

THE HANDS BEHIND HOMEC

IT TAKES A CADRE OF DEVOTED STUDENTS, A YEAR'S WORTH OF WORK AND A WHOLE LOT OF POMP TO BRING OU'S CENTURY-OLD TRADITION TO LIFE.

By Dana Branham

THOUSANDS LINED Boyd Street and wound around the north oval, waving glow sticks in time with the sounds of the Pride of Oklahoma Marching Band for OU's first nighttime Homecoming parade. Chants and cheers and a slew of Christmas lights electrified campus for the crowd of students, alumni and Norman families.

Behind the scenes, the celebration was a massive feat of logistics—the product of countless hours of planning and months of anticipation for students who organized the

A student dance group takes the stage at the 2023 OU Homecoming Rah! Rally.

OMING



week of Homecoming revelry.

Unlike many of its counterparts in the Big 12 and SEC, OU's Homecoming Week is planned and executed by students, who spend nearly a year preparing for the festivities that draw thousands of participants each year.

Already, preparation for next year's Homecoming is underway. By the start of the spring semester, a new Homecoming chair will have been elected, vice chairs will be chosen and students will be dreaming up ideas for the celebration—

one of several events hosted by the OU Campus Activities Council each year.

Planning Homecoming Week is a marathon, current and former students in leadership roles say. It can even feel like an academic major, given the hundreds of hours they pour into planning. But it's well worth the time to see students, alumni and the Norman community come together.

"The thing that I love most about Homecoming is there's really something for everybody," says Emma Williams, this

year's Homecoming chair.

Students from every part of campus and organizations of all sizes can find a way to participate, whether it's performing at the "Rah! Rally," painting a banner, decorating a parade float, showing up for Trivia Night, or just snagging some free food on the south oval.

"I love seeing every corner of OU come together," says Williams, a visual communication senior from Dallas.

This year, students put their own spin



Miss Indian OU Jonna Grace Brady at the first Homecoming night parade.

SOPHIA ARMOUDIEN



ERIKAH BROWN

Pomping Alpha Gamma Delta/Beta Theta Pi float panels.



ERIKAH BROWN



SOPHIA ARMOUDIEN

Chalking OU's south oval sidewalks.

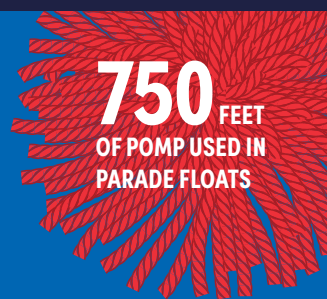


HOMECOMING By The Numbers:

\$20,000+
RAISED BY THE
HOMECOMING COMMITTEE



750 FEET
OF POMP USED IN
PARADE FLOATS



32,000
PIECES OF CANDY HANDED OUT
AT HOMECOMING PARADE



500 STUDENT
RAH! RALLY DANCERS



1,000
HOURS OF
STUDENT PREP WORK



50

COMPETING STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS



“I get to meet so many new people all the time. I have connections with staff now who I would never in a million years have come across.”

—HARPER LASHLEY



OU student organizations decorate the south oval with chalked art and board designs stretching from Lindsey Street to Bizzell Memorial Library.

on two long-standing Homecoming traditions: the Rah! Rally and Homecoming Parade. Instead of the parade being held the Saturday morning of the Homecoming football game, students opted for a “Glow Parade” the night before the game, leading straight into the Rah! Rally on OU’s north oval. Students hoped the change would drive even more participation among students and Norman families and set OU’s Homecoming apart from its peers.

Students have the chance each year to make their mark on the event, says Ty Aldridge, last year’s Homecoming chair and a 2023 OU graduate.

“We offer the perspective of understanding the needs of the student body, but knowing Homecoming is student-run also provides that special drive each year for us to really make it our own and special,” he says.

Pulling off this year’s changes required plenty of communication with representatives from student organizations and OU Student Life: “A lot of emails, a lot of talking to people, a lot of meetings,” says Jasmine Mhamdi, a psychology and women and gender studies junior who is this year’s Homecoming vice chair of night programming.

On top of working with student organizations to encourage participation in Homecoming Week events, students juggle nominees for the royalty court, invite faculty and staff members to judge Homecoming competitions, and engage with alumni.

“I’ve developed a lot of leadership skills through it all by talking with staff, faculty and alumni—it’s pretty cool,” says Harper Lashley, Homecoming vice chair for community engagement. “I get to meet so many new people all the time. I have connections with staff now who I would never in a million years have come across.”

Students also fundraise to financially support Homecoming Week. The Homecoming operations team is responsible for visiting businesses across Norman and Oklahoma City to gain sponsorships that make events possible, says Jalen Williams, last year’s executive vice chair and a former operations committee member.

Homecoming student leaders work with staff adviser London Moore, who encourages them to take ownership of ideas and bring them to life, says Williams, an OU biology senior from Lawton, Okla. When students bring Moore an idea, she doesn’t give them

instructions on how to achieve it—she’ll ask what they think they should do next.

“London drives that student focus,” he says. “She reinforces the idea that we need to think about practical ways to do the things we want. It forces you to really be in the role.”

The friendships Homecoming executive committee members build through many hours of organizing and planning are a huge part of what makes their experience rewarding.

“The bond between exec members is super special,” says Lashley, a Wildwood, Mo., junior majoring in nursing. “I wouldn’t have met these people without Homecoming.”

And watching peers and alumni experience the fun and excitement of Homecoming Week makes all the time spent worthwhile, students say.

Some might find the experience stressful, admits Mhamdi. But for her, it’s a joy.

“Seeing people enjoying something I’m doing,” she says, “That makes me feel energized, makes me feel loved, makes me feel appreciated.” 📍

Dana Branham is a former reporter for The Oklahoman and a freelance writer who lives in The Village, Okla.