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## Under Cover

# “Just David”

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*“Under Cover” was a regular Sooner Magazine feature from August 1951 to May 1957. The author, David A. Burr, often used his column to pay tribute to special Sooners. So for the last time, “Under Cover” appears here, under other authorship, to say goodbye to the very best.*

For years after he had left typewriter and pica ruler behind, long after he had become a university administrator, David Burr still listed his occupation as “journalist.” To those he touched during his long career, he was counselor, consultant, troubleshooter, tough competitor, arbitrator, facilitator, patient listener, good friend. In other words, he was just David.

David was also a salesman, perhaps the best in the business. He was successful because he adhered to the time-honored rules of his profession: he believed in his product, and he knew his territory—and he loved his job more than anyone you have ever known.

For 37 years, until his death on August 6, 1987, David promoted the cause of the University of Oklahoma with anyone who would listen—students, faculty, alumni, legislators, prospective donors, the media, the general public. Whatever his job responsibilities happened to be at any given time, he never lost sight of what a university ought to be. He dreamed big and saw no reason why his dreams for the institution should not come true—and most of them did.

David came to the University with the WWII veterans in 1948 after two years at Northeastern A & M College. He edited *Sooner Magazine* while working on a journalism degree, joining the alumni publication’s staff full-time in 1950. The magazine at that



time was largely class notes and club news; David saw other possibilities.

Then-President George L. Cross tells of being a captive audience while the young editor chauffeured him to an alumni club speaking engagement in Ada. After outlining the magazine’s potential for promoting the University, David made a plea for a more adequate budget.

“I told him to forget about money,” Cross recalls, “to just go out and produce the best alumni magazine in the country—that he would find a way.”

David accepted Cross’s challenge and in 1955 won the Robert Sibley Award from the American Alumni Council for the best alumni magazine in America. For the balance of his career, he refused to accept the argument that the often financially strapped University could not afford to strive for the best.

In 1957, David left the Alumni Association to become assistant to the president and director of the University’s public relations program. He would serve as a senior administrator under five different OU presidents—Cross, J. Herbert Hollomon, Paul F. Sharp, William S. Banowsky and

Frank E. Horton—and three interim presidents—Pete Kyle McCarter, J. R. Morris and Martin Jischke. The secret to his longevity was simple. However much he might come to like any of the presidents he served, his loyalty was to the office of the presidency and to the University. No one ever had to wonder where David stood.

David became Cross’s idea man, and from Cross he learned the diplomatic art of university administration. In 1961, when Cross called for innovative ways to stem the tide of outstanding Oklahoma high school students attending out-of-state colleges and universities, David created the President’s Leadership Class. Under the plan, the University combed the high schools for their top students, offering them freshman scholarships and participation in a year-long leadership training class.

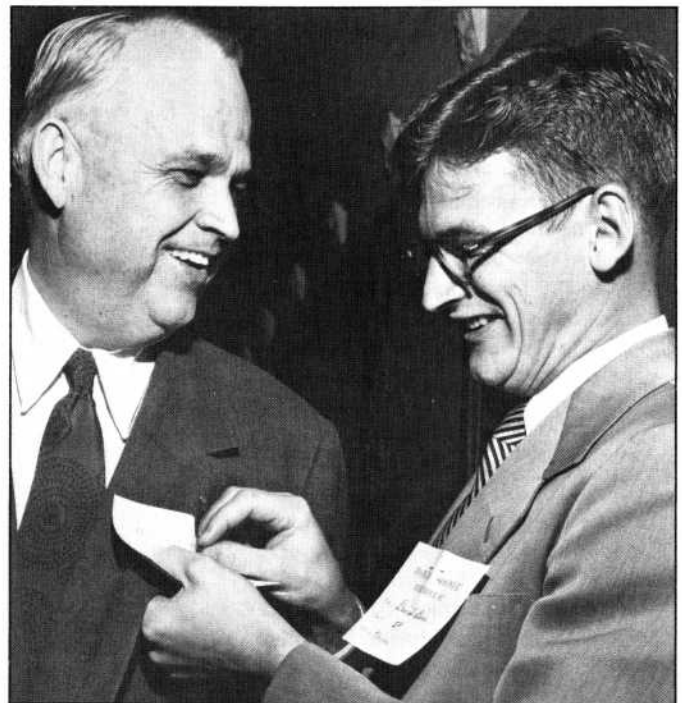
When the dean of students at the time expressed no enthusiasm for the PLC concept, Cross instructed David to sponsor the class himself as the president’s personal representative. The program has been such a success at OU that it has been copied at other institutions throughout the state and nation. During the 16 years of his association with the program, David worked directly with more than 1,200 of OU’s student leaders.

Governor Henry Bellmon saw in PLC the germ of an idea for keeping Oklahoma’s college graduates in the state and in 1964 asked David to develop and direct the Oklahoma Governor’s Opportunity Program.

About this time, David was offered the presidency of the American Alumni Council in Washington, D. C.; several years later, when Cross retired, he was urged to pursue a Ph.D. which would qualify him for a college presidency. On those and other occasions, he admitted that his great love was not higher education in general, but



David and an assistant select photos for *Sooner Magazine*, which won the 1955 Robert Sibley Award for the best alumni magazine in the nation in response to a challenge from OU President George L. Cross.



Even state notables such as Robert S. Kerr wear nametags at University functions, and David makes sure the statesman will not slip around anonymously at this alumni reunion in the early 1950s.

the University of Oklahoma in particular, and there he stayed.

David was the first to hold three different OU vice presidencies. In 1968 Hollomon selected him to head the newly created University Community, which combined all aspects of student life outside the classroom. Those were chaotic days on the nation's campuses, but with the calm, reasoned approach which became David's trademark, he kept the Norman campus cool in the face of severe provocations from both left and right. He was determined that there would be no repeat of Kent State on the campus of the University of Oklahoma.

In addition to his campus duties, David was active in several national educational groups, notably as one of the founders and long-time director of Editorial Projects for Education, Inc., original publisher of *The Chronicles of Higher Education*. Through these associations, David became convinced that only a major ongoing private support program would make it possible for OU to be anything but an average state university. Hollomon's successor in 1971, Paul Sharp, had both public and private school experience; he was



The vice president turns announcer for the charity games, "Almost Anything Goes," in the late '70s. Helping David is Paul Wilson, director of recreational services.

eager to establish a development program, and David was equally eager to be OU's first vice president whose sole responsibility was private fund raising.

Not everyone likes asking people for money; David loved it. He had received his first taste of private fund raising in 1962 as Cross's liaison with R. Boyd Gunning and the OU Foundation on

the first comprehensive all-University campaign, the Plan for Excellence. Building on his own commitment to the University and his faith in its future, David had no problem asking others to share in the funding.

"We never feel like we are begging," he would insist. "We are always convinced that the University has a good deal to offer, and we are offering the

donor a chance to get in on it."

An amazing number of donors took him up on the offer. During his tenure as OU's chief fund raiser, the University received nearly \$200 million in private funds. He directed the two major comprehensive campaigns which followed the early Plan for Excellence, then designed and was directing the \$100 million Centennial Campaign, which was announced in fall 1986. He crafted a number of public/private partnership arrangements to fund capital improvements—Lloyd Noble Center, Huston Huffman Physical Fitness Center, the Doris Neustadt Wing of Bizzell Memorial Library, the Energy Center, Catlett Music Center, Goddard Health Center, the Law Center, Viersen Gymnastics Center, Fred Jones Jr. Memorial Art Center, Henry D. and Ida Mosier Pharmacy Building, L. Dale Mitchell Baseball Park. Numerous student scholarship programs also were funded, as well as endowed and named professorships and countless support programs for teaching and research.

During the Banowsky years of the early '80s, with the economy booming in Oklahoma, Texas and surrounding states, OU experienced successive record-setting totals for private support. Remarkably, however, the all-time high came in 1986-87 as the oil and agriculture states endured their worst economic slump. During the first year of President Horton's Centennial Campaign, the University received \$20 million in private gifts.

In 1977, David added his former public relations responsibilities to fund raising in the new vice presidency for University Affairs, administering the offices of Alumni Affairs and Development, News Services, Electronic Media and Photo Services, High School and College Relations, Public Affairs, Special Events, Legislative Relations and Publications.

David's honors and awards are too numerous to mention here. They came from every area of his life and even posthumously continue to be presented. He received Pepperdine University's highest honor, the doctor of laws degree, but was always a little uncomfortable as "Dr." Burr. His greatest pleasure came in 1983 with receipt of the University of Okla-



*David's organized, take-charge delivery, coupled with his affable personality, made him a hit on the speaker circuit. Always comfortable at the podium, he addressed practically every OU student, faculty, staff, donor and alumni group.*

homa's highest honor, the Distinguished Service Citation, and with the establishment by former PLC members of the David A. Burr Scholarships for outstanding class members during their upper-class years at OU.

Although David was most visible in the University community, he also worked diligently in the city and in his church, sometimes with the fanfare of the United Way campaign he directed, but more often in the quieter, supportive role he had perfected with the individual students, faculty and alumni who, year after year, found their way to his office. He was never too busy or too important to listen, offering help or advice when needed but always a pat on the back or a hug when it mattered.

And then there was his family. No one ever worked harder or with more

love at being a husband and father. Whether it was coaching Little League baseball and softball or being one of three fathers in a roomful of mothers at PTA—or maybe helping his less-skillful wife in the kitchen—he was always there. In a life crowned with achievements, nothing surpassed his pride in Michael, Kathleen and Thad.

David's death, coming as it did with little warning when we expected many more years with him, has left a void in many lives. And yet, as his minister said to an overflow crowd at his memorial service, how disappointed David would be if the rest of us failed to complete what he started. It is time to say goodbye and get on with the task, even those of us who have lost our very best friend.

—Carol J. Burr