

**What Clarke Stroud didn't think of doing as a student probably hasn't been done. Now he is dealing with another generation from the other side of the desk.**

Stroll around campus on any given day and you are apt to see a tall, lanky man in professional dress with a quirky twist—a bow tie dotted with cartoon characters, perhaps—earnestly engaged in conversation with a student. Even a casual on-looker can see that Clarke Stroud, vice president for Student Affairs and dean of students, truly cares about these backpack-toting collegians. He listens to them,

empathizes with them and mentors them. It comes, he says, from both his heart and his head.

"I enjoy interpersonal relationships. I self-disclose easily and am pretty transparent. And when you disclose something about yourself, others are more willing to share something about themselves," says the 36-year-old Stroud, who has served the

# Still a Student

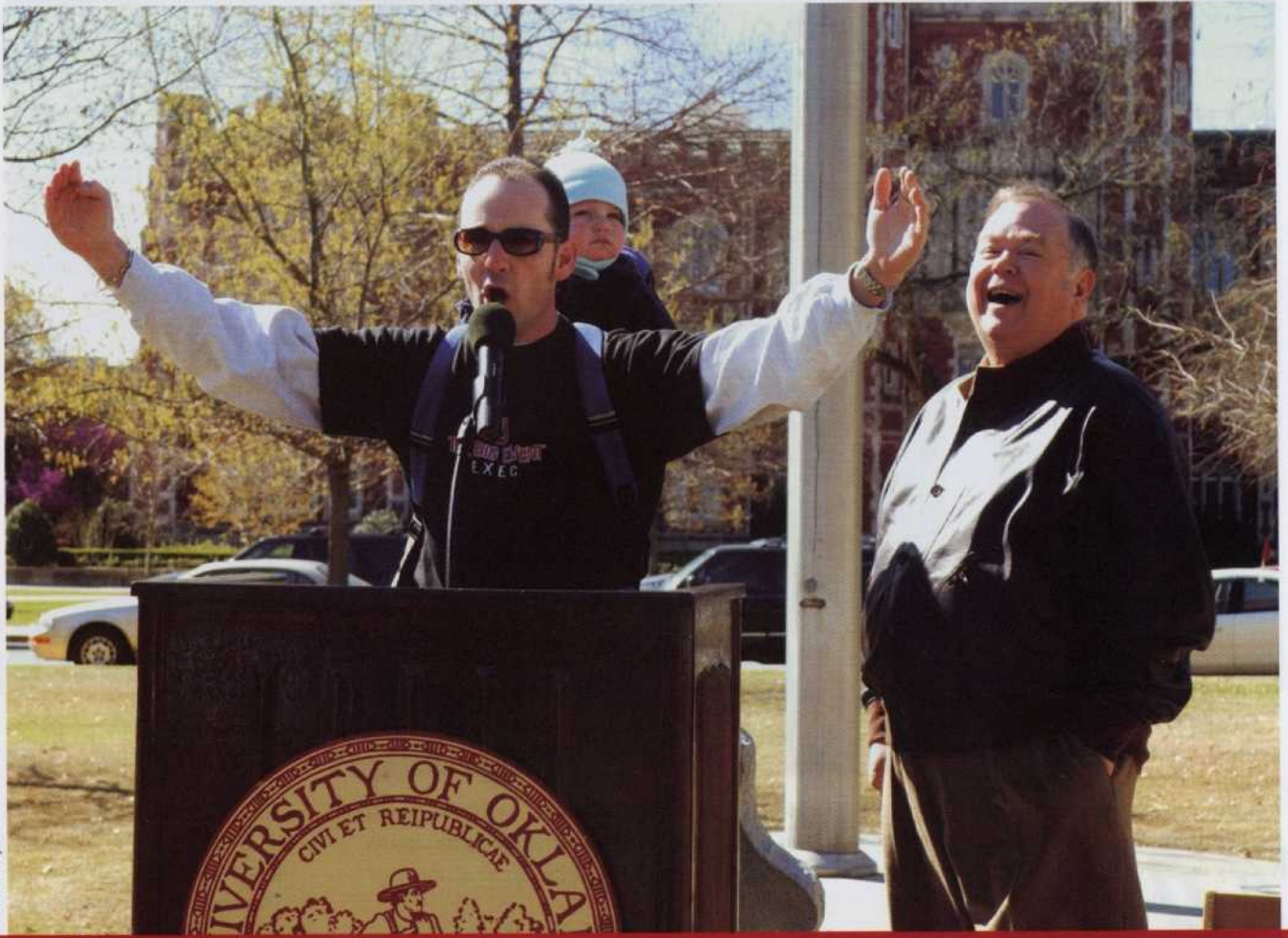
BY DEBRA LEVY MARTINELLI

# at Heart

University in this present capacity since 2000. "When I interact with a student, I go through a quick censorship process: 'Is what I'm thinking OK or not OK to say?' If I decide it is, I go with it." His unique ability to find common ground with just about any segment of the campus population is rooted in his own

**OPPOSITE TOP:** Revving up the Big Event student volunteers before sending them out to do good works in the community, Stroud draws a bigger laugh from President David Boren, right, than from son Callahan, who is just along for the ride.

**OPPOSITE BOTTOM:** Who would have thought, when Brian Stowe, left, Clarke Stroud and Fred Russell were floor mates in one of OU's residence halls in 1987, that Stroud one day would be in charge of all of student housing and everything else that affects Sooner students outside the classroom.



Robert Taylor



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experiences as an OU undergraduate and graduate student in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Born in Denver and raised in the nearby suburb of Aurora, Colorado, Stroud grew up in a family of University of Colorado and Colorado State University alumni. But he knew he would not follow either of those legacies. Instead, he applied to OU sight unseen and, during a brief visit in the spring of 1986, made his decision. "The football team had just won the national championship, the oil industry was still booming, and there was almost gold dust on everything at OU and in Norman," he recalls. "I decided this was where I wanted to come to school."

Active in extracurricular affairs, he was a RUF/NEK and a member of a group called Continuity that performed comedy sketches at such university wide events as Sooner Scandals during Mom's Weekend and OU Sing during Dad's Weekend. He also was a self-described rabble-rouser, who participated in what might generously be described as coming-of-age antics. He could not have predicted that those experiences—some of which brought him face-to-face with the University's disciplinary system—would give him valuable insight into the struggles of the students he counsels today.

After earning a bachelor's degree in public administration with a minor in French in 1990, Stroud re-enrolled as an undergraduate to study in France under the University's international exchange program. On his arrival in Clermont-Ferrand, he discovered there were not enough residence hall rooms for all of the American students and volunteered to seek housing elsewhere. He found a room in an apartment in what he later learned was the town's red-light district, but that did not faze him.

"I had a great French roommate and a room of my own," he recalls. "The apartment was in the center of town. I could walk to school a mile and a half away, and I could get fresh bread every day at a bakery across the street."

When his semester abroad ended, Stroud moved to Chicago in search of employment. "I thought companies would be beating at my door because I had a degree in public administration and was fluent in French. But the economy was bad, and I ended up waiting tables at a place in the Sears Tower," he says.

With no job prospects in sight and in need of career advice,



Robert Taylor

When the occasion demands, Stroud has no problem shedding his administrative dignity to assume a "Billy Bob" alter ego to enliven otherwise staid campus gatherings.

he called his former boss, Deborah Baker, who at the time was OU's associate director of housing. "I'd been a resident adviser as an undergraduate, and the students liked me," Stroud says. "Deborah told me I'd be really good in housing and student affairs, but I'd need to get my master's degree. School had already started for the fall semester. My wife, Robin, who was my fiancée at the time, walked my application through, and when I got here, my professors agreed I could get up to speed, even though we were already in the third week of classes.

"I lived in the Yorkshire Apartments and got a job as an apartment coordinator, making \$300 a month. I had a bicycle but no car. When Robin and I had to go somewhere, she rode on the back of my bike. Those were lean years."

Shortly after the couple married in January 1992, his parents helped them obtain their first car, a Mercury Colony Park station wagon with wood panel sides that had belonged to his grandparents. "It was a student favorite. Nobody had anything like it. The Housing Center Student Association entered it undecorated in the Homecoming parade," Stroud recalls.

Armed with his master's degree, he quickly rose through the ranks in OU's Division of Student Affairs: programming assistant, Adams Center coordinator, assistant director of residence life, director of Oklahoma Memorial Union and, for the past four years, the division's top administrator.

He says he could not have done any of it without steadfast support from his wife, who also works for OU as assistant to the vice president of Executive and Administrative Affairs. "Robin is my best friend and number one supporter. She has made amazing sacrifices both in her career and personally so that I would be able to advance at the University. I admire her as a professional, friend and mother," Stroud says. "Robin encourages me and pushes me to challenge myself. Most importantly, she has been incredibly supportive of the long hours that I put in working with students."

The irony of an undergraduate scalawag becoming overseer of the University's student disciplinary system is not lost on Stroud. In fact, he uses it to his advantage. "President [David] Boren is fond of saying that no student could do anything worse than I did as a student. I got second chances, and I try to teach





Wherever collegians gather on the OU campus, you are likely to find Vice President Clarke Stroud, far right, an administrator whose most obvious qualification for his job is that he really cares about students.

students [who are having difficulty of one sort or another] that they can modify their behavior and be given a second chance, too," he says.

Suzette Dyer, who as OU's judicial coordinator is responsible for enforcing the University's Student Code, regularly sees Stroud do just that. "He understands that the OU judicial system is based on a philosophy of retention and is willing to resolve student issues with educational sanctions so long as the welfare and safety of the University is not at risk," she says.

Boren calls Stroud one of the best vice presidents of student affairs in the country. "He has a unique ability to connect with students and to understand both their hopes and their personal challenges," Boren says. "His unbounded energy and spirit have a positive impact on the entire University. He has truly helped to create a sense of family on the campus."

Stroud counts Boren among his mentors and credits the president with teaching him how to be a mentor himself. "President Boren taught me that no matter how busy or important you think you are, being a mentor is the most important thing you can do. It's your legacy," Stroud says. "There have been really important moments when I thought I'd let him down, but he'd put his arm around me and say, 'It's not the first mistake you've made, Clarke, and it isn't going to be the last. It's OK. Learn from it.'"

Former associate vice president for Student Affairs Dave Schrage, who gave Stroud his first opportunity as a RA, also taught him valuable professional and life lessons. "From Dave, I learned strategies on how to effectively make the transition from graduate student to full-time professional," Stroud ex-



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Sooner RUF/NEK Clarke Stroud always had a pretty girl waiting at the end of the game in 1989—and the same girl, wife Robin, is still waiting at the end of the day.



plains. “He taught me leadership skills—how to solve problems and how to manage crises. And he taught me the importance of first impressions.”

“What initially struck me about Clarke when he was a resident adviser was his creativity, energy level and ability to relate to both students and their parents. He was a genuinely exciting, bright young man,” says Schrage. “Those characteristics also are what have made him successful as vice president for Student Affairs. He has the rare ability to identify and articulate the needs, interests and philosophies of both students and the institution.”

“Clarke works tirelessly at all his roles—as a father, husband, friend and member of the OU administration. He’s a wonderful representative of the University, Norman and Oklahoma,” Schrage says.

From his parents, Stroud learned one of life’s most fundamental truths. “We all want to be treated well, but are we willing to treat others like we want to be treated? My parents

taught me that everyone deserves to be treated with dignity and respect, and that one person’s contributions may be different, but they’re just as important as those of someone else.”

He tweaks this basic wisdom a bit in guiding his Student Affairs staff. “I tell them what one of my professors told me: Management is a universal discipline. I didn’t understand then what it meant, but I grew to understand it—if you can manage people in one environment, you can manage people in any environment. They want to be appreciated. They want to know they matter.”

Members of the Student Affairs staff know they matter to Stroud. “Clarke is very supportive of me and very understanding of the demands, workload and stress involved with my job. He is great about telling me how much he appreciates me,” Dyer says. “He knows the judicial services office is very understaffed and has tried to address that. He also provides me with professional opportunities and has been innovative in bringing new programs to Student Affairs. Clarke is willing to listen to new ideas and to try something different. He’s the main reason we now have an OU wheelchair basketball team with annualized funding for the graduate assistant and six new sports chairs.”

For Amy Davenport, OU’s current housing director, Stroud is mentor, boss and sometimes older brother. “Clarke strives to



Robert Taylor

Stroud created a game called “Improv Fairy Tale” to spark the imagination of his four-year-old daughter, McKenna, and to share with her his own off-the-wall comedic skills.

understand the whole person rather than just one aspect of a person,” says Davenport, who has known Stroud for a dozen years. “As he learns more about staff members, he learns about their passions in life, which reveals their strengths. He helps them use those strengths to ensure their success.”

To help ensure students’ success, Stroud’s message is simple: Finish your degree. “I tell them that education is something no one can ever take away,” he says. “I tell them that they can take away your dignity, your job, your car—but your education is an enduring accomplishment and achievement.”

Despite the daily time and energy demands of his job, Stroud always builds in down time with his family and a host of friends. A lover of improvisational theater—he joined the local Baloney Rodeo improvisational troupe in 1994—he uses the medium’s techniques to help develop the imagination of

his four-year-old daughter, McKenna.

“My two-year-old son, Callahan, is still a little young for this, but with McKenna I play what I call ‘Improv Fairy Tale.’ I’ll start a story with something like, ‘Once upon a time, there was a little girl named [blank] and her friends [blank and blank] who went to the [blank] . . .’ and McKenna will fill in the factual details. Some of the information you get from a four-year-old is absurd, so the stories can get silly. She understands the process and is sometimes deliberately silly. It’s a lot of fun, and it makes her think creatively,” he explains.

He continues to hone his own improvisational skills by performing with Baloney Rodeo. “It’s just like ‘Whose Line Is It Anyway?’ on TV,” he says. “It’s brilliant, wonderful and different. Because we take suggestions from the audience, the sketches change as the suggestions change. We mirror what they want.”

The same could be said for the way Stroud addresses his day job. He is sometimes brilliant, some would say wonderful—and certainly different—in his approach to students. He always takes suggestions and does his darnedest to give them not only what they want but also what he knows they ought to have. ■

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