

A

Testament

to the Future

OU'S ANNUAL LEAD ON CAMPAIGN GALA SHOWCASES THE POWER OF SCHOLARSHIPS TO CHANGE STUDENTS' LIVES.

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Photography by Travis Caperton

IT WASN'T THE ELEGANCE of crystal, china or dramatic lighting that defined a gala celebrating *Lead On: The University of Oklahoma's Campaign for the Future*. The true centerpieces of the evening were simple, profound stories from OU students—each a testament to the power of private giving.

Hundreds of supporters gathered in Oklahoma Memorial Union's Molly Shi Boren Ballroom to mark the progress and continuing mission of the seven-year campaign, which has raised more than \$1.27 billion toward its \$2 billion goal since *Lead On* launched in July 2020. Last year, the OU Foundation raised \$334 million in gifts, shattering previous fundraising records.

The campaign prioritizes increased access through enhanced student support and programming, fostering faculty growth, creating research opportunities, and encouraging a welcoming campus climate—each in alignment with OU's *Lead On, University* strategic plan.

Central to the campaign's goal is a \$500 million commitment to scholarship and student support and a \$300 million commitment to support the strategic recruitment and retention of outstanding faculty.

OU President Joseph Harroz, Jr., told the gala audience that “the delicate

intersection of excellence and affordability” is the basis of the strategic plan and thanked members of the Oklahoma State Legislature, private industry and individual donors for doing their part to help the university thrive.

Harroz pointed out that OU enrolled a record number of freshmen this year, 26% of whom are first-generation students. “Their lives are forever changed,” he said. “The great opportunity in our society is to make advances in your own life and the life of your family.”

Still, decreasing numbers of Oklahomans and students nationwide are attending college.

“You have to ask, ‘Why?’” Harroz said. “And the answer is, for far too many people, it feels like college is not attainable. It's for someone else. That has devastating consequences, not just for the individual, but for our society.”

Elena Price knows that feeling well. The Lawton, Okla., senior had dreamt of going to OU but knew that her family could not afford the cost. She was surrounded by peers experiencing challenges ranging from food insecurity to teen pregnancy and alarming school dropout rates.

“I knew it wouldn't be easy carving out my own path, but I was determined,” said Price, one of three OU students who spoke about the critical role scholarships have made in their education. Price is a psychology major on a pre-medicine track and a cadet in the OU Army ROTC who will serve in the Army National Guard upon graduation. She also credits scholarship support for providing her with opportunities to study abroad and obtain internships.

“To the donors who invested in me, thank you for seeing my potential when I didn't always see it in myself,” Price said. “It is amazing to know that there are people in the OU family like you who believe in me. Your impact is real.”

OU alumnus Elvie Ellis, who is currently a member of the *Hamilton* national touring cast, shared how receiving scholarships formed his own OU experience. He served in a wide variety of student organizations, including the OU Student Government Association, President's Community Scholars, Greek Life and the Black Student Association. He also was elected OU's Homecoming king.

“Because of scholarships, I was able to have a fulfilling and quintessential college experience,” said Ellis, who earned a 2014 OU bachelor's in music education and a 2016 master's of adult and higher education.

“Today, as I live out my dream, I know it would have been impossible without the scholarships I received,” he said.

After Ellis displayed his OU-trained talents by singing a rendition of “Never Enough” from *The Greatest Showman*, Harroz stepped forward to share that private giving is helping to make OU educational expenses significantly lower than just five years ago.

But, he said, much more remains to be done to ensure that students can earn a college degree.

“It takes teamwork,” he said. “No one is going to get there on their own. We are taking real steps toward solving this paradox—because we know that the American dream has to be accessible to everyone.” ●



OU President Joseph Harroz, Jr., welcomes guests to the annual campaign gala.



Broadway performer and former OU student leader Elvie Ellis performs "Never Enough" for the campaign gala audience.



JaLynn Yoakum, an OU chemistry senior, shares how scholarships made his OU education possible and opened doors to opportunities he couldn't have envisioned growing up in Hinton, Okla., as part of a large family.



Elena Price, an OU psychology senior and Army ROTC member, discusses the difference receiving scholarships has made in her OU education.