

The Signs of Sooner

PRIDE

Kathy Martin stands behind a wooden table just inside the east entrance to the University of Oklahoma Field House. It is 7 p.m. on a dank Tuesday. Martin, chair of OU's Graduate Student Senate, leafs through a pair of yellow legal pads. The pages are filling up with names of students checking in to offer help for "OU Pride Day," Wednesday, March 1.

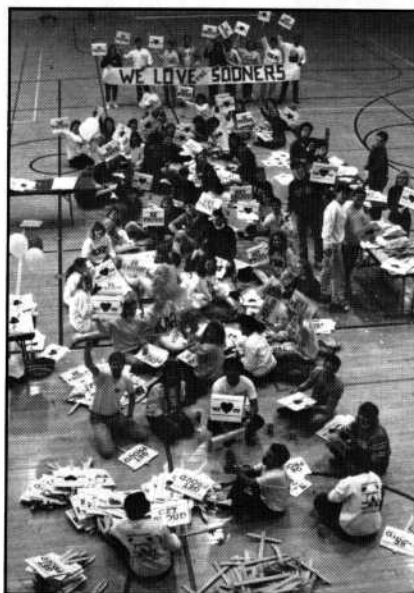
"Sign your name," Martin announces to a just-arrived trio of freshmen. She has to shout to be heard. Behind her, at rows of work tables, student volunteers are busy with hammers, staplers, brightly printed cardboard and wooden stakes — the raw materials for OU Pride yard signs.

"Put down the organization you're representing, and I'll get you tickets to a free pizza party," Martin tells the new arrivals. The three are among nearly 500 students who will stop by the old gym before this evening is over. They come in threes and fours, pitching in for a while and departing with hands full of finished signs to be posted all over the campus and the Norman community. The messages neatly summarize the sentiments which have brought a wide variety of students together: "Get Proud," "Be Proud" and "We Love OU."

Plans for Pride Day go beyond yard signs. Students are encouraged to wear red and white to class on Wednesday. Signatures and donations are being collected for advertisements in state newspapers. Support banners are readied for display at fraternity and sorority houses.

Martin describes her own reasons for being at the Field House. "I'm showing my own pride . . . Almost all my family has gone to OU, and I wouldn't go anywhere else."

Preparations for the day have had the rambunctious air of a hastily-



devised grassroots effort, one born of frustration. Its organizers have endured weeks of sordid headlines and sour media coverage concerning the troubles in OU's football program. Spurred by encouragement from alumni offering financial assistance for supplies — and pizza — student groups seized the opportunity to hit back publicly with an emotional gesture of support for their university.

"The students came to us last week with this idea, and we gave them suggestions on how to go about it," explains Chris Purcell, assistant vice president for OU Student Affairs.

The upshot is OU Pride Day, backed by more than 65 student organizations. Its sponsors cite a need for all concerned members of the university community to put forth a balanced, more positive view of OU — and thus to light a few candles, leaving others to curse the darkness.

"Basically, the general population has a real problem separating the OU football team from the University of



The Field House floor (photo at left) is covered with the signs of Sooner spirit as more than 500 students gather to assemble materials (photo above) to be posted throughout Norman (photo below).

Oklahoma," contends Lori Ann Sharpe, president of the University of Oklahoma Student Association (UOSA). "They're two separate entities, and even within the athletic program each player is a separate person."

She scans the growing stacks of yard signs, which ultimately will total 5,000. "We're trying to tell everyone, you know . . . We're the University of Oklahoma, not the University of Football . . . So please look at us as a university."

Jeff Swanson, vice chair of Spirit Council, has no trouble putting forth specific reasons to be proud of OU. "We're fifth in the nation in producing Rhodes Scholars, among public universities. We're in the top 20 in recruiting National Merit Scholarship finalists and semi-finalists among public institutions. It was great to watch the football team win the championship in 1985, but our law school also won the National Moot Court competition around that same time. And our band,



the Pride, achieved a number-one ranking in 1987."

Swanson adds, "Any school that can have all this — and still be ranked at or near the top nationally in all the major sports — has a lot of diversity to be proud of."

The word "diversity" could describe equally well the variety of students working together at the Field House on Tuesday night. Included are fraternities, sororities, housing associations, academic clubs, international student groups and spirit squads.

"It's great. You hardly ever get to see this," exults Jeff Anderson, president of Ruf/Neks. "The Greeks work together a lot, but now we're getting everybody else as well."

"A lot of guys from my fraternity and other fraternities who usually don't attend pep rallies are here for this," adds Lance Humphries, chair of Spirit Council. "It's a neat thing; usually OU students are not very spirited."

Pride Day isn't just another pep rally. The organizers have been careful to emphasize the positive and refrain from defensiveness about the football program controversy, to the point of

removing a pro-Barry Switzer sign placed on a Field House wall by one enthusiastic booster. Yet while some students see a Pride Day as primarily a chance to trumpet OU's under-appreciated academic achievements, others see themselves defending an embattled and unfairly treated group of athletes.

"Just because a few people make mistakes doesn't mean this university is down," Anderson says. "We're Sooners; we're proud of it, and we still love our football team."

But whether students are more prone to cite academic endeavors or athletic skill when discussing "pride," few would disagree with Jeff Swanson's attempt to summarize the goals of Pride Day. "What we're trying to do is to make the rest of the students aware — and beyond that, the Norman community, the state and the national media — that regardless of everything that's been dealt to us the last few weeks, we're solidly behind our school."

Swanson concludes, "We're one hundred years' strong. We're going to swallow this and move on."

The sun flickers through a spotty overcast early Wednesday morning, heralding the first bright day in a long succession of gloomy ones. The 500 workers from the previous night and their colleagues go about their campus business costumed in various combinations of red and white. The effort to collect ad signatures will continue through Spring Break, but the pride message is already out, via stories in area newspapers, on radio and TV newscasts.

Meanwhile, members of the OU community, Norman businesspeople and sleepy commuters rolling northbound on Interstate 35 encounter the same roadside sight. "Get Proud . . . Be Proud . . . We Love OU," proclaim bold red letters on white cardboard. The 5,000 signs have been installed within the Norman city limits, but that line by no means marks the extent of this day's student enthusiasm.

According to Lori Ann Sharpe, "If we had the chance, we'd put the signs up all over the state."

—MICHAEL WATERS

