When you speak to 81-year-old Dr. William Rice about his experience as a doctoral student in BYU’s marriage and family therapy (MFT) program, you quickly realize that his life has been changed through this divine and groundbreaking program. He was the first graduate of the MFT program and, though now retired, spent decades working as a professor and therapist. His career, church callings, and home have been blessed by the lessons he learned in MFT.

Like many other students and faculty members in MFT, Rice has always wanted to help families be unified and healthy. He recalls being asked as a child what he wanted to be when he grew up. “I said I wanted to be a marriage lawyer,” he says. “I was 10 years old. I wanted to help marriages stay together. I saw too much pain and suffering in families. That’s something that’s been my emphasis in my heart, my soul, probably all my life.”

In his master’s program at a different university, Rice was told that to graduate, he would have to compete against his peers and that “only the best and brightest among them would graduate with a degree from the university,” he says. This statement pushed him to have a very competitive mindset. In his first class for his doctoral degree at BYU, Rice worked harder than the rest of his peers, striving to make them look unprepared and shallow minded. At the end of that first class, Rice was called to the front of the room by the department chair. Instead of being praised, Rice was reprimanded for purposely making his peers look bad. From then on, Rice lived by the chair’s counsel: “If anybody fails because of you, you fail with them.”

BYU is known for its rigorous programs, but, in the MFT program, it is essential to work and learn together. “We were there together solving the same problem,” says Rice.

Fifty years later, current master’s student Cara Nebeker-Adams shares the same value of camaraderie with her program cohort. Her peers have taught her how to conduct therapy and develop strong relationships; she then puts these skills into practice with her clients. Regarding her classmates in the program,
Great Minds Think Differently, but They Serve Together

Marriage and family therapy students and faculty work in a unique environment. MFT is located in the Comprehensive Clinic, which is housed in the John Taylor Building. The clinic provides the supplementary organizational structure that allows MFT students to get clinical practice without having to worry about the client intake process, archiving data, or other processes. Most importantly, the clinic fosters a spirit of collaboration between MFT and other fields that focus on improving people’s relationships and mental health.

Interdisciplinary research and practice allow individuals to receive the best treatment for their specific needs. By mixing diverse backgrounds and theories, new information is produced to help support both individuals and practitioners in the therapy process.

Dr. Dean Busby, the current director of the Comprehensive Clinic, has been a part of this process countless times. He says that, as research is conducted on families and therapy practices, you see the knowledge “ripple through hundreds of therapists and families,” making a difference in thousands of lives.

Each year, MFT students see an average of 400 family cases. Treating these cases provides accessibility to therapy for individuals who would not otherwise receive it. After graduation, however, the lasting ripple of knowledge and service is seen as graduates go on to impact individuals and families through their own practices.

For many students, such as Nebeker-Adams, this knowledge hits close to home. Regarding her education and the skills she has acquired, she says, “I realize I (won’t) just be a mother to my kids (but I’ll be a support) to other people in the community.”

A simple principle that Nebeker-Adams has learned in the program is one that she will apply in all aspects of her life and career: “Just being present and being human and empathizing is huge,” says Nebeker-Adams. Sometimes we “be nice to people.”

Within the program, faculty and student research looks at core family issues in the lives of real individuals. In addressing these struggles, BYU MFT answers the unspoken question, Does what we’re doing really help? Dr. Dean Busby, the current director of the School of Family Life and a BYU MFT graduate, has been a part of this process countless times. He says that, as research is conducted on families and therapy practices, you see the knowledge “ripple through hundreds of therapists and families,” making a difference in thousands of lives.

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With the gospel emphasis on the eternal value of relationships, therapists see relationships as opportunities for growth and progression. Sandberg feels that the spirit brought by having this perspective has helped him to be “enlightened, strengthened, and magnified” in his personal research. Nebeker-Adams shares that, through the program, both her testimony and her relationship with Heavenly Father have grown.

The power and light of the gospel allow for enlightenment and the strengthening of relationships. For some, it also provides the comfort and conviction to go forward and change the world through marriage and family therapy. “I don’t think I could have reached [my dream of becoming a marriage and family therapist] without the comfort of the Church and the gospel emphasis toward the family,” remarks Rice.

Making a Lasting Difference

BYU MFT has helped a life-changing field develop and grow. The specialization that has developed within the marriage and family therapy field, which best helps all individuals in all situations, has changed countless lives for the better.

“The lives touched—how can you measure people who didn’t get divorced?” Sandberg remarks. “How can you measure the number of kids who were abused and starting substance abuse who figured out how to work through therapy? There is no way to measure the amount of human suffering alleviated.”

Not only does BYU marriage and family therapy save lives—it also changes them. Nebeker-Adams says that the biggest change she has witnessed is within herself. In the same vein, Rice says, “I would be [in a bad place] had I not had this need to understand why so many marriages aren’t what they pretend to be. It’s given me a real sense of foundation and purpose.”

Cara Nebeker-Adams (fourth from left) with her cohort at the MFT 50th anniversary celebration