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# OU’S FIRST LADY

*is the president’s top adviser  
and driving force in  
campus community*

BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP

**Nothing in its 105-year history** could have prepared the University of Oklahoma for the creative force that was First Lady Molly Shi Boren.

A proud native of Ada, Okla., and former high school English teacher, Mrs. Boren was no stranger to OU. She earned both an OU master’s and law degree before being selected as the first woman to serve on the Oklahoma Bar Foundation Board of Trustees and as a special district judge in Pontotoc County. In 1977, she married then-Oklahoma Governor David L. Boren. The couple headed to Washington, D.C., just

two years later when David was elected to Congress.

There, Senator Boren’s most trusted partner and confidante became even more essential. “Someone in a position like his is often surrounded by people who tell him what he wants to hear,” Mrs. Boren explained to *The Oklahoman* in a 2014 interview. “I tell him what I think he needs to hear.”

“She is my number-one adviser,” President Boren confirms. “She has insight, and she has shared my whole life experience. When I’m trying to figure out how to handle a difficult problem, she’s the person I



Molly Shi Boren's impact extends far beyond the boundaries of OU. In 2004, she was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame.

talk to most. She's the real strength of my presidency."

The Borens' shared experiences took them across much of the globe and enriched them with a love for art, music and the beauty of natural surroundings. When her husband was selected as OU president in 1994, the university gained a first lady who would become one of its most valuable assets.

By the time national columnist Georgie Anne Geyer wrote about OU's ongoing renaissance in 2003, Mrs. Boren could rightly call Norman's campus "the Central Park of Oklahoma." In fact, all three of the university's campuses had undergone a radical transformation that began within weeks of the Borens' arrival. Mrs. Boren immersed herself in learning every aspect of the campus grounds, even auditing OU landscape courses. It wasn't unusual to find OU's first lady wearing a sweat suit and running shoes, sitting cross-legged on the grass, chatting with a campus gardener.

Early on, Mrs. Boren led the charge to place more than 175 teakwood benches across OU's campuses in hopes of fostering communication and providing small moments of retreat. Students, faculty and staff took in vistas that grew to encompass dozens of public artworks, fountains and charming gardens under a green canopy created through the addition of more than 25,000 trees, including some 1,000 planted by students during Arbor Day events. The Arbor Day tradition was begun by first OU president David Ross Boyd and resurrected by the Borens, with an eye toward a much larger goal.

"What we hope students learn is that they benefit from the trees someone planted generations ago; they plant for the next generation. You received a benefit and you have an obligation to carry it on," Mrs. Boren told *The Oklahoman* in 2014. "Our primary mission is not only to provide the best possible education for students, but also to send out good citizens, to create – as much as we can – a model community so when students leave

here, they will create and sustain a community wherever they go."

"Mrs. Boren has always wanted to build for the future of the university," says Allen King, director of OU Landscape and Grounds, who has worked alongside the first lady for two decades. "The one thing she always brought into the equation is, 'How are students going to use this landscaping? How is it going to benefit the university?' She put a purpose behind it and is so good at knowing what everybody needs."

King and Mrs. Boren became collaborators who spent many hours crisscrossing OU in a golf cart and envisioning campus streets lined with Shumard Oaks. Together, they designed parks, gardens and sidewalks as new buildings sprung up on three campuses. And when a devastating 2007 ice storm destroyed more than 1,000 Norman campus trees and seriously damaged up to 80 percent of surviving trees, King and the entire university community watched in admiration as the first lady secured a matching gift from then-OU Regent Jon R. Stuart and his wife, Dee Dee, and encouraged alumni, faculty and staff to raise the remaining amount for the \$1 million Reforestation Campaign in just two weeks.

One particular day during the 2007 storm recovery effort became among King's most vivid memories. Mrs. Boren had suggested a "Rake It Up" event that encouraged OU students to take ownership in clearing storm debris from the Norman campus. "We had bought box lunches for about 350 students and thought that would be way too many," King recalls. "But the students just kept coming and coming." In the end, more than 1,000 students followed the first lady's lead.

"It was a really emotional time to see those students get out there and care for the university like that," says King, who has chosen to retire on the Borens' last day as OU's president and first lady.

Mrs. Boren also helped transform how students see the university's interior landscape in nearly every building. Eschewing cold, institutional surroundings, she hand-selected beautifully crafted Mission-style and leather furniture, mixing in fabrics and artwork inspired by the American Southwest and antiquity. Prime examples can be found in the Oklahoma Memorial Union, the Jan Marie and Richard J. Crawford University Club, the Stephenson Cancer Center and the Robert M. Bird Health Sciences Library.

The response was immediate. It became common to see students utilizing new gathering spaces for study or even to catch a quick nap, and the student union once again became a hub of activity. Prior to renovation, approximately 600 students had passed through the union daily; afterwards, that number swelled to 12,000 daily users. "When we put in grandfather clocks and Asian rugs, people said you couldn't do that in a student union," President Boren



First Lady Molly Shi Boren visits with the 2017 national championship OU softball team at Boyd House. The Sooners won the Big 12 Championship for the sixth time this May.



Mrs. Boren immersed herself in learning every aspect of the campus grounds upon becoming OU's first lady. It wasn't uncommon to find her seated on the grass next to a gardener, deep in conversation.

told *Sooner Magazine*. “Not one thing has been hurt.”

Much of the artwork installed in buildings across campus was from OU's Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, which bloomed under the Borens' care. The museum doubled its size in 2005 with construction of the 34,000-square-foot Mary and Howard Lester Wing, which was designed by noted architect Hugh Newell Jacobsen, and gained another 18,000 feet with the 2011 addition of the Stuart Wing.

Jacobsen had brought another of Mrs. Boren's visions to life during the 18-month renovation of Boyd House, where she helped to create a singular home and gardens for the university community and future presidents. The first lady's consideration of even the finest details met with the enthusiastic approval of more than 15,000 people who visited Boyd House in the first two years of its reopening.

Mrs. Boren's foresight and devotion also helped inspire the beginning of several campuswide efforts that since have become treasured traditions, including OU Cousins, which pairs American and international students in friendship; the President's Community Scholars, which brings student leaders together to engage in outreach; the Cleo Cross Tea, honoring outstanding international students; OU's Religious Studies Program, which promotes a more informed citizenry and understanding between people of different beliefs; the President's Trophy Award, recognizing student organization achievements in academics, campus activities, volunteerism and community experience; and the Otis Sullivant Award for Perceptivity, which honors an individual whose insight benefits society and the broader community.

Mrs. Boren's own keen insight turned outward to help Oklahomans reshape public spaces into environments that foster community. Since 2008, the Institute for Quality

Communities has brought OU's perspective and talents into more than 40 cities and towns across the state to shape quality places. The institute sponsors the biennial Placemaking Conference, which brings top community development experts together on OU's Norman campus with students, professionals and civic leaders.

“Mrs. Boren had the original vision and inspiration,” says Shane Hampton, director of the Institute for Quality Communities. “She has been a steward of the idea that the built environment is a major part of our quality of life.”

President and Mrs. Boren's stewardship of the built environment has resulted in OU repeatedly being named among the 25 Most Beautiful College Campuses. The Health Sciences Center campus also was presented the top award from OKC Beautiful. And, as a couple, the Borens' impact on our state has been recognized with induction into the Oklahoma Higher Education Hall of Fame and individual inductions into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame. Mrs. Boren also has been named recipient of the ATHENA Leadership Award, which honors professional excellence, community service and efforts to help women achieve professional and leadership skills.

The history of the University of Oklahoma has always belonged to those who love and shape it. Perhaps future generations will see Mrs. Boren reflected in the beauty that she brought to three campuses, the outstanding programs she inspired, or in the counsel and strength that she lent her husband.

But even those reflections would be imperfect. “Molly Shi Boren doesn't dwell in anyone's shadow,” as one *Tulsa World* writer aptly summed up. “She casts her own.”

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