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**Sid Williams: Chiropractic's Human Whirlwind
Ryan Gainey's Gardens of the Rich and Famous**



If chiropractic is the
New Age religion, Marietta's
Life College is its Mecca
and Sid Williams its prophet

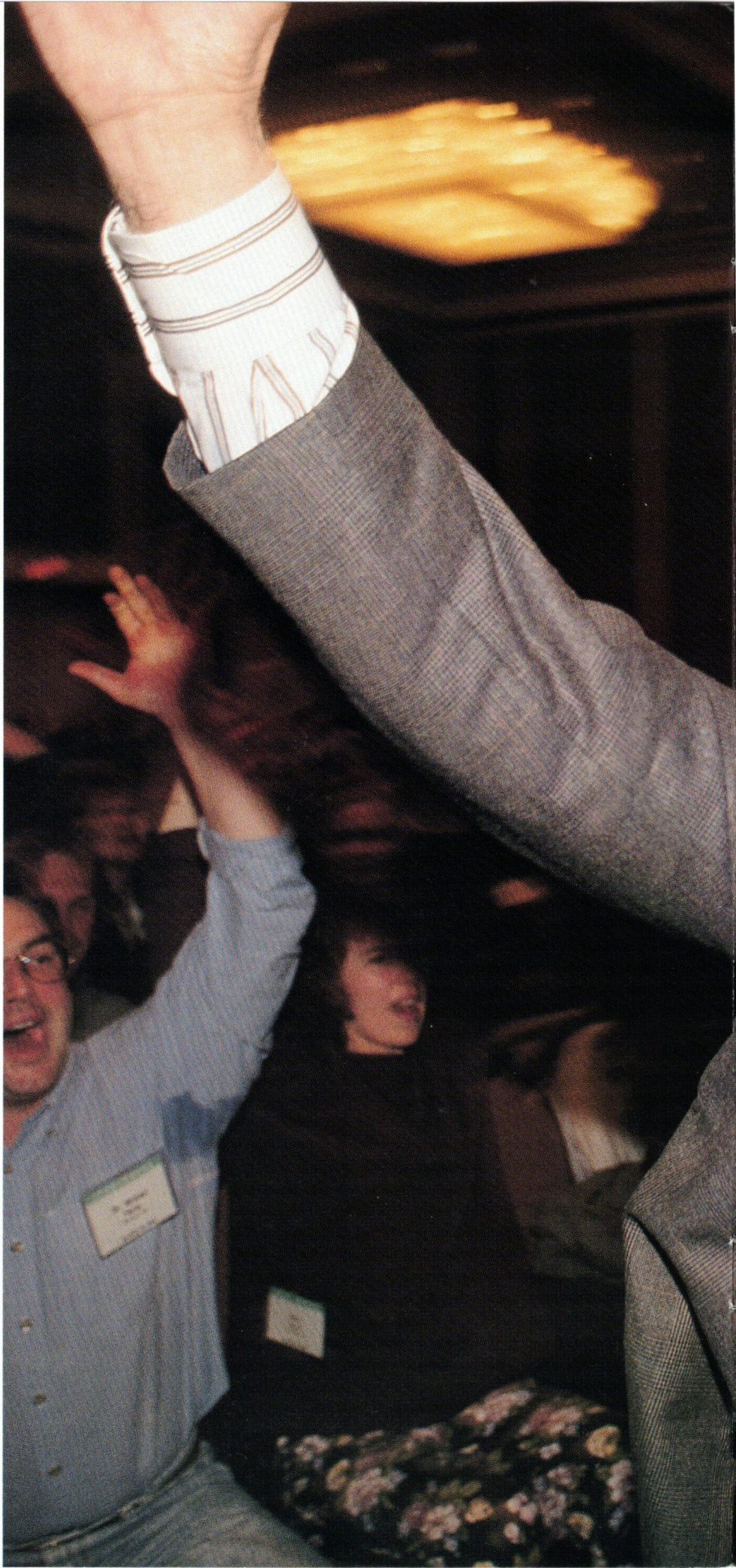
Dr. Sid

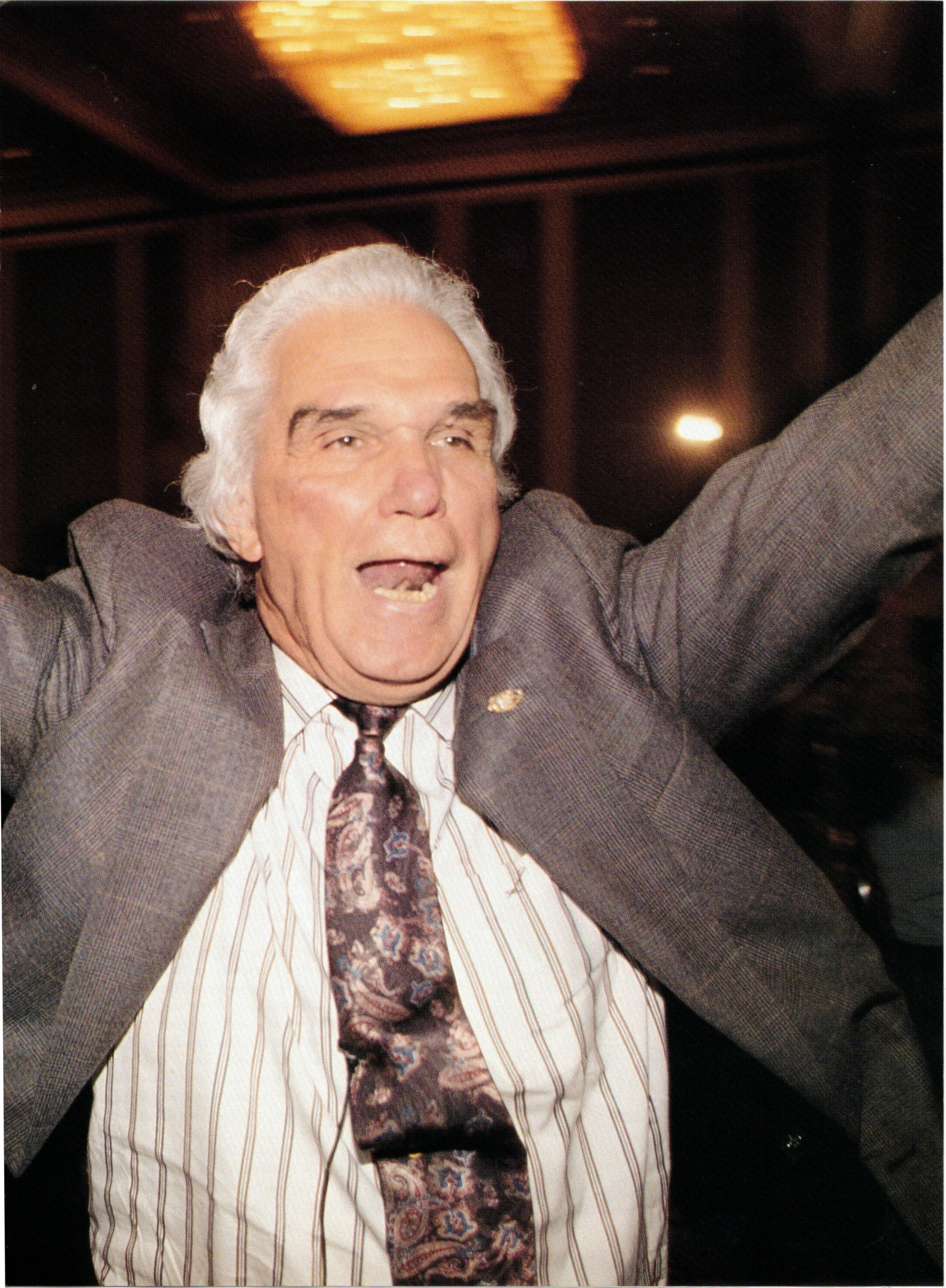
By Vincent Coppola

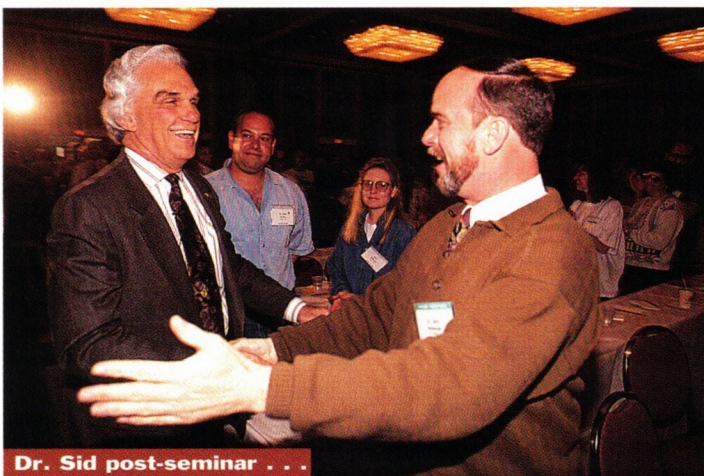
The Cadillac, a great white Fleetwood Brougham, 24-karat gold-plated grill grinning in the morning sun, noses into the reserved parking space. An aide scurries to assist as a tall man, silver-haired, with eyebrows like hawk wings, emerges. Impeccably dressed in a dark blazer and gray slacks, he walks with a rolling gait, like Captain Ahab on shore leave. The back doors of the new gymnasium swing open and Dr. Sid E. Williams, president, founder and maximum leader of Marietta's Life College, the Mecca of Chiropractic, enters.

It's Assembly Day. About 400 of the college's 3,100 students and some faculty members shuffle to attention while Dr. Sid, as Williams is known, glad-hands his way, like a politician at a pig pickin', to the podium. In the stands it's ponytails versus toupees. Life students range from hard-bodied 20-somethings in sweats and surfer shorts to paunchy, polyester-clad 50-somethings eager to retrofit their lives. The accents on the campus are more "Joisey" than Jesup. Money's the magnet. What's four years and \$40,000-plus in tuition and fees when the average chiro-

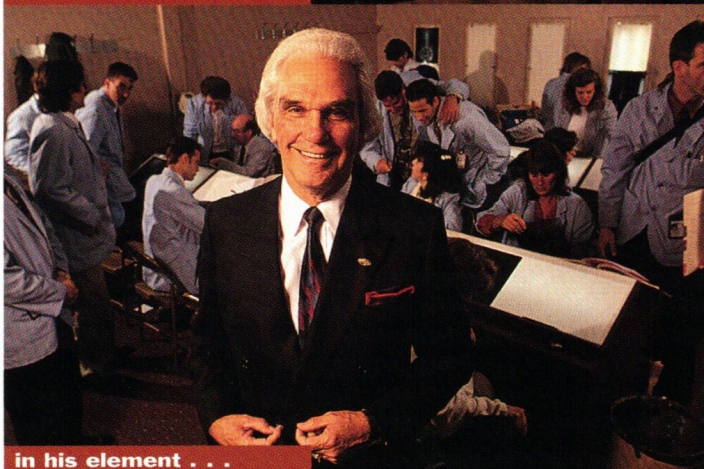
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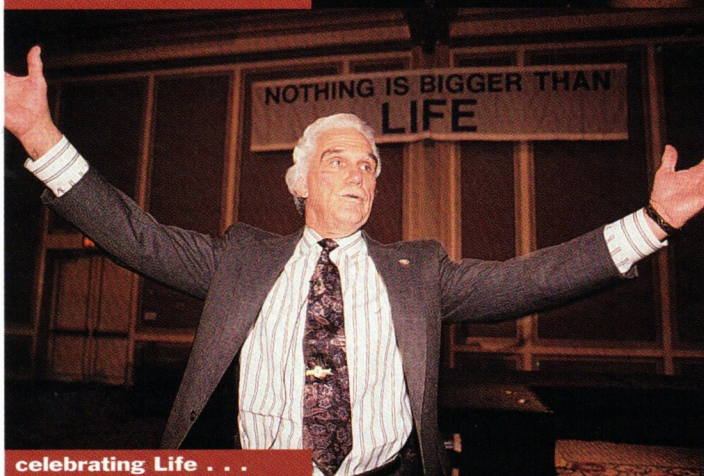




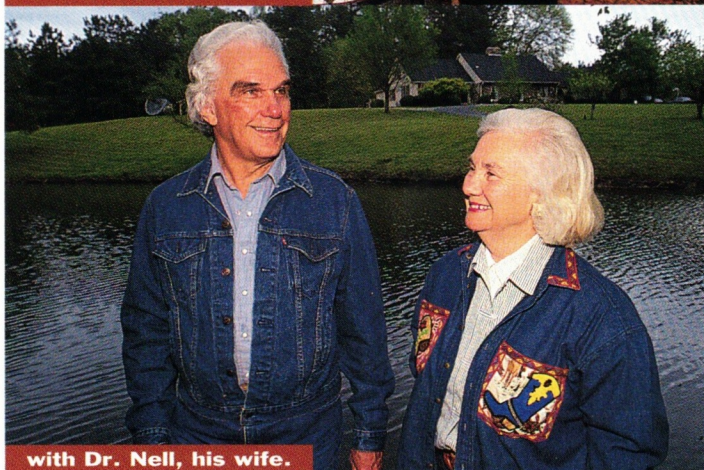
Dr. Sid post-seminar . . .



in his element . . .



celebrating Life . . .



with Dr. Nell, his wife.

practor earns more than \$100,000 a year?

"My sister's a real estate agent in Florida," one lab-jacketed student in the audience confides to another. "She just sold a \$2 million house to a chiropractor."

This day, Dr. Williams dispenses with his infamous Money Hum: *"Start imagining yourself ultra, ultra, ultra wealthy. Just see bales and piles of money, just everywhere. Gold or diamonds or whatever it is turns you on. . . . Start down at the bottom and get you a handful of it. In your mind's eye, say M-m-m-m-m-m-m-m-money!!!"*

Instead, he harangues his audience, nonstop, no notes, for an hour and 15 minutes about threats looming on chiropractic's horizon. A masterful speaker, Williams combines Jimmy Swaggart histrionics with Herman Talmadge-style folksiness. The American Medical Association, depicted by Williams as chiropractic's Great Satan, is about to be given a seat at the table writing Bill Clinton's health care reform program, forcing chiropractors to settle for crumbs. *Boos and hisses from the students.* Not to worry: "I know President Clinton's mother's chiropractor," Dr. Sid assures them.

He paces, moves in and out of the crowd, patting shoulders, making mild off-color jokes, drawling asides. Up close, his long, silvery hair conceals a hearing aid; the skin covering his prominent cheekbones and formidable brow — a daunting sight to TV viewers who've seen Williams' Life College commercials — is stretched so tight it appears bruised. "In the past we've been labeled illiterate charlatans and cultists," he thunders, "but we've grown! We are flourishing." Chiropractors heal without drugs, without surgery, he says, and therefore are a threat to the greed-heads of the "trillion-dollar" medical establishment. "Don't discount your enemies" (the AMA, insurance companies, drug manufacturers, legislators and lobbyists), Williams warns. "You should know intimately every spurious detail of every attack."

Like any good preacher, Williams extends the promise of salvation: "The will of the people will always win," he tells the fired-up students. Some 50,000 pro-chiropractic letters will be sent to 7th District congressman Buddy Darden; 50 million pieces of mail from around the nation will flood Washington. "And then," says Williams, "they [the politicians] will come crawling to you." *Cheers and whistles.*

The assembly ends with Dr. Sid asking his students for a "high five."

"How do you feel?" he shouts.

"Near perfect!" they respond.

"HOW DO YOU FEEL???"
"NEAR PERFECT!!!!"

Welcome to *Sidneyland*. Welcome to *Williamsburg*, where a bronze statue of Adisi, Cherokee Eagle Dancer, messenger of the Great Spirit, stares out over the wooded, 180-acre campus Williams and his faithful chiropractic companion (and wife of 40 years), Dr. Nell, carved out of scrub pine and kudzu north of Dobbins Air Force Base and south of The Big Chicken. The face on the winged, loin-clothed statue belongs to Sid Williams.

idential suite, to protect it from damages from hypermotivated chiropractors.

Sid does not drink, smoke, or frequent nightclubs. "Sometimes I think we're strange," says Dr. Nell. "Our idea of happy hour was going home to take care of the kids."

Two 11th-quarter students stand talking in one of the examination rooms in the bustling Life College chiropractic clinic, an outpatient teaching facility that treats more than 2,000 patients a week at \$70 a pop. (That's for an initial workup; subsequent visits run

smiling like he was some Silicon Valley CEO looking to sell off new microchip technology. After they've left, Williams pulls from his pants pocket a crumpled \$500 traveler's check, apparently a gift from one of the visitors. "These people love me," he says. "They love me!"

Slowing Sid Williams down is like trying to lasso a hummingbird. He sits fidgeting in his cluttered office, surrounded by stacks of books, papers, tapes, videos. There's a safe alongside his desk. A grandfather clock marks time with elaborate chimes every 15 minutes. Finches warble in a glass cage in a corner of the office. Williams, asked to elaborate on

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Established in 1974, Life is perhaps the largest school of chiropractic in the world, as well as a fully accredited institution of higher learning offering baccalaureate programs in nutrition and business administration and a master's degree in sports health science. It pulls in students from every state and 64 foreign countries. There's a Christian Chiropractic Club on campus, even a sprinkling of Hasidic Jews. Georgians, however, are a distinct minority. "Usually people don't like you in your own territory," grumps Dr. Nell, the school's senior vice president of student affairs. Last year, the college graduated 319 Doctors of Chiropractic (D.C.'s). Harvard Medical School, by comparison, graduated 160 M.D.'s; Emory 110. Sid likes to think big: One-third of the buildings on the gleaming model outside his office have yet to be built and many of the shelves in the Nell K. Williams Learning Resource Center's 100,000-book "capacity" library are bare.

Sid and Nell's globe-trotting makes Henry Kissinger seem like a homebody. As chairman of the 6,000-member International Chiropractors Association (membership is overwhelmingly American), Sid claims to have helped introduce chiropractic to Israel, Egypt, Greece, Mexico, Korea and dozens of other benighted countries. He brought a contingent of chiropractors to the Soviet Union during Ted Turner's 1986 Goodwill Games. In 1964, he began his immensely popular "Dynamic Essentials" seminars, expounding on the "philosophy, principles and practice" of chiropractic. So dynamic are these sessions that management at one local hotel decided to stop renting Williams the pres-

\$10 per "adjustment.")

First student: "He's cool, but I think some of his ideas are years ahead of us."

A third student enters the room: "How do I know who you guys are talking about?"

Dressed in a beautifully tailored gray suit, Sid Williams lopes into the Life College reception area outside his office to greet a group of former students who've dropped by for a visit. Crackling with energy and good humor, he pounds backs and pumps hands like the former jock and lifelong sports nut he is. (A fearless, 167-pound defensive end, Williams starred on Bobby Dodd's undefeated '51 Georgia Tech team. He capped his football career with seven shattered teeth, nine broken bones and an Orange Bowl victory.)

The reception area is literally a shrine, every inch of wall covered with Williams' trophies, medals, press clippings and other memorabilia chronicling the Georgia Tech glories, his years at Tech High School (captain of the football and track teams, student body president, "Most Handsome" student), his progress through the ranks as a Boy Scout — Tenderfoot through Eagle, with the merit badges to back it up — a 1979 appearance on *60 Minutes*. There are oil paintings of Sid, Dr. Nell, and, less prominently, Bartlett Joshua (B.J.) Palmer, one of chiropractic's early gurus.

A group of Japanese troop in for the campus tour and promotional video that begins at 10 sharp each morning. They surround the taller Williams, nodding and

some arcane aspect of chiropractic philosophy, instead squats on the rug, gleefully reliving some almost 50-year-old Tech High School memory:

"... Coach comes over, grabs my pads. 'I told you to block him, you son of a bitch! Bend over.' Pow! He kicks me in the butt. ... Second time when I don't do well he says, 'Take off your hat, boy.' Pow! He hits me with his ring, a big ol' University of Georgia ring. It gets my attention. ... I hit that tackle in the face and kept on hitting him. ... I pumped him back about 15 yards. Everybody clapped about that. Coach says, 'What's your name, boy? I believe I like you. ...'"

Eventually he gets back to chiropractic, a subject he can discourse upon with nonstop passion. Sid Williams does not personally concern himself with realigning vertebrae to ease lower back pain. No sir. He's talking big time, a by-golly medical *revolution* that could land him up there with Galen and Hippocrates. Chiropractic is no neuromuscular treatment, Dr. Sid says; it's a revolutionary approach to health care. "There's a billion-dollar industry built around the germ theory," he says. "I'm gonna prove that damn theory wrong."

Williams, a former John Birch Society member, jerks a manicured finger at a canvas bag in the corner of the office. "Come over here," he says. "I want to show you something." There's a *tombstone* in the bag. It belongs to Harvey Lillard, a black man who, says Williams, was the world's first chiropractic patient. Dr. Sid says he plans to establish a one-man cemetery, then re-inter Lillard, resting somewhere

Dr. Sid

outside Seattle, on the Life College campus.

Sidney Earl Williams, 65, graduated from Georgia Tech in '51 with a bum knee, a fiancée, Nell Kimbrough, and no idea what to do with his life. Unlike many of his old-money classmates, he had no cushy job in a family business, bank or law firm waiting for him. He'd grown up in Atlanta's West End near Fort McPherson,

"rocked" young Sid home, pelting him with stones as he ran for the safety of his mother's arms. "I was dark-skinned," says Williams. "Maybe they thought I was a dago or something."

At Georgia Tech, the much-battered Williams had visited a chiropractor despite warnings from the team trainer "not to fool with them quacks." The chiropractor (from the Greek, meaning "done by hands") quickly restored Sid's flagging energy ("I could outrun a pickup truck.") and eventually cured his migraines; M.D.'s, says Williams, could find nothing

spinal adjustment removed interference (i.e., a blockage of carefully programmed signals from the brain through the nervous system to various organs and tissues), allowing the body's *innate intelligence* to restore Lillard to health. Palmer defined innate intelligence as the "soul, spirit or spark of life."

Today's chiropractors use X-ray machines and high-tech imaging equipment to locate so-called *subluxations* (misalignments of one or more of the 33 bony segments, or vertebrae, that make up the spinal column — resulting, chiropractors believe, in a restriction of vital energy passing through the nervous system). Their hands-on adjustment techniques have impressive-sounding names — J. Clay Thompson, Gonstead, Motion-Palpatation. Homeostasis (equilibrium within an organism resulting from a balance of functions) has replaced "spark of life" as the term of choice. But chiropractic theory as expounded by Palmer remains essentially unchanged. "If you got an improved homeostasis," says Williams, "what damn difference does it make what diseases you gonna be encountering. The whole germ theory comes crashing down from its tower!"

"We call it the Big Idea," says Elizabeth Wintner, 27, an 11th-quarter student with a B.A. in biology from a New York college and a firm belief in the gospel according to Sid. "A life-governing force exists in our body," explains Wintner. "A higher power. We want to release that power in our patients. . . . Medicine wants us to prove it. How do you prove something you know instinctively?"

Wintner is a member of Dr. Sid's D.C. Dancers, a higher-powered cheerleading/go-go/aerobics squad who unleash a performance that makes the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders' routine look like a waltz at a tea dance.

Most visionaries have a life-changing experience that makes their destiny clear to them. Saul, knocked off his horse on the road to Damascus, became the apostle Paul. Sid Williams says his moment came while he was selling Wear-Ever cooking utensils to make ends meet while he and Nell were at Palmer College:

It was a Saturday morning in this little town in Illinois. I had no feeling for what I was doing. I knelt down after a demonstration and my foot broke through the shoelace of my cordovan. When that happened, something came over me. An intense love and an intense craving, a oneness for that cooking utensil. I felt like I was in that utensil and it was in me. There was no thought, just feeling. I let this love move through me.

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the only child of John Williams, who ran a produce business out of the farmer's market behind the Capitol, and Jessie Broadwater, an unlettered, but highly ambitious woman from Kingston, Ga. "There were times when we didn't have a lot," remembers Williams. "For a while, a washtub with a cloth on it was our dinner table."

John Williams traveled constantly, leaving Sid in the hands of the relentless "Jessie B," who decided her skinny, blue-eyed son would one day be president. "His mother never let go," says Nell Williams, "even after we got married." For high school ROTC inspections she'd polish the *back* of Sid's belt buckle. Not surprisingly, he became captain of the drill team and regimental commander. Jessie demanded he make the honor roll; Sid, no rocket scientist, made the list every quarter, paid for it with terrible migraine headaches that left him exhausted. "A lot of things she did you'd call child abuse nowadays," says Williams. "She wore my ass out."

There was a stubborn, nonconformist streak in Williams, beyond the reach of his mama's exhortations or the shouts of coaches, preachers and teachers. He refused to join the "sinner's line" at the Baptist church, preferring to keep his sins and his secrets to himself. Even as a kid, he looked different. The odd cheekbones and inky hair marked him as an outsider. Many afternoons, neighborhood kids

wrong with him. "I saw the multiplicity of it," Williams remembers. "If I could do what was done for me to another patient and another, I could multiply that business and extrapolate and be a success."

Thus began the career of one of the nation's more controversial health care figures. Williams' high-pressure salesmanship (the Money Hum a prime example) has been criticized as much as his medical theories. Chiropractic was also "unacceptable . . . a challenge . . . a minority view" — things a 167-pound defensive end with a stubborn streak could relate to. Dr. Sid admits he wasn't immediately overwhelmed by what he now says are chiropractic's miraculous possibilities: "I didn't love it, but I liked it."

In 1953, Sid and Nell, newly married, left Atlanta for Davenport, Iowa, where D.D. Palmer had established the Palmer College of Chiropractic in 1895. Palmer, who'd operated a "magnetic healing" clinic — the old Sears & Roebuck catalogs are full of devices used at such places — claimed to have restored hearing for a janitor named Harvey Lillard by adjusting his spinal column. Palmer decided that by relieving pressure on the spinal nerve responsible for hearing, he had cured deafness. (Unfortunately, a spinal nerve involved with hearing has yet to be discovered.)

Further, Palmer theorized that the

... The girl said 'Mama, I'd like to get the big set.' The mother said, 'I think I'll get the middle-sized set.' I wasn't a sharp talker. It was more expression, like Marlon Brando in that Apocalypse thing. Almost a painted, all-glowing, nonverbal thing.

After that, says Williams, "I became a great salesman, but a sorry student."

After graduation, Sid and Nell returned to Georgia. The ferocious energy that drove him on the football field swept Williams to financial success. Dr. Nell, who also earned her degree at Palmer, was no slouch either. By 1958, the two were operating 18 clinics in metro Atlanta and Si-Nel, a publishing house and company that sells chiropractic equipment. What they couldn't earn was respect. When Dr. Nell, who displays none of her husband's flamboyance, applied for membership in a garden club in Austell, she was rejected. "They said they couldn't accept me because I was pregnant," says Williams. "I know it was because I was a female chiropractor."

In the early '60s, the powerful American Medical Association (supported by the American College of Surgeons, the American College of Radiology and others) intensified its long-standing opposition to chiropractic, labeling its practitioners "unscientific cultists," alleging it was unethical for M.D.'s to associate with them. Chiropractors, claiming the assault derived from financial rather than ethical concerns, retaliated with a lawsuit, accusing the AMA of violating antitrust statutes. In a landmark 1987 decision, the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled against the AMA and issued a permanent injunction against further interference. The U.S. Supreme Court let the ruling stand.

Today, all 50 states license chiropractors as health professionals. Annually, more than 18 million Americans visit chiropractors; Medicare, Medicaid, and many private insurers and workmen's compensation policies cover chiropractic services. The U.S. Department of Education recognizes the Council on Chiropractic Education — which approved Life College's curriculum and standards — as an accrediting agency.

In a pamphlet titled *Life of a Salesman*, Williams describes how a 1959 attempt to raise money to establish a chiropractic college (in part to counter AMA charges that chiropractors were poorly trained) nearly destroyed him. Plans to construct 80 homes in Cobb County, to subsidize the college, were washed away by torrential rains. *Everybody started suing me*, Williams writes, *calling me in the middle of the night to pay up. The*

banks foreclosed, even took my car. I was \$14 million in debt. ... The whole world was after me.

I got sick in 1960. For four years, I couldn't even drive a car. I could hardly talk. ... I felt like some kind of demon had me. ... I'd have these sinking spells when I was working in the clinic and I'd have to get out because I didn't want to die inside the clinic. ... Every night we'd go out riding in the car until 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning. That was the only thing that would calm me down. The maid that lived with us would sit in the back seat and hold my son Sid on a pillow and my daughter Kim

'In the past we've been labeled illiterate charlatans and cultists,' Williams thunders, 'but we've grown! We are flourishing.' Chiropractors heal without drugs, without surgery, he says, and therefore are a threat to the greed-heads of the 'trillion-dollar' medical establishment.

would hold me up. Dr. Nell would drive. ...

Needless to say, Sid fully recovered. He opened Life College in 1974, with 22 students. By 1986, Bob Hope was cracking jokes as a commencement speaker.

At the clinic, Tony Bianchi, 27, a "senior assistant," begins a visitor's medical workup, a thorough physical exam that includes a 14-page medical history, blood pressure check and hearing test, seven different X-rays, a test for ischemia (in this case, impeded blood flow through the vertebral artery to the brain) and a urinalysis that accurately picks up evidence of an earlier kidney stone problem.

The X-rays indicate, according to a staff technician, degenerative changes in the lower neck and *facet syndrome*. Two facet joints are located in each of the 33 segments of the human spine. The joints — containing a lubricating fluid called *synovia* — are encapsulated in a membrane sheath that protects the bony structures much like a shock absorber cushions the chassis in a car. Chronic lower back pain is commonly associated with the stretching or rupturing of these synovial sheaths.

Bianchi then runs a dubious-sounding device known as a Nerv-O-Scope down

the visitor's spine. The heat-sensitive scope supposedly picks up minute variations in temperature that can indicate a subluxation, the energy-draining, pain-causing compression of one or more of the nerves passing through the spinal column.

Next comes the chiropractic adjustment; each student is required to perform 250 such outpatient adjustments before graduation.

Each step of the two-hour examination and eventual adjustment (which takes less than 10 seconds) is carefully overseen by one of the clinic's staff doctors. In a 1984 investigation, TV reporter Richard Belch-

er documented instances of students signing X-ray authorizations and treating patients without proper supervision. He also accused Williams of setting up an illegal political action committee (CIP-PAC) that funneled contributions to local politicians, of declaring a getaway in Sarasota, Fla., a chiropractic "museum," (actually Williams' lush getaway is next door to the museum — now called the B.J. Palmer-Sid E. Williams Chiropractic Embassy Compound), and of spending college funds to buy Atlanta Hawks season tickets.

The college agreed to a consent order authorizing more student supervision in the clinic. Nothing came of the other allegations. Today, state Attorney General Michael Bowers gives Life a clean bill of health.

In 1984, the nonprofit, tax-exempt college was paying Dr. Sid \$101,000 a year, \$10,000 more than the presidents of Georgia Tech and the University of Georgia were making. Sid's and Nell's current salaries are not disclosed.

"I went through a damn Channel 5 *expo-say*," grumbles Williams, "where everything I did was wrong. Somebody was trying to git my ass." He's making a rare appearance at the clinic, with a well-dressed lobbyist, former state legislator

Virgil Smith, in tow. A familiar figure at the state Capitol, Williams engineers, on average, three pro-chiropractic bills each session. Asked for a list of friends and associates, Sid sends a four-page fax that includes, among others, the names of Zell Miller, Herman Talmadge, Jimmy Carter, congressmen John Lewis and Buddy Darden, former Georgia Tech football coach Pepper Rodgers, Speaker Tom Murphy and Marietta Mayor Joe Mack Wilson.

Sid Williams has himself a basketball team. With Life College in the vanguard of chiropractic's move into sports medicine, an athletic program seems a natural fit. Sid, being Sid, could never tolerate a *losing team* or a bunch of intramural dweebs. He hired Georgia Tech All-American Roger Kaiser away from West Georgia College and put him in charge of Life's Running Eagles. Kaiser went 29-6 in 1991, his first National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics season. Last year the team finished sixth in the NAIA.

Drs. Sid and Nell sit in the stands watching the Running Eagles thrash a hapless Brewton-Parker squad. The score is 46-29 at the half. The Williamses are wearing sweat shirts like many of their raucous students, but Dr. Nell sports a four-carat diamond ring. ("An old ring," she explains.) Sid Williams is having a

glorious time, eating popcorn, joking with students. His shoulders bob every time his team scores a point.

Williams says the team, mostly junior-college transfers recruited by Kaiser and former Georgia Tech football stars like Robert Levett and Eddie McAshan, is composed of business majors. "We got 300 minority and disadvantaged students," Dr. Sid tells a visitor. "Twenty-seven Native-Americans already graduated.

"What's that degree we give?" Williams asks the senior staff members sitting around him. "A B.A. in business administration?" No one seems to know. Sid asks a widening circle of college officials. Finally, a woman responds: "A Bachelor of Business Administration . . . B.B.A."

"She better know," says Williams with a wink. "She's only the goddamn recruiter."

He turns his attention elsewhere. The D.C. Dancers, in skintight black costumes, are gyrating wildly on the floor. "Look at that," Williams says proudly. "I didn't find them out there in the yard. . . . And the best part is none of 'em are on scholarship."

The Money Hum is wearing cat suits.^a

Vincent Coppola is an Atlanta Magazine contributing editor.

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