that, they've been enormously successful."

Zimmermann believes that Richard Dawkins, the atheist biologist, has been "the single most dangerous man to the cause of science literacy. When he says that evolution has to lead to atheism, he drives reasonable people into the arms of fundamentalists like McLeroy. Most scientists would tell you that's a false choice—that's actually the mainstream Christian position—but generally people don't know that." While Zimmermann may not believe in God, he says, "I do know that if we're going to advance the cause of science literacy in this country, we can't force people to choose between faith and science. Because they aren't going to choose us."

McLeroy agrees that the debate is, at root, a religious issue. "I know we're the minority, both religiously and scientifically," he says. "But I have faith that we'll prevail."

How can he be so confident, given his lack of training in science, theology, or education?

For the first time in our interview, McLeroy sounds taken aback.

"That's a good question," he says.

He's quiet for a long time.

"Because the truth is on our side," he finally says. "We may not be trained, but I have faith that we're right."