

# CHANNELING



At three Norman Public Schools' sites, some superheroes wear OU men's gymnastics, soccer and Pride of Oklahoma Marching Band uniforms.

# OF FRIENDSHIP





# THE POWER



BY JAY C.  
UPCHURCH

# IT

all started as an innocent e-mail from a local teacher to a collegiate coach.

Over the past 17 years, that simple e-mail has blossomed into a series of rewarding partnerships between University of Oklahoma students and Norman public elementary schools that could be used as the blueprint for mentorship programs across the country.

Since 2005, thousands of Cleveland Elementary School students have been impacted by regular classroom visits from members of the OU men's gymnastics team, student-athletes who give generously of their time and energy and who often become positive role models. That program also has inspired two new mentor partnerships between OU's soccer team and Adams Elementary and The Pride of Oklahoma Marching Band and Kennedy Elementary.

"I thought it was something that had a lot of potential," OU men's gymnastics coach Mark Williams reflects on his team's relationship with Cleveland Elementary. "To be honest, it's probably one of the best decisions we've ever made regarding our program."

"Once we got it going, it really took off," says the author of that original e-mail, program founder and former Cleveland Elementary School music teacher Regina Bell. "Everyone involved embraced it—the kids, the teachers and the entire school, plus all the gymnasts."

Asking his student-athletes to find time to squeeze a mentorship program into their already-demanding school and training schedule was no simple request. But Williams has seen how the positives far outweigh any negatives that might exist.

"The partnership we have built with Cleveland Elementary has had a long-lasting impact, not only on our success in terms of community outreach and fan participation, but also in the fact my guys have been changed in so many positive ways thanks to the relationships they've built with those young students," he says.

"It warms my heart that my team members have always been willing to give of themselves to these kids, especially knowing how much of a difference their presence has made for so many of them."

The Cleveland program blueprint—which has been followed by Adams and Kennedy—assigns a classroom to each OU gymnast, who in turn devotes

an hour or two each week to helping with everything from tutoring kindergarten to fifth grade students in the classroom to participating in various games and activities at recess.

The gymnasts also perform during school assemblies, and OU invites the entire school to what has become known as "Cleveland Night," a regular-season gymnastics meet where students help run the evening's festivities, handing out awards and escorting the OU gymnasts during introductions.

For its part, the OU soccer team hosted a special "Adams Night" at one of its home games this fall, an event that drew an estimated 800 additional fans made up mostly of Adams students, teachers, administrators and their family members. Students decorated the stands with homemade signs, and the Adams choir opened the pregame ceremony by singing the national anthem.

Kennedy Elementary officially launched their partnership with the Pride by attending one of the band's November rehearsals, where they provided members with cookies and drinks.

"The kids treat us like celebrities. It can be pretty humbling at times," says fifth-year senior gymnast Spencer Goodell of Tigard, Ore. "The best part of the experience is feeling like you can influence their lives. And just knowing that has definitely changed my life in a positive way, as well."

Goodell's insight has become a recurring theme over the years.

"I think knowing they have all of those little eyes watching their every move really brings out the best in the gymnasts," says teacher Megan Allen, who currently coordinates the Cleveland program. "The kids see them as superheroes, and that's a lot to live up to."

Second grade Cleveland teacher Jessica Trent has seen the positive impact the program has had on many of her students.



Kennedy Elementary teacher Kevin Russ coordinates the school's mentorship program with the OU Pride.

OU soccer player Taylor Hunter helps an Adams Elementary student.



ERIKAH BROWN

“To be honest, it’s probably one of the best decisions we’ve ever made regarding our program.”

— MARK WILLIAMS



OU men's gymnast Jack Freeman greets a young fan at Cleveland Night.

KYLE PHILLIPS

“For as long as I’ve been here at OU, we’ve had various teams go to local elementary, middle and even high schools to participate in reading programs and mentorship programs that positively impact young students. Having this type of influence on the community is something we feel very strongly about.”

—JOE CASTIGLIONE



Band members James Francisco and Chloe Kelly dance with students at the Kennedy Elementary Snow Ball.

TERESA BRAGG



OU gymnasts and mentors get high fives from Cleveland Elementary students before competing.

ERIKAH BROWN



Goalkeeper Makinzie Short talks Adams students through their work.



Zach Nunez holds a drawing of himself created by a student.

KYLE PHILLIPS



KYLE PHILLIPS

“Having an additional role model in the classroom can be inspirational in so many ways but can really make a big difference for some of the students who don’t come from great backgrounds.”

According to Director of Athletics Joe Castiglione, OU student-athletes perform, on average, around 5,500 hours of community service each year. He believes mentorship programs serve a greater purpose.

“For as long as I’ve been here at OU, we’ve had various teams go to local elementary, middle and even high schools to participate in reading programs and mentorship programs that positively impact young students,” says Castiglione. “Having this type of influence on the community is something we feel very strongly about.”

Bell Johnson points to Cleveland’s mentorship program as one of the main reasons she made the decision to pursue a future in gymnastics while still an elementary school student.

“I was fortunate enough to develop a great relationship with several of the gymnasts, and I kind of grew up around those guys,” says the Norman native, currently a junior on OU’s national champion women’s gymnastics team. “It definitely helped inspire me to take gymnastics more seriously, and to eventually come to OU.”

Although still in their infancy, there have been plenty of signs of success for the Adams and Kennedy programs, as well.


“We’re excited about the possibilities,” says Heather Murphy, Adams’ school counselor and mentorship sponsor. “It’s been so great to see our students forming relationships with the players and really looking forward to that part of their week.”

“I like it when the soccer players come to our class and help us with our schoolwork,” says Saylor Jones, an Adams kindergartener. “They sit with us and read, and sometimes play games with us. It’s so much fun.”

Participation in the mentorship programs is not mandatory for OU students, but all three partnerships have enjoyed solid support from student-athletes and band members, Castiglione says.

“The impression that Pride members have made on our students so far is profound,” says Kevin Russ, a former OU band member who is a first-year teacher at Kennedy. “Whether it’s talking about music or listening to a mentor play their instrument, the kids love the time they get to share when the band members are in our classrooms.”

Norman Public Schools District Superintendent Nick Migliorino is hopeful more mentorship programs involving OU and local schools could be on the horizon.

“What a blessing it is to have a major university in our backyard, and especially to have them get involved with our schools and help inspire and lift up young students,” says Migliorino. “There are so many levels of positives. We will always be open to these types of partnerships and to any of the coaches and athletes who are willing to invest their time and efforts in our schools.” 

*Jay C. Upchurch is editor in chief of Sooner Spectator and lives in Norman, Okla.*