

OU: A Model for Modern Traditions

BY GEORGIE ANNE GEYER

Editor's Note: The obvious benefit of bringing renowned authorities to the campus lies in the knowledge and experience they impart to the University community. An equally intriguing result of these high-profile visits is the enhanced understanding of the University that these distinguished speakers take away. When the visitors happen to be members of the media, they often share their impressions of OU with their readers.

NORMAN—When the respected Sen. David Boren voluntarily left Washington nine years ago, he made a remarkable statement, given the overreaching ambitions of much of the capital.

"I said that real vitality and creative thinking were stuck in Washington and that, if the country was to be rejuvenated, it would have to come from the grassroots," he reminisced with me recently on the campus of the University of Oklahoma. "The main artery of the nation might be blocked, but I was looking for a bypass around it. Things were blocked at a national level, not a local level."

And with that, one of the true stars of the U.S. Senate—a charming and vigorously intellectual man who many looked to as the Democrats' potential presidential candidate—pulled up stakes and went home to become the president of the University of Oklahoma.

And today? While many of our country's institutions mope around wondering and dithering about what their "mission" should be in the 21st century—and while the nation nervously ponders war across the globe—university president Boren oversees one of the most outrageous successes in America today.

Start with only a few of the statistics. The university now ranks in the top 10 in the country in attracting National Merit Scholars; in the past seven years, OU has increased the number of endowed faculty chairs to 351 from 100; it has the largest weather research center of its kind in the world, a superb biogenetics program and a history of science collection that includes works by Galileo. In 2001, the university was given one of the most valuable single gifts of art ever given to a public university, a collection of great French impressionists. Architecturally gorgeous new buildings grace the campus.

Boren's OU also just completed one of the five largest public university academic fund-raising drives in history, raising more than \$514 million and expanding the donor base during the last five-year period from 17,000 to more than 70,000.

But a walk around the campus on a sunny spring day revealed more than just "facts." Boren took me by exquisite gardens, many of them designed by his wife, Molly Shi Boren. Nine major pieces of sculpture, innumerable fountains, historical markers and pictures of the university's 100-year history are everywhere. Bright red British phone booths gaily spot the campus, as well as French kiosks.

"People learn from works of art or from the flowers," Molly Shi Boren said to me at one point. "This campus has become the Central Park of Oklahoma." We stopped by the student union. "It was a mess when we came," Boren related. "Now we have a 24-hour restaurant, student broadcasting, computer labs open 24 hours a day, 600 students doing ballroom dancing. . . . When we put in grandfather clocks and Oriental rugs, they said you

couldn't do that in a student union." He paused, then added proudly, "Not one thing has been hurt."

In the Great Reading Room of Bizzell Memorial Library, modeled after the central rooms of historic British universities, students voted against allowing laptops in the library—it was "sacred space." And at one side, some of the old "stacks" with their dog-eared, weathered paper files, have been deliberately kept—"so the students can see how it was." Boren keeps pictures of his school years' mentors on his office wall, along with all the American presidents he has known.

We passed a storied statue, situated in another lovely garden. The monument is to a beautiful African-American woman, Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher, whose controversial admission to law school at OU helped set the stage for *Brown v. the Board of Education*. Boren pointed out that her case was really settled when the students themselves refused to accept segregation, and later she became a respected regent of the university.

The university does not throw this history in your face or preach about it. Justice was done; they integrate experience into the continuity of today's university, and always with beauty and flowers.

"Maybe it is my political background, but I see a splintering in the country," the president said at one point. Yet he also believes that we may be beyond the truly "splintered" generation. He finds current students the "most generous generation since World War II, people who want to give back." He and his wife talk constantly about a university "family," about "building community"—and they live it daily on an uncommonly wide scale.

The university has students from 111 countries and 156 exchange agreements with other countries, the highest number in the nation. The student body is 28 percent minority students (higher than the minority percentage of the population of the state), and the university conspicuously deters separation by race or ethnic group (by allowing students to pick only their suitemates).

When you ask Boren what his philosophy is, he lists a series of concepts and deeds: "community, quality of life, academic intensity, rewarding teaching instead of researching, a holistic and comprehensive approach." But what they are doing here is so important that we need some terms for it.

The families of both the Borens have their roots in small-town or farm Oklahoma, and many think that those values don't exist in America anymore. This experience tells me they do. What you see at this university is a true, traditional, inclusive American multiculturalism, as opposed to the divisive '60s multiculturalism of so many universities. Perhaps a truly updated Americanism, a superb and sensitive modernized traditionalism. Whatever we want to call it, "The World According to Oklahoma" is surely something wonderful to watch.

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