



The Leader of the Pack

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Kenah Nyanat, who calls Malaysia home, twice has been the students' choice as president of OU's student government, a history-making event on both counts.

BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP

Photos by Robert Taylor

There are all kinds of borders—barriers between nations, between cultures and even those spanning the breach between dreams of achievement and the reality of what can be achieved. But for engineering senior and two-term University of Oklahoma Student Association President Kenah Nyanat, those borders might as well not exist.

Nyanat, 23, is a native of the Sarawak region of western Malaysia and an award-winning student in the Mewbourne School of Petroleum and Geological Engineering. In becoming the first person twice elected to lead the UOSA, Nyanat broke records. He also made history as the first OU international student to hold the presidency.

"Personally, it's a very humbling experience, because I never intended for this to happen," Nyanat says. "I believe the job adds a dimension to my life that I would never have dreamt about."

One of Nyanat's dreams was clear—to attend college in the United States. The son of a petroleum engineer whose work often took him to Europe, Nyanat was raised in Malaysia's British education system; he already was a seasoned international traveler who spoke three languages by the time he graduated from high school in 2001. He was given his choice of universities in Malaysia, the United Kingdom, Australia or the United States.

"My parents wanted me to explore the world on my own, and they were ready to let me go," Nyanat says. He researched colleges across the United States and was accepted into OU's petroleum engineering program. But the world

changed in the wake of 9/11. Nyanat's visa application was stalled, so he decided to get as close to the United States as possible. He enrolled at the University of Windsor in Toronto, sitting squarely across the border from his goal.

"The irony was that my dorm faced America, and I could literally have swum across the river," Nyanat says.

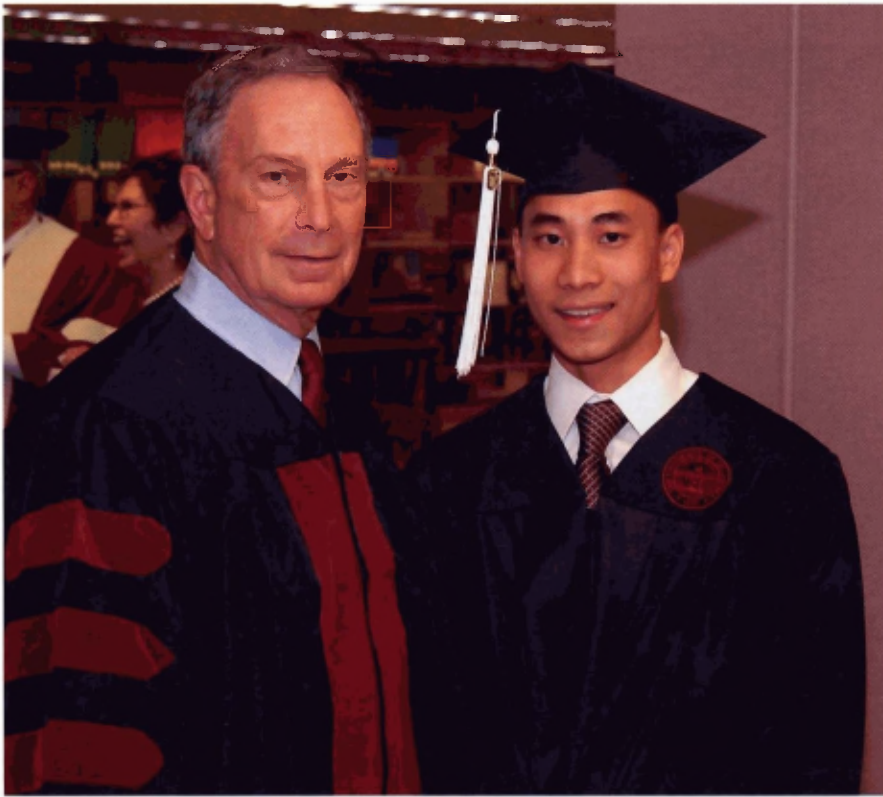
Getting to OU proved to be even more difficult when a visit home to Malaysia ended in a visa snafu. Nyanat finally landed late one August night at Oklahoma City's Will Rogers World Airport. He took a cab to the doorstep of Couch Center, where he

was to live on the international student floor. Nyanat spoke fluent English, but a misunderstanding led him to go hungry for a solid day until someone explained that his student ID card also was his meal ticket. His first foray onto campus was to eat at the Crossroads Restaurant in Oklahoma Memorial Union, just steps away from the UOSA office he now occupies as president.

Nyanat quickly jumped into OU student life, drawing upon "a passion for international culture" to join the Malaysian Student Association and the International Advisory Committee. As a student in OU's Gateway to Learning



Kenah Nyanat congratulates his sister, Rami, a geology sophomore, who was named Cousin of the Year in April. The OU Cousins program promotes cultural exchange between American and international students.



In his role as UOSA president Kenah Nyanat has the opportunity to meet with some of the top leaders from around the nation and the world. Here, Nyanat poses with New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who was invited to the Norman campus as commencement speaker in May 2007.

course, which helps freshmen navigate the transition from high school to college, Nyanat was assigned to write about a student organization for a research paper. He chose the UOSA. Before long, Nyanat was representing University College.

Within two years of arriving at OU, Nyanat simultaneously was serving as UOSA vice president and president of the International Advisory Committee. As IAC president, he led 20 organizations representing 1,600 international students from 120 nations around the world.

Then, a new passion emerged—bringing an international perspective and new ideas about what student government could accomplish to the UOSA presidency.

“One of my main goals was to establish a sense of unity within student leadership. It was a very heated time when I came in. We were able to build coalitions and develop a unified voice where everyone agreed to work together to reach a goal,” says Nyanat, a calm and modest presence who articulates his ideas in clear, unbroken streams.

After capturing the presidency and bypassing many assumptions about what

an international student could achieve at OU, Nyanat and his coalition went to work. Results from a student focus group and surveys led the way. “My job was to give students the opportunity to make their voices and their choices heard,” he says.

Among items on the agenda was establishing OU as a wireless campus. In just one year, 60 percent of that goal was accomplished. Another target was building sidewalks on Elm Avenue to provide safer passage for students living in South Greek and the Traditions Square apartment complex. With backing from a wide variety of campus organizations, Nyanat and his team took their proposal to the City of Norman, helped write a grant for federal funding and were told by President Boren that he would match their efforts with OU funds. The venture broke new territory by building relationships between UOSA and governments on the municipal and even federal level, Nyanat says.

“It was really a milestone for us, because for 10 years, OU students had been told it couldn’t be done,” he says of the sidewalk project.

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Much of what Nyanat helped accomplish through the UOSA may well be the legacy of a man he never met—the late Duane Draper. Draper, ’69 ba, ’75 jd, was president of the UOSA in 1968 and went on to become president of the national Association of Student Governments, national co-chairman of the 1972 Edmund Muskie presidential campaign and assistant commissioner of public health for the State of Massachusetts.

When Draper became involved with student government at OU, there was no constitution and, as a result, no real means of student self-governance. The 1968 UOSA constitution Draper helped design “granted unheard-of power to student government,” says Norman attorney and former UOSA member Rebecca Patten, ’74 ba.

“No other student government system in a state-operated college or university had such institutionalized power,” Patten wrote in a letter about Draper. “For all the mythology of Berkeley or [the University of Wisconsin] Madison student power, none could approach the formal system at, of all places, the University of Oklahoma.”

Since Draper’s tenure, UOSA has educated and enriched generations of student leaders. Nyanat has benefited from such opportunities as joining other Big

12 Leadership Conference students in Washington, D.C., to meet with Undersecretary of Education Eugene Hickock. The students advocated for higher education funding, and Nyanat also had the opportunity to champion study abroad, a cause close to his heart. The effort paid off in June, when the U.S. House of Representatives unanimously passed the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation bill. The bill is aimed at making study abroad more affordable and accessible for all students and has a goal of helping one million American students study abroad during the next decade.

his term as president, Nyanat says running for a second term was the farthest thing from his mind. "I don't think that anyone comes into this saying, 'Okay, let's do two years.'" But friends and peers worked hard to convince Nyanat and running mate Tatianna Cannon to think otherwise.

"I had to seriously think about it, pray about it, for two weeks," he says. "I wouldn't do it without the support of the students."

A normal UOSA campaign takes approximately six months to organize; Nyanat and Cannon had one month. Then, in one of the biggest student turn-

"People feel like he cares and get a feeling of compassion and empathy just talking to him. It's not something you can take in a class—that's something that is God-given. They feel like he cares about what they're saying; in turn, they listen to him. He has done unbelievable things at OU."

Those "unbelievable things" have been recognized with the J.R. Morris Campus Life Award, two-time selection as Rotary International Student of the Month and the Mewbourne School of Petroleum and Geological Engineering Student Leadership Award. Nyanat was nominated for the Mewbourne award by Chandra Rai, interim director and chair of the school. Rai acknowledges that Nyanat is an excellent engineering student; however, his selection was based on expertise developed through the UOSA. "To be successful, you need some other, softer skills, like interpersonal relations and teamwork," Rai explains. "These things are very important."

For Nyanat, engineering certainly is in his immediate future. He hopes to travel abroad and says that while politics are not appealing, he is fascinated by the United Nations and is open to the possibility of some form of public service. "I would definitely take that on in a heartbeat," he says, smiling.

Nyanat spent the summer in his third consecutive internship at Dominion Exploration and Production in Houston, where his parents, Thomas and Janet Nyanat, now live. Nyanat draws inspiration from his engineer father, who overcame many hardships and became the first member of his Bidayuh tribal village to attend college.

"If he was lucky, my father had a handful of rice to eat each day," says Nyanat, explaining that his father's family lived in the Malaysian jungle and often had to hunt for their food. Nyanat says the lessons of his father's struggles and successes are not lost on him and may have set the mold for his own belief that no border is a barrier.

"I try to exemplify what my father has taught me," he says.

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Nyanat, right, goes over proposed policy changes with Clarke Stroud, OU vice president for student affairs and dean of students. Stroud says Nyanat has made major accomplishments as UOSA president. The Malaysian native has championed student causes from improving sidewalks to making OU a wireless campus.

"For me, as an international student, I see this as a huge priority. I've seen it work," says Nyanat, who proudly points out that OU was one of only four universities nationwide to be awarded the Sen. Paul Simon Award for Campus Internationalism by the NAFSA Association of International Educators.

When he returned to OU to finish out

outs in UOSA election history, Nyanat and Cannon won in a landslide.

Such overwhelming student support comes from a very genuine place, according to Clarke Stroud, OU vice president for student affairs and dean of students.

"Kenah is loved and admired by nearly everyone who knows him. He has an incredibly gentle spirit," Stroud says.