

“One morning during the holidays, you’ll come into the office, and there will be a little Christmas tree, all decorated . . . and that’s Dwyane,” says Gene Thraikill, director of University of Oklahoma bands, when trying to describe the young man thousands of Oklahoma sports fans have come to know as “the student who sings the national anthem.”

In 1990, Thraikill learned of the impending retirement of Bruce Govich, the OU professor of voice who had sung the national anthem at home football games for more than 20 years. It was up to Thraikill to find a replacement, and the pickings among OU’s prestigious voice faculty were lush. But after much thought, the band director decided to tap someone his students could relate to—a baritone horn-playing music/pre-nursing major from El Reno named Dwyane Smith.

“I never told anybody that I had always wanted to sing the national anthem with the Pride,” says Smith, who had been performing in the OU marching band since his 1988 freshman

Cathy Davis

year. “It was like a prayer being answered. I think I turned cartwheels down the hallway, and then I came back calmly and told Coach Thraikill ‘yes.’”

Singing with the Pride may once have been only a dream for Smith, but music always has been a very real part of his life. He is the son of instrumentalist and former music teacher Joseph Smith and one-time singer Alberta Smith, an alumnus of the Oklahoma Regional All-District and All-State choirs, a vocalist who directed an adult choir while

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*His pre-game duties completed for another week, bandsman Dwyane Smith, who has made “The Star Spangled Banner” his signature number, heads back to the baritone horn section of the Pride of Oklahoma.*

still in the ninth grade and the first black drum major of the El Reno High School band.

As a high school senior, Smith was offered a full scholarship to attend Oklahoma State University. But during an appearance as drum major with the Oklahoma All-Star Marching Band at Owen Field, the path to his future changed.

“I fell in love with the Pride,” Smith admits. “I watched Coach Thraikill directing us that week, and I thought, ‘If I can work with that man . . .’”

The working relationship, as happens with many students who study under the Pride’s director, became a family affair. Smith came to call his director “Dad,” and Thraikill’s wife Karen, assistant secretary of the OU Board of Regents, “Mom.”

“I can’t tell you how many times there will be a knock on the door, and Dwyane says, ‘Here, Dad,’ and hands me a pie or cookies,” Gene Thraikill says. “I don’t know anyone who’s any more caring than he is. No matter how busy he is, Dwyane’s one of those kids who tries to do everything.”

“Everything” encompasses the Pride, part-time jobs as a manager of a local McDonald’s franchise and as an assistant in the band office, and the responsibility of being assistant director of St. John’s Baptist Church in Oklahoma City. All this is in addition to singing appearances at all OU home football and basketball games, Commencement, the annual OU Associates’ banquet, numerous weddings and funerals, and such special events as

the recent Phillies/Cardinals exhibition game and the NCAA Women’s College World Series, both held in Oklahoma City.

Add to that list Smith’s efforts in trying to finish two degrees—pre-nursing and vocal music education—simultaneously. For now, music is taking first priority. But Smith cannot forget his love for hospital work, a love he inherited from his mother, who is a nurse at Norman Regional Hospital. For several years, Smith also worked with the Norman nursing staff, accom-

panying doctors on their rounds and getting to know patients and their families on a first-name basis.

"I like working with the patients and watching the healing process take place, knowing that you can be a part of it," he says. "It's kind of like teaching—you can't be in it for the money, you have to love what you're doing."

Teaching is the next challenge for Smith. After completing his bachelor's degree, he hopes to earn a master's and instruct music at either the high school or college level. In time, he aspires to combine his love of music and medicine in the emerging field of music therapy.

But for now, he is a student and an accomplished performer who has caught the eye of such luminaries as Max Weitzenhoffer, the OU alumnus who won a Tony award as a producer of "The Will Rogers Follies." Smith was seated next to the producer at an OU basketball game. After hearing him perform, Weitzenhoffer turned to Smith and asked him if he had thought of devoting himself to a singing career.

"I told him I would love to, but that I wanted a degree to fall back on. Then he asked me, 'If you were offered a job in the future, would you take it?'" Naturally, a rather astonished Smith immediately said, "Yes."

While the future—be it teaching, music therapy or Broadway—remains to be seen, Smith's present success is very real. He has performed to rousing ovations at OU home sporting events, and even managed to win over Longhorn fans during the 1991 OU/Texas game in Dallas.

"It was Texas' year to be the home team, and their band was performing," Smith remembers with a smile. "I walked out onto the field, a little spot of red in the middle of all that orange. When they announced my name, the Texas fans booed, and a few of the fans were yelling down at me from the stands. I was scared, but in the end, it just made me sing better. After I sang, the crowd just roared."

Smith also remembers fondly his very first pregame performance at an OU home football game, which unexpectedly became a part of the CBS telecast.

"I'm standing out on the field, and this producer walks up to me and says, 'We don't know, but we may put you on TV.' I was already a bundle of nerves, and I thought, 'Oh, thanks a lot,'" he recalls.

Smith since has overcome his fear of performing in front of large crowds. In fact, now it is small audiences that make him anxious.

"The smaller the crowd, the more

then when I'm singing, 'Whose broad stripes and bright stars,' my eyes always hit the flag again. It's full concentration. When I finish, then I'm fine; I'm back to myself again.

"A lot of people have gotten out in the center of the field and ruined the anthem," he stresses. "I don't want to embarrass myself, the band, the University or my country. I work at making each performance the best I can make it. That's my goal each time I sing the national anthem."

But Smith recalls one time when his all-important concentration was broken, and he was grateful. The Persian Gulf War was coming to a close, and Smith was to sing in front of a home basketball crowd on Saturday. Arrangements had been made for a team of Air Force fighter jets to fly overhead at the moment he finished singing the national anthem during pregame ceremonies. Timing was everything, and in this case, it was off. Pregame was running late, the jets were enroute from Tinker Air Force Base, and Smith was absorbed in the national anthem.

"The war was almost over, and I started crying while I was singing the anthem. It really got to me. Just as I got to the part about 'the rockets' red glare,' I could hear this roar, and the planes went flying over me. I almost stopped singing; I had chills all over me. It couldn't have come at a more appropriate time."

Timing has been very kind to Dwyane Smith. He will be the first to say that his years as a student have given him the opportunity to live out many of his dreams while becoming part of an OU tradition and family. And, he credits those OU family members "for being there to help" him along the way.

Helping a student like Dwyane Smith to find his potential is an educator's pleasure, according to his "coach" and mentor.

"He's an extremely talented individual," Gene Thraikill concludes. "But the great thing about Dwyane is that he's a caring individual."

—ANNE BARAJAS

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*Singing the national anthem is serious business for Smith, who is aware of big-name performers who have botched the job.*

nervous I am. At a football game, you have 76,000 eyes on you, but you don't know who they are."

Before stepping in front of that anonymous audience, Smith begins his day by rehearsing with the Pride at 8 a.m. From the start of rehearsal until kickoff, work and family and school fade away, and he has only one thing on his mind.

"I call it my 'seance stage.' My mind is set on nothing but singing the national anthem," Smith explains. "When it's time for me to walk out to the middle of the field, I basically have to block everything out. I always look at the American flag before I start, and