

SOONER SATURDAY

by Anne Barajas
photos by Robert Taylor

Think back.

Do you recall the first time you saw the gingerbread trim of Jacobson and Carpenter halls? Or the first time you noticed the tall trees lovingly planted on the Norman campus by President David Ross Boyd more than 100 years ago? How about the first time someone said, "Welcome to OU"?

Do you remember the first time you felt like a Sooner?

On one Saturday each fall—one "Sooner Saturday," to be precise—hundreds of high school seniors and college transfer students are given the chance to feel part of what President David L. Boren calls "the OU family."

Parents and students from as far away as South Dakota, Connecticut and Canada and as nearby as Oklahoma City travel to Norman to participate in Sooner Saturday. The events, which are headquartered in Dale Hall, range from faculty

lectures to campus tours to sessions on financial aid. This year, 628 prospective students—including 118 from out of state—were welcomed to the University of Oklahoma through Sooner Saturday, according to Scott Healy, assistant vice president for recruitment services.

"It's our way of just opening up the campus doors and saying, 'Take a look at us and compare,'" Healy explains. "We craft a day in which we not only put our best foot forward but also take an honest approach to what we are. We try to give visitors a taste of the University so they can make a more informed decision."

Healy understands that choosing a university is not an easy decision. Accordingly, he and other staff members make sure that Sooner Saturday provides answers to as



"I'm new here myself." Boren spends his third day on the job welcoming prospective students and their parents to Sooner Saturday.

Each fall the University of Oklahoma invites prospective students and their parents to "take a look at us and compare."

many questions and concerns as possible. All OU colleges are represented, as are minority and special-need student support offices. Financial aid and admissions questions can be handled on the spot. And if students want to know about intramural sports or what the residence halls look like? No problem. Information and tours abound.

Parents and prospective students even are encouraged to come to Norman a day or two early for a broader University experience. The Office of Prospective Student Services matches students with professors who teach in their areas of interest, provides special tours of facilities and arranges for visitors to sit in on classes.

"You're not just recruiting students, you're recruiting families," Healy emphasizes. "I think visitors are very pleased and surprised that people here bend over backward to make sure that

their needs are met. We try to give them a true sense that OU is an outstanding academic institution with faculty and staff who can provide support in a meaningful way for students."

Current students also play a crucial role in recruitment. The recruiting staff provides opportunities for visitors to speak with students during Sooner Saturday and other sponsored events throughout the year.

"OU students add credibility to what we say. They are part of the University; they are our consumers. They tell the story from a student's perspective. The opportunity to meet with students is very important," Healy insists.

The combined efforts of the University community have produced impressive results. Of last year's Sooner Satur-

day participants, some 60 percent applied for admission, and 59 percent of those students were accepted. In actual numbers, 455 of the 1993 Sooner Saturday participants entered OU in fall 1994.

"Sooner Saturday is an important event for us," Healy says, adding that the University experienced significant increases in the number of incoming first-time freshman students this year. The freshman class also is the most diverse and academically talented in the institution's history.

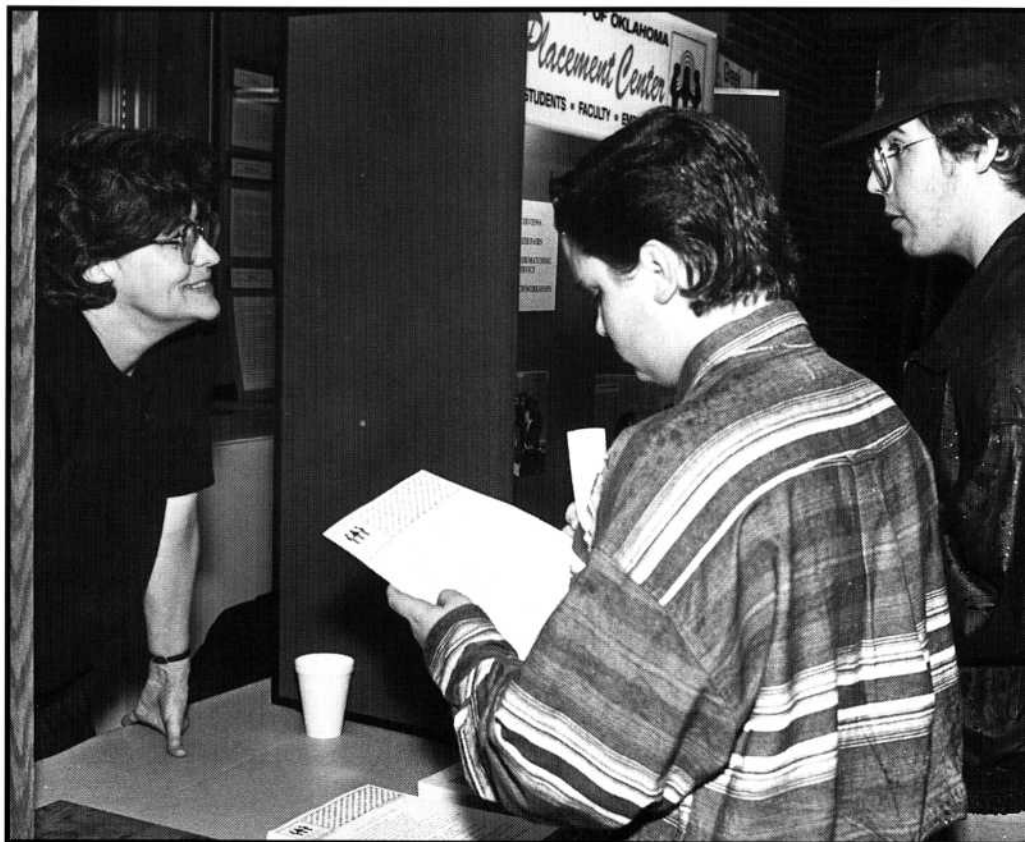
In fact, the number of first-time freshman students increased 10.3 percent this year. The University's first-time freshmen have an average composite ACT score of 24. (Incoming students are required to score 21 on the ACT for admission.) Some 8 percent of the first-time freshmen are National Scholars, and almost 30 percent of the entering freshmen were ranked in the top 10 percent of their high school graduating class. Some 59 percent ranked in the top 25 percent of their class.

Also, Healy says, the University continues to lead the Big Eight in the enrollment of minority students, who represent 19 percent of the Norman campus enrollment. Enrollment has risen in all minority categories, with the largest increase—15.9 percent—occurring among Native Americans.

"Quality, content and diversity have been improved greatly. There are 75 people at OU and an advisory committee of 25 others who work very hard to accomplish this great challenge."

Among those 75 staff members are a handful of dedicated recruiters who canvass the state and region to share the good news about the University. Last year alone, the recruiters from Prospective Student Services, directed by Leslie Baumert, conducted more than 800 visits and logged more than 20,000 miles.

Although visiting prospective students in their hometowns is highly successful in bringing students to the



On campus for Sooner Saturday, high school seniors Scott Reasland, center, and Josh Carnahan, both of Lawton, stop at the OU Career Planning and Placement booth in Dale Hall to discuss with the office's director, Sue Marshall, left, the University's services for its job-hunting graduates.

University, Baumert says that her office's most effective recruiting tool is the Norman campus itself.

"One thing we firmly believe is that getting prospective students and their parents on campus is one of the biggest selling points we have. We have a beautiful campus—and so many people comment on that, and also on the fact that people are so friendly," she says. "Families take those memories back home with them, and the word spreads."

The word about the University has spread far and wide. Last year, recruiter J. P. Audas was walking through the lobby of Boyd House when a male visitor caught his eye. He

struck up a conversation with the young man, who told Audas that he had walked to Boyd House from the bus station nearly two miles away, stopping only to ask directions from friendly strangers. The visitor said he had just arrived from Boston to visit the University and learn about its world-class meteorology programs.

Audas invited the visitor to lunch and discovered that the young man planned to stay in a Norman hotel for a week while he explored OU. If he had enough money at the end of his visit, he planned to fly back to Boston. If not, then he would take the bus.

When Audas told his wife, Allyson, about his encounter with the Boston

visitor, she insisted that the young man stay at their house for the entire week.

"We went everywhere, even to a baseball game," recalls Audas, whose mother, Millie, is director of the Office of International Programs, and father, Bill, is head of the College of Business Administration's J.C. Penney Leadership Center. "We had a great time. He

serving as a resource in their communities for questions and/or problems encountered by current and prospective students and their parents. Others represent the University at college-day or college-night events in Oklahoma and at out-of-state high schools, and at such special events as American Indian Visitation Day, National Scholars Day, Latino/Hispanic

The new University of Oklahoma president already has taken his place on the team. His third day on the job, Boren spent part of his Saturday morning shaking hands and greeting Sooner Saturday participants, many of whom had known him for the last 16 years as their voice in the U.S. Senate in Washington, D.C.

Representative of the new friends Boren made were Wesley Mitchell and his mother, Susan, of Deep River, Connecticut, who also were attracted by the University's meteorology programs.

"We decided in the eighth grade that he wanted to come to OU,"

an enthusiastic Susan Mitchell told the president.

Her son, explaining that he had never set foot on Oklahoma soil until 48 hours prior to Sooner Saturday, admitted that he was something of a "weather junkie" who had been fasci-

Thanks to Oklahoma's famed hospitality, the Boston visitor now is an OU student in meteorology.

fell in love with everyone he met."

Thanks to Oklahoma's famed hospitality and the Audas' generosity, the Boston visitor now is an OU student in meteorology.

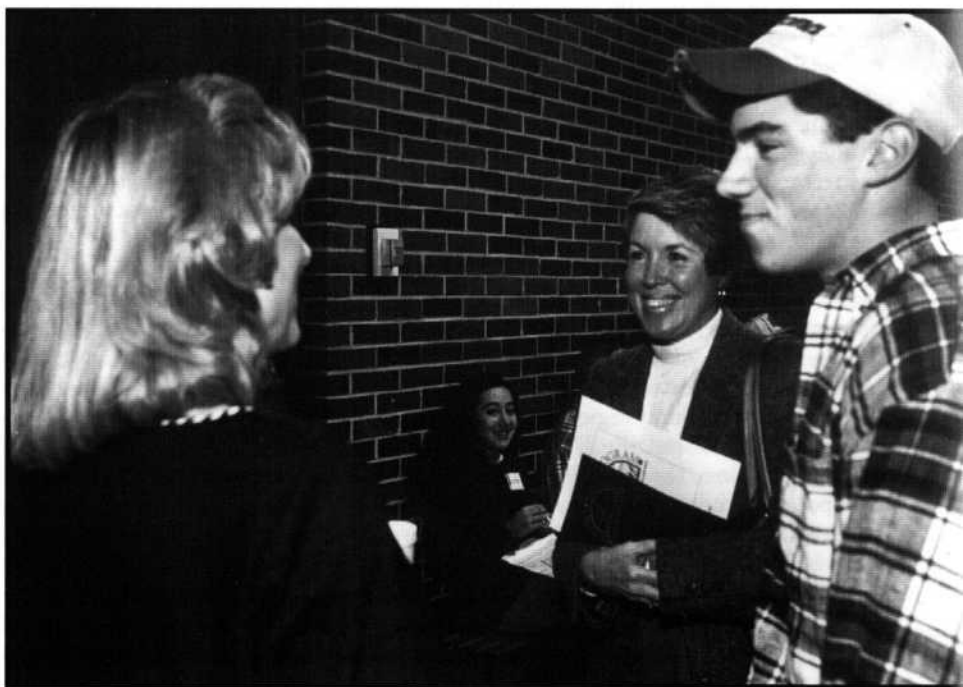
Baumert adds that alumni also go above and beyond the call of duty to bring prospective students to the Norman campus. For instance, alumni support the University's Sooner Shuttle program and keep it thriving. Through this program, a University recruiter travels by chartered bus to selected towns and cities, picks up large groups of prospective students and brings them to OU for a full day of activities that includes faculty lectures and a luncheon in Couch Cafeteria. Alumni do their part by helping to coordinate the program in their hometowns and providing financial support.

"We call the Sooner Shuttles 'personalized recruiting,'" Baumert continues. "We can tailor each shuttle program to a high school's needs. The feedback has been excellent, and we hope to expand the involvement of alumni across the state."

In addition to Sooner Shuttle efforts, Healy says that alumni help by opening their homes for receptions and old-fashioned hamburger fries and by

American Sooner Day, Asian-American Sooner Day, Transfer Days and Tomorrow's Black Sunshine.

"We need the assistance of our faculty, students, administrators and alumni. Recruiting students is a team approach," Healy insists.



nated with tornadoes since early childhood. An acquaintance insisted that the University of Oklahoma had the nation's best weather programs, and Wes Mitchell's destiny was set.

"I went out and bought this the next day," he says, pointing to a well-worn OU Sooner baseball cap with strings of frayed fabric hanging from the brim. "This is the only hat I've ever owned. The store had one left. I stuck it on and never took it off; it's been everywhere with me.

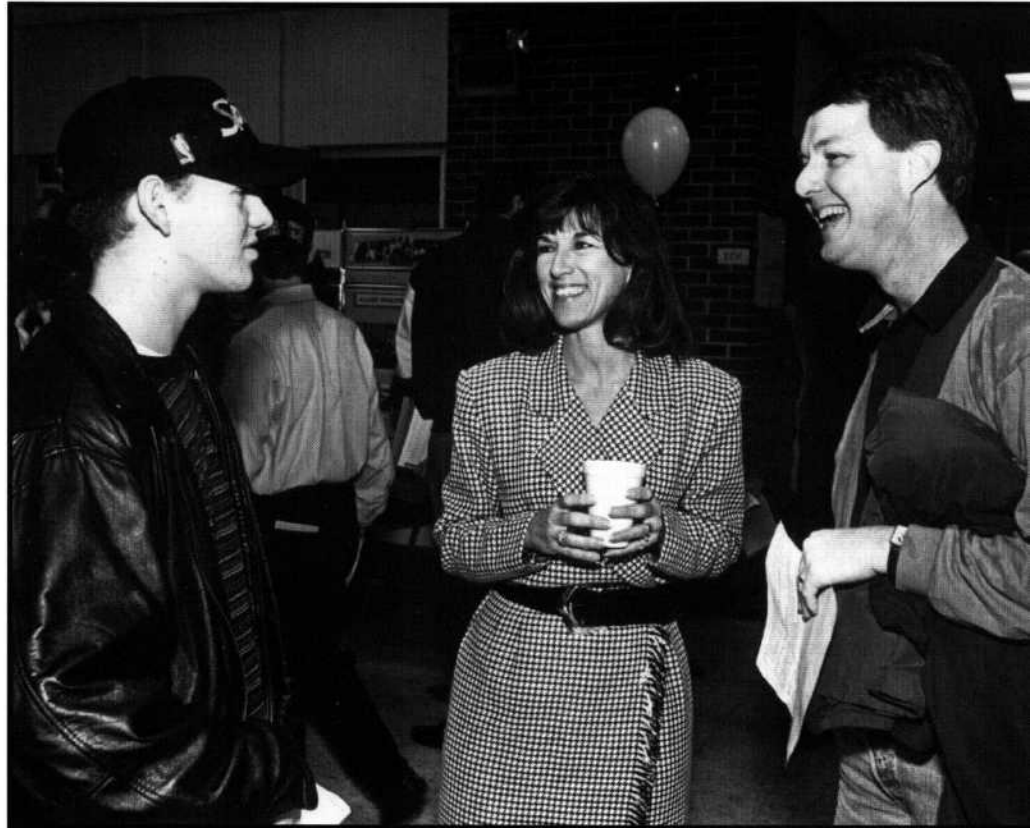
"Then we thought we'd lost it in the hotel room," Wes laughs. "It was awful. We turned the whole place upside down."

In addition to meeting Boren, the Mitchells were able to visit with director William Beasley and some of his students from the School of Meteorology. They also toured the University's weather research facilities.

Sooner Saturday gave Boren a unique opportunity to speak to all the students and parents attending the recruiting event, which was so large that the president had to address separate groups in three of Dale Hall's biggest lecture rooms.


"I can't tell you how enthusiastic I am about this place," Boren told his audiences, reminding them of the excellence found in OU academic programs. He spoke proudly of the University's leadership in such areas as meteorology, engineering and musical theater. He also bragged about

OU's Leslie Baumert, left, director of Prospective Student Services, greets Susan Mitchell and her son Wes, visiting Oklahoma for the first time from Deep River, Connecticut. A self-confessed "weather junkie," Wes has been planning to come to OU to major in meteorology since the eighth grade.



the record number of National Merit Scholars, the Western History Collections and the upcoming Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History, which Boren promised will be the best natural history museum west of the Mississippi.

Boren also announced his intention to teach an introductory political science class and mentioned his plans to bring the University's finest educators in close contact with first- and second-year students.

"I hope you will come and be a part of our family," Boren told this next generation of OU students. "You're the reason I decided to come home. I wanted to be with you because you are our future." 

When Tom Poole, right, of Aberdeen, South Dakota, brought his son Andy, left, to Sooner Saturday, he was greeted by a friend from his undergraduate days at OU, Linda Tahsequah, now senior academic counselor for the College of Engineering.