



Travis Caperton

# A Parent's Best Friend

BY OLIVIA McCOURRY

**T**racy Carlson remembers the phone call from a worried mother in California. The woman's University of Oklahoma freshman son was feeling isolated, spending too much time alone in his residence hall room and finding it difficult to make friends. His mom was at a loss as how to help.

Within minutes, Carlson—coordinator of OU Parent and Family Programs—was on the phone to the Division of Student Affairs. Staff members reached out to the student and connected him with one of the University's many clubs and organizations.

"The group would meet regularly for breakfast and play basketball together. They ended up being a great community for him to get involved with, especially when his home caught fire during the California wildfires," Carlson says.

"His mom called back and said that her son felt comfortable staying at OU and that his friends were checking in and supporting him. 'He doesn't feel like he has to leave to come be with me,' she told me, and she was so excited that he'd found a community here."

OU Parent and Family Programs, or PFP, was created five years ago in recognition of the fact that students are going to school "in a different day and age," says Carlson.

"Parents used to drop kids off at college and expect them to adjust on their own," she notes. "Now, parents have more of an investment in their student's education and they want to be able to help consult."

Carlson says college students can often get tunnel vision. Distracted by classes and activities, they may be unable to focus on OU's available resources, including academic tutoring, scholarships, student life opportunities and mental health support.

"For instance, when a student calls home, they might say, 'I want to do an internship, but I don't even know where to start.' A family member who has been to PFP's orientation during OU enrollment or who has been able to look at our resources can direct them where they need to go. We are trying to equip family members so they can be their students' number one advocate."

Parents expressed their wish to do exactly that at one of PFP's dozens of orientation sessions this past summer.

"This is my first child, so this is a whole new experience for us. We're hoping to learn all the ins and outs of what we're going to experience," says Michelle Nance of Cordell, Okla., whose daughter, Shelby, is an OU freshman.

Others like Dallas resident Sarah Soliman, whose twins, Selma and Tarek, were incoming freshmen, acknowledge that students might become overwhelmed by all of OU's offerings.

"It would be great to almost have a cheat sheet—here's what you need to know your first 30 to 60 days."

PFP, which is free of cost, is the first line of contact for parents when they need to locate a resource for their child. In addition to making connections with organizations and offices, Carlson finds ways for parents to share information.

"We have so many stories of being able to advocate for OU students through their family

## *OU's Parent and Family Programs become the first line of support for students.*

members," she says.

PFP also sponsors OU's Family Weekend, as well as Sooner Parents, a paid membership organization providing annual benefits such as a calendar that provides tips for parents, event and academic news, early access to football tickets, one-day OU parking passes and promotional items.

Sooner Parents gives back to students each year through scholarships and gifts to the OU Food Pantry; The Big Event day of community service; and the University's student emergency aid fund, Sooners Helping Sooners. Carlson adds that Sooner Parents has seen a 50% increase in membership during just the past year and now boasts more than 5,000 members.

Melissa Medina is president of Sooner Parents, as well as a professor and associate dean in OU's College of Pharmacy.

"Tracy is the direct link into student life. She's there to support students and the parents and the one who brings opportunities to us," says Medina, whose daughter, Maddie, is a senior and a member of OU's cross country and track teams. "She is seeing students all the time, which makes our efforts more complete and well-rounded because it's not just us making assumptions about what students need." ►

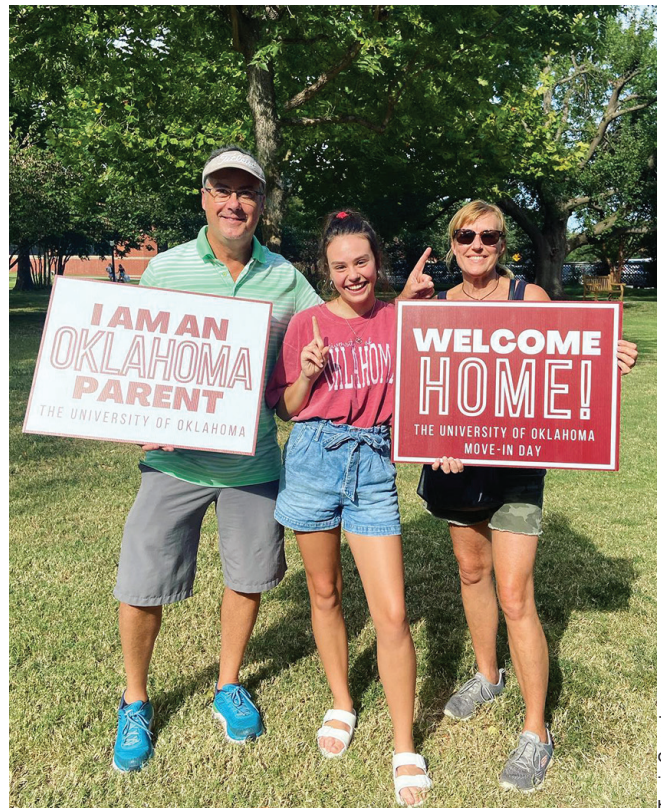


In the midst of the pandemic, members of Sooner Parents supported students and staff dealing with food insecurity through a \$5,000 contribution to the OU Food Pantry.



"This is a whole new experience for us," Michelle Nance of Cordell, Okla., says at a Parents and Family Programs summer orientation.

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Parent and Family Programs hosts a Move-In Day tent with a DJ, ice cream, yard games and photo signs for families as they send students off on their OU adventures.

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Parents and students return from orientation to their home communities swagged up with OU gear for the fall semester.

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Parent and Family Programs Coordinator Tracy Carlson, called “the direct link into student life,” greets hundreds of future OU families filling Oklahoma Memorial Union ballroom.

Christy Galyean joined Sooner Parents while her family lived in Texas and her son came to OU as a freshman. “I’ve been an out-of-state parent,” she says, “And if you don’t know someone, you kind of feel helpless, not being able to do something for your child.”

Galyean found that getting involved with Sooner Parents was beneficial to her son, 2019 OU graduate Phillip, as he began navigating university life—so helpful that, after her family retired to Norman in 2020, she became a member of Sooner Parents’ executive board. She also came out of retirement to join the staff of OU’s Gallogly College of Engineering.

Galyean, whose younger daughter, Peyton, now is an OU meteorology junior, believes that PFP and Sooner Parents are important links between giving students their independence and helping them learn to fly.

“For parents whose kids don’t always tell them what’s happening at school, this has been a good way to know, but not intrude, on your student’s college experience,” she says. 

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