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April 2014: Farewell, and Thank You

For more than five years, I have had the pleasure of sharing stories and thoughts through this newsletter about how individuals and organizations claim UHCL as their own. The column was born the spring that the theme for the annual President's Report to the Community was "My UHCL." This will be the last installment; I am retiring from UHCL after almost 13 years on April 30, 2014.

One of the facts of life for commuter campuses is that they all fight the challenge of connection: students come and go, and they don't get as well connected to the university as students who live on campus and have "traditional" college lives. In my many interactions with alumni, donors, friends and university family members over the years, it became clear that while many don't have a strong affinity, as could be expected, almost all have a strong appreciation for the university. Appreciation developed through the life transitions that came through education has given birth to many great activities, donations and involvement with the university. As I have said often, our alumni include poets and painters, the simply curious and CEOs, lawyers and engineers, teachers and lifelong students. In each is a story; in each is the explanation of how and why they chose UHCL; and, in each is the insight into the future if we listen.

Shortly after I arrived, I ventured out to meet some alumni to learn about their experiences to better understand what it means to be an alumnus/a of UHCL; I am a University of Houston graduate and I worked there for seven years. I realized that I needed to learn the distinctions between the university I knew and the university I was about to serve. To learn, I listened. All the conversations were helpful, but one transformed the office for which I have been responsible since August 2001.

Troy Villareal is an alumnus of our healthcare administration program. I met him at his office in Dallas; on his walls were various memorabilia and documents from the Dallas Cowboys and Texas A&M. I simply asked him, "How can I help you? You are affiliated with one of the strongest alumni associations around and I have a tiny staff. Truly, what can I do for you that is not already being done through A&M?" He smiled, paused and then leaned over his desk a bit. "I grew up at A&M. You can never replace that. Don't even try. My career grew up at UHCL. What can you do with that?" From that conversation arose my vision for the Office of University Advancement.

I have repeated that story hundreds of times. Its truth is poignant. No one came to UHCL for fun and play or partying or killing time...everyone came to grow personally, professionally or both. And that is magic. From that reality, we developed the five action verbs of University Advancement: contact, engage, serve, empower and acknowledge.

I have been blessed with a patient leader and a superb team of creative, humane and talented individuals. From them, great things have come and the university has been transformed in many ways because of their influence. I have been blessed with some internal partners with whom we were able to turn great ideas into reality.

There is no way that I could thank everyone who deserves recognition here. I won't even try at my retirement party that will be held April 25, 4-6 p.m., in the Bayou Building! But I was destined to be here.

My first interview for the job was a video interview. As I sat in a Kinko's 900 miles away, looking at a television screen that showed an empty room, I wondered if something had gone awry. Missy Adkins appeared on the screen. "Are you Mr. McInnis?" "Yes, I am. Hello!" "Sorry, but we've had a fire alarm so the committee is out but will back." A couple of minutes later she said, "I'm sorry, but they take fire alarms very seriously around here so I have to go. We'll be back." They returned. The interview went well. I was invited to come to campus for an interview, and I was hired to begin on Aug. 15. Making the decision to come was not a slam dunk, even though a positive decision would bring me home to Houston and to an area where my dad and I had many wonderful fishing times.

As I tried to decide whether to accept the offer or not, I shared with my middle son—then 16—that I wished there was a burning bush to give me a sign as to what to do. He replied, "Well, dad, didn't the process start out with a fire alarm?"

Thirteen years after my on-campus interview, I am retiring from a university that is heading toward major changes and transformations. Life and growth continue. Some things won't change.

Donors support what they believe in; community members collaborate when it makes a true difference; students are students for a few years, and alumni are alumni for life.

For the rest of their lives, alumni hold their feelings, affections, frustrations and memories of time at the university deep within them. For some, those are "simply part of the past," and for others there is a call to return to their alma mater in some way, whether through service, support or socialization. Likewise, donors and community partners have been part of life-changing experiences because of their involvement with the university.

Even during the upcoming changes, UHCL will attract those who are looking for something different, something beautiful, something personal...and they will leave with memories and life-changing experiences. Then, now and in the future...this is their, this is your...UHCL. I am proud and honored to have been a part of your relationships as alumni, donors and friends.



Dion McInnis

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