

# OBU

Alumni Magazine

SPRING 2024



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## PIONEERING CONTRIBUTIONS

in Medical Research



## Shaping the Future After the Storm

By now, most of you are aware of the tornado that struck OBU on April 19, 2023. If you aren't, I hope you will take the time to read about it in this magazine. But the story doesn't end there. That is just the beginning of OBU's next chapter.

We stand at the forefront of one of the most significant opportunities in OBU history. As the tornado tore across the OBU campus, ripping off roofs, uprooting trees and tearing holes in walls, God protected the lives of our students, our employees and our entire community. We praise Him for that miracle and for how He is using the experience to shape the future of OBU.

Although the storm left in its path of destruction considerable damage to every structure on campus, we have moved from the wreckage of that moment to a renewal and indeed, to a revival of OBU's campus. This renewal is not just about rebuilding and updating our buildings and damaged campus grounds and structures; it's about the opportunity to emerge from this disaster prepared to transform lives and communities.

Our goal is not to reprimatinate the past. Our goal is to shape the future.

The tornado hasn't kept us from moving forward over the past nine months. While we moved ahead with disaster clean-up and reconstruction of buildings, we also made significant strides in meeting educational, employment, and societal needs through our programs and offerings. We have asked, "What does our world need, and how can we meet that need?" We turned our eyes to the community around us to determine how we can serve our neighbors to make this world a better place for God and for good.

Industry leaders told us they need mechanical and electrical engineers, particularly in the field of aerospace. So, we launched new engineering programs in August 2023 with more than three times the number of students initially projected. We transformed Thurmond Hall's first floor into a high-tech, contemporary home for our engineering programs where our students experience state-of-the-art learning spaces and learn from professional engineers who serve as their professors.

The healthcare industry has experienced many challenges in filling needed positions because there are too few graduates to meet current demand. To help meet this need and provide quality Christian education for the substantial number of graduate students interested in these careers, OBU will launch four new graduate healthcare programs, pending accreditation, over the next three years: Doctor of Occupational Therapy, Master of Science in Speech-Language Pathology, Master of Science in Physician Associate Studies and Doctor of Physical Therapy.

Communities nationwide recognize pressing concerns in mental health and cybersecurity, global business leaders emphasize the importance of financial and data skills, and the sports industry continues to grow. In response to these community and workforce needs, the OBU Board of Trustees approved new undergraduate programs to begin in the spring

and fall 2024 semesters, including cybersecurity, actuarial and financial math, data science, family therapy, sport psychology, sports communication, creative media, and education degrees in art, Spanish and theatre.

To move our future-shaping goal forward, we have worked over the past two years to develop a new OBU Master Plan. Although we had no idea that a storm would hit campus last April, God knew. He had been preparing us to be ready for the substantial work that would need to take place on campus in the aftermath of the storm.

Plans were already in place to move classes and faculty offices out of Shawnee Hall to prepare for the remodeling needs we had identified. Although the extensive damage from the tornado moved the start date of that timeline forward about a month, the groundwork had already been laid.

The reconstruction and renewal of Shawnee Hall is expected to take around 18 months. This building has served every student on Bison Hill since it opened in 1915, and with this renewal, it will continue to serve as the center of learning where future shapers are equipped for the next 100 years.

Portions of Wood Science building have been updated, and additional renovations are part of the Master Plan to meet the needs of the future in scientific research, medicine and forensic science, among others.

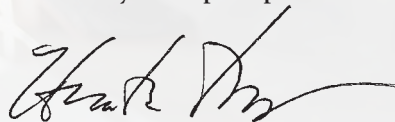
Many areas in OBU's residence centers need updating, and plans are in place to renovate those spaces and replace residential buildings lost to the tornado.

OBU's most iconic building, Raley Chapel, the home to chapel services, concerts and recitals through the years, received extensive damage from the tornado, rendering Potter Auditorium completely unusable. The spire, tiled roof, stonework, ceiling, stained glass and seating require major rebuilding and replacement. The process to repair and reconstruct this vital location on campus will be lengthy and very costly. We anticipate a two-year reconstruction period at the very least.

### Great Need Creates Great Opportunity

Your University needs support in the days, weeks, months and years ahead. While we have financial needs that outstrip our current capacity, we believe God has a plan for our future, and we trust in Him. OBU's substantial need has provided us with enormous opportunity. We ask for your help as we walk through these next years of rebuilding, renewing and transforming the OBU campus. Please join us as we embrace the greatest opportunity Bison Hill has ever experienced.

How will you help shape the future?



DR. HEATH A. THOMAS  
OBU President





## Thurmond Hall Remodels for New Engineering Programs



Thurmond Hall serves as the new home for OBU's mechanical and electrical engineering programs. Extensive remodeling to create the needed classrooms and labs (pictured here) began last year on the first floor and is nearly complete. Plans for the second and third floor are ready to go. OBU's first class of engineering students began courses in fall 2023. While OBU set an enrollment goal of 12 students for this inaugural class, 37 students began the semester.

# OBU

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OBU graduate Judith James, '89, is Executive Vice President and Chief Medical Officer of Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation and Austin Lopez is a current OBU junior majoring in bio-chemistry.





# The Walk

**Cherished tradition continues  
in spite of tornado damage**

Although OBU's graduation ceremonies couldn't be held in Raley Chapel's Potter Auditorium due to tornado damage, graduates were still able to observe the honored tradition of The Walk from the Oval to the steps of Raley Chapel, where they were greeted with applause from friends and family along with OBU faculty, staff and students.

Commencement ceremonies in May and December 2023 were held at First Southern Baptist Church, Del City.

## Jennifer Santos

2023 OBU Graduate

MAJOR: Biology, Forensic Emphasis

HOMETOWN: Dallas, Texas

Currently a graduate student at Oklahoma State University pursuing an M.S. in Forensic Science with an emphasis in Biology/DNA



## OBU Slated to Launch Four Hybrid Accelerated Graduate Programs in Healthcare

In an exciting development, OBU recently revealed plans to introduce four groundbreaking hybrid accelerated graduate degree programs in healthcare.

Pending accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission, these programs will include Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT), Doctor of Occupational Therapy (OTD), Master of Science in Speech Language Pathology (MS-SLP), and Master of Science in Physician Associate Studies (MS-PAS). Through a revolutionary approach to healthcare education, OBU is poised to offer students the opportunity to complete these programs in just two years or less.

The unique feature of these programs lies in their hybrid and accelerated education model, designed to make them accessible to aspiring healthcare professionals across Oklahoma and the entire nation. The majority of coursework will be delivered online, supplemented by hands-on lab immersion experiences on the OBU



campus. Furthermore, each program will incorporate clinical and capstone requirements, ensuring graduates are well-prepared for the real-world challenges they'll face in their careers. This accelerated hybrid model is geared toward launching graduates seamlessly into clinical practice and post-professional education programs.

The pressing need for healthcare professionals is widely acknowledged, and OBU's partnership with Evidence in Motion (EIM), a leading learning solutions company, seeks to address this issue. The demand for healthcare graduates has reached critical levels, and these new programs are a testament to OBU's commitment to meeting the needs of both local communities and the nation as a whole.

Dr. Heath A. Thomas, president of OBU, expressed his enthusiasm for the partnership with EIM, stating, "At OBU, we are focused on providing well-equipped, faith-forward professionals to meet the needs of our communities. With these degrees, we will be able to help our communities meet severe healthcare needs and address employee shortages we are experiencing in Oklahoma and throughout the nation."

This partnership marks EIM's ninth nationwide collaboration and its first university partnership in Oklahoma.

"It is important to forge partnerships that share our common vision and make an impact on our world," said Pradeep Khandelwal, CEO of EIM. "OBU is exactly this type of partner, and it is a great feeling to welcome them to





MORE INFO

to pursue this option for tomorrow's future shapers in the allied health industry."

Each of these programs has a specific timeline. The physical therapy, occupational therapy, and physician assistant programs will each span two years (six semesters), while the speech-language pathology program will cover 1.3 years (four semesters).

The outlook for graduates of these programs is incredibly promising. According

to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the demand for physical therapists is projected to grow by 15 percent, resulting in a need for 37,300 new positions by 2032. Occupational therapists are also in high demand, with a 17 percent growth rate and 23,000 new job openings expected. Physician assistants are experiencing even greater demand, with a projected growth of 31 percent and 40,000 new job opportunities. Lastly, the field of speech-language pathology is set to grow by 29 percent, creating a demand for 45,000 new professionals.

Taking a closer look at the regional context, specifically in the Southern United States, which includes Oklahoma, it becomes evident that there is a significant gap in meeting the demand for speech-language pathologists and physical therapists.

The demand for healthcare graduates has reached critical levels, and these new programs are a testament to OBU's commitment to meeting the needs of both local communities and the nation as a whole.

In this region, only 70 percent of the demand for speech-language pathologists is being met, and only 81 percent of the demand for physical therapists is being achieved.

The announcement to launch these four hybrid accelerated graduate healthcare programs is a momentous step toward addressing the critical shortage of healthcare professionals.

As the demand for healthcare professionals continues to rise, OBU is stepping up to meet this challenge head-on, shaping a brighter future for both its students and the healthcare industry as a whole.

"Through this partnership, OBU is leading important healthcare and educational transformation not only in their region, but across the national landscape," Khandelwal said.

These innovative programs, which combine online education with hands-on experience, are poised to equip students with the skills and knowledge needed to excel in their healthcare careers. OBU's commitment to faith-forward education and community service shines brightly through this initiative, and the impact is sure to be felt not only in Oklahoma but across the entire nation. For more information and updates, visit [okbu.edu/programs/health-sciences](https://okbu.edu/programs/health-sciences). □

our innovative circle of existing universities, and we know that we will be offering meaningful value to their long-term goals for success."

Each program will undergo programmatic and HLC accreditation. Pending approvals, the OTD program is expected to commence in January 2026, with applications opening in early 2025. The MS-SLP program is slated for a fall 2026 launch, followed by MS-PAS in early 2027 and DPT in fall 2027.

Dr. Larinee Dennis, co-provost and dean of business, health, science, and education at OBU, emphasized the benefits of the accelerated hybrid model, stating, "This model in graduate healthcare helps students reach their professional goals more quickly while training them with excellence in the field. OBU is excited



# Celebrating Excellence in Education

DR. TONY YATES AND DR. LYDA MURILLO WILBUR

With intramural sports and other activities, the Recreation and Wellness Center has been filled with plenty of sounds through the years. However, now that Raley Chapel's Potter Auditorium is being repaired due to damage caused by the April tornado, the RAWC is being filled with new sounds coming from large student gatherings, such as chapel services.

During the fall 2023 convocation chapel service held in the RAWC, the sound of applause from students, staff and fellow faculty actually spoke volumes as Dr. Tony Yates received the Distinguished Teaching Award, and Dr. Lyda Murillo Wilbur was honored with the Promising Teacher Award. It was a testament to those who tirelessly and unselfishly invest in the future shapers on Bison Hill.

OBU has long been a beacon of excellence in education. As we navigate the corridors of this esteemed institution, we encounter two exceptional educators who have left an indelible mark on the university's academic landscape. Yates and Wilbur embody the university's commitment to excellence in education.

## DR. TONY YATES: Nurturing Scientific Minds

Yates, OBU professor of science, stands as a paragon of dedication to education and scientific exploration.

His journey at OBU spans over five years, during which he has consistently demonstrated qualities that align with the University's commitment to excellence in teaching.

Yates' educational journey is a testament to his passion for science. He holds a range of degrees, from an A.A. in Biology to a Ph.D. in Science Education. His extensive academic background equips him to teach courses that delve into the intricacies of the biological world, including Human Anatomy, Human Physiology and Microbiology.

Beyond the classroom, his commitment to advancing science education extends to his research endeavors. He has been at the forefront of investigating misconceptions about biological evolution among high school students. His co-authored papers with Dr. Edmund A. Marek, retired director of the John W. Renner Science Education Center in the OU College of Education, have shed light on these misconceptions, highlighting the significance of science education in dispelling misunderstandings and fostering critical thinking.



Dr. Tony Yates





Dr. Lyda Murillo Wilbur

Yates is not content with merely educating students at OBU; he actively shares his insights as a guest speaker at the University of Oklahoma, where he emphasizes research strategies and methodologies. His dedication and hard work were recognized when he received the University's Provost's Ph.D. Dissertation Prize for his work on students' acquisition of biological evolution-related misconceptions.

His commitment to the field of science education is further evident in his active involvement in professional circles, including memberships in the National Association for Health Advisors, the National Association of Biology Teachers, and the Oklahoma Academy of Science. Yates is not just an educator but also a tireless advocate for the advancement of science education, inspiring future generations of scientists.

#### **DR. LYDA MURILLO WILBUR: A Beacon of Promise**

Wilbur, OBU associate professor of Spanish, has had a remarkable journey

to receiving the Promising Teacher Award, a reflection of her dedication to teaching.

As a native of Panama, Wilbur's multicultural background enriches her approach to teaching Spanish. She is the youngest of four siblings, born to retired Oklahoma Baptist missionaries, instilling in her a deep sense of faith and purpose in her educational endeavors.

Wilbur's academic journey is marked by an impressive array of degrees, including Marketing, Spanish, Spanish Studies, and Educational Leadership. Her Ed.D. from the University of Oklahoma delved into fostering self-efficacy for self-regulated learning in urban schools, highlighting her commitment to improving education in diverse settings.

Before joining the OBU community,

Wilbur dedicated 24 years to public education, with 12 of those years spent teaching Spanish. Her extensive studies in Spanish, both nationally and internationally, have led her to guide student groups through Spain, Morocco and France, as well as engage in mission trips to Mexico, Thailand, Venezuela and Peru. Her passion for language and culture shines through as she nurtures a love for learning among her students.

Wilbur's impact extends beyond the classroom. Her commitment to OBU's mission is evident in her positive presence on campus. She has high expectations for her students but always pairs these expectations with a caring heart, embodying the values of faith integration and mentorship that OBU holds dear. Students describe her as challenging, inspiring and kind, and they appreciate her genuine care for their success in both academics and life.

Wilbur, who recently led an OBU honors trip to Ecuador, is not only a dedicated educator but also a wonderful colleague who brings joy to those around her. She exemplifies OBU's commitment to forging lifelong relationships and preparing students for a life enriched by knowledge and faith.

Yates and Wilbur are excellent examples in the classroom and across the campus of OBU's call to "Live all of Life, All for Jesus." □

**As we navigate the corridors of this esteemed institution, we encounter two exceptional educators who have left an indelible mark on the University's academic landscape.**



# Recover. Restore. Renew.

Pink insulation dangled like ribbons from splintered oaks. Red bricks were flung about as easily as if they were empty shoeboxes. Large red tiles from the roof of Raley Chapel lay shattered on the ground.

Dr. Heath A. Thomas, an alumnus of Oklahoma Baptist University and now her 16th president, slowly walked the campus Oval during the dark, early morning hours of April 20.

Images entered Thomas' eyes but quickly swirled to his heart.

He had rushed to campus following the EF2 tornado to check on students, faculty, staff, family and friends, who by God's grace and protection, were unharmed. This was the first of many "hallelujah moments" Thomas would experience in the coming hours.

The same did not hold true for the structures on Bison Hill. Nearly every building had been damaged and showed it.

On many days throughout OBU's 113-year history, the presence of God had been felt and celebrated in this same location on Bison Hill under blue skies. Now, the only luminance came in sharp flashes of lightning as the clock on Thomas' phone chewed up the early hours of a new day.





## A PLAN WELL-FOLLOWED

At 4:54 p.m., on April 19, 2023, an OBU alert went out to students and employees telling them a tornado watch had been issued for Pottawatomie County and to stay alert to weather conditions. For Oklahomans this is a regular occurrence during the spring months as tornado watches come and go frequently. However, this night would be different.

Just about four hours later at 8:51 p.m., a second OBU alert announced a tornado warning for the county along with instructions for students and employees to move to shelters. Thankfully, students, led by residence directors and assistants, had time to get to designated shelters in the residence centers prior to the tornado's arrival. Many also sheltered

in the basement of Raley Chapel while the tornado rumbled overhead.

The National Weather Service, Norman Forecast Office reports show the EF2 tornado that made its way through the OBU campus traveled 15.5 miles between 9:39 and 10:16 p.m. with maximum wind speeds of 130 to 135 mph and a maximum path width of 2,300 yards, or 1.3 miles.

## THE WRECKAGE

Downed powerlines resulted in power outages throughout campus and most of Shawnee, creating a dark, surreal scene as people emerged from shelters. Huge, uprooted trees lay haphazardly across lawns, parking lots and roofs; glass from shattered windows, random bricks from walls lining walkways, and shards of lumber ripped from buildings made

walking across campus difficult.

OBU's Recreation and Wellness Center, the only campus building with a fixed generator, quickly became the hub of activity where employees, students, emergency workers and volunteers gathered and would continue to assemble for the next few days.

Soon after arriving at the RAWC after a hasty and unexpected early return trip from Texas, Thomas located an erasable marker and went to the glass wall of a nearby racquetball court. Listing priorities, he began with plans to ensure the safety and ongoing care of the University's students and employees.

After a contingent of Oklahoma Highway Patrol Troopers and other search and rescue personnel gave the all-clear, Thomas turned to Randy



## "We stand at the forefront of one of the greatest opportunities in OBU history."

Smith, executive vice president for business and administrative services, and said, "I want to see the campus."

For Thomas, that was the same as saying I want to check on my friend. This friendship formed long before he became the 16th president of the University on January 1, 2020, and even before he joined the OBU faculty in 2015. Thomas came as a student, graduating in 1998, with a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature and a religion minor.

It's evident that he not only talks about OBU equipping Future Shapers – he's proof. He is living all of life, all for Jesus.

### THE RENEWAL

While the National Weather Service provided the start and finish times of the tornado's track, it did

not report the exact time it struck OBU. But it's evident that almost as soon as the wreckage ended and everyone was believed safe, the renewal took hold as emergency workers, employees, volunteers and friends of the university began clean-up and plans for restoration. And within the days to follow, about 800 construction personnel and volunteers would converge on Bison Hill to join in the renewal.

Before the sun of April 20 sunk into the western horizon, Thomas was standing on a bench in front of students, employees and volunteers in the Recreation and Wellness Center, which had become the command post, a temporary residence center and a dining hall.

It doesn't take much time to realize that in situations like this, Thomas

doesn't speak from prepared statements. He's communicating through a mix of his memories and experiences along with dreams for the future – memories from when he was a student on Bison Hill, and dreams of the future for those walking the campus now, as well as those who will follow, each one a Future Shaper.

He pointed out that there had been no deaths, no injuries, "and where I come from that is considered Hallelujah Territory!"

"The reality is, this is a huge opportunity for us, and this is what we do as Oklahomans, right?

We take tragedy and turn it into a triumph. And that's what we're trying to do – all across the city."

### HELP NEEDED

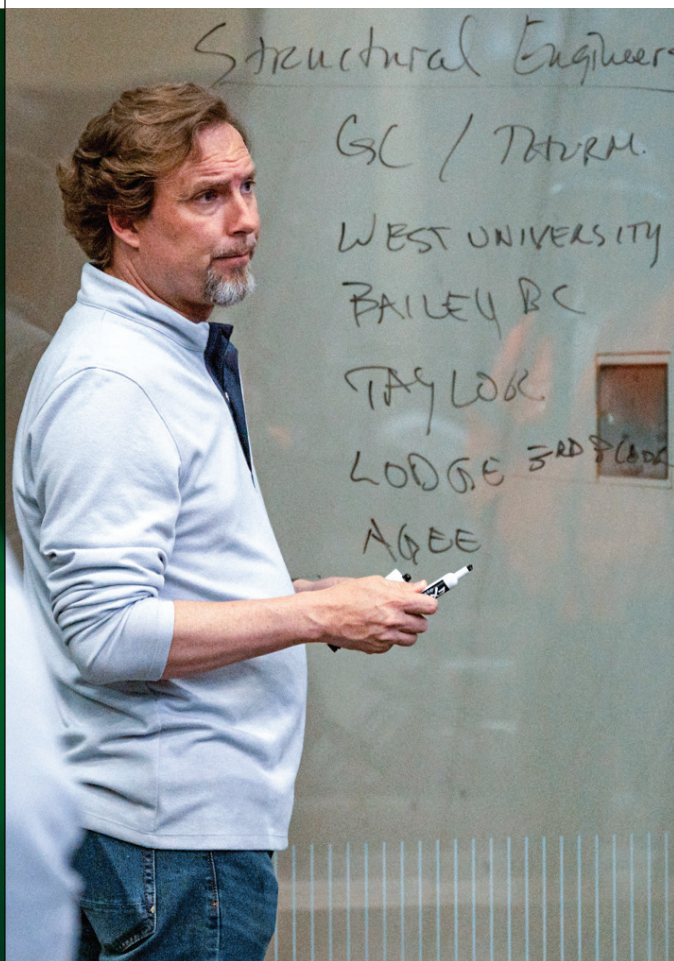
Within the following days, Thomas would don many hats – not just the green safety helmet. He wasn't only bearing the massive responsibility of university president, he was a pastor, a construction liaison, a media spokesperson and most of all, a sincere friend to those around him: students, faculty, staff, alumni, workers, volunteers, the monks at St. Gregory's Abbey/Monastery on the Green Campus, the City of Shawnee and many others.

The 47-year-old leader of his alma mater may not have been quoting Psalm 121:1 aloud, but he was certainly living it: "My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth."

He knew he would need help recovering from the worst natural disaster in OBU's 113-year history. That was evident when the oldest and largest classroom building, Shawnee Hall, takes a tornadic gut punch; or when the inside Bailey Business Center's second floor is seen clearly through a gaping hole in the brick wall; or when a metal shipping crate holding band instruments gets tossed like a toy for 250 yards until it wraps around a light pole.

He knew he would need help when he realized the roof of the beloved and historic Raley Chapel had been peeled back like the top of a microwavable meal.

That's why goals weren't just something verbalized in situation





update meetings or written on boards. They were taken to prayer and then carried into action.

## FIRST THINGS FIRST

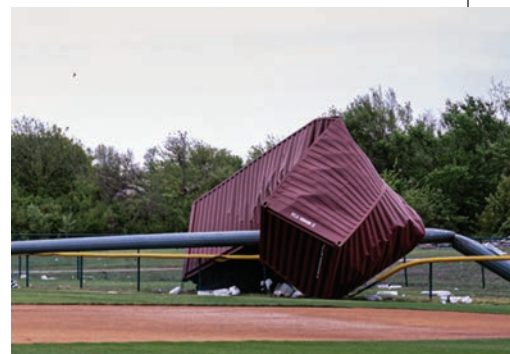
There were only two days in which classes were not held – April 20 and 21. Students met with faculty via virtual learning the week of April 24-28.

Thomas had made it clear that he wanted to bring students back on campus for in-person learning by May 1. University leadership agreed it was important for students to have the opportunity to finish out their semesters and for seniors to finish out their degrees in person. Thanks to OBU employees, volunteers and construction personnel working night and day, that goal was achieved.

So, although commencement couldn't be held in Raley Chapel that May, students were able to participate in the beloved tradition of The Walk on campus on the evening of May 18. The Nursing Pinning and Lamp Lighting Ceremony celebrating the completion of nursing graduates was graciously hosted at Immanuel Baptist Church in Shawnee on May 19. And First Southern Baptist Church, Del City, hosted commencement on the scheduled date, May 20, and with the scheduled speaker, Dr. Alan Noble.

During his commencement comments, Dr. Thomas told graduates, "Your time at OBU is done, but the choices ahead lay before you. God's mercies and opportunities await you."

Thomas, and all those around him, knew the same was true



for OBU as the University moved forward with renewal.

## SIX MONTHS LATER

The feeling that opportunity was upon OBU, only grew stronger as campus grounds and structures were studied thoroughly in the months following the storm.

As the six-month anniversary of the tornado coincided with the opening day of The Weekend, Thomas stood in front of alumni, friends, students and parents to address those gathered.

"We stand at the forefront of one of the greatest opportunities in OBU history," he said. "We have seen significant clean up over the past six months thanks to the help and support of our partners, alumni, donors and prayer warriors. We have moved from the wreckage of that

moment to a renewal and indeed to a revival of OBU's campus. Although some of our most significant buildings are out of commission due to the destruction, our students are back on campus and thriving. And so, renewal to me, to the students, to the staff, to the faculty, to you and especially to us together, represents the greatest opportunity in the 113-year history of OBU."

Why is this a great opportunity? Because no one was hurt, OBU was protected, and now the University is poised to renew. This renewal is not just about rebuilding and updating campus buildings and damaged grounds and structures, it's about having the opportunity to emerge out of this disaster prepared to transform lives, communities and the world.

It's about Shaping the Future. □



Architectural Rendering, 2023

## Shawnee Hall: Shaping the Future with a Historic Touch

*The first building constructed on the OBU campus, Shawnee Hall has served an estimated 40,000 students since its beginnings, survived an act of domestic terrorism in 1964 when it was struck by an airplane, and withstood an EF2 tornado in 2023. The historic building hasn't just withstood the past, it's firmly positioned for an amazing future atop Bison Hill.*

**OBU IS THRILLED** to announce a groundbreaking renovation project that will breathe new life into its historic Shawnee Hall. This ambitious undertaking aims to revitalize the first, second and third floors of Shawnee Hall, a cornerstone of OBU since its opening in 1915.

The Shawnee Hall Campaign is driven by a few fundamental objectives, each designed to enhance the educational experience for

students and address critical needs in the community.

A primary project goal is to bring OBU's educational facilities in line with best practices by modernizing educational space. Shawnee Hall will undergo a remarkable transformation, with 12 newly updated classrooms boasting a total of 472 seats. These state-of-the-art learning environments will provide students with cutting-edge spaces to enhance their

education, hone their skills, and prepare for a bright future.

The campaign also seeks to increase the number of faculty offices within Shawnee Hall. This expansion will create valuable space for various schools and divisions, fostering collaboration and innovation among educators. It will further strengthen OBU's commitment to nurturing its academic community.

As part of the renovation, Shawnee Hall will see significant improvements in energy efficiency and safety. The replacement of the HVAC system will align the building with CDC guidelines, ensuring a comfortable and healthy learning environment. Additionally, the installation of new fire suppression and alarm systems will enhance life safety measures, while updated ADA-compliant restrooms will promote inclusivity and accessibility on all floors.



Shawnee Hall plays a pivotal role in OBU's mission, offering core education courses for all students and catering to specific needs within the Henry F McCabe Family School of Education and the Marriage and Family Therapy program.

In recent years, the demand for emergency teaching certificates in Oklahoma has surged dramatically, from 32 certificates in 2011-2012 to a staggering 4,574 in 2022-2023. OBU is committed to supporting students who hold these one-year certificates in their journey toward full certification. The university has initiated the Alternative Teaching Certificate program, known as ACCESS, to address this pressing need and make a lasting impact on education in the state.

Moreover, the field of certified marriage and family therapists is experiencing rapid growth, projected to increase by 14 percent from 2021 to 2031, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. OBU's Marriage and Family Therapy graduate program equips students to provide therapeutic services from a relational and systemic perspective, serving diverse settings such as counseling agencies, schools, hospitals, churches, and private practice.

"This renovation project at Shawnee Hall is not just about updating a building; it's about transforming lives and communities, or as we say on Bison Hill, shaping the future," Dr. Heath A. Thomas, OBU president, said. "The enhanced facilities will not only benefit our students and faculty but will also serve as a testament to our commitment to providing a faith-forward education that prepares individuals for the world."

By embarking on the Shawnee Hall Campaign, OBU aims to address critical educational needs, boost student engagement, and create

a lasting legacy in the heart of its campus. The campaign's impact will extend far beyond the walls of Shawnee Hall, strengthening

OBU's recruitment efforts and its dedication to serving both its students and the community for generations to come. □

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To learn how you can contribute, visit [okbu.edu/giving/shaping-the-future](https://okbu.edu/giving/shaping-the-future).



## Shawnee Hall: The Early Years

### 1911

The annual meeting of the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma reported that the cornerstone for the building had been set Feb. 22, 1911, but later, work on the building had been halted. "... owing to various reasons, and the general depressions existing throughout our state."

### 1913

Reflecting the period of "suspended animation," Mary Blake Hixson, daughter of W.P. Blake, trustee chairman from 1909-17, wrote, "They got the building up, the walls, etc., finished the interior, and then they ran out of money. There was danger of vandalism, and, in order to collect insurance on the building, it had to be occupied, so in the fall of 1913 the Blakes left N. Harrison street in Shawnee and became residents of that empty building. It is shocking that a house, though bare, can become a home. The building did. We used the large basement room off the West entrance as a kitchen and dining room and large room across the hallway as a storeroom. Corresponding rooms upstairs were our living room and bedrooms. A curtained partition provided necessary privacy. . . . It was home until early in the year 1914 when building was resumed.

### 1914

The Board of Trustees report given to the BGCO discussed the need for completion of the Administration Building (named Shawnee Hall in the mid-1920s) and recommended that the convention "begin at once to provide for the equipment of the building and make other necessary provisions for the opening of school in September, 1915."

### 1915

A total of 143 students enrolled for the fall semester, and classes were held in Shawnee Hall.

### 1917

The first graduation ceremony held on the OBU campus was in Shawnee Hall's auditorium.



## Modern, New Look ... From Labs to Lighting

*Shedding new light on the W.P. Wood Science Building*

Generally speaking, a new day comes with new light and new energy.

It's a new day for the W.P. Wood Science Building.

OBU Project Manager Ryan Grider said the primary goal of renovations to the 38-year-old building was to usher it into the modern era. Its dimly lit interiors have been replaced with a vibrant, energy-efficient environment due in part to LED lighting.

Just off the main entrance lobby, the two floors of collaborative space feature a spectacular chandelier. This intricate structure, inspired by a double helix representing DNA, adds a touch of elegance while

maintaining a connection to the building's scientific roots. A glass wall provides openness, allowing students to use the space dynamically while preserving its unique identity.

Down the hallway, the first-floor lab underwent a comprehensive makeover. The installation of a spill-resistant, high-texture epoxy floor addressed safety concerns, and new fixtures illuminate the space, making scientific exploration more engaging.

The stairwells, once dull passageways, now exude brightness. Taxidermy mounts -such as that of a moose, caribou and whitetail deer - have been carefully cleaned and

preserved, maintaining a connection to the building's history.

Ascending to the top floor reveals a renovated classroom. This room underwent a digital transformation with the introduction of plug-in spots for laptops, tablets and smartphones, reflecting the contemporary shift towards digital resources.

While the Wood Science Building is embracing modernity, it also pays homage to tradition. The timeless brickwork and capstone remains untouched, preserving the building's external integrity. The faculty offices underwent subtle renovations.

The Wood Science Building is an example of the seamless integration of tradition and modernization. Its renewed spaces echo with the spirit of collaboration and innovation, inviting students to explore the wonders of science in an environment that honors the past while embracing the future.



# What's Next for Raley Chapel

Raley Chapel, a beloved symbol of the University's rich history, has faithfully sheltered generations of students, faculty and visitors since 1961. When the tornado swept across campus the evening of April 19, the iconic building, along with Shawnee Hall, received the lion's share of damage.

As the 135-mph storm blew out the glass windows of the spire clock tower, the entering wind pressure traveled down through the vestibule ceiling, wreaking havoc on everything in its path. It pushed its way into Potter Auditorium, dropping debris and hazardous stormwater along the way, before ripping a hole in the ceiling, lifting the roof, and escaping again through a very large hole in the red tiles of the Raley roof at the southeast corner of the building.

Architects and structural engineers have thoroughly inspected and studied the structure to help develop a solid plan to reconstruct and revitalize this critical space for the University community. While the building is safe for use in its lower levels, Potter Auditorium is currently closed and weekly chapel services have been moved to the Recreation and Wellness Center.

Raley Chapel's first floor, including Potter Auditorium, requires extensive repair and replacement of floors, walls, ceilings, windows, seating, furniture and other items. Stained glass windows that were damaged will be repaired by specialized artists. The Potter Auditorium roof structure is structurally sound but will also

require repairs. The entire clay tile roof is being replaced with all gutters receiving new construction materials to protect from future water damage. The limestone blocks that adorn the exterior of the chapel are being cleaned and tuckpointed to ready the chapel for the next 50 years. The copper spire will be entirely replaced due to the extensive damage to its copper sheeting. The clock tower will receive new clockworks, numerals and hands.

Raley reconstruction planning is well underway with plans for completion in late 2026. Initial estimates indicate costs for the project could range to more than \$15 million.

In the summer of 2016, Raley Chapel's roof received a much-needed makeover. Under the banner of the "Revive the Roof" campaign, donors had the opportunity to personally autograph some of the new tiles that would adorn the chapel's renewed crown.

Larry and Teri Walker, both long-

time OBU employees, purchased two tiles and wrote their daughters' names, Worthy and Amity, on each tile.

"A few days after the tornado I received a call from President (Heath) Thomas informing me that they had found Worthy's roof tile," Teri said. "Imagine my surprise."

The Walkers had sheltered in Raley Chapel when the tornado hit, ripping countless tiles from the historic chapel.

"As we were leaving Raley that night," Teri said, "I realized that the crunching sounds we heard were the broken pieces of roof tiles and other debris we were stepping on. The fact that so many students were sheltering on campus that night and walked out in one piece and that a few days later I would have a roof tile pretty much untouched with our daughter's name on it says God is at the end of this story!"





# ENJOY the Journey

The story of an OBU alumna who is changing medicine and the OBU junior who intends to advance it further!

Raised on a northern Oklahoma wheat and cattle farm near Pond Creek, Dr. Judith James suffered from asthma.

Even at four years old James saw the visit to a local pediatrician as an excellent opportunity to reel off numerous questions.

She recalls the doctor saying, “that if I wanted to become a nurse, he would hire me.”

The focused preschooler politely flipped the conversation.

“I told him that I would become a doctor and hire him,” she said.

## The Path to Chief Medical Officer

James, an Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation Fleming Scholar in 1988, graduated from OBU summa cum laude with honors in 1989 with a Bachelor of Science degree in chemistry. She then became the first M.D./Ph.D. dual degree program graduate from the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center.

Today, she serves as the Executive

Vice President and Chief Medical Officer of OMRF and chairs its Arthritis and Clinical Immunology Research Program. James, a board-certified rheumatologist, has made pioneering contributions to understanding how autoimmune diseases start and progress.

In November 2023, she was inducted into the prestigious Oklahoma Hall of Fame.

So, given the opportunity, what would she go back and tell herself? Or rather, how would she shape her own future with advice?

OBU junior Austin Lopez, a biochemistry major and a 2023 Fleming Scholar, can answer that.

“My first-time meeting Dr. James was actually when my nephew was born at OU Children’s Hospital,” Lopez said. “Dr. James and my dad were close friends at OBU, as they were both science majors.”

James stopped by to say hello and gave Lopez and her father, Carl Lopez, a 1990 OBU physics graduate, a tour

of OMRF, located across the street from Children’s Hospital.

“I remember her telling me then that the path I wanted was daunting, but to take things one day at a time,” Lopez said. “This advice was simple but honestly has been a mantra for me for the past few years.”

As a sophomore, Lopez took organic chemistry, university physics and advanced physiology.

“That was by far the most difficult academic semester of my life,” she said. “The only way I made it







Dr. Judith James, left, and Austin Lopez in a medical research laboratory at Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation.

through was by taking one day at a time and leaning on my community. Sophomore year was the season of my life where I can see the most growth, and I know that looking up to people like Dr. James gave me the motivation to push through the hard times.”

Those words shared during that impromptu tour, were future shaping.

### **Advice for Aspiring Students**

While her medical research has had an impact on the world, James has never lost sight of the individuals.

When asked what additional advice she would give to Lopez and other students with similar aspirations, James said, “Take time to enjoy the journey,” James said. “Being goal-oriented is great and leads to wonderful productivity. However, taking time to enjoy the steps along the way is critical to avoiding burnout. Stay in touch with your community. Science can be very isolating. Find ways to connect with and to stay connected with uplifting family and friends.”

James encourages Lopez not to fear failure because it isn’t bad, “it’s just a hypothesis that you proved wrong. Adjust and try again.”

Conversely, while it’s important to understand how to handle the challenges, James also wants Lopez to enjoy the wins.

“Celebrate the successes,” she said. “Pause and appreciate the good things. Science is a lot of research. We often search and search again. It’s easy to ignore the good things because we are too busy doing the work.”

James could do this all day long – sharing ways to help others. She's done it for a lifetime. So, what should the "you of Bison Hill days," or rather Lopez, keep in mind going forward?

James encourages consideration of the M.D./Ph.D. dual degree program.

"Melding the clinical and science training is great for career development – and you get paid to go to school," she said. "Also, study hard and stay up on your grades, but make time for some spontaneous fun with your friends and colleagues."

At that point James drops a hint, "Apply to schools broadly and critically review the offers or call an individual to have this discussion."

It wouldn't take too many guesses as to whom James is suggesting Lopez might call for advice.

### A Valuable Internship

Like James, Lopez is always looking to advance her medical interests. So, like James, she pursued and was chosen as a Fleming Scholar for summer 2023. The Fleming program is named for Sir Alexander Fleming, the British scientist who discovered penicillin and, in 1949, came to Oklahoma City to dedicate OMRF's first building.

While interning at OMRF Lopez infected cartilage cells with a virus to determine whether the virus might be therapeutic for osteoarthritis.

"The genes that are being transplanted through those cells are able to turn an older cell into a young, stem-like cell," she said. "After growing and infecting the cartilage cells, I extracted RNA and analyzed it to see whether the virus transplanted the genes into the cells."

The Tulsa Union High School graduate and now OBU

upperclassman was among 16 students from Oklahoma who formed the 67th class of Fleming Scholars at OMRF Lopez'

OMRF mentor was Matlock Jeffries, M.D., a board-certified rheumatologist and lead researcher on a clinical study aimed at identifying biological signs that could help predict the severity of osteoarthritis.

"Austin is quite conscientious and smart, and she did a great job on the final presentation summarizing her internship project," Jeffries said.

So, OMRF brought her back as a research assistant for the fall 2023 semester.

"I would like to continue being involved in research in medical school, residency and my career," Lopez said. "I am not sure the specialty I would like to go into, but I have always loved working with kids. I am heavily considering rheumatology and obstetrics and gynecology."

Lopez is very thankful for the knowledge and experience she has gained on Bison Hill.

"The science department and community have grown me as a person tremendously," she said. "The friends I have made here are friends I know I'll have for life."

She has praise for all her science professors. For example, Lopez

"She [Dr. James] is one of the hardest-working people I know, and despite being one of the most prestigious scientists in the United States, she continues to go above and beyond for others."

—AUSTIN LOPEZ

said of Dr. Contessa Edgar, chair of the Division of Science and associate professor of biology, "Dr. Edgar has been a mentor and a role model for me. She has helped me grow so much as a student and person. She helped me apply for my research programs and worked at OMRF as a post-doc before coming to OBU, so having someone who could help me make connections at OMRF has really helped me."

### From Internship to Landmark Career

James had just finished her junior year at OBU when she went to OMRF as a Fleming Scholar. She'd told the selection committee she wanted to do research on asthma, which not only



Austin Lopez



afflicted her but also many members of her family. She was assigned to the laboratory of Dr. John Harley, a physician-researcher who was an allergist and rheumatologist.

Harley assigned James a pair of projects to study different aspects of lupus, an autoimmune disease.

James thought her research on lupus would represent a brief scientific detour.

"I figured I'd learn some auto-immunity, then apply it to asthma," she said.

But as she delved into the depths of the disease, investigating the molecular targets and the immune cells that mistakenly attack them, the work struck a chord with her.

"I really liked the detective work," she said. "I enjoyed trying to figure out something that no one had figured out before."

James returned to OBU for her senior year but kept working with Harley in OMRF's labs. The OU Health Sciences Center launched an M.D./Ph.D. program, and on the strength of her undergraduate career and work in Harley's lab, James was one of two students accepted into the inaugural class. This enabled her to pursue a medical degree as well as a doctorate in microbiology and immunology simultaneously.

That momentum only continues to build in her landmark career. How does James hope she has shaped the future?

"Through our clinical and translational research, I hope we have and are changing the future of autoimmune diseases," James said. "We are now finishing the first in the world lupus prevention study, and we are changing the future by forwarding prevention for these complicated

diseases that remain a top 10 medical cause of death in young women between ages 15 and 45. I also hope I am changing the future by mentoring junior trainees to help them launch their own independent research or medical careers."

Her former trainees have gone on to faculty jobs at Columbia, Harvard, Yale, Stanford, University of California San Francisco and others.

"Finally, I hope I am shaping the future through collaboration as I lead the Oklahoma Shared Clinical and Translational Resources," she said. "It's the largest National Institutes of Health grant in Oklahoma history that involves 29 Oklahoma entities, and we are focused on improving the health of all Oklahomans."

### **Commitment, Impact and Inspiration**

The pediatrician likely didn't see such a monumental impact rising from within the four year old with asthma. However, it hasn't surprised James – it's been her goal. And it certainly doesn't shock Lopez.

"I am so honored to know Dr. James," Lopez said. "She has been such an inspiration to me. She is one of the hardest-working people I know, and despite being one of the most prestigious scientists in the United States, she continues to go above and beyond for others. Her commitment to providing opportunities to women and underrepresented communities in science is something I am also very passionate about. She truly inspires me. I hope someday I can make a percentage of the contribution she has made to the biomedical sciences field." □



### **DR. JUDITH JAMES: Shaping the Future in Medicine**

- Internationally recognized rheumatologist, specializing in lupus and related conditions.
- First graduate of OUHSC's M.D./Ph.D. program, pioneering medical education.
- Published 330-plus articles, led NIH-funded projects, and explored targeted therapies.
- As associate vice provost at OUHSC, led National Institutes of Health initiatives for improved health outcomes.
- Has mentored 150-plus students, emphasizing diversity and fostering future medical professionals.
- Recipient of prestigious awards/honors, including induction into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame, Presidential Early Career Award, Evelyn V. Hess Award, American College of Rheumatology's Distinguished Basic/Translational Investigator Award.
- In 2022, became the first Oklahoma woman elected to the National Academy of Medicine

# Equipping the Next Generation

MEET BRANDON PETERSEN

**I**n July 2020, OBU welcomed alumnus Brandon Petersen back to Bison Hill to serve as the dean of students and vice president of campus life at OBU.

Petersen's journey is deeply rooted in the values and mission of OBU. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Business Administration from OBU in 1995 and later earned a Master of Arts in Christian Education from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1999. His connection with OBU goes back even further, as he previously served as an advancement officer from 1995 to 1996.

Throughout his career, Petersen has demonstrated a steadfast commitment to both church ministry and professional growth. He served in various roles, including single adult minister at First Baptist Church of Euless, Texas, and later as an associate pastor of education at First Baptist Church in Broken Arrow. His journey continued at Shandon Baptist Church in Columbia, South Carolina, where he served as executive pastor and education pastor until 2018.

Upon returning to Oklahoma, Petersen has contributed his expertise to JM2 Capital in Oklahoma City as the director of consulting.

Petersen's appointment as the dean of students and vice president of campus life represented a homecoming, reflecting his deep love for Christ, the church and Bison Hill. His comprehensive leadership experience in both church and business settings equipped him to enhance the student experience, overseeing vital aspects of campus life such as housing, dining, clubs and spiritual development.



## Q&A

**What is your main responsibility as dean of students and vice president of campus life at OBU?**

My primary focus is to help create the best student experience possible on Bison Hill. The campus life team seeks to do this through offering excellent service, programming and events in the areas of residential life, student organizations and activities, recreation and wellness and spiritual life. We take seriously our part in helping to equip the next generation of future shapers to live all of life all for Jesus. Our goal is to partner with our faculty and other staff to best prepare students for the next chapter in their lives as they move into their professional careers.





“Our goal is to partner with our faculty and other staff to best prepare students for the next chapter in their lives as they move into their professional careers.”

our students feel supported, heard, and valued regardless of what they are going through or what they believe. We seek to do this through the lens of scripture and a Christian worldview. We want to show and demonstrate the love, grace, and truth of Jesus through all we do.

#### **What do you think sets OBU apart from other universities?**

I believe our commitment to leading through a Christian worldview, truly sets OBU apart from other universities. I also believe our world class faculty distinguishes and makes OBU unique. Our faculty delivers excellent instruction while offering a truly personal touch with each and every student. They know and love our students.

#### **What excites you most about serving in this role?**

The thing that most excites me about my role is seeing students grow, thrive and flourish while on campus. I love seeing a student transformed by the grace and love of God to the point they lead and impact others accordingly.

#### **What are some of the most rewarding aspects of your position?**

Having the privilege of mentoring and investing in the lives of our students is truly the most rewarding aspect of being the dean of students.

#### **What are some of the most challenging aspects of your position?**

Navigating the craziness of our culture is one of the most challenging aspects of this job. We want to make sure all

#### **What impressed you the most about OBU's response to the April 19, 2023, tornado?**

I was most impressed by the speed in which OBU was able to bring students back to campus to finish the spring semester. This was done without compromising the safety of our students or the level of instruction provided to our students.

#### **What is your vision for university culture at OBU?**

I would love to see an increasingly diverse culture at OBU as we move into the future.

#### **What are some things you enjoy doing when away from the office?**

I love to spend time with my family. We love hiking, snow skiing and spending time at the lake. When I can, I love to play a little golf and do some fishing as well. □

# 2023 HIGHLIGHTS the weekend



## Profile in Excellence Award Recipients

This award is given to former students, not necessarily graduates, who have demonstrated recognizable accomplishment in their profession, business, avocation, or life service in such a way as to bring pride and honor to OBU. Seven recipients received the award in 2023.

To nominate an individual for any alumni award, visit [okbu.cc/AlumniAwards](https://okbu.cc/AlumniAwards), or follow the QR code.



Deadline Nomination: March 15, 2024



**MATTHEW CLOUGH, '05**

Matthew pursued a master's in theological studies to deepen his ministry understanding. As lead pastor at Fellowship West in Bonner Springs, Kansas, he's a remarkable spiritual leader, actively engaged in community initiatives and serving as a Bonner Springs Police chaplain. His commitment to church planting and family, including his wife Meghan and two children, showcases a role model deserving of the Profile in Excellence award, leaving a lasting impact on others.



**HOLLIE FULLER, '05**

Hollie, a caring and remarkable educator, has made a profound impact on her students at Byng Public School. Her passion for teaching math and science, innovative methods, and civic involvement earned her numerous accolades, including the Presidential Award for Excellence in Math and Science Teaching State Finalist. Beyond the classroom, she actively supports her community and fosters a love for innovation as the head robotics coach.



**AMANDA TEAPE JOHNSON, '10**

Amanda currently serves as the Spend Life Wisely Ambassador for First United Bank of Shawnee, where she utilizes her skills and expertise to promote First United's four pillars: faith, health and wellness, personal growth and financial well-being, spreading love and impact across Pottawatomie County. Amanda's dedication to community service and leadership has earned her numerous awards.



# The Weekend is for Everyone!

As students, OBU alumni were involved! So, when alumni return to campus each fall, it's for an experience, not just a visit.

It's a chance to strengthen friendships created on Bison Hill. Plus, The Weekend is an experience for not only students of the past, but of the present, such as talented members of the Bison Brigade Marching Band and Harvest Court Queen Hannah DeMoss and King Nathan Chan shown with OBU First Lady Jill Thomas and OBU President Dr. Heath A. Thomas.

At every turn, there's something for everyone including the always appetizing BBQ on The Oval; displays of local art including ceramics, woven pieces, jewelry, photography and baked goods at Art on the Hill and games such as cornhole at the Bison Bash Tailgate.

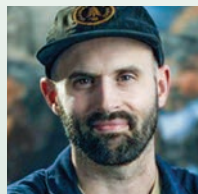
Throughout The Weekend, classmates share memories, such as the Class of '73, who celebrated their 50th anniversary. Top all of that off with the homecoming football game, where OBU claimed a 28-7 win over Northwestern Oklahoma State University!

**It truly is The Weekend  
to be on Bison Hill!**



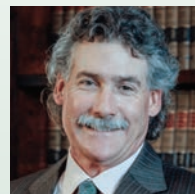
**TODD LAMBERT, '01**

Todd's dedication to serving others has profoundly impacted his community and beyond. A passionate believer, he spent more than a decade overseas learning multiple languages and helping people in very remote areas. He continues to use innovative approaches to enrich the lives of people from oral cultures all over the world as well as among refugees in his hometown.



**LUCAS SIMMONS, '12**

Lucas, a distinguished artist and community advocate, has left an indelible mark on Shawnee and beyond. With impressive achievements and accolades, his captivating artwork showcases a unique style. As a devoted husband and father, he finds support in his loving family. His involvement in mural projects and civic engagement reflects his commitment to merging art and history, fostering a sense of community, and inspiring others.



**BRAD WEST, '87**

With over three decades of trial experience, Brad relentlessly pursues optimal outcomes for clients at The West Law Firm in Shawnee. His accolades, including being an Oklahoma Super Lawyer, demonstrate his legal prowess. Beyond law, Brad's philanthropy shines. He spearheads the Coat Donation Program, donating over 3,400 coats to those in need. His community service stretches to multiple organizations, including board membership with The Salvation Army of Shawnee.



**NOAH JOHN WICKHAM, '03, '18**

Noah exemplifies excellence in every aspect of life. With a passion for serving others, he worked as a children's and family pastor in churches in Oklahoma and Texas. His life call to equip, encourage and enrich families has led him into the mental health field where he is currently working as an LMFT and clinical director at Rogers County Youth Services.

The background of the entire page is a photograph of a church steeple in silhouette against a dramatic sunset sky. The sky is filled with clouds in shades of orange, yellow, and grey. The steeple is a dark, vertical structure with a pointed top and a balcony with small figures or lights near its base.

# *Journey* of Renewal



It has been truly amazing to see the way  
God has blessed us and the work he  
has done with the help of an enormous  
number of faithful servants.

Dear Alumni and Friends,

Our University has been on a three-year journey that has provided the opportunity for all of us in the OBU community to focus on the Multiply Strategy, an initiative introduced and championed by President Thomas. The Multiply Strategy has been focused on providing excellence, influence, service and value. We have worked diligently to accomplish our strategic objectives to:

- 1) Reach Students and Families
- 2) Realize Financial Potential
- 3) Refocus the University and Shape the Future

This strategy has allowed us to create structure around the work needed to enhance and renew this historic and beloved educational institution.

Already, we have seen some incredible results from the Multiply Strategy, and we are prayerful that it will continue in a strong way. However, our journey is nowhere near complete. Our Father has more for OBU to accomplish, much more.

As you may know, we have been traveling extensively throughout the state and region, and much of this travel has been presented as part of our OBU Day in the Churches. President Thomas has focused a tremendous amount of his time traveling to churches to preach. At the same time, our admissions team has accompanied him to provide enrollment information to students and their families considering their college opportunities. Our alumni and advancement team members have also helped host luncheons during these OBU-themed days. We believe this effort, along with the enhanced work and effort by our admissions team, has resulted in a substantial increase in freshmen and transfer students.

Additionally, we have been blessed to receive significant and generous gifts from our alumni and friends that have certainly made a difference in our effort to renew and enhance our programs and student scholarships while also assisting us in the much-needed renovations of campus buildings.

Much of the work that needs to be done on our campus has been identified by conducting full evaluations of academic and other buildings on campus. Using these evaluations, we embarked on a much-needed master plan process to address the identified needs.

Literally one week after receiving the first major draft of our master plan, the OBU campus was hit by an EF2 tornado. We thank God fervently that no one in the OBU family was injured or killed, as we all survived the tornado. But our campus was drastically different after that April 19 storm. As you may know, we were blessed to have many, many friends from all over the state who came to help us clean up and start the rebuilding process.

Like a roller coaster worth all its raving reputation, the aftermath of the tornado has been a constant wave of ups and downs while we have worked with construction leaders and contractors and so many others to urgently begin the process of saving our historic buildings. For all of us at OBU, this has been significant work in addition to our typical job responsibilities. Still, it has been truly amazing to see the way God has blessed us and the work he has done with the help of an enormous number of faithful servants.

An important part of our journey of renewal has been following the Multiply Strategy that has resulted

**We are praying this campaign will help  
revitalize and support the work needed  
to enhance and improve our campus  
facilities and programs.**

in our planning of a forthcoming capital campaign. We are praying this campaign will help revitalize and support the work needed to renew and improve our campus facilities and programs. We currently are working through the process of conducting a feasibility study with some of our donors. This has been an excellent way to share ideas and plans that have been influenced by the work done over the last three years.

One of the most exciting and noteworthy aspects of our capital campaign has already taken shape as we have begun a time-sensitive campaign to renew the venerable Shawnee Hall. This wonderful and historic building on the OBU campus already needed significant renovation so we could continue to educate our students with excellent classrooms and other academic spaces. However, when the April 19 tornado struck our campus, Shawnee Hall was one of the most severely impacted buildings. To summarize, what was already going to be an expensive renovation became much more expensive and expansive. The good news about this situation is that our insurance coverage will help significantly, and we are grateful for it. However, more resources are needed to create the high-quality space required for our academic programs.

We are excited to share with our community the opportunities ahead for others to help with this renewal effort to turn Shawnee Hall back into a gemstone of a classroom building that students for many years to come will experience.

We are also looking forward to sharing plans of renewal and renovation for Thurmond Hall, Wood Science and Raley Chapel – all buildings that are

vitaly important in the future for our campus community and the opportunity to offer first-class facilities matched with our world-class education.

This is an exciting opportunity for OBU to begin reaching out to our faithful alumni and friends to share with you all the highest priority areas where we need contributions to improve our campus and continue to serve our outstanding students. These students will experience the OBU educational excellence that will help them become wonderful servants of our Lord as they shape the future and make a lasting impact.

Please know that we are incredibly grateful to our OBU alumni and friends and so thankful for those able to assist the University with financial gifts, volunteer opportunities, recruitment assistance, and just finding ways to give back to OBU that will truly make a profoundly positive and lasting difference as we continue our journey of renewal!

If our advancement and alumni team can assist you in any way, please know we would be honored to receive your call or email. We are thankful to represent OBU and encourage you to find ways to come back to Bison Hill. We wish you and your families all the best for a wonderful 2024.

Sincerely,

**Tim Rasnic**

Vice President for Advancement





## Shaping the Future through OBU's Annual Fund

In the wake of a challenging year for OBU, where the echoes of a devastating April tornado still linger, the OBU family's strength and unity continue to shine as a beacon of hope. As we reflect on the journey from wreckage to renewal, it's clear that the resilience and dedication of our community have driven our recovery.

The storm damaged nearly every building and structure on our campus, leaving no stone unturned. But our commitment to OBU remained unshaken amidst the debris. The clang of construction and the sight of scaffolding became familiar companions, accompanied by the sounds of laughter and joy that permeated our campus. The start of restoration projects on iconic landmarks like Shawnee Hall and Raley Chapel mirrored the spirit of rejuvenation that filled the air, particularly during the festive holiday season.

True to the OBU spirit, our students continued to forge ahead and carve out their futures even as we rebuilt ours. The resilience displayed in the face of adversity embody the essence of OBU, and we express immense gratitude for the support of our donors, alumni, and friends.

Generous contributions from individuals like you played a pivotal role in our recovery. Your kindness not only helped rebuild structures but also fortified dreams, cultivated resilience, and paved the way for excellence.

As we enter the new year, we extend a heartfelt invitation for you to be part of the next great chapter at OBU by making a gift. Your contribution will significantly impact our mission.

Gifts of all sizes to our Annual Fund make a tangible difference to our university through:

- **Scholarships of Promise:**

Did you know that 99% of OBU students receive scholarships and financial aid, including a minimum \$12,000 in scholarships and grants for each first-time, full-time student? Your support ensures that current students have ample opportunities, both financially and academically.

- **An Empowering Curriculum:**

The world is constantly evolving, and so is our educational approach. With your help, a new generation of students has access to more than 80 fields of study, preparing them for careers, passions, and lifelong learning.

- **Meeting Critical Needs:**

Our care for students extends beyond academics. Your support enables us to offer essential services like mental health resources and career counseling, allowing our students to focus on their education.

Your commitment to our Annual Fund resonates deeply within the OBU family, and we thank you for standing with us during this transformative year. Your support will help us repair our campus and will allow us to invest in the promise and potential of every student who calls OBU home. Please visit [okbu.edu/give](http://okbu.edu/give) to make your contribution while this message is still fresh in your mind.

As we embark on the new year and we continue to rise from the rubble, stronger than before, we lean on that unbreakable OBU spirit – a spirit that you've helped shape and sustain. Let's move forward, shoulder to shoulder, building a brighter tomorrow for this incredible family we all hold dear.



OBU is excited to launch a new app for both Apple and Android users. The Renew OBU app was designed by students to provide a practical way for donors to give toward specific and meaningful campus projects.

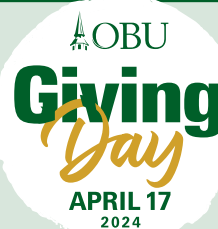
Not only is the app intuitively easy to use, but it also offers the ability to hand pick projects to support. Whether donors would like to help upgrade the seating, lighting, or rugs in their favorite residential hall, replace trees that were lost in the April 2023 tornado or support the renovation of classroom and educational spaces, projects will be continually updated with the needs of Bison Hill.

The OBU network stretches far and wide across the globe, and the Renew OBU app offers an opportunity for alumni and friends to make a difference in the lives of our future shapers. Scan the QR code to download the app today to keep up with the freshest updates to campus and support the projects that speak to your heart.



### OBU GIVING DAY – 4.17.24

Join the entire OBU family for our Annual Giving Day! What can we do in a day? For 24 hours we will have the opportunity to give back and celebrate God's generational impact on Bison Hill. On this day, your gifts of all sizes will honor the past, invigorate the present, and shape the future! Giving Day supports the Annual Fund, where every dollar goes to support OBU in the form of scholarships that defray tuition costs for students, as well as aid in tornado renewal efforts. Let's focus on shaping the future together!





**Dear OBU Alumni and Friends,**

As we begin 2024, I can't help but look back on 2023 and the blessings that God provided for OBU and your alumni association. We literally weathered a tremendous storm on April 19, when an EF2 tornado hit Bison Hill. God provided protection that night and has been providing renewal ever since. Students returned to campus, planned events have still taken place, and strategy and prayer continue to shape the future. Alumni engagement is higher than it's ever been and we expect 2024 to be no different. Here are a few things you should be aware of that are ongoing or coming up this year:

Visit the alumni website at [okbu.edu/alumni](https://okbu.edu/alumni).



Follow the Herd on Social Media.



**Bison Memories Oral History Project**

Did you receive a yellow postcard or an email asking you to verify your contact information? If so, rest assured this is an official project launched in the fall of 2023 by the OBU Alumni Association in partnership with Publishing Concepts Inc. (PCI). This project is meant to not only provide data updates and data verification on our alumni base but to also collect oral history stories from our alumni about their time on Bison Hill. All stories and interviews collected will become a permanent part of the University Archives so that future generations can know the story of OBU. To date, we've had more than 2,500 alumni share their stories with us and nearly 4,000 alumni participate! Thank you for helping to make this project a huge success for our alumni association!

**Traveling Bison**

2023 was our inaugural year for this program and we were thrilled to see alumni and friends of the university travel the world together! We still have many trips available in 2024 and will be unveiling our 2025 travel schedule this spring. Be sure to think of Traveling Bison when planning your next adventure! All OBU alumni and friends are welcome!

**The Weekend**

Last fall, we saw more alumni and friends come back to Bison Hill than ever before in our history. Start planning your return to Bison Hill this fall, October 17-19, 2024! We will once again have dozens of events and experiences you can be a part of while you reconnect with fellow alumni and get to know our current students. Families of current students are invited to participate as well, with Family Weekend activities happening throughout The Weekend. If you have a prospective student in your life, bring them for Bison Day where they can learn about life on Bison Hill and consider making OBU their collegiate home.

Do you want to see more individuals from your class attend The Weekend? Take the initiative and contact them with a personal invitation! Forward our emails with a personal note. Make a few phone calls. Share our posts about The Weekend on social media so we can reach even more alumni and friends. Make plans within the schedule of The Weekend to meet up and reconnect. Let us know how we can help. You can play a vital role in the success of The Weekend by working alongside our team to reach as many alumni and friends as we can.

There's more happening with the OBU Alumni Association than we can list here. Visit our website or follow us on social media to keep up with upcoming events, programming and services we offer. This is THE time to engage and stay connected! Join us in whatever capacity you can. Let us know your ideas and how you want to engage. Partner with us in regular prayer for our campus and each other. We are so incredibly grateful for each of you and the ways God is using you for His glory. Thank you for the support you give and for the love you still hold for your alma mater.

– Lea Ann Quirk



## From the Alumni Board President



What an exciting time it is to be engaged with OBU! That may sound a little strange after Bison Hill experienced the most destructive natural event in the school's history in April 2023. But God is good! And what could have left long-term wreckage has instead become the launching pad for a renewal of the campus we love for decades to come.

We are on the front edge of exciting changes – and we can all be a part of it!

It has been my great honor and pleasure to serve on the Alumni Board since 2016, and as president this academic year. It has been exciting to work alongside Lea Ann Quirk, our alumni director, as she is recreating the association to better support all alumni and the future alumni currently attending OBU. We are already seeing the success of the The Weekend which is much more than just homecoming. We are seeing fellow alums travel the world to exciting places. My wife and I will be on the Italy trip in 2024 – and are so excited! We see new initiatives being built to engage alumni across the state in volunteer projects that will enrich their communities, new ways to support recruiting of new students to Bison Hill, and other programs to be announced in the coming year.

The reach and influence of the OBU Alumni Association is expanding. We want to be a valuable asset to the university we love. There is a place for you plug in. Contact Lea Ann to make sure you know what exciting activities are coming up. Explore being on the Alumni Board and helping shape our future. Look for events in your local community and serve with other Bison. Find a way to engage with OBU!

–Chuck Lawrence



## 2023-24 OBU Alumni Board Members



### PRESIDENT

Chuck Lawrence, '82

### VICE-PRESIDENT

Austin Manger, '14

### SECRETARY

Amanda Teape Johnson, '10

### TERM EXPIRES 2024

Elizabeth Bird, '98

Kalyn Baker Fullbright, '15

Megan Kelly Higgins, '05

Leanne Hayes Howard, '78

Chris Peters, '07

Lisa McMillan Roth, '92

Karen Wilkinson Sims, '80

### TERM EXPIRES 2025

Libby Atyia, '02

Scott Greenland, '03

Leah Hillman, '99

Mandy Kniskern, '98

Austin Manger, '14

Mandi MacDonald, '12

Dena Payn, '02

Jeremy Smith, '00

Deanna Wilder, '97

### TERM EXPIRES 2026

Amanda Teape Johnson, '10

Jordan Cleveland, '08

Jake Vanderslice, '19

# Shawnee Residents and OBU Volunteers Join Forces in Tornado Aftermath

*“We believe a great experience at OBU means OBU serves our community and the world.”*



Dr. Health A. Thomas, left, and Brandon Dyer, OBU alumnus, address the OBU volunteers prior to participating in community clean up.

Typically, when we think of heroes, the first images that come to mind are often first responders or fictional caped crusaders. However, immediately after the April 19 tornado, another group of heroes captured the spotlight on Bison Hill: the Shawnee community.

Along with first responders, members of the Shawnee community were among the first to appear on Bison Hill, helping assess damages and begin cleanup.

“On the heels of the tornado in April, we were in crisis mode here on campus,” said Director of Student Ministry Dr. Matthew Kearns. “We saw a lot of response from partners and friends in ministry.”

OBU is blessed to have so many partners across the country willing to help in any way they can. However, OBU President Dr. Heath A. Thomas realized that the Shawnee community may not have that same support.

“As we were able to get back on our feet, immediately Dr. Thomas was thinking about how we can serve others

in our community that don’t have all these partners,” Kearns said. “Out of that, there was a desire for us to do what was necessary on the campus but also turn our attention outward to the community.”

One of the first events hosted by OBU to repay the Shawnee community was Big Serve Shawnee. During the event, OBU faculty, staff and students volunteered to help with cleanup around Shawnee in partnership with Community Renewal.

“Big Serve was largely nuts and bolts, literally picking up nuts and bolts, nails and glass, all those kinds of things that happened right out of the gate,” Kearns said. “Lots of cleanup in that regard.”

This event was not just about general cleanup but also attempting to bring back a sense of normalcy following the storm.

“There was still a lot of work to be done, so we did trash pickup and cleanup in downtown Shawnee, along Kickapoo, and in some neighborhoods, but we also worked to help some events move forward in the community to help reestablish some sense of normalcy,” Kearns said.

OBU and Shawnee have been great partners for more than a century.

“We are committed and dedicated to students, faculty and staff having a great experience here at OBU,” Kearns said. “We believe a great experience at OBU means OBU serves our community and the world. The heart behind it is we want to communicate to friends and neighbors as we’re commissioned to do as followers of Jesus and as a compassionate member of the community to care for those around us.”

While helping at the Community Market, Dr. Thomas was asked what message he hoped Bison Serve would send to Shawnee.

“OBU is here for our community,” he said. “We serve regularly through Bison Buddies and a number of other service projects in our city. We want our community to know we are here to serve and engage. OBU wants to be



OBU faculty, staff and students volunteer to clean up around Shawnee following the tornado.

a crucial part and contributor to the well-being of this incredible city.”

OBU is connected to Shawnee in more ways than just location. Student organizations work with local organizations to host events and fundraisers to support those in need in Shawnee.

“We talk often about what Jesus said in Mark 10:45, which is ‘The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many,’” Kearns said. “So, I think opportunities like this put us right in line with following King Jesus in compassionate and caring service in our community.”

An example of one of these partnerships would be Kappa Phi Beta, a student organization dedicated to positively impacting OBU’s campus and the Shawnee community. They work in unison with Community Renewal to raise funds for those in need in Shawnee.

“We work with the Kappas as their community partner and provide opportunities for them to invest in the lives of grade-schoolers in our community,” said Brandon Dyer, Executive Director of Community Renewal and OBU alumnus. “The Kappas have also been generous with donations from their events like Chacos and Tacos to help with our kids’ clubs across town.”

Community Renewal offers education and opportunities for building better relationships and communities. They accomplish this by connecting people who have a heart to serve with one another and equipping them with the tools to develop healthy, caring relationships throughout the community.

Following the April 19th tornado, Community Renewal and OBU partnered to help the community by opening a daily distribution center and volunteer hub at the OBU Green Campus.

“Community Renewal and OBU partnered strategically to help the community in the aftermath of the April 19th tornado, which devastated portions of Shawnee,” Dyer said. “By allowing us to open a daily distribution and volunteer hub at the Green Campus, over 6,000 people in our community were able to access the emergency support



and care that they desperately needed as shipments of supplies showed up from all over the country.”

Partnerships like this benefit OBU students by training them to be servants of Christ. It allows them to create valuable connections with other students who volunteer, Shawnee citizens, and organizations like Community Renewal.

“OBU students can have a tremendous impact on the community of Shawnee by choosing to invest their God-given love and care while they are here,” Dyer said. “Students don’t have to wait for a special mission trip to become a future version of themselves to be future shapers.”

Since Dyer is an OBU alumnus, he understands OBU and what’s happening on campus. His relationship with OBU is more akin to brotherhood or family than just a simple partnership. Through efforts like Bison Serve and organizations like Kappa Phi Beta, OBU strives to build this kind of relationship with the Shawnee community so that the University can serve them just as they have served OBU.

Often, it is said that heroes will answer any call to action; however, after the April 19th tornado, no call was needed. Numerous heroes across the Shawnee community showed up to assist OBU in cleanup efforts, and OBU intends to continue its strong partnership with the Shawnee community through these various volunteer programs. □



## The Data Revolution: Unveiling the Dr. Peggy D. Keck Finance and Business Analytics Lab

SHAPING THE FUTURE IN REAL-TIME

A future shaper is many things – including someone who never loses sight of the importance of others. The story of the Dr. Peggy D. Keck Finance and Business Analytics Lab begins with a distinguished alumna whose focus has always been on others.

A visionary and accomplished financial analyst, Dr. Peggy D. Keck, '54, envisioned a space where faith, education and data-driven decision-making converged to mold tomorrow's leaders. Her generous endowment became the cornerstone upon which the Keck Lab stands today.

The eye-catching, cutting-edge Keck Lab opened for the 2023 fall semester in OBU's Paul Dickinson School of Business at the Bailey Business Center.

During the fall ribbon cutting and dedication ceremony for the Keck Lab, Tim Rasnic, OBU vice president for advancement, said, "This state-of-the-art facility embodies OBU's dedication to faith integration and workforce preparation, ensuring that tomorrow's leaders are equipped with both knowledge and a strong moral compass. Dr. Keck's enduring focus and commitment to Bison Hill continue to inspire, reminding us that her legacy of faith and education lives on."



Dr. Heath Thomas and  
Dr. Peggy Keck at the ribbon cutting.

### The Visionary

Keck graduated from OBU in 1954 with a degree in business and a minor in education and social studies. While a student on Bison Hill, she was active on campus, serving in many leadership roles, including OBU varsity cheerleader for three years, president of Orion, president of the Women's Athletic Association and executive roles in several other organizations. She served in student government, on the junior-senior banquet committee, Young Woman's Auxiliary and as FOCUS Week seminar chairman, to name a few.

She earned her Ph.D. at the University of Oklahoma and later moved to Bowling Green, Kentucky. There, she taught finance courses at Western Kentucky University for 28 years. She was active in the Campus Crusade ministries, mentoring many students during that time. In later years, she worked as a training consultant for the General Electric Appliance Division and the American Gas Association.

She resides in Ardmore, but nearly seven decades later, her focus and commitment continue to be to Bison Hill.

"OBU opened a whole world to me. I really grew up at OBU," Keck said. "I loved it, and every day was fun. I



hope the lab develops a relationship between the faculty and the students. For the world, they need to have that human relationship. Plus, they are going to get current and up-to-date information. The future of OBU looks good. I want to thank (OBU President) Dr. (Heath) Thomas, his administrative staff and the business staff for visualizing and creating this modern, tech-oriented lab and letting me be a part of it.”

### Faith in Finance

“Faith is not the enemy of education; it’s the very heart.” These words are etched into the walls of the Keck Lab, serving as a constant reminder of the guiding principles that set OBU apart. In a world where finance and data analytics often seem impersonal and devoid of morality, OBU stands tall, showing that faith can indeed be intertwined with the world of finance.

Students who enter the lab are encouraged to explore the intersection of faith and finance. Through faith-based financial models, they learn how ethical decision-making can shape not only their careers but also the world around them. The lab’s mission is clear: to instill values and principles that will serve as the foundation for a lifelong mission of responsible financial stewardship.

### Data, Decisions and Destiny

Walking into the Keck Lab feels like stepping into a realm where numbers come to life, revealing stories hidden within the data. With state-of-the-art technology and software at their fingertips, students hone their analytical skills under the mentorship of seasoned faculty. “Faculty are mentors” isn’t just a slogan at OBU; it’s a reality.

Here, students aren’t just crunching numbers; they’re shaping the future. From stock market predictions to economic impact assessments, the lab’s projects influence not only their academic journey but also the communities they serve. It’s more than a path to a career; it’s a path to a calling, where they use data to make the world a better place.

A crowning achievement of the Keck Lab is the inclusion of the Bloomberg Terminal. This invaluable resource allows students to pursue Bloomberg certification, providing comprehensive coverage of markets, industries, companies and securities across all asset classes. With Bloomberg certification, students gain specialized expertise in the stock market and real-time trading practices, setting them on a path to becoming confident future leaders in the world of finance.

“Everyone wins with this finance lab,” said Dr. David Houghton, chair of the School of Business. “The Bloomberg Terminal will allow finance majors and our data

analytics majors to have the gold standard. It will make them even more competitive in the global marketplace. This enables our students as future shapers. This also increases our School of Business’ role as a pace-setting leader.”

### Forging Lifelong Relationships

In the Keck Lab, the bonds formed aren’t just between students and data. They are bonds of friendship, mentorship and shared experiences. The engaging campus community at OBU thrives in this space. Students collaborate, challenge each other, and celebrate victories together.

As they work late into the night, poring over spreadsheets and refining algorithms, they aren’t just preparing for a career; they are forging lifelong relationships. They learn that in the real world, success isn’t solely about what you know but also about who you know and how well you collaborate.

### Live All of Life, All for Jesus

“Live all of life, all for Jesus” isn’t just a motto; it’s a way of life at OBU, and the Keck Lab is no exception. Faith fuels education, and education prepares students for the world. As they graduate with a wealth of knowledge of themselves and something much greater, they carry the light of faith and the power of data with them.

In a world marked by uncertainty and rapid change, OBU equips its students with the tools they need, including a strong moral compass. The Keck Lab is a testament to this commitment, where data analytics and faith integration are seamlessly interwoven to prepare students not just for careers but for lives filled with purpose and meaning.

### A Promise

Information is constantly scrolling across the ticker. Things are always changing. However, the Keck Lab is a promise that doesn’t change – a promise that OBU makes to its students, its stakeholders and the world. It’s a promise of leaders who are not only equipped with knowledge and skills but also with a deep sense of faith and ethics. It’s a promise of renewal and transformation of lives lived all for Jesus.

At the ribbon-cutting and dedication ceremony, President Thomas told Keck, “Thank you for your investment in the future of our future shapers on Bison Hill. It truly is an investment in the lives of others. Let’s celebrate the students that are going to be equipped here to go into their world and make a difference for God and for good.” □

Alumni Notes are only available in the print edition of OBU Magazine

## OBU's New Bison Pact

Transforming Higher Education Accessibility for Oklahoma's Promise Qualifiers

**D**irecting a student to the proper path is a powerful way of shaping the future. Families, such as the Meltons of Ponca City, believe OBU's Bison Pact is a path Oklahoma students need to hear about.

OBU's new Bison Pact covers the remainder of tuition and general fees for Oklahoma's Promise qualifiers who are incoming OBU freshmen and transfers in fall 2024, making private Christian education affordable for many families across the state. This stands to save families \$140,000 over the course of four years.

"We are excited about the creation of the Bison Pact program that will provide new incoming Oklahoma's Promise students with a financial pathway to obtain an OBU degree," said Brad Burnett, vice president for enrollment management. "In an effort to assist as many Oklahomans as possible, we are also offering the program to qualifying Oklahoma's Promise students transferring to OBU."



Scott and Terri Melton

Bison Pact covers the gap between the Oklahoma's Promise scholarship and the cost of tuition and general fees, providing students a significant financial boost toward covering the cost of their education. This initiative is applicable for the fall and spring semesters, allowing students to benefit from affordable education during their entire academic year.

It's the path Josiah Melton was seeking but had not heard of until his sister came across the game-changing information on Instagram. Melton wanted to go to Bison Hill but also desired to graduate debt-free. His parents, Scott and Terri Melton, were equally thrilled to hear of this new path. Three of their children have graduated or are currently attending OBU.

"The Bison Pact was a huge answer to prayer because it met his financial desires, but also he gets to be plugged into a solid Christian environment," Scott Melton, senior pastor of Northeast Baptist Church, Ponca City, said.

"We believe in the mission, Terri Melton said. "We've taken all of our kids through OBU, and we believe in what they're trying to accomplish."

To take advantage of this incredible opportunity, prospective students are required to apply to OBU by March 1 and file a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) before March 1. Bison Pact recipients must maintain satisfactory academic progress at OBU and file a FAFSA each year before March 1 to retain the scholarship in future years.

**For more information,  
visit [okbu.edu/admissions/bison-pact](https://okbu.edu/admissions/bison-pact).**





# OBU Launches Raley College

## A Revolutionary Two-Year Hybrid Learning Program

OBU will launch a new groundbreaking two-year hybrid residential learning program leading to an associate degree. Launching in 2024, Raley College at OBU offers undergraduate students the opportunity to live on campus while taking four out of five courses per semester via online learning.

Raley College, supported by the CampusEDU online learning platform, offers a hybrid educational model tailored for today's students. Students can earn an associate degree in interdisciplinary studies from OBU that will prepare them to transfer into any of the University's bachelor's degree programs.

"Raley College at OBU opens a pathway for even more students to experience OBU's world-class Christian education by providing affordable associate degree education in a residential setting," OBU President Heath A. Thomas said.

Thomas said Raley College, with its innovative blend of in-person and online learning, is another great example of OBU meeting students where they are and drawing them into OBU's Christian community so their lives might be enriched.

With an average cost of only \$18,400 per year (including tuition, fees, room, board and books for online classes), Raley College at OBU makes a high-quality Christian education an accessible option for students seeking a residential university experience at a lower cost.

"This hybrid approach offers the perfect balance of residential living and online learning and ensures flexibility without compromising on the quality of education," said Brad Burnett, OBU vice president for enrollment management. "Through faculty mentoring, students will gain invaluable insights, build confidence in their abilities, and create a roadmap for their educational and career goals."



## A Faith Stretching from Bison Hill to the Big Apple

Jordan Bowles Kirby, '14, followed her values to OBU and then God's path on to New York City.

**B**ison Hill and New York City are linked in the life of Jordan Bowles Kirby by the word "massive."

Obviously, New York City is massive. More than 8.3 million people call it home. However, that's only part of the equation for the 2014 communications graduate who serves as the chief of staff and senior associate athletic director for strategic initiatives at Fordham University in the Bronx, N.Y.

"The impact OBU had on my life is massive," she said.

Yet Kirby can take the "massive" and quickly narrow it down to specifics.

### A Mentor for Life

"One specific that certainly stands out is the close friendship

and mentorship I built with Dr. Vickie Ellis (former OBU professor of communication arts)," Kirby said. "Her presence in my life has been such a gift. She was always so caring, energetic and genuinely invested in me as both a sister in Christ and student."

Some of Kirby's favorite moments at OBU can be connected to Ellis' little corner office at Sarkeys, "whether it was talking about my future or listening to her sing Broadway show tunes," Kirby said.

As Kirby, a native of Edmond, approached graduation in 2014, Ellis was the one who encouraged her to consider New York City as the "next step" for graduate school.

"While considering this decision, Dr. Ellis accompanied my mom, sister and me to an industry conference I presented at during my senior year," Kirby said. "Visiting St. John's University in Queens, New York, with her and my family helped confirm NYC was the right place to go next. Fast forward to nine years later, I met my husband (Steven Kirby) in New York City. We are a part of a deep Christian community, and I have a career I love. I continue to keep in touch with



Dr. Ellis to this day, and she even attended my wedding. All these things would not have been possible without Dr. Ellis and OBU."

### Focused Priorities

A lifelong sports fan -- specifically the University of Oklahoma sports -- Kirby certainly considered spending her college years in Norman.

However, as she neared graduation from Christian Heritage Academy, Kirby did more research. It became clear that OBU aligned with her top priorities for her college experience -- smaller class sizes, academics, community and values.

Most sports fans, such as Kirby, are deeply familiar with the term "Monday morning quarterback." Often, the term is used in reference to criticizing, judging or second-guessing.

However, on a Monday or any other day of the week, Kirby looks back with a great peace



that “I definitely made the right decision” by going to OBU.

“It was the college experience I always dreamed of, deep friendships I still cherish to this day,” she said. “It was a season of life in which I was encouraged and able to mature in my relationship with the Lord. The memories of playing club basketball, volleyball and intramural sports, founding the Kappa Phi Beta sorority and social club, Welcome Week, whole milk two mile, etc...all made my years at OBU so special. I was able to grow spiritually, emotionally and academically while at OBU.”

Today, her role at Fordham is vital in shaping the future of their athletic programs and fostering a culture of excellence. With her expertise in sports management, which she earned through a master’s degree from St. John’s University in 2016, Kirby possesses the skills necessary to drive strategic initiatives and propel Fordham’s athletic department to new heights. Her dedication, innovative thinking and leadership qualities have garnered her respect and recognition among her peers and colleagues.

“Shortly after starting graduate school, it was apparent the academics at OBU prepared me well for my post-grad classes and work,” she said. “Without my relationship with Dr. Ellis and her encouragement to move to NYC, I would not have met my husband, my friends and Christian community I so deeply

love and my boss I have worked with for many years now, who I met during my graduate studies at St. John’s. It’s fair to say my daily life would look radically different without OBU’s presence.”

### **More to Life Than a Workday**

While her professional achievements are remarkable, Kirby’s commitment to community service is equally inspiring. She was honored

to volunteer for Part of the Solution (POTS) in the Bronx, New York, where she devotes her time connecting Fordham’s student-athletes and her colleagues to helping individuals and families experiencing homelessness and poverty in their community.

Outside of her professional and community endeavors, Kirby cherishes quality time with her family and friends. Whether exploring the vibrant streets of New York City, embarking on exciting travels,

**“It was the college experience I always dreamed of, deep friendships I still cherish to this day. It was a season of life in which I was encouraged and able to mature in my relationship with the Lord.”**

---

with the Ignatian Award for Outstanding Generosity to the Community in Fordham University Athletics. This recognition stands as a testament to Kirby’s unwavering dedication to giving back and making a positive impact beyond the sports arena.

Her involvement as an Advent Food Pantry volunteer, a Redeemer Presbyterian Church Children’s Ministry volunteer, and a Women’s Bible Study leader at Redeemer Presbyterian Church exemplifies her nature and desire to uplift those in need.

Additionally, Kirby is an active

or training for half-marathons, Jordan seeks opportunities for personal growth and adventure.

One of her favorite verses is 1 Thessalonians 4, which says, “...make it your ambition to live a quiet life.”

“I think we can shape the future for Christ by living a life that always glorifies Him over ourselves and our own achievements,” she said. “Living from a heart posture of gratitude for the big and little things in your life each day and aiming to treat everyone you interact with each day as someone that was made in the image of God will make for a great future.” □

## Among the Best at NASA

F. Don Cooper, '60, literally solved the problem of where to point the astronauts when they left earth's orbit.

**F**or a hamburger, F. Don Cooper helped put a man on the moon.

And not a 2023-priced hamburger. This was 1960s coin.

Well, that wasn't Cooper's entire compensation. But it's a very interesting part of the story of a history-making OBU alumnus.

Cooper graduated with honors from OBU in 1960 with a degree in physics and a minor in mathematics. He continued his education in graduate school at the University of Alabama. That same year, he went to work for the Army Ballistic Missile Agency in Huntsville, Alabama, as a member of the Advanced Design Laboratory, where they designed a new missile for the Army that was deployed to NATO.

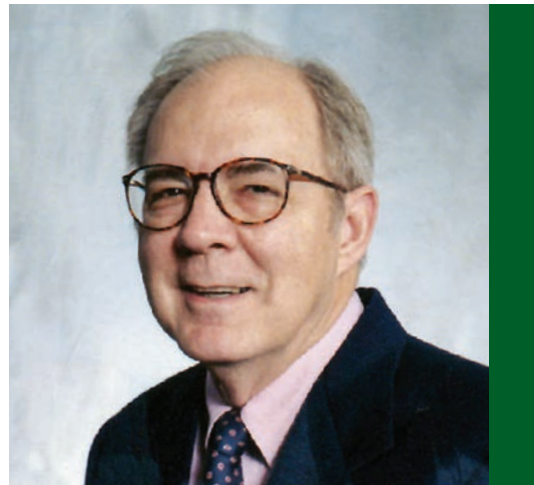
In early 1962, he transferred to NASA as a mathematician at the George C. Marshall Space Flight Center in the Guidance Theory Section. There, he helped create the trans-lunar targeting equations for the manned Apollo missions. In all,

Cooper worked on eight Apollo missions, plus the Atlas Centaur, the Air Force Dyna-Soar, and the Mars rocket NOVA. For the Apollo 13 mission, he provided the trans-lunar coast abort options to Houston Mission Control.

NASA is where the burger comes into play.

A paper, written from the viewpoint of Cooper's NASA boss, Doris C. Chandler, describes the creation of the Saturn V guidance and Trans-Lunar Insertion (TLI) targeting equations: "Cooper Integrated the IGM (Iterative Guidance Mode) and TLI targeting equations into a comprehensive guidance and targeting system that was chosen to fly all manned Apollo missions. The definitive documentation by Cooper included performance and accuracy analysis over the complete launch window. The reward was a hamburger that Chandler bought A. W. Deaton and Cooper for lunch."

True, Cooper's compensation was more than a beef patty,



buns, pickles, onions, lettuce and tomatoes. The hamburger was a kind gesture from an individual who believed in the young mathematician from Oklahoma she hired in early 1962.

Cooper explained that Chandler believed in the people she hired and let them do their jobs.

"I am proud to have contributed to the NASA Apollo project, which placed the first man on the moon," Cooper said. "I was fortunate that my immediate supervisor at MSFC, Doris C. Chandler, gave me the undeserved freedom and encouragement to peruse my belief that TLI targeting should be an analytic solution when the collective wisdom was a different approach."

### Launching from Bison Hill

The precision involved in formulating a launch window is amazing – as are the steps God leads each person to take as they travel down their particular path in life.



Although it's been more than six decades since Cooper graduated in the class of 1960, he recognizes God directed his steps and those of his wife to create their unique paths to OBU.

In Cooper's case, the pastor of the church he attended during high school had a brother who went to OBU. Also, a high school friend of Cooper's went to OBU.

"I was initially planning to go to the University of Oklahoma, where my uncle Glenn went, and become an electrical engineer," Cooper said. "But my senior year in high school, I decided to major in physics."

The deciding factors for Cooper were a scholarship from OBU along with partial financial assistance from his church.

He took it from there.

"By working summers in the oil field, I graduated debt-free," he said.

Cooper could see God working in various ways.

"When I met my wife-to-be, Linda Lou Lee, who I would never have met except at OBU, I was certain God had led us to each other, and so was she," Cooper said. "I was always glad I went to OBU. My freshman chemistry class taught by Dr. (William E.) Neptune was very important. He was a tough teacher, and I earned one of the few A's. My primary goal was to learn all I could about physics, math and chemistry."

A high school friend of Cooper's went to MIT and they got together the summer after their freshman year.

"I learned his classes were more accelerated than mine,

but OBU was not far behind," Cooper said. "That assured me I was at an excellent school. OBU gave me a first-class education."

At his first job at the Army Ballistic Missile Agency, Cooper became the lead mathematician in his group.

"At NASA, I was one of the best among many very good mathematicians," he said. "My entire life I have been able to choose whatever I wanted to do and be a success because of my education at OBU."

Cooper helped design a new Army missile called the Lancer. He created and programmed a method to approximate detailed computer simulations that saved months of time. For this, he received the Army Commendation.

He understates the next step, which certainly meant more to the space industry than a hamburger lunch.

Very humbly, he said, "I worked at NASA on Apollo and solved the problem of where to point the astronauts when they left Earth orbit."

As his impact on the present and the future continued to expand, he moved his family to Houston in 1965 and worked for the Johnson Space Center for the next seven years.

He then became the software project manager for a company that installed computer systems for General Public Utilities, which consisted of five electric companies. Following this position, he created a business installing microcomputers to manage inventory using software that he wrote.

Finally, he retired as the chief information officer for the Professional Compounding Centers of America.

Cooper firmly believes that Bison Hill was the right place to launch – academically and in terms of establishing self-confidence.

"I believe a small school with dedicated teachers is superior to large universities," he said. "Teachers are more accessible, and they truly want every student to succeed."

### **Back to the Classroom**

Cooper accomplished much in the years after leaving the classrooms of OBU. Interestingly though, his passion for sharing his knowledge has returned him to the classroom in retirement.

After he retired in 2002, he found a new calling to encourage students to pursue a future in the physical sciences. Cooper enjoys speaking to youth groups, community organizations, schools and universities. He does so with the hopes of inspiring the technology leaders of the future with his first-hand account of the events as they actually happened.

"Students do not know much about Apollo since it all happened before they were born," he said. "My objective is to show them how it happened, emphasize that education is essential, and show how math and physics solve real-world problems."

That's worth the price of a 2023 hamburger and a lot more. □



## A Lifelong Symphony of Impact

Dr. Laura Dawn Hillman, '90, is living a life of focusing on God and pointing others to Him.

**C**lose your eyes and imagine the sound of someone ringing a bell.

Now open your eyes and think what it must be like to have chemo and radiation treatment five days a week for 5 ½ weeks. That's taking chemo twice a day and radiation each morning.

On the evening Dr. Laura Hillman received the OBU Alumni Achievement Award, she proudly said, "This morning was my last treatment and I got to ring that bell. And I can still hear it. It's pretty cool."

Stage IV metastatic cancer isn't the whole story for Hillman, a 1990 music education graduate. However, it's undoubtedly an amazing part of it.

### A Melodic Beginning

In the world of education, there are individuals whose commitment

to their craft transcends the classroom walls. Hillman precisely represents that.

Hillman's journey began in 1990 when she earned her Bachelor of Music Education degree from OBU. Little did she know that this was just the prelude to a lifelong symphony of impact. Her passion for music education led her to Cheyenne Public Schools in Cheyenne, Oklahoma, where she assumed the role of vocal music director. For more than three decades, she has nurtured young musical talents, molding them into harmonious beings.

### A Crescendo of Excellence

While her initial degree laid the foundation, Hillman's commitment to excellence drove her to pursue higher education. In 2021, she earned a Doctor of Education degree, specializing in leadership and organizational change, from Baylor University. This advanced degree equipped



her with the knowledge and skills to not only guide her students but also to inspire her colleagues and the broader educational community.

### A Chorus of Accolades

Hillman's contributions to music education have not gone unnoticed. Throughout her career, she has received a chorus of honors.

In 2002, she was named Teacher of the Year at Denison (Texas) High School. Two decades later, history repeated itself when she received the same honor at Cheyenne High School in 2022. Her exceptional expertise was further recognized when she was honored as the Director of Distinction by the Western Oklahoma Choral Directors Association in the same year.

Beyond the classroom, she took center stage as a featured presenter at the Oklahoma Music Education Association



Winter Conference in 2023, sharing her wisdom with educators statewide.

### **The Overture of Community Service**

Hillman's impact extends far beyond the notes on a musical score. She is an active member of her community, dedicating her time to organizations like the General Federation of Women's Clubs and the Sorosis Club.

As the board of directors secretary for Friends of the Rook, she plays a pivotal role in the restoration and renovation of the historic Rook Movie Theater and the Cheyenne Star newspaper office, transforming them into vibrant venues for community events.

Her commitment to her local church shines through as she shares her musical talents as a private piano, voice and guitar teacher and contributes as a pianist, worship music team member and adult Sunday School teacher.

### **A Proud Alumna and Leader**

Hillman's connection with OBU runs deep. She has served as an esteemed member of the OBU Alumni Association Board and has held various leadership positions, including her recent role as president.

Her dedication and passion for her community, her students and her alma mater

exemplify the highest standards of excellence. Hillman's contributions are not just appreciated; they are celebrated, and she stands as a testament to the values OBU instills in its alumni.

### **Focus and Point**

Although her body was weak, it was evident Hillman's spirit was strong as she accepted the Alumni Achievement

Then she asked herself how she, a single woman, was supposed to teach a Bible class to a group of married couples. God gave her the same answer.

Next came, "How do I answer everyone's questions about when we lost everything we owned to a random wildfire?" 'Focus on Me, point them to Jesus.'"

Last December, when Hillman was told she had stage IV

**Hillman's contributions are not just appreciated; they are celebrated, and she stands as a testament to the values OBU instills in its alumni.**

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Award with a speech that is a shining example of what faith integration can lead to after Bison Hill.

"Throughout my life, whenever I was at a loss for what to say or do, God told me, 'Focus on Me, point them to Jesus,'" she said. "For example, there's teaching. 'What am I supposed to do, teach, or am I supposed to be a missionary?' God said, 'Focus on Me, point them to Jesus.'"

Hillman has been an educator for 34 years.

"Another example, 'Am I ready to become a parent?'" she said. "God said, 'Focus on Me, point them to Jesus.'"

metastatic adenocarcinoma, God's direction didn't change.

"Then, when I rang the bell this morning to signify the end of chemo and radiation treatments, God said, 'Point them to Jesus and focus on Me.'"

"Last but not least, at 2:23 this afternoon, when I didn't know what I was going to say this evening, God said, 'Focus on Me and point them to Jesus,' so would you please join me in singing 'Blessed Assurance?'"

As the group stood to sing, clearly touched by her words, it was evident she had indeed pointed the crowd to Jesus. □

# Fulfilling His Role as Disciple and Servant

Ross Geyer, '70, lives his life devoted to Christ and being His servant.

Ross Geyer's life has been devoted to serving Christ as a minister of the gospel, primarily in bi-vocational churches. For the last 21 years he has served as the pastor and director of Obadiah's House, a church and ministry that provides a transformation home for men coming out of prison with a myriad of issues Satan has used to try to destroy their lives.

## The Journey to OBU

In the heart of Oklahoma, on Bison Hill, a young man embarked on a journey that would shape his destiny and inspire countless lives.

Geyer, who graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in religion and

speech in 1970, found his path at OBU, where he would come to embody the University's values of faith, education and service.

Geyer's journey began in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he was born and raised. As a child, he contracted Polio during the Polio Pandemic. His home was chaotic, and there were many issues he had to overcome, but he found solace and a spiritual family in a small Baptist church where he learned about Jesus and was saved. It was in that church Geyer was invited to preach. He answered the call of God to the ministry and, from the age of 13, has been preaching the gospel all over the world.

He attended McClain High School in his hometown, setting the stage for his future academic pursuits. It was during these formative years that Geyer's passion to preach and minister to his community began to take shape.

Geyer initially had plans to attend the University of Oklahoma on an athletic trainer scholarship but faced a sudden change in circumstances. When



the head coach at OU changed, Geyer lost his scholarship. Seeing potential in Geyer, his pastor stepped in and encouraged him to attend OBU, even offering to pay for the gasoline if Geyer and his mother would go and visit OBU.

## A Scholarship and a Miracle

During that visit, Geyer met Bob Bass, the head coach of OBU's national championship basketball team. Bass offered Geyer a scholarship to be the athletic trainer for OBU's sports teams, a role he continued to fulfill despite eventually losing the scholarship.

Upon arriving at OBU, Geyer found himself in a challenging situation, financially and socially. He candidly recalls not having enough money for basic necessities like toilet paper. However, during his time at OBU, his calling to ministry became clear. OBU would prove to be the place where his life



was transformed and prepared him for his lifelong calling to be a pastor and preacher of the gospel.

He married during his junior year, and the burden of providing for his family compelled him to work tirelessly. He juggled a heavy course load with employment at the campus cafeteria and a nearby hospital.

“The miracle of God is that when I graduated from OBU, with other scholarships, my college education cost me approximately \$17.85,” he said. “I lost the trainer scholarship basically, but God just provided in different ways. My entire life has been learning to be totally dependent on God to provide. God’s provision brings glory to Him. OBU is very special to me. It was a miracle of God.”

This early perseverance and determination would become hallmarks of his character.

### Influential Mentors

Two influential figures at OBU left an indelible mark on Geyer, including Dr. Rowena Strickland, OBU professor of biblical studies from 1953-80.

Geyer said, “This is how she began every lecture. She’d say, ‘Gentlemen, let us pray, and as we pray, remember never, never, never worship the Book. Worship the Author and let him illuminate the Book.’”

Dr. James S. Timberlake, OBU professor of religion from 1950-88, taught Geyer to examine the Bible critically and encouraged his students to explore various perspectives,

even using controversial sources like a magazine article on the “God is dead” debate to stimulate discussion. These professors instilled in Geyer the importance of hearing God under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, as revealed in the Bible.

### A Lifelong Dedication to Service

Geyer’s life after OBU has been marked by a commitment to being a servant of Christ and being a pastor. Most of

nothing short of extraordinary, a testament to his resilience, faith and commitment to serving others. His story serves as a beacon of hope and a shining example of what it means to be a future shaper, touching lives and profoundly impacting the world. Through his compassion, leadership and unwavering faith, Geyer exemplifies the values and ideals cherished by OBU.

“My prayer for OBU in regard to the student body, the Future

## Geyer’s journey has been nothing short of extraordinary, a testament to his resilience, faith and commitment to serving others

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the churches he has pastored were bi-vocational churches. God opened the door for him to serve as both a social worker and as a parole officer in the criminal justice system, working diligently to protect vulnerable children and assist parolees in their reintegration into society.

Twenty years ago, God called Geyer to establish Obadiah’s House Ministries, Inc. in Fort Worth, Texas. Obadiah’s House serves as a beacon of hope for men seeking redemption and transformation, reflecting Geyer’s unwavering dedication to guiding others toward spiritual and personal growth found only in Jesus Christ.

Geyer’s journey has been

Shapers, is, ‘do not miss the opportunity to be instruments in the hands of the Holy Spirit,’” Geyer said. “Hang on to them for Christ and launch them into the ministry that you’ve prepared them to do -- nurses, doctors, lawyers, whatever they are. Most of all, they are disciples of Jesus Christ.”

In a world searching for meaning and purpose, Geyer has found his calling, and it continues to inspire those around him. His life story is a testament to the power of faith, education and service, reminding all to be instruments in the hands of the Holy Spirit, shaping a brighter future for generations to come. □

Alumni Notes are only available in the print edition of OBU Magazine.



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## Former Oklahoma Baptists Leader Remembered for Faithful Service



Oklahoma Baptists were shocked to learn the morning of Jan. 21 of the death of longtime Oklahoma Baptist servant and statesman Ron Fannin, who passed away the evening before.

Fannin served Oklahoma Baptists as senior associate executive director from September 2000-July 2014.

Born July 4, 1948, to Hobart and Catherine Fannin in Chandler, Ron grew up in Wynnewood, and resided in Chico, Texas before moving to Marietta, where he graduated from high school in 1966. Fannin graduated from Murray State College in Tishomingo in 1968 and from OBU with a degree in church music in 1971. He accepted the call to Gospel ministry at age 16 and was ordained in 1970 at First Baptist Church, Drumright.

In addition to his ministry in music, education, youth and administration at churches, Fannin served the Baptist Foundation of Oklahoma (BFO, currently WatersEdge) as vice president for church building loans and student services and senior vice president from 1988-2000. In the latter role, he oversaw a \$30 million church building loan portfolio, traveling more than 40,000 miles a year assisting Oklahoma churches in evaluating building projects and creating a safe debt service to allow them to maintain their current ministry and keep their missions giving strong.

After "retirement," he served with the BFO as trust/probate property manager and fleet manager for vehicle purchases, and with Oklahoma Baptists, Oklahoma Baptist Homes for Children and Baptist Village Communities as fleet manager for vehicle purchases, repairs and insurance claims.

Fannin served in more than 25 interim music positions during his 26 years in the Baptist Building. Nationally, he also served on the Stewardship Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention.

In 2013 he was a recipient of the OBU Alumni Association's Profile In Excellence Award.

Ron was a member of the Singing Churchmen of Oklahoma beginning in 1971 and served as president of the group in 1982. He was the recipient of the Churchmen's Royce Brown Award for Lifetime Achievement in Music Ministry in 2014. He traveled with the Churchmen on mission trips to Russia twice, China, Australia and Armenia. He also traveled to the Holy Land on three occasions.

Married to the former Jamie Pace of Tishomingo in 1968, the couple have three married children: Melanie Nippert, Todd Fannin, and Greg Fannin; 10 grandchildren and two great-grandsons.

Fannin was honored by the Oklahoma Baptist Historical Commission during the 2023 Oklahoma Baptists' Annual Meeting with the annual Distinguished Service Award.

— *Written by Bob Nigh and reprinted with edits courtesy of The Baptist Messenger.*



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