



prologue.

Ron Burton found his destination job early in life and leaves it with fond memories and few regrets.

Ron Burton and Jim Faulconer will not be taking their customary first-day-of-classes stroll around the Norman campus this fall. From 1992 to 2005, the president of the University of Oklahoma Foundation and the OU music professor met to revisit their inaugural day as Sooner freshmen by retracing their class schedules, searching out the buildings much like any rookie collegian—but by then they knew where those buildings were by heart.

The two men were ideal companions for the campus walk. They came to OU at the same time, lived in Cross Center, worked for the University after graduation and had a reason for recapturing that freshman feeling. For his part, Burton never wanted to forget the awe and anticipation he felt that first day; he never wanted to become blasé about the University they both served. Faulconer retired in 2004, and this year Burton will follow his lead, leaving the position he has held at the OU Foundation for nearly 30 years.

That Burton openly reveals such sentimentality about OU comes as no surprise to his colleagues. Whatever Burton does he does with a single-minded passion that brooks no interference. He worked his way through OU at LeeWay Motor Freight and Safeway grocery, earned a 1969 BBA in accounting, worked part-time in the OU accounting office while pursuing his 1974 law degree, then passed the bar.

In the meantime, he caught the attention of R. Boyd Gunning, the founding executive director of the OU Foundation, who hired him as the independent, nonprofit organization's treasurer in 1970. Burton had found his life's work. When his mentor retired in September 1978, he tapped the 31-year-old Burton as his successor.

Burton inherited a \$17.5 million foundation; on October 12, 2007, he will

leave one with \$864 million in total assets. During his tenure, first as executive director, then as president, the Foundation received, invested and managed nearly \$1.1 billion in private donations and expended \$834 million to benefit University capital improvements, research support, student scholarships and fellowships, equipment, faculty supplements and awards, and other forms of program enrichment. The Foundation endowment rose dramatically from \$10 million in 1978 to \$643 million at the end of fiscal 2007, forming the major part of the University's recently announced \$1 billion total endowment.

If a single trait marked Burton's administration of the Foundation, it has been a strict, almost obsessive, adherence to fiduciary responsibility—the commitment to donors that their wishes will be followed in the expenditure of their contributions to benefit the University. Occasionally this policy meant saying no to professors and presidents alike, even turning down some gifts to the Foundation that did not fit the University's mission.

Burton's stubborn integrity paid off when Oklahoma's higher education foundations were tested in the mid-1980s. When the president of one of Oklahoma's regional universities went to prison for using his school's foundation for his own enrichment, the legislature came down hard on all foundations. The OU Foundation's impeccable operational record withstood the challenge.

The Foundation has experienced ongoing change in the past three decades—physically, technologically and administratively. Burton spearheaded the move from four cramped rooms in Evans Hall to a specially constructed building on south campus. Adding machines gave way to a highly computerized operation.

Then in 2000, the Foundation underwent a complete review and

reorganization. Where a single Wall Street firm once managed its investments, 19 firms in specialized areas now manage and invest Foundation funds. Today the Foundation Board of Trustees is not merely advisory; rather its members are active participants in pursuing the organization's mission to promote University excellence. And finally Burton and the trustees have set in motion a succession plan for his retirement with the board expected to make an appointment announcement early in the fall semester.

Burton's future activities undoubtedly will involve Rotary International, the only cause that ranks with family and the OU Foundation on his commitment scale. A former director of Rotary International, he currently is a member of the Board of Trustees of the Rotary Foundation, lending his expertise to the funding of the organization's worldwide philanthropies. His lengthy list of service to Rotary earned him its two highest honors—the Rotary International Service Above Self Award and the Rotary Foundation Distinguished Service Award. He and Jetta, his wife of 40 years, have represented Rotary in travels to 25 different countries.

True to his oft-stated philosophy of not so much giving back as giving forward, Burton has been an honored Norman community leader as well. He played key roles in the formation of Norman's public school foundation and community foundation, served the Last Frontier Council of the Boy Scouts and was the 1990 Civic Volunteer of the Year.

The Burtons have two married children with OU degrees, Ronna Schenk of Leesburg, Virginia, and Josh Burton of Amarillo, Texas, and two young grandchildren, who already are ardent Sooners—and perhaps prospective candidates for another round of first-day-of-classes walks through the campus.

—CJB