



**For the first time in University of Regina history, two brothers will receive the institution's highest tribute. Gavin and Jack Semple have distinguished themselves in two completely different fields. Gavin is a well-known Regina businessman and philanthropist. Jack is one of Canada's preeminent blues guitarists. Each will receive honorary degrees at the 2016 spring convocation.**

**By Bill Armstrong**

Photos by Trevor Hopkin, University of Regina Photography Department

# All in the family

Jack and Gavin Semple reminisce quietly while walking around the Semple family homestead, about 25 kilometres north of Regina. A horse in an adjoining pasture, curious about the visitors, sidles up the fence line to accept some gentle strokes from Gavin and then Jack. As the old saying goes, you can take the boy off the farm, but you can't take the farm out of the boy.

While both Jack and Gavin have received multiple honours and recognition in their respective and very distinctive fields, they had similar reactions to the news the University of Regina was offering them honorary degrees.

"I was blown away when I got the call," Jack recalls. "I thought, 'Are you sure you got the right Semple?' Then, when it sank in that it was Gavin and I, I was just thrilled and proud."

When University of Regina President Vianne Timmons called Gavin with the news, he said it shook him in a positive way. "For a farm boy who spent eight years in a one-room school, this was something I'd never imagined. And to have Jack recognized in this way with me, I got a little bit choked up," Gavin says.

Having two siblings from the same family receive honorary degrees at the same time is unparalleled in University history. The brothers' accolades couldn't be earned in more different arenas. Jack is a virtuoso guitar player and singer whose music is usually associated

with the blues. In fact, his musical interests are eclectic and wide-ranging. He adores the music of Gordon Lightfoot, as is evident from the cover photo of his tribute album, which shows Jack seated, at one with his guitar, in a characteristic Lightfoot pose. Yet, his work with the True Jive Pluckers, a partnership with former Department of Music faculty member Ed Minevich and Regina Symphony Orchestra's Stephen McLellan, includes elements of jazz, gypsy and klezmer music, showcasing the trio's versatility and musical interests.

Gavin, on the other hand, is a born salesman and business entrepreneur. He began as a sales representative with a small electrical contracting company in 1972, guiding and transforming it into Brandt Industries Ltd. and the Brandt Group of Companies, the first privately-held business in Saskatchewan to achieve \$1 billion in annual sales. Gavin served as president of Brandt Industries and CEO of the Brandt Group of Companies, and is still active in the business as chairman.

Although he has been showered with many personal and corporate awards, including Brandt being recognized as one of Canada's top 50 best managed companies for several years in a row, Gavin quickly defers to Jack as the real entrepreneur. "He's been dedicated to his music and focused on playing the guitar since he was nine," Gavin says, "and he's had a successful



Opposite page: Spring 2016 honorary degree recipients Gavin (left) and Jack Semple photographed on the family homestead about 30 kilometres northwest of Regina. The brothers are the first siblings to receive University of Regina honorary degrees. Above: Although he no longer serves as president of Brandt Industries and CEO of the Brandt Group of Companies, Gavin Semple is still active in the business as chairman. The company is the largest privately-held business in Saskatchewan with sales of more than \$1 billion annually.





Gavin Semple in his office at Brandt Tractor Ltd. The company is the world's largest privately held John Deere construction and forestry dealer.

career even though he chose to settle with his family in Regina, which is not the centre of the blues universe.”

On the flip side, Jack describes his brother Gavin as the most humble, well-educated, self-made man he knows. “I was the youngest of the six kids,” Jack explains, “and Gavin was one of my mentors. At age nine, when I wanted to play guitar, Gavin and another brother, Jim, showed me how if I did my chores every day, I could get that guitar. Throughout my performing career, any time I’ve considered cutting my hair and getting a real job, Gavin has been there to encourage me to keep at it.”

Sprinkled throughout conversations with both men are references to the importance of hard work as a key ingredient of success, the familiar Saskatchewan work ethic. “You could not use the word ‘can’t’ around my father,” Gavin says. “Yes, it was hard work, but

you learned to enjoy the work when you felt the sense of accomplishment that came from being involved from seeding time through to the harvest.”

Brother Jim Semple, two years younger than Gavin, adds that all of the siblings learned important life lessons and values around the kitchen table from their hard-working, hard-driving father, John, and their compassionate mother, Blanche. “Our family had all meals together and there was always lots of discussion, mostly led by our dad.”

Gavin recalls that he and his father would debate all the time. Looking back, he realizes that his father was trying to teach him things, including that part of being a good leader is being a good listener. He also observed how his father applied his entrepreneurial spirit to build a successful farm business producing grain crops and raising purebred cattle, collecting and selling firewood and marketing fence posts.

At the same time, while their father was regarded as a successful farmer, the farmhouse had no central heating system, no running water and no electricity. Although such hardships were common among farmers in the area, Gavin calculated the size of the farmhouse at about 800 square feet. He noted that there were eight family members, and often a hired hand from the neighbouring Piapot First Nation, to be fed every day. “How our mother did it, I don’t know,” Gavin says, shaking his head as the sentence trails off.

Jim says the family was and remains close-knit, with 20 to 30 family members gathering about once a month to celebrate birthdays and anniversaries. Jim gives most of the credit to Gavin and his wife Annette for keeping alive the

tradition of family gatherings that began in their modest farmhouse.

Jim and his wife Linda operated a welding shop for 14 years before they sold the business and Jim joined Brandt Manufacturing as a machine shop foreman. He retired 25 years later as vice-president of manufacturing. He recalls how he and Gavin listened over and over to the recorded teachings and philosophy of Earl Nightingale, a popular writer and speaker about personal development and motivation. In essence, Nightingale’s message was, “We become what we think about.” Jim adds that Gavin is regarded as the big thinker by his siblings.

“Earl Nightingale was no doubt a big influence,” Jim muses. “However, Gavin’s mind was open to the concept of unlimited possibilities, of striving to achieve one’s potential. His success exemplifies the promise of positive thinking.”

During their walkabout, Jack and Gavin also reminisce about travelling five and a half miles to the one-room Satulmari School, by horse and buggy or inside a wooden caboose on skis in winter, drawn by their faithful horses Topsy and Beulah. “There was a wood stove inside this wooden caboose,” Jack says. “Can you imagine that happening today?”

When Gavin completed eighth grade, there were no school buses to take students to high school, so his mother wisely arranged for him to attend Luther College in Regina and live in the boys’ dormitory on campus. At age 14 the move was a shock to his system, he admits.

“Here I was, living with 70 or 80 other students, and I’d literally never seen a shower before. And,” he continues, “they were really smart kids. It’s easy to be the

top student in Grade 8 when you’re the only student in Grade 8, so this was like being thrown in the deep end.”

Gavin describes himself as a middling student at Luther College, suggesting that if there had been a secret “student most likely to fail” poll at the school, he might have been a candidate. He also notes there was a fair amount of discipline during the week. While he didn’t like it at the time, he realized later it was a good thing. In 2004, Gavin led a campaign to repair the existing gymnasium on campus, which paved the way for Gavin and his son Shaun (now the president and CEO of the Brandt Group of Companies) to make a major donation in 2013 toward the construction of a new gym, called the Semple Gymnasium.

Being the youngest of the six kids, Jack was, in his words, the “young brat” who escaped the hard labour around the farm because his siblings wanted to protect his guitar-picking fingernails. Maybe Jack just substituted one form of hard work for another. Jim states most emphatically that no one ever had to tell Jack to practise his guitar lessons. “On the contrary,” Jim laughs, “sometimes we were tempted to tell him to put down the damn guitar, because you couldn’t get away from it in that little house.”

More seriously, he adds that Jack is the best example of the theory that it takes 10,000 hours of practice for anyone to achieve mastery in his or her chosen field. Jim calculates that by practising three to five hours a day, Jack has logged at least 40,000 hours of practice, not including performances.

“His guitar has become an extension of himself,” Jim says. “He has his mother’s compassion, and he loves nature. As often as possible, he and I enjoy walking the trails on our family



Honorary degree recipient Jack Semple is one of Canada's premiere rhythm and blues guitarists.

property in the Qu’Appelle Valley. Jack hears music in the wind and the trees, where I just hear the wind and see poplar trees. He has a gift.”

Jack began performing in public when he was 15. For two years in the 1980s he was based in Toronto, performing with The Lincolns, a funk and rhythm and blues group. Then he returned home.

“My first daughter was a little girl, and being around her at that time was the most important thing,” Jack explains. “There was also my extended family here. I like Regina; it’s the right size and a good place to raise a family.”

Jack tours about 10 days a month, but he also plays at McNally’s Tavern in Regina two or three times a year, one of his favourite gigs. He also performs at many local community fundraisers, such as for the Early Learning Centre and Souls Harbour Rescue Mission. When he isn’t on the road, he stays involved with various projects, including working on soundtracks for film and television productions, often collaborating with a diverse group of musicians that he met and played with during his time in Toronto.

And, now that they are honorary degree recipients, what advice would

they pass on to this spring’s University of Regina graduates? Jack stresses the importance of maintaining an attitude of humility as a way of remaining open to learning and growing. (Interestingly, when you trace the family name back to Middle English, Semple means simple, straightforward and humble.)

“I would say, respect your elders and those around you,” Jack advises, “because you’re not in their shoes, and they may have advice based on their life experiences that you can learn from. The more doors you open, the more doors you will discover opening for you.”

Gavin’s response mirrors his brother’s. His words of wisdom are to believe that you have the capabilities to achieve success and to remember that failure is part of success.

“Most people coming out of school, I think, don’t have a fully-formed idea yet of what they want to do with their lives, and I think that’s perfectly normal,” Gavin says. “I believe the answers are all out there, so I encourage everyone not to be afraid to ask questions.” **D**

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## A family affair

When the Semple clan gathers, Jack and his family could provide an appropriate soundtrack, beginning with Sister Sledge’s *We Are Family*. Jack’s wife, Tara, plays flute for the Regina Symphony Orchestra, and the interests and talents of their three children prove the old adage that the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree: Kaitlyn is an actor, singer, dancer and teacher, while son Kieran is a songwriter, instrumentalist and singer, now living in British Columbia. Zenaya, the youngest, is a singer who really admires blues and jazz singer Etta James. (If you check out the Semple Family Band postings on YouTube, you can see and hear then 11-year-old Zenaya belting out a soulful version of Smoky Robinson’s *Who’s Loving You* during a performance at the Conexus Arts Centre.)

Over at the Brandt Group of Companies the familial connections run deep. Combined, the six Semple siblings have produced 54 offspring. Several of them have joined the family business, so there are plenty of opportunities to talk shop at family gatherings. Gavin’s wife, Annette, has played a significant role in the family business, and, he adds, has been his biggest supporter. (They celebrated 50 years of marriage in May 2016). Their daughter, Juanita, a graduate of the University of Regina Faculty of Business Administration, is the manager of recruitment for the Brandt Group of Companies. Their son, Shaun, and his wife, Gayleen, have two sons in the business: Christopher is vice-president of engineering, while Andrew is a sales manager. Christopher’s wife, Lisa, is a financial analyst.

Jim joined the company as foreman of the machine shop, which, at the time, had eight employees. He retired as vice-president of manufacturing, overseeing the work of 240 employees. And, Gavin is hopeful that grandson Matthew, who is in his third year of university, will also join the company.

Photo by Michael Morien.



Jack Semple performs at the 2014 Saskatoon Jazz Festival.