

TEXAS★LEADER

PLANNING TO CHANGE THE WORLD

In Ty's Place

A mother salutes veterans to honor son's memory

Fall 2017



TEXAS
The University of Texas at Austin



From the President

Making a difference now and in the future



PHOTO BY MARSHA MILLER

Philanthropy is more important than ever for The University of Texas at Austin to fulfill its mission.

The impact of giving is apparent across campus, in scholarships that allow students to experience an education on the Forty Acres, professorships that recruit the best and brightest scholars, and research labs that lead to innovative breakthroughs for today's greatest challenges. The university relies on the generosity and foresight of alumni and friends to ensure that our students receive a world-class education and our faculty are able to prepare the next generation of leaders.

This issue of *Texas Leader* salutes those whose philanthropy benefits both UT's current and future initiatives through "blended gifts"—giving now and leaving a legacy gift later. Within these pages of the *Texas Leader*, you will read seven stories of remarkable people who support Texas with blended gifts. Some are alumni supporting the area in which they studied. Others never attended UT and are giving to programs they have come to love.

Regardless of their affiliation, each generous donor has made important investments in this institution. Dayton Williams is endowing a scholarship that will support a veteran in honor of her late son, who wanted to come to Texas but did not have the chance. Bob O'Rear, one of Microsoft's original employees, earned a master's degree at UT and was instrumental in bringing the Gates-Dell Computer Complex to campus. Bob is funding a team of students in the Freshman Research Initiative. Duke DeGrassi, a business alumnus, is endowing a scholarship in the University Leadership Network, our nationally recognized student success initiative. Rick Church is making the largest gift in history to the Longhorn Band and a major contribution to mechanical engineering, the department where he earned a bachelor's degree. Betty Taylor Cox, a communications alumna with a storied career, is helping provide state-of-the-art technology for TV and film students. And Roice Nelson, also a mechanical engineering alumnus, is endowing an outreach program for mathematics.

By giving now and later, these Texas Leaders demonstrate a profound commitment to the flagship university of Texas. Each of them, and each of you, have my thanks.

Gregory L. Fenves, President

The University of Texas at Austin | @gregfenves

Roice Nelson, Math Evangelist

Prime Exponent

Some people play golf in their spare time. Some enjoy shopping. When Roice Nelson has a few minutes to spare, he opens a textbook and dives deeper into advanced mathematics.

That's not all he does—he's an artist, he plays piano, he even rides motorcycles and unicycles. But if you ask what his true passion is, it's mathematics. It's an interest that has been growing since shortly after he graduated from The University of Texas at Austin with a mechanical engineering degree in 1997.

While some people view math as a means to an end, and others a necessary evil, to Nelson, it is a profound force for good in our lives. "Whether it's helping people think more clearly, or having an objective perspective on something as best we can, I do think mathematics can help people flourish. The study of it for me leads to positivity," he says.

For this reason, he wants others to understand the power of mathematics and to get excited about its potential for changing their outlook on life. So he and his wife, Sarah, are endowing a fund for mathematics outreach at the university.

"It's become such an important part of my daily thinking. When I'm not at work and I'm by myself, that's what I'm thinking about."

"Sometimes even when he's not by himself!" Sarah interjects with a laugh.

"One day I was just hanging out daydreaming and she comes up to me and says, 'Are you thinking about 4-D rotations or something?!' And I happened to be thinking about 4-D rotations at that moment. And I said, 'I love you so much! How do you know me so well?!'"

Their \$50,000 endowment includes their personal gift and a matching gift from his employer, GE Aviation in Austin, where he has worked as a software developer for

PHOTOS
Dave Mead

(top to bottom) Roice and Sarah Nelson on the Forty Acres enjoying two of many passions —his Rubick's cube and unicycle



17 years. He also has a planned gift, which will greatly supplement the endowment.

When Roice first approached the university, he didn't know what form his gift would take—he just knew it would relate to mathematics. The endowment will fund an outreach program, which could include public talks or helping professors have extra interaction with students.

"The spirit of our endowment is to bring more people to mathematics however we can. I think if we do that, good things will come." ■



In Ty's Place



For almost a decade, Dayton Williams searched in vain for a way to honor her son's memory. Then she got an idea.

BY
Avrel Seale

PHOTOS
Courtesy
Dayton Williams



When Dayton Williams entered her son Ty's house, it was clean. Everything was organized. It was the house of someone who had his act together.

As with many young people, it was the military that had given him this precious gift. It was the Marines that took a young man who struggled in school, struggled to find a direction, and gave him the discipline to achieve his goals.

Ty had started college in Oklahoma but without direction or commitment eventually dropped out. At age 26, "Tyrell was, in many ways, lost," his mother recalls. He went to a Navy recruitment office, most likely because his grandfather was a Navy veteran, but that office was closed at the moment, so the Marines got him. He told no one he was going to enlist.

His entire military service was overseas—three tours in Iraq.

In November 2007, four and a half years of wrenching worry came to a merciful end when Ty finally came home, honorably discharged as a sergeant. At last she had a chance to get to know her older son again, and it was a bit like getting to know someone new. He was 31 now, focused and grounded. "I witnessed the

man my son had become," she says. And one of the things he was focused on was getting the college degree that had eluded him in his early 20s. He wanted to come to The University of Texas at Austin and study psychology.

On February 11, 2008, Tyrell was gearing up to do just that when he was killed by a hit-and-run driver in Austin.

The depth of Dayton's grief was something only one who has suffered the loss of a child could understand. To survive, she had to break her life apart and put it back together in a different configuration. She moved from Bryan to Galveston back to Bryan and then to Fort Worth. She took early retirement from her long career as a senior project manager for IBM and became a life coach. She devoted herself to nonprofit causes that felt more impactful, became a FEMA Reservist and began helping other bereaved mothers. "My entire inner and outer world shattered into a thousand pieces, and I had to put myself back together. Who am I? What's important? What's of value? Service to humanity—that's what I value. I loved my profession, but it became meaningless in contrast to the loss of my son."

Concurrent with all those life changes, for nine years she struggled to find a way to honor Ty. Her emails to other universities where she wanted to explore memorials went

(left) SGT Tyrell Seth Williams, USMC during his active duty service

(above) Tyrell's grandfather, Ed Davis, a Navy veteran, and Ed's wife, JoAnne, welcome Tyrell home after his second tour of duty.



Aundre Wesley, first recipient of the scholarship inspired by Tyrell Williams

PHOTO MARSHA MILLER

“What if she honored him by enabling another returning veteran to, in a sense, take Ty’s place at the university?”

unanswered. The gears of other nonprofit organizations she tried to support in his honor would not turn. Then, she had an idea.

Ty loved Austin and had planned to be a Longhorn. “This was just the school he knew in his heart he wanted to be at.” What if she honored him by enabling another returning veteran to, in a sense, take Ty’s place at the university? One email later she was on her way to setting up an endowment. “I am crying,” she remembers. “I am thinking, ‘Oh my gosh. This is it. This is beautiful!’”

With no previous connection to The University of Texas at Austin, Dayton is creating an endowment that will support a military veteran who is coming to Texas as an undergraduate. It was important to Dayton to begin helping

veterans as quickly as possible—something she was able to accomplish by fully endowing the scholarship now. To enhance Ty’s legacy, she has also dedicated a portion of her estate to the scholarship later. While she is leaving something for her grandchildren, and has a few other charities that likely will get something, she says, “The endowment is my highest priority. This is the most important thing.”

“This is beautiful,” she says, “because this is where he wanted to go. I’m an Aggie, my daughter’s an Aggie, and my youngest son is an Aggie,

so Tyrell was the only one who was going to blaze the trail and come down the road.”

The scholarship will not be based on academic merit (after all, Ty would not have qualified were that the criterion). Rather, it will be awarded to those with need, which Dayton has defined broadly.

The university’s Office of Student Veteran Services, which supports the more than 500 student veterans on campus, administers the scholarship. Director Jeremiah Gunderson believes the fund will help even the playing field between student veterans and their non-veteran counterparts. “A lot of veterans, because they rely on the G.I. Bill to pay the light bill and buy groceries, have to stay in school year-round, so they don’t get an opportunity to do networking, research, interning, things like that during the summers that their undergraduate counterparts do. So even with all the experience they have that you can’t put a price tag on, they end up graduating behind their peers because they don’t have the same opportunities of an 18-year-old whose parents are supporting them.”

Gunderson adds, “We, as veterans, feel very strongly about the people who never got a chance to come back and go to school, and we take that really seriously. Whenever we see people who are at school and down on the experience—‘Man, this is terrible’—they should think about Ty and the others who didn’t get a chance. This scholarship means a lot because it provides for a veteran who is almost sitting in his place in a classroom.”

Dayton says, “I want the people who are the recipients of this scholarship to know Ty.” That means connecting with him via the sense of service that he felt toward his country. She also wants them to know that he lived with passion. She wants them to enjoy their time at college as she knows he would have. “Education is necessary and requires focus and determination, but enjoy it. Enjoy this part of the journey because you’ll never have it again.”

Dayton hopes Ty’s story inspires others to support veteran students too. “This is such a huge area of need in my mind.”

The first award was made this fall to Aundre Wesley, a Marine veteran (pictured above). Today he is sitting in Ty’s place. ■

Duke DeGrassi and Gayla Lewis support at-risk Longhorns

Near to the Heart

“Shortly after Duke and I started dating, I realized that if I didn’t get into the UT football thing, this relationship wouldn’t go very far,” says Gayla Lewis.

But the passion her Longhorn now-husband, Duke DeGrassi, imparted to her for his alma mater did not stop at the stadium’s edge. The couple is now making a significant gift to support the University Leadership Network. This nationally renowned program identifies students who are statistically likely to struggle at Texas’ flagship university and “flips the script,” turning them into campus leaders.

“For many years I’ve had the university in my will,” says Duke, who earned an accounting degree from Texas in 1969, and who retired seven years ago from a long career in oil, financial services, and investments. “I had always hoped to set up some form of scholarship, and fortunately UT called on me and told me there’s a way to get started before you pass away. I turned 70 this year so it worked out really well with my IRA.” He is giving a set amount each year for the next five years, and his will provides that when he passes, there will be another gift. But their scholarship will be set up by the end of this year. “It was a great boon for us to be able to do that now so we can see what’s going on for a few years instead of waiting until we’re deceased.”

The scholarship will go to a University Leadership Network student from Duke’s native Amarillo. He now lives in Golden, Colo., and says he knows there is a tremendous amount of need in the hometown he still loves.

“The other thing that was very important to us was the particular program, the University Leadership Network. That type of program is very near and dear to our hearts,” says Duke. “We think there are a lot of people being left off to the side these days, so when

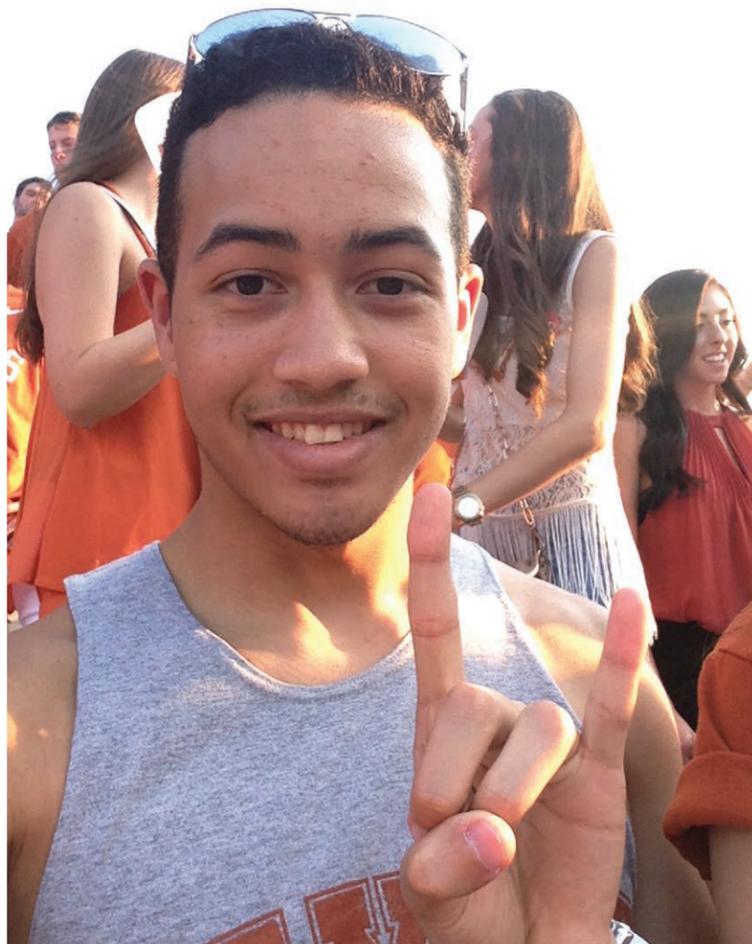


PHOTO Courtesy Duke DeGrassi

we heard about that program, it fit into the type of philanthropy and the feelings we have about things. It’s the perfect program.”

Gayla adds, “It’s the type of vehicle that really appeals to us—to help kids that otherwise wouldn’t have the opportunity to attend a university of this stature.” ■

Great Expectations



The University Leadership Network flips the script for students at risk

Alex Moon-Walker, recipient of the Leaton Thomas Oliver Scholarship in Chemical Engineering, at his first UT football game

For as long as public universities have existed, one of their chief benefits to society has been the power to break generational cycles of poverty and enable upward social mobility.

In his most recent State of the University Address, President Greg Fenves noted that nearly half of the UT students who graduated in the early 2000s, who came from families in the lowest income quintile, are now earning at least twice the amount their families earned. “For these graduates, this is the American dream come true,” he said.

But these blessings have never been evenly distributed nor the power to bestow them fully deployed. A report published in 2012 showed that 60 percent of Longhorns whose parents both graduated from college graduated in four years, while just 39 percent of first-generation students could say the same. This becomes all the more dire against a backdrop of declining generational prosperity nationwide. “Over the past half century in the U.S.,” Fenves said, “a child’s prospect of earning more than their parents has fallen from 90 percent to 50 percent. It has been a dramatic change, and it affects every person in every walk of life.”

In recent years, The University of Texas at Austin has worked hard to provide support for students least likely to graduate in four years and is now seeing significant improvement. The overall four-year graduation rate has increased from 51 percent in 2011 to 66 percent in 2017. It is estimated that almost 8,000 undergraduate students at UT are first-generation, and first-generation and low-income students had the largest percentage increase during this time period. These students increased their four-year graduation rates to nearly 60 percent. In addition, UT strengthened its ability to be a force for social mobility by putting money and infrastructure behind a program that specifically helps students who, statistics tell us, are least likely to succeed. The University Leadership Network (ULN) is an incentive-based scholarship program for students with financial need who may be unprepared for the rigors of college, the majority of whom are first-generation students. In May 2014, the program

gained national attention when it was featured on the cover of *The New York Times Magazine*.

Each year, 500 freshmen enter the program, which includes four years of leadership training, experiential learning opportunities, and university service. Students gain skills in problem solving, professionalism, time management, team building and coordination, communication methods, and ethical decision-making. Students also earn up to \$5,000 in financial assistance every year they stay on track. A key element of the program is that students receive their incentive-based scholarship in 10 \$500 payments dependent upon completion of specific program requirements.

Students must complete 30 credit hours per year and maintain at least a 2.0 cumulative GPA. The financial support is combined with professional development, including three years of internships, which helps students streamline their college experience, cut student loan debt, and graduate on time.

As Paul Tough wrote in *The New York Times Magazine*, “a big part of the solution lies at colleges like The University of Texas at Austin, selective but not superelite, that are able to perform, on a large scale, what used to be a central mission—arguably the central mission—of American universities: to take large numbers of highly motivated working-class teenagers and give them the tools they need to become successful professionals.”

The success of the University Leadership Network is part of an even larger student success story. Today, nearly 66 percent of UT undergraduates earn degrees within four years, with 82 percent graduating within six years. When the first ULN class arrived on the Forty Acres in 2013, it was predicted that only 33 percent of them would graduate in four years because they were not academically prepared for the rigors of UT and had high financial need. Those students far exceeded expectations, with 55 percent graduating in four years, a 66 percent increase over what was predicted. In addition, nearly 20 percent of the incoming class is still enrolled and on track to graduate in five or six years. Graduates of the program now work at companies like Deloitte, General Motors, and KPMG, and others are continuing their studies in graduate and doctoral programs at universities including Harvard and UC Berkeley.

Alex Moon Walker

“I come from a family that does not have a lot of money,” says Alex Moon-Walker, of Irving, a member of the first graduating class of the University Leadership Network.

“My mother struggled to make ends meet month to month, so it was never really an option for me to ask my parents for financial support.” Fortunately, Moon-Walker received the Leaton Thomas Oliver Scholarship in Chemical Engineering given by Leaton’s parents, George and Leila. “If I had not received this scholarship and my ULN scholarship, I would most likely have had to borrow an insane amount of money,” he says, “maybe to the point where I would not be able to attend a great university such as UT.” This year, he graduated with a double major in biochemistry and microbiology.

He says the support networks he was able to develop over the past four years at Texas made all the difference. “Fellow students and faculty who have mentored me have become a big part of my identity as they have helped me grow not just as an academic but also as a person. The connections I have made will last the rest of my life.”

Though the donors of his scholarship are now deceased, if he could tell them anything, he would say, “From the bottom of my heart, I would like to say thank you. If it were not for your financial support, I would not have been able to attend UT and graduate from one of the most incredible institutions in the world. I am beyond excited to continue on my career path and leave a legacy that will exemplify UT’s motto, ‘What starts here changes the world.’”

Moon-Walker is now a Ph.D. student in virology at Harvard University. He wants to one day be a professor and research emerging viruses.

The Oliver Scholarship has supported 88 students since its inception and like Moon-Walker each of these students has their own remarkable story. ■

PHOTO
Courtesy
Alex Moon-Walker



in communication. Indeed, you would be hard-pressed to find any alumnus of the college whose career represents more of its disciplines. Journalism, advertising, film and video documentary work—she’s covered the waterfront.

Now, Cox is giving back to the university, contributing out of her individual retirement account (IRA) to help the Moody College of Communication purchase a green screen for its Department of Radio-TV-Film. Green screens—walls or flats painted green—allow artificial backgrounds to be added to a scene. Also known as chroma key compositing, the technique has become fundamental to TV and film production. The construction of Texas’ green screen started in June, and the result will be a seamless wall 20 feet tall and 70 feet long with a full 90-degree rounded corner. Other donors to the project include William Bollinger, Joe Phillips, and Larry Safir.

In addition, through two charitable gift annuities, Cox’s generosity will benefit the

I went into journalism so I could see the world, be part of it, make an impact on things.”

In journalism school and at *The Daily Texan* she found her calling. “I believe that journalism has the power and responsibility to change attitudes. A democracy depends upon the free press. If we’re ever going to solve our problems and have peace in the world, we’re going to have to have journalists there telling both sides of the story,” says Cox, who still reads two or three newspapers each day.

She was so impatient to see the world that she and four friends, most from *The Daily Texan*, skipped their 1955 graduation and hopped a former Italian troop ship to Europe, traveling and staying in youth hostels for three and a half months. The young women would pass her portable typewriter from lap to lap, as they drove. They rented a French car, and soon wondered at how friendly the French were, waving to them as they came through the first town. A bit late, they discovered it was the finish line of the Tour de France. (They stopped in time.) Later, a transmission problem forced them to drive only forward for the rest of the summer, never backward—a fitting metaphor for the rest of her life.

From the 1955 Geneva Summit Conference—where the four *Daily Texan* journalists outnumbered reporters from *The New York Times*—she filed stories with the *Dallas Times Herald*, then went to work there as soon as she came back. “In those days, if you were a woman your beat was ‘women’s news,’ which at that time was just a place to put wedding pictures, obits and few other things,” she recalls. “But my editor, Vivian Castleberry, was determined that we would provide real news.” She developed confidence in interviewing, and wrote features for the city desk. “I went undercover as an alcoholic at an AA convention, when it was a story that there were women alcoholics.” Her series made the front pages.

But her alma mater would have one more influence on her path. “The thing that made Texas so special was its instructors. I had professors who took a personal interest and played a role in my life.” One of those was legend Dr. DeWitt Reddick. After Cox graduated, Reddick, a fellow Presbyterian, kept suggesting jobs outside her hometown. “He wanted to

uproot me from my comfortable life in Dallas to work for the Presbyterian Church U.S.,” which Reddick served on various boards.

In Nashville and later Atlanta, Cox handled media and publications for the church’s Boards of World Missions and National Ministries during the Civil Rights movement’s beginning, covering the 1967 “Poor People’s March” in Washington, D.C., that began LBJ’s War on Poverty and events as colonialism ended in Africa, sharing reports from their missionaries in the former Belgian Congo through UPI’s wire service.

The next chapter of her career opened when an acquaintance, an ad executive at Coca-Cola’s Atlanta corporate headquarters, told her he needed her there in marketing. “I hesitated after working on life-and-death issues ...” But go she did, and there learned about the corporate world and filmmaking, as one of the company’s first female executives. She produced short films for the company’s brand managers and for nonprofits they supported—the United States Olympics, etc.—before leaving to start her own production company, The Communications Department, Inc.

Her company, with offices in Dallas and New York, was hired by the United States Postal Service to produce basic training tapes for mail carriers and its first sexual-harassment tapes. She and her crew documented Superfund sites nationally for the EPA and produced training videos for communities and first responders, marketing and fundraising films/tapes for corporations, colleges and nonprofits across the country. Several won CINE Golden Eagle awards as the best non-theatrical films of the year, and represented the United States internationally.

“I give to the university and the journalism school because I do believe we are what this country was founded on—as communicators we help make possible a free press and the exchange of ideas. There’s no substitute for what students learn here,” she says. “That experience at UT allowed me to help influence things in a changing world. And with my gifts to the university and the Moody College of Communication, I can continue to be a part of it.” ■



PHOTOS
Courtesy
Betty Taylor Cox

Jill of All Trades

Communication triple-threat Betty Taylor Cox is giving back to the Moody College

When most people think about The University of Texas at Austin in 1951, “diversity” is not the first word that springs to mind. But diversity is relative, and to Betty Taylor Cox, diversity meant people who were not from Dallas.

“There were students who were working their way through, there were artists, people who had a different view of society, had different issues they cared about, so that we began to think about a broader world. One of my journalism classes had one of UT’s first African-American graduate students, and one of the issues I remember was what the Texas Legislature then called the ‘red books bill,’ with books to ban in Texas. We met the world here,” she remembers.

Cox’s education in the early 1950s would be a springboard to a multifaceted career

Moody College now and in the future, and provide her income during her lifetime. Betty is planning these gifts, along with a bequest, to make the greatest impact on the Moody College, while meeting her own financial and philanthropic goals.

Cox’s first year of college was spent on a music scholarship at The Hockaday School in Dallas. She then came to Texas as a piano major. “I was practicing three hours a day, and they decided that I was not destined for the concert stage.” (Still a music lover, she plays cello in two community orchestras in the Metroplex.) Her attention turned toward journalism. “From a personal standpoint, I wanted to know more about the world. I had been on newspapers in high school and thought I was a good writer.

(above) Betty Taylor Cox with Leonard Bernstein at the after-party of the 1976 Broadway premiere of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Cox was Coca-Cola’s liaison during development and production of the show, which Coca-Cola funded to celebrate America’s bi-centennial.

(right) Cox visiting the Moody College this year



Rick Church and Big Bertha
at Darrell K Royal–Texas
Memorial Stadium

He's With the Band

Rick Church's historic gift helps ensure Longhorn Band's future.

PHOTO
Wyatt McSpadden

While classrooms, libraries, and laboratories make up the formal nexus of a college education, it is the extras that form the larger part of our experience and memory—the fraternities and sororities, the intramural teams, and, in Rick Church's case, the Longhorn Band.

Indeed, Rick's experience in the band affected him so deeply that at age 62, he has made the largest gift to the band in its history—\$4 million. He also is paying off a \$350,000 pledge to the band (\$250,000 to its Legacy Fund and \$100,000 for scholarships).

Of course, one doesn't typically become that financially successful solely by playing the tuba. Rick's success stemmed partly from a varied and busy childhood. He was born in Los Angeles, and his family moved to Missouri when he was six because his father wanted to try dairy farming. Milking cows at 4 a.m. before going to school accustomed him to hard work. When he was 12, his mother tired of agrarian life, so

"I am privileged to be in this position to make a significant donation to the university, but everyone should give to what made them who they are."

the family moved to Houston, where his father founded a company that fabricated parts for NASA. Rick worked by his father's side, first sweeping the floor, then gradually learning the basics of manufacturing before deciding, "I don't want to be the guy who makes things, I want to be the guy who designs things." He decided to be an engineer around seventh grade.

Rick came to The University of Texas at Austin to study mechanical engineering, and that department also is benefitting from his generosity to the tune of \$3 million. At Texas, he studied extensively under Dr. Kenneth Ralls (now in his 50th year on the faculty) and earned money operating the scanning electron microscope in the materials lab.

After graduating, Rick became a mechanical engineer in the oil industry as well as a successful entrepreneur. He still lives in Houston but frequents his scenic ranch near Bastrop, where he cares for his father.

He is leaving a significant part of his estate to UT. "I am privileged to be in this position to

make a significant donation to the university, but everyone should give to what made them who they are. I want to give to the people who made me who I am—my mentors, my band directors, my professors in engineering. These people gave me everything. I just want to give back," he says.

Rick's motive to give to the band is twofold: the first is sheer appreciation. It didn't hurt that his time in the "Showband of the Southwest" coincided with a legendary era of Texas football. During his freshman year (1974) the band played at Super Bowl VIII, held in Rice Stadium. The final game of Rick's student career was also Coach Royal's final game. And his first two years at Texas were lived under the stern baton of a looming figure in Longhorn history. "Vincent DiNino was a big mentor in my life. I just can't imagine the value he put into all these people over the 20 years he was there. I can remember walking into the stadium a few minutes before practice and him sitting on the top of his podium saying, 'Mr. Church, if you're on time, you're late! If you're early, you're on time!'"

Rick's second motive is a concern for the future of the organization. As funding pressure on universities across the country increases, bands—especially large bands like Texas—are at risk of being underfunded, and Rick wants to shore up the showband's margin of excellence and ensure it remains a thriving tradition far into the future.

While Rick underwrites the band's future, he's as active as anyone in its present. In more than 40 years of Alumni Band days, during which up to 1,000 alumni return to perform at halftime, there have only been a couple of occasions when Rick and his tuba could not be found in the X of the "Texas" formation. "The tubas are always in the X!" he laughs. ■

The Calculated Life

Microsoft's Bob O'Rear, formative figure of the PC age who guided astronauts home, is helping his alma mater create new stars.

In 1980, Microsoft was a scrappy little company with about 40 employees known mostly for producing computer languages like BASIC and FORTRAN. Annual revenues were just a few million dollars a year. That changed when they got a call from global computer giant IBM. Could they help with a top-secret project to build, in less than a year, an affordable personal computer for ordinary people?

Microsoft employee No. 7, Bob O'Rear, M.S. '66, says his team proposed not only to produce languages for the new computer, but to build a complete operating system. It was risky because they'd never built one before, and it had to be done quickly. Their plan was to buy the rights to a bare-bones operating system developed by Seattle Computer Products and modify and expand it for IBM's new personal computer.

BY
Marc Airhart

PHOTO
Courtesy Microsoft



"From the fall of 1980 to mid-summer 1981, I worked almost every day, all day on the IBM project," O'Rear says. "I worked through all holidays and weekends, canceled vacations and basically put the rest of my life on hold as I worked to make the IBM PC a reality."

The IBM PC was launched in 1981 and soon became the world's dominant microcomputer. At its peak, IBM sold one PC every minute of every business day. The age of personal computing had arrived.

From the Panhandle to the Moon

Bob O'Rear was reared in the Texas Panhandle of the 1940s and '50s by sharecropping grandparents. In high school, he was a B student with few aspirations. But a new loan program for disadvantaged students from his hometown, Perryton, helped him attend Texas Western College (now UT-El Paso).

He initially majored in physical education so that he could return to Perryton to coach tennis and teach health. But many students in his dormitory were engineering majors. "They teased me mercilessly about my PE major," he recalls, "how easy it was and how difficult their major was and that it really took a lot of brains and superhuman effort to pass calculus and that I probably couldn't handle it." He signed up for calculus the next year just to prove that he could do it, and although it was extremely hard work, he made one of the few A's in the class and changed his major to mathematics. "I was a full-fledged convert to the beauty and power of mathematics," he says.

Graduating in 1964, he went on to graduate studies in math at The University of Texas at Austin. He took a course calculating the orbits of comets and planets and minored in astrophysics. He also studied computer-programming in the math department, as there was no computer science department yet. He realized that his skills in math, computer programming, and astrophysics could be useful in the aerospace industry. "This was the mid '60s, and probably the most glamorous job you could find as a math guy was working in the space program," O'Rear remembers.

When he finished his master's in 1966, he joined a company in Redondo Beach, Calif., called TRW writing programs for top-secret spy satellites. Two years later he transferred to Houston to support the Apollo space program. O'Rear wrote algorithms to calculate



reentry paths for Apollo command modules returning from the moon to ensure that they didn't skip off the atmosphere, burn up, or splash down too far away from Navy ships.

"It was exciting, and it took an awful lot of work," he says. "It was very similar to the Microsoft experience in the sense that you worked very hard and you played hard, and you were doing something that you felt was really important."

Giving Back

After Apollo, O'Rear worked on various military and aerospace projects and co-founded a company that made automated manufacturing systems.

In 1977, a friend told him about a six-person software company in Albuquerque looking for someone with programming and math skills. "He told me about this young guy, Bill, who was running the company and looked about 13 but was very knowledgeable about computers," O'Rear remembers. "I interviewed with Bill Gates and Paul Allen. It took no time to realize that both of them were very talented."

He joined the team, and it grew to 12 people. They moved to Bellevue, Wash., in 1979. The following year, they received that fateful call from IBM. After the successful launch of the IBM PC, O'Rear opened Microsoft subsidiaries in Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, Hong Kong, and South Africa. He retired in 1993.

In his retirement, O'Rear joined UT's College of Natural Sciences Advisory Council and helped raise funds for a new computer science building. "Before that building, they were scattered all over campus," says O'Rear. "They didn't have their own building or identity, and it was hampering

their ability to attract young new professors into the computer science department."

He convinced Bill Gates to contribute to the effort. As the fundraising effort for what would become the Gates-Dell Computer Science Building was nearing its goal, O'Rear wanted to find a way to thank Gates. So O'Rear funded a student research program in Gates' honor that would advance one of the billionaire's major interests: global health. That program, DIY Diagnostics, is a research stream within the Freshman Research Initiative. Student researchers in the stream work on a range of projects from developing apps to detect skin cancer to crafting a cheap, portable device to test mosquitos for malaria or Zika.

"The big accomplishment here is that we're showing kids what research is like and how fun it can be," he says. "We'll develop plenty of additional scientists doing this. If they discover something important from the research, it will be the cherry on top of the sundae."

O'Rear lives near Seattle with his wife, Cathy, and continues to support the college in many ways, including through IRA transfers and service on its advisory council. He says his time in graduate school at Texas made a huge mark on his career, from introducing him to astrophysics and computer programming to connecting him with potential employers in the aerospace industry.

"My career would never have gone anywhere if it weren't for The University of Texas," says O'Rear. "That really opened the doors for me." ■

(left) Bob O'Rear (second row, far left) was employee No. 7 at Microsoft, a small software company that mostly wrote software for computer languages at the time of this company photo (1978); Bill Gates (front row, far left) and Paul Allen (front row, far right) are also pictured.

(above) O'Rear visiting the College of Natural Sciences

PHOTO
VIVIAN ABAGIU

Cover

Dayton Williams with student veterans Maria Bazaldua, Caleb Johnson, Michael Gonzalez, Tony León, Taylor Lujan, Ryan Maynard, Mike Rogers, Sean Salome, Tiffany Thomas, and Director of Student Veteran Services Jeremiah Gunderson and Student Advisor Ivan Vazquez.

PHOTO BY NICK SIMONITE

Submissions

TEXAS LEADER is published for members of the Texas Leadership Society and other alumni and friends of The University of Texas at Austin. To submit story ideas, comments, questions, and address changes, please use the enclosed envelope, call us at 800-687-4602, or email giftplan@austin.utexas.edu.

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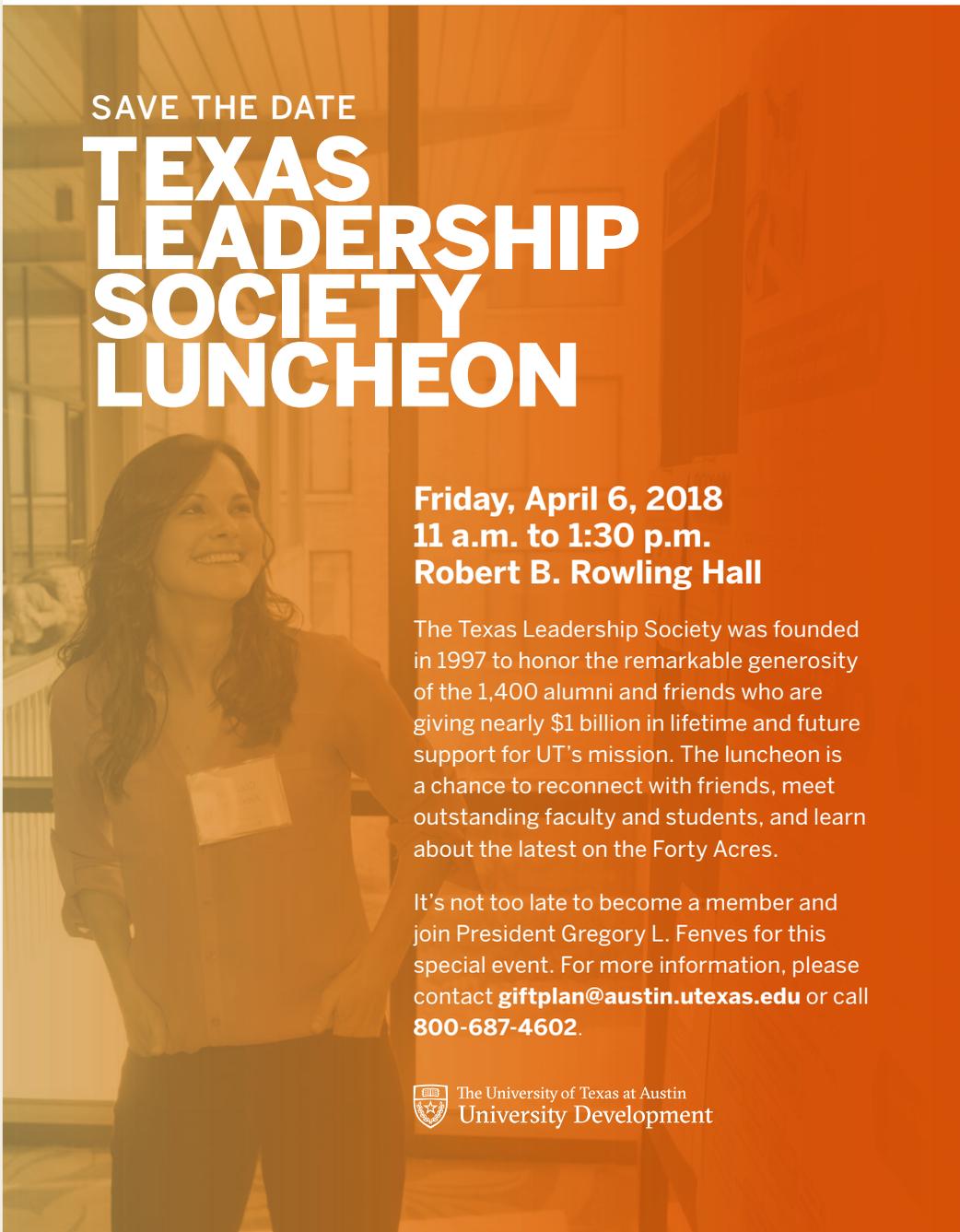
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