



Jostling across the University of Oklahoma campus in a golf cart, three men made a beeline for the triangle of residential towers where a convoy of cars was disgorging bikes, laundry baskets, mini-fridges and students—anxious parents in tow. The largest freshman class in OU history—4,523 strong—was moving in and OU’s new interim president, Joseph Harroz Jr., wanted to greet them all.

Jumping from the cart Harroz, along with Dean of Students David Surratt and Student Government Association President Adran Gibbs, joined volunteers waving signs and shouting welcoming wishes to students and their families. Walking the line of cars under a hot August sun, Harroz often stopped to offer an outstretched hand through a rolled-down window to introduce himself. It was hard to tell who was more enthusiastic, the first-year president or the freshman students.

At 53, Harroz effortlessly recalls his own 1985 move-in day. “Adams Center, Johnson Tower, 903,” he says. “My older sister helped me move in and showed me where my first class was in Dale Hall.”

First as a student, then administrator, legal counsel and, most recently, dean of OU Law, Harroz had spent nearly half his life at OU before accepting the role of interim president in May.

As an undergraduate, he was named a Letzeiser silver med-

alist, homecoming king, Outstanding Student in Economics and honorary member of PE-ET. Graduating Phi Beta Kappa, he was the first student adviser to the Oklahoma State Regents and a founding member of OU’s Crimson Club.

“I met Joe my senior year of high school. He was already at OU and very involved in leadership roles,” says Kent Ledbetter, a 1991 OU finance graduate. “He became an immediate friend and role model. He was outstanding then in his academic accomplishments, and now in his ability to lead the university. There are two kinds of people, those who love Joe and those who don’t know him.”

Harroz takes such praise modestly, crediting his elders for doing the heavy lifting. “I had amazing parents and family,” he says. “It would have been difficult to have failed.”

As a young boy, Harroz’ paternal grandfather, Nicola Harroz, came to America on his own from Lebanon. There were jobs in the oil fields for those who didn’t mind hard work and “Grandpa worked really hard,” says Harroz.

All of Nicola’s nine children graduated from high school. The youngest, Harroz’s father, Joe Harroz Sr., was the first to attend college. With help from his family, Joe Sr. earned a bachelor’s and medical degree from OU and practiced women’s health in Oklahoma City for decades. Joe Sr.’s brother, Nicholas, founded Crest Foods after years working in his dad’s Oklahoma City grocery store. In one generation, Nicola had

A conversation with **Joe Harroz**

The former OU law dean comes to Evans Hall as interim president energized by the opportunity to set a strategic course for the future.

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN
PHOTOS BY TRAVIS CAPERTON

grown from a single, young immigrant to the patriarch of a large and robust family that had made itself at home in the Sooner state.

“It’s just not our story,” says Harroz. “It’s really the story of what makes America, and what a great public university can do to change lives.”

Joe Harroz Jr. grew up in Oklahoma City and attended Putnam City Schools. Like his dad, he planned to attend the OU College of Medicine, but changed his mind the weekend before classes started. He had taken the LSAT on a bet and had been accepted at Georgetown University. At 22, Harroz thought he was leaving Oklahoma behind when he headed to Washington, D.C., with plans to practice international law.

As determined as he was to see the world, Harroz was also influenced by fellow Putnam North and OU alumna Elizabeth Garrett, who would become the first woman president of Cornell University. Three years older than Harroz, Garrett was a national debate champion and class president when he started high school. “She was an icon before I ever knew her,” he says.

After earning her bachelor’s in history from OU and her juris doctorate from the University of Virginia, Garrett clerked for U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall and served as a legal adviser at the Iran–United States Claims Tribunal at The Hague. She also served as legislative director and counsel for then-Sen. David L. Boren of Oklahoma. In 2015, she became president of Cornell. Tragically, she died seven months into her tenure from colon cancer.

“She was a force of nature, an intellectual giant,” says Harroz. He often refers to his friend and mentor as “Lizzy G.”

“We worked together a lot in D.C.,” says Harroz, who served as legislative director and legal counsel for Boren. “Watching her, I learned how to convert a passion for something into re-



Around 100 people gathered at Boyd House for the first meeting Harroz hosted in the president’s official residence. The group was invited to discuss diversity and inclusion and how best to make the OU campus welcoming to all.

sults. I saw her commitment to public service, to education.”

Harroz returned to his home state in the early ’90s, working for Oklahoma City law firm Crowe & Dunlevy. But he missed public service and returned to OU in 1994 as vice president for executive affairs. In 1996, he was named OU general counsel, a position he would hold for 12 years.

Harroz became dean of the OU College of Law in 2010. Under his watch, OU Law quadrupled its annual giving, increased the annual amount of scholarships to more than \$1.5 million and launched the nation’s first law school Digital Initiative. During that time, OU Law led the state in bar exam passage rates and in setting new pro bono service-hour records each year, with more than 23,000 in 2017.

After the resignation of university president Jim Gallogly in May, the OU Board of Regents tapped Harroz to serve as interim president for a minimum of 15 months—making him



ABOVE - Interim President Joe Harroz greets the largest class of freshmen in OU history at the “Class of 2023 Kick Off” held Sept. 18 inside the Gaylord Family/Oklahoma Memorial Stadium. LEFT - Harroz joins students in the stands during the OU/Texas Tech football game Sept. 28. The enthusiastic cheering section helped the Sooners dominate the Red Raiders 55-16.

OU’s third president in a tumultuous year that included two Title IX investigations into former administrators, racist incidents on campus, misrepresentation of donor-related figures, and budgetary issues.

When colleagues congratulated him on his appointment, Harroz would respond with a cheerful, “What could possibly go wrong?” Despite the humor, which is often self-deprecating, the dean-turned-interim-president is dead serious about charting a course for the future of the university, beginning with definable goals and strategies to reach them.

“It’s as much work as I thought it would be,” Harroz says a few months into his term. “It’s crazy busy, but it’s also been more fun and energizing than I expected. Because you know why people are engaged with the university and what’s in their hearts in terms of wanting to make a difference, and you realize there’s a real ability to do this together.”

Harroz says every decision and every dollar must advance what he calls “OU’s sacred mission”—educating the next generation of leaders, creating knowledge and serving society. The interim president has asked for help from all three OU campuses in creating a strategic framework for each to more close-

ly align the university's goals with its mission. An email survey was sent to students, faculty, staff and alumni seeking input on establishing priorities. More than 4,000 people have responded so far. A strategic blueprint for the Norman campus will roll out in spring 2020.

From his first day in office, Harroz has been clear about his top priority.

"If we don't get diversity and inclusion right we cannot flourish," says Harroz. "Students come to OU with their own beliefs, but by the time they leave they should understand those who believe differently from them and why. It's fundamental to our democracy."

Harroz, an Arab-American, says there have been times when he's felt the sting of prejudice, from being singled out by airport security to having racist comments hurled in his direction.

"Especially after 9/11, I experienced it enough to be sensitive to it and understand its implications. When it happens, it's jarring. To be judged as who you are by one thing. But it's nothing like what a lot of our students feel every single day whether it's gender or sexual orientation or color."

Jane Irungu, who serves as interim vice president in the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, says Harroz has been a "critical part of our mission."

"Our president is saying very clearly that if we don't get diversity and inclusion right nothing else will matter. We have to have different voices around the table because it's not just a minority issue. It's literally everybody's issue.

"When you come to this campus, whether you're a faculty member or staff or a student, you should feel that you are at home. There is home and there is house. A house is a structure you come in and out of. Home means that you find comfort. You will be challenged, but you will also be supported and nurtured. Growth and success are for everybody. It's about collective and shared responsibility of everyone on this campus. There's an African proverb that says, 'If you want to go far, don't go alone.'"



As dean of OU Law, Harroz, along with fellow alumnus Judge Scott Palk, presided over the finals at last year's Calvert Moot Court Competition—an annual moot court competition open only to OU Law students in their second or third year.

The proverb also relates to another defined goal of the university—to bolster graduate and interdisciplinary research.

"At the university we get to be a part of creating knowledge, and that's so exciting," says Harroz. "We have stunning opportunities to lead in many areas including quantum technology, computer science, weather, cancer and diabetes research. We have our doctors from the Health Sciences Center working with our engineers and researchers on the Norman campus discovering new technologies and new therapies for healing and improving lives. That's an incredibly noble pursuit. And it's just the start."

To lead that pursuit, OU Regents approved the hiring of Tomás Díaz de la Rubia as vice president for research and partnerships. Díaz de la Rubia, an accomplished physicist, joined OU from Purdue University, where he served as chief scientific officer and senior vice president of strategic initiatives, including a multidisciplinary research hub.

"Díaz de la Rubia is a game-changing, internationally renowned figure in the field of research discovery. We have made exciting progress in our research efforts the past few years," says Harroz. "With him at the helm, I'm confident



TOP - Even snakes were welcomed, although not hugged, by Harroz during events on the south oval to celebrate the first week of OU's fall semester. Harroz says the best part of his job is interacting with students. ABOVE - Harroz jokes with 10-year-old son, Jude, during a visit to Boyd House.

we'll build upon our success and that OU will emerge as a national leader in research."

Like his predecessors, Harroz is also concerned about access to education and affordability. "We did not raise tuition again this fall," he says. "Education can't be so expensive that most folks can't afford it. So, we need to combine excellence and affordability. And one of the areas we're looking at right now is building out the idea of OU Global, the online campus."

In 2014, while Harroz was dean of OU Law, the college embarked on its Digital Initiative—the first law school in the nation to do so. Since then OU Law has become a leader in modern legal education and was named one of the Top 20 Most Innovative Law Schools in the nation by *preLaw Magazine*.

"I've taught online," says Harroz. "It isn't a fad. It's a paradigm shift in education. When you think about how higher education developed, in order to make it accessible, you built schools where people could get to them."

"But when you look at that goal with technology, you realize you can make higher ed accessible to people no matter where they live. For many people it's the ability to fit working full time and going to school into their schedule. It's creating more opportunities for citizens in our state and spreading the OU brand to more and more people outside of our state."

Another commitment Harroz made is to keep OU strong financially.

"We must have a healthy balance sheet, so we need a five-year strategy around that—one that is bold, honest and clear-eyed," he says. "Strategic growth demands a crystal-clear financial strategy. An example of important progress is OU's Advanced Radar Research Center, which is outgrowing its current facility making it necessary to have a plan to allow for that in a financially viable way."

Harroz likens it to having a family conversation around the dinner table about the household budget. What do we need to do to the house? What's in our savings and checking account? Where is the most important place to put our money?

"I think part of this is being really honest and knowing our strengths and our weaknesses. Because you can't get better unless you really know where you stand and where you want to go. And we need to work on it together."

"It's been a rough year and a half, but let's keep it in context," says Harroz. "OU is an incredible institution. Our people are stunning. Our best days are ahead of us, and I mean across the board. My job is to serve our students, faculty and staff and give them the resources they need to do their jobs. They are the creators of knowledge."

"Working with and being a member of the OU community brings a level of excitement I enjoy every day and I know how lucky I am to be a part of it."