

Welcome Home,



Hugh Scott

After 15 years in higher education administration, an OU alumnus comes full circle, returning to his alma mater as dean of students.

BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP

Dean Surratt

David Surratt might never have become the University of Oklahoma's new vice president of student affairs and dean of students if he hadn't been nudged out of the OU nest after graduation.

In 2004, after having completed his bachelor's in English and a master's in human relations, the then-Walker Tower residence hall director realized the time had come to move on – whether he liked it or not. “I was so desperate to stay. I loved OU and I never wanted to leave,” he says. “But there just wasn't a job to be had. It was one of those moments where you sometimes think about the fortune of unanswered prayers.”

Unanswered prayers and a love of working with students drew Surratt even deeper into the world of higher ed, where he earned a doctorate in education and spent 15 years helping to lead both small and large institutions before fate brought him home.

“I'm so glad that I found an opportunity to leave and grow in a different way, then come back to OU and contribute,” says Surratt, who accepted his post in December and was approved by the OU Board of Regents in late January.

OU's first new dean of students in 18 years arrived at a time when his education and experience may be uniquely suited to the challenges of a university community grappling with global issues on a microcosmic scale, such as racism, diversity and the expression of personal freedoms.

Born in California and largely raised in Tulsa, Surratt was a first-generation college student. His father retired from the U.S. Air Force and his mother is an immigrant from South Korea. “I wanted to do something that would make them proud and accomplish some of the dreams I think they felt were deferred. OU represented that for me,” he says.

Surratt met his future wife, Tasha Pargali Surratt, within days of arriving on campus in 1998. “When I say, ‘met,’ I probably saw her before she saw me,” Surratt confesses with a grin, adding that both were members of the University Achievement Class, a precursor to today's President's Community Scholars.

Tasha also was a four-year member of the Pride of Oklahoma Marching Band.

“One day, I introduced myself to her when she was walking back to Adams Tower after a football game. She was in her band uniform and embarrassed because she was hot and sweaty, and I was just curious to know her and say hi. We started dating by spring semester and haven't been apart since.” Tasha, who earned an OU bachelor's in finance and master's in education, now serves as a deputy contracting chief for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers South Pacific Division.

“She was the overachiever and I was the one who was underachieving all the time as a student,” Surratt says, explaining that Tasha convinced him to take an OU resident adviser course with her so they could both become RAs – she in Cate Center and he in Walker Tower. “I tell people, ‘If you want to blame anyone, it's her. She's responsible for my career path.’”

Also responsible is OU Sylvan N. Goldman Professor, David Ross Boyd Professor and Regents Professor of Human Relations George Henderson, who recalls a young Surratt dropping by to introduce himself.

“And with that introduction, our conversation has continued,” Henderson says. “I found it refreshing, talking to an undergraduate who had enthusiasm for being an active member of the university community. I meet a lot of people, and sometimes there's something in their eyes and voice that seems to communicate they're not just talking about helping people – they want to do it, and they want to do it well. David was one of those persons.”

Henderson later became Surratt's graduate studies profes-

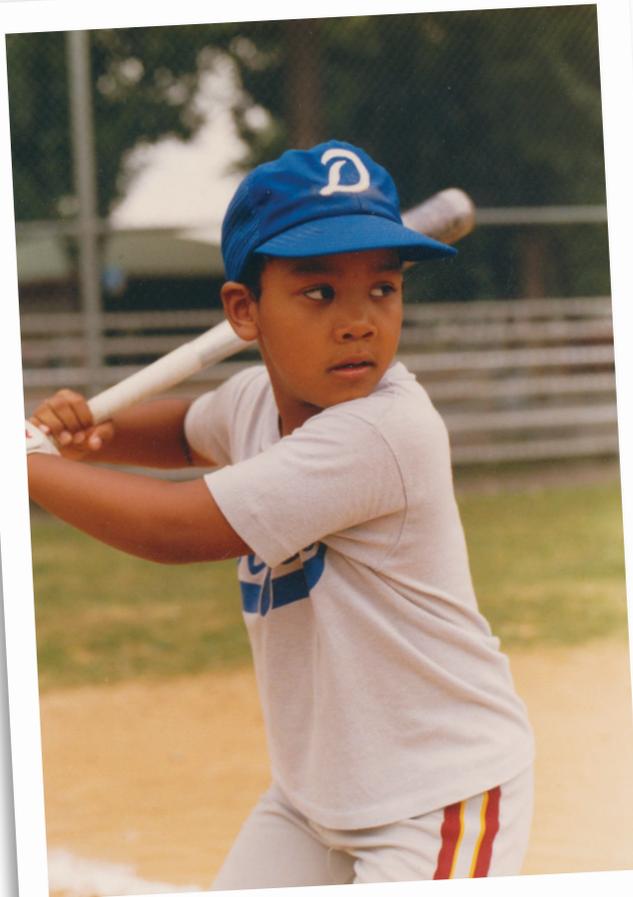
Vice President of Student Affairs and Dean of Students David Surratt visits with OU Relay for Life team members senior Jake Johns of Dallas, left, and junior Sydney Warwick of Norman, Okla.

sor and a trusted adviser. “I remember a counseling session where I said, ‘We probably have taught you as much as we possibly can about OU’s approach to student affairs. It would be good for you to go elsewhere and get other perspectives and ways of understanding the theories and practices, and then come back.’ That was wishful thinking on my part.”



Tasha and David Surratt as students in OU’s resident adviser course. The two met soon after arriving as OU freshmen “and haven’t been apart since,” David says.

The wish would take nearly two decades to fulfill. Surratt’s career in student affairs led him from a satellite campus in the Penn State University system to St. Peter’s University in New Jersey and Rosemont College in Philadelphia. In 2013, he was recruited to the University of California-Berkeley as assistant vice chancellor and associate dean of students. Within five months the university’s dean of students resigned.



A baseball player since early childhood, David Surratt gave up scholarship offers from several junior colleges in favor of attending OU.

“He said to me, ‘I already told them that you’re going to be the interim dean of students’ – without talking to me,” Surratt recalls. “In retrospect, I take that as a compliment because he thought that I was able to do it.”

Surratt filled both jobs while finishing a George Washington University doctoral degree and writing his dissertation. Meanwhile, UC-Berkeley was hit with lawsuits and a federal investigation regarding mishandled Title IX reports of student sexual misconduct from years before.

“It was all these different things coming at once. I’d say the most challenging thing was trying to learn a new environment when I didn’t even know myself that well yet. I was still trying to figure out who I was and what I was going to be doing in that role,” he says.

Surratt’s work at Berkeley furthered his scholarship and honed burgeoning skills as a personal coach and national pre-

senter on leadership. He ran the gamut of student affairs, including a stint overseeing housing, dining, residential education, and protest and demonstration management. There, his OU background in human relations played a significant role.

“I was trying to get administrators to understand what we’re supposed to hear and listen to when students are protesting. Understand why activism takes place; it oftentimes happens after students have made a commitment to change something



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for the better. They’re having an emotional response because they love the institution.”

When Surratt learned in 2018 that his longtime friend Clarke Stroud was stepping down following nearly two decades as OU’s vice president of student affairs and dean of students, Surratt’s thoughts began turning toward home.

The idea of being near his and Tasha’s families after so many years was a strong draw. “And professionally, I thought, ‘What better place to be able to contribute to the work that I’ve been preparing myself for than my alma mater – to do it at a place like OU, a flagship institution and major research

university that impacts so many people?’” he says. “It would be a huge opportunity and a humbling experience.”

Surratt discussed his admiration for George Henderson during his initial OU interview by videoconference. “The next day, I messaged Dr. Henderson and said, ‘Hey, just FYI, your name came up in my interview.’ He wrote back to me, ‘I got a reference call for you already.’ ”

Surratt asked Henderson for his thoughts about accepting the job if it were offered. Henderson’s response stays with him.

“He said, ‘It’s time for you to come home.’ Thinking about that always brings chills because I could literally hear his voice in a text message. I remember thinking, ‘Well, it sounds like

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this might be it.”

Surratt’s selection was announced Jan. 7. Less than two weeks later, OU would be embroiled in a national incident of racism when two women students donned blackface and one uttered a racial slur on social media. A second video of a man wearing blackface while walking near campus was posted online within days. Surratt’s distress was not lessened by the miles separating Oklahoma and California.

“I was upset as an alumnus, as a person of color and as someone who probably felt like my alma mater was disrespecting many of the students and alumni,” he says in measured tones. “That was my initial reaction. The other reaction was disappointment. I had wanted to come into the role of dean not as only ‘one of the first black men’ or ‘the first Asian-American man.’ I wanted to come in as steadily and thoughtfully as possible. I knew because of this critical issue that it was going to shape how I was perceived.”

Though his job would not begin for two more months,

Surratt went to work immediately, reaching out to administrators and leaders like OU Student Government Association President Adran Gibbs.

“That meant a lot to people who were working behind the scenes, trying to figure out our response and how to stand in solidarity with the community,” says Gibbs, a junior from Oklahoma City. “David was really rooting for us and provided any resources that he could, and I think that shows you the kind of person he is.”

Surratt also made a lasting impression once he arrived on campus. He and a group of students who felt deeply impacted by the racist events met a full day before he was to be confirmed by OU regents.

“As dean of students, I have to have sincere relationships with my students and connect with them in a way that’s meaningful and authentic,” he says. “I walked away from that meeting with a sense of hope.”

“He’s a very intentional guy,” says Gibbs, who later met in depth with the dean to share perspectives on OU student life. “He cares about people a lot. He’s very honest with you and isn’t going to give you a political answer for political gain. He really wants the best for students, and you can see that by the way he interacts with them.”

Surratt has made interaction a centerpiece of his work. Though an avowed introvert with a quiet, contemplative manner, his wide smile is a familiar sight at student events and on social media. He also is highly visible as the head of OU’s new Student Code of Conduct Review Committee, which was formed before his arrival. In response to the blackface incidents, many students have called for the code to establish a zero-tolerance policy for



Tasha and David Surratt join niece and OU freshman Brianna Patterson, left, and nephew Noah Barger at OU’s 20th annual Big Event, which brings hundreds of students, faculty and staff together for community service activities across Norman and Oklahoma City.

racist speech and actions.

“I think the deeper question is to address why a zero-tolerance policy can or cannot exist at a public institution,” Surratt says. “I want to listen to the fundamental issue and help give voice to some folks who might not fully understand the nego-

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tiation that we have as a public institution, while also supporting the constitutional right to free speech.

“I’ve shared my desire that we look beyond the Code of Conduct as the only thing we can be examining for measures



OU Vice President of Student Affairs and Dean of Students David Surratt greets students during his first week on the job.

of success in inclusivity, to rethink and look at how we are welcoming and orienting students who are new to our environment. How are we creating access and opportunities for diverse populations that match the diversity of Oklahoma? How do we develop policies and practices impacting populations that don't always feel like they have a voice?

"It's about students having expectations of their experience in the university community. I can't control everything, but I have a little bit more influence and access to information than these students do, and they're just asking for help. That's the biggest thing I try to focus on and listen for: 'How do I help?'"

As a student affairs professional, a scholar and an alumnus, Surratt takes the challenges facing OU to heart. But he deeply believes the same hope that brought him to the university as a college freshman and pulled him back home after 15 years will win out in the end.

"I will always see the promise of education," he says. "I see it in our students every day. I see them valuing the relationships they create in the college environment and with their staff and faculty, who are brilliant, caring people. Many of our students are still first generation and say OU provides them with an opportunity that means more to them and their families than we can realize."

For George Henderson, Surratt's homecoming is the embodiment of another kind of promise.

"I talk about passing on leadership to the younger generations," he says. "From my perspective, David was that next generation of university leaders. As one of his mentors, I am proud to predict that he will identify and mentor the next generation of student leaders."

"The circle is getting closer to being complete." 

Anne Barajas Harp is associate editor of Sooner Magazine.