



# The ALUMNUS

## TECH TOOK US THERE EDITION

July 2023

Special Edition

### Alumni celebrate nearly 100 years of student government at Tennessee Tech

Throughout Tennessee Tech's 108-year history, more than 1,000 alumni have helped shape the programs, policies and procedures that govern the university through participation in student government.

On April 14, 2023, Tennessee Tech's Crawford Alumni Center and the Tennessee Tech Alumni Association hosted a reunion for Student Government Association alumni, and alumni from every decade from the 1950s through the 2020s attended and shared their stories with one another and with current SGA members. Addison Dorris, '23 marketing and 2022-23 Student Government Association president, spoke to the alumni in attendance.

"Tennessee Tech has changed a lot of over the years," Dorris said. "There's a lot of new buildings and student spaces and construction, but regardless of how many changes have been made on campus, one thing has remained constant. And that constant is Tennessee Tech's sense of community. Students, faculty, staff and Cookevillians hold a strong bond with one another, and that bond is still very, very unique to our campus. Another constant is the nature of our work as the Student Government Association. When you were involved in SGA, I'm sure you were all very passionate about advocating for changes to improve the student experience, and that passion for advocacy and change is still present and flourishing in today's SGA."

Dorris shared some of the recent changes that have occurred at Tech, thanks to SGA. In 2013, students voted to approve a fee to build a new fitness center at Tech, and this vote was the product of a bill passed unanimously by SGA. In 2021, the Marc L. Burnett Student Recreation and Fitness Center celebrated its grand opening. SGA also voted to establish the Student Organization Life Opportunity (SOLO) concert series that brings musicians and comedians to campus and pioneered a mental health matters initiative to bring more emphasis to students' mental health. And in 2016, they created a process to recommend a student to serve on the



Dwight Henry and attendees of the SGA/AGB Reunion

university's Board of Trustees to ensure that students have even more of a voice on campus.

In the past year alone, SGA has worked to improve compensation packages for residence assistants, hosted the first Student Leadership Awards ceremony, piloted an assembly program for first-year students interested in SGA, increased the number of bike racks on campus and restructured senate and committee meetings to improve the comradery and productivity of the senate.

Finally, Dorris shared what she believes will be a focus of SGA in the future.

"I expect our senate to be involved in a lot of the conversations surrounding academic policies regarding artificial intelligence in the classroom — ChatGPT, for example," she said. "I believe SGA will have a large role in providing the student opinion on how that's going to affect the future of education."

Student government has been a part of the university for nearly as many years as Tech has been in existence and is referenced as early as

1925, the beginning of what would be Tech's first four-year college class — the class of 1929.

Tech's student government was originally known as United College Classes. In the Nov. 19, 1925, edition of The Oracle student newspaper, an article on a "Go to College" campaign demonstrates how, even in 1925, students united to promote their school. The headline read, "Go to College Movement receives unanimous endorsement of Tech's college students." The article describes how members of the United College Classes established plans for a "Go to College" campaign, which offered a free subscription of The Oracle to Upper Cumberland high school seniors for one year to show prospective students what Tech had to offer. Tech's student body voted to fund the initiative and worked with The Oracle newspaper staff to dedicate a column in each edition to the campaign.

The article read, "The aim of the campaign is to show by facts and figures the beneficial effect of a college education on every activity of life. The Tech Collegians voted unanimously in favor

of the campaign, pledging their support to put it over in true Tech style.”

In approximately 1940, United College Classes became a more formalized group called the Associated Student Body, or ASB. In 1987, the name changed again — to the Student Government Association. But while the name changed a few times, SGA’s mission remained: Act as a channel for the expression of student opinion regarding the university, collaborate with administration to better student welfare, support student organizations and foster community on campus.

Alumni from both ASB and SGA attended the April 14th reunion and shared their favorite memories, most impactful votes and examples of how their student government experiences prepared them for future careers.

Ray Render, '89 industrial engineering, is the deputy district director for Congressman John Rose and says his friendship with Rose and his career all started at Tech.

“We were both running for the 1987-88 SGA presidency,” Render said. “I beat him, but today I work for him. So, I always tell people, don’t burn bridges.”

Render also shared that during his time in SGA he helped change the campus parking pass system, and that system remains in place today.

“You used to have a sticker that you put on your car,” he said. “And with a shovel and a stick of dynamite, you could get that sticker off. Otherwise, it was going to be on your car for the rest of your life. We said, ‘There has to be a better way.’ So, we implemented the hangtag system in the late '80s, and I’m glad to see that has ‘hung around.’”

Dwight Henry, '76 history, says his political career also began at Tech. In 1985, Henry was elected mayor of Cookeville. He also served one term in the Tennessee House of Representatives, from 1989 to 1991, and has served for several years on the Cookeville City Council.

“Student government taught me how to work out something that everyone can agree with,” Henry said. “And that’s a skill you can transfer no matter what you do after your student government days.”

Henry says that as a Tech student, he was interested in the political process, so a friend suggested that he run for ASB president; however, Henry transferred to Tech from Cleveland State Community College and had only been at Tech for two quarters. Not many people knew him.

“My friend suggested handing out Oh Henry! candy bars,” Henry said “Your last name’s Henry,” he said. ‘All you have to do is go to dorms and fraternity houses and pass out the candy bars and say, ‘I’m Dwight Henry and I’m running for ASB president. You may not vote

for me, but you will remember my name.’ I’m not sure that I was any better qualified to be ASB president than the guy I ran against, but he didn’t have a candy bar. And that launched my political career.”

Henry recalls leading city council meetings as the mayor of Cookeville in the mid-'80s.

“Had I not had that Tech experience, had I not had that ASB president experience, I would have known nothing about parliamentary procedure,” he said. “There I was, 32 years old, chairing city council meetings and taking knowledge and experiences that started right here, and using those. The skills I gained here so easily transferred as far as working with people. Getting to hang out and rub elbows with administrators and faculty — that’s going to serve you well for the rest of your life. When I started at Tech my plan was to graduate and go back home. But I didn’t. I stayed right here. I spent my life here. If I had it to do over, I’d make the same decision and I’d be right here.”

Shabir Bhegani, '15 civil engineering and '21 M.A., also says his knowledge of parliamentary procedure served him well during his time at Tech — and beyond. Bhegani served as a senator from 2010 to 2012. He later ran for SGA vice president and president and didn’t win but says the experience prepared him well for other leadership roles.

“I learned a lot of lessons along the way,” he said. “I became president of the Engineering Joint Council. I also got involved in the National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE) and became president of that a year later. Eventually I became the national parliamentarian for NSBE. I was responsible for elections, maintaining order in meetings and representing our constitution. I was the person responsible for being the referee. Without that experience in SGA, I don’t think I would have been prepared. Going through SGA gave me that experience and that ability to build consensus and know how to run a campaign and win. And I had a good time doing it.”

Jacky Kimes, '01 electrical engineering, says what he’s most proud of from his time in cabinet was more behind the scenes than some others.

“At the time, they didn’t have a web page, so I built one,” he said. “I remember designing a little button that you could hover over, and it would change colors. And that was a big deal! It would look so cheesy today, but I was proud of it.”

Kimes also said that his experiences in cabinet gave him the confidence to get involved in other student organizations; he later became president of Tech’s electrical engineering honor society.

“Without SGA, I don’t think I would have done that,” Kimes said. “Because I had always been the kid who didn’t like talking in front of people.”

Art Blanchford, '93 mechanical engineering, also credits SGA for instilling the importance of good communication skills.

“It is great to have wonderful technical ideas, but without being able to communicate them, they mean nothing,” Blanchford said. “In my career, I often look for engineers who can lead and sell, and there aren’t too many of us. Being able to be an engineer and a great leader has served me, my customers and my teams very well.”

And Blanchford is inspiring the next generation of SGA members. His son, Sawyer, just finished his freshman year at Tech and is interested in running for SGA.

Jim Greeson, '68 health and physical education, '71 M.A. and '76 Ed.S., says his SGA experience served him well in his 43-year career as a professional educator, which included assignments as a teacher, basketball coach, principal and education consultant with the Tennessee Department of Education.

“Listening to others — their thoughts about issues and concerns on campus — and representing those thoughts at ASB meetings was something that I learned from serving as a senator,” Greeson said. “That experience, and being receptive to others, was valuable to me throughout my professional life.”

Sara Pierce-Ramey, '05 political science and '07 M.A., says she uses the skills acquired through SGA in her career every day as the founder and executive director of a nonprofit legal service.

“A primary activity during my work day is to listen to people’s stories,” she said. “As an SGA senator and member of cabinet for three SGA presidents at Tech, I listened to a lot of stories. I learned very quickly that every request is not grantable, but everyone can feel heard. Listening to people and taking time to discuss possibilities was far more important than a pass or fail vote. When a request is denied but the request is heard in a more genuine way, it is more tolerable. We don’t all win. We don’t all get our way. But we are all valuable, and maybe that’s what matters most. And that is what I took away from SGA.”

From the United College Classes in 1925 to the Student Government Association in 2023, Tech students remain committed to bringing positive change to campus. And alumni remain grateful for the SGA experiences that prepared them not just for careers in politics, but for careers in engineering, education, business, advocacy and more.

“I’m thankful for the opportunities I had at Tech,” Pierce-Ramey said. “And I’m thankful that Tech still pours lessons into my cup, even after so many years have passed.”

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[www.tntech.edu/alumnirecords](http://www.tntech.edu/alumnirecords)

# Fitness trainer, business owner and author Jarrod Houston found space to mature and grow at Tennessee Tech

Today, Jarrod Houston, '07 business management, co-owns three TITLE Boxing Clubs and has trained some of the biggest names in entertainment including Kane Brown, Morgan Wallen, Ryan Seacrest, Shawn Porter and Bobby Bones, just to name a few. But the road to success wasn't always easy for Houston who experienced sexual, mental and spiritual abuse as a child. Houston learned to draw from his experiences at Tennessee Tech — which included joining the Chi Lambda chapter of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, playing for Tech's football team and majoring in business management — to turn past trauma into a rewarding career path.

"I will always be grateful to Tennessee Tech for giving me the space to mature and for not treating me like a product," Houston said. "Even with all of the immaturity that I brought to campus, Tech believed in me and helped me along the way."

Houston admits that his college experience wasn't easy. Houston transferred to Tech from Valdosta because he needed to be closer to his younger brother who was attending Tech.

"It was a culture shock leaving Valdosta," Houston said. "I just wanted to play football. I didn't really care about school. If you were to ask anyone at Tech, I was a knucklehead when I was there. I was not an exemplary student. You would never hear someone say, 'I want to be like you, Jarrod.' I had to really reassess what I was doing. I had to dig deep into the life I had and where I came from and who I was."

Thanks to the advice of an advisor, Houston chose to major in business management.

"I graduated with 200 hours," he said. "I was on my way to becoming a career student. I wanted to start my own business, and I wanted to be a professional football player...at 5 feet 8 inches tall!"

Houston also joined the Chi Lambda chapter of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. at Tech.

"At first, I had a hard time adjusting to Chi Lambda," he admitted. "I broke a lot of rules. I didn't like people telling me what to do. But I gained a brotherhood, and I still talk to some of my fraternity brothers and football teammates on a daily basis."

After graduating from Tech, Houston earned his master's degree in human performance sports sciences from Tennessee State University and decided he wanted to apply for training positions at universities.

"I applied for 65 jobs and got not one," he said.

But eventually Houston accepted a position as an assistant strength and conditioning coach



Jarrod Houston

at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He sold everything he owned including his house. Houston's wife, Laura, moved back in with her parents to save money. Houston bought a one-way plane ticket to Las Vegas but didn't have a place to stay and actually slept on a cot inside the weight room. It was the second time Houston experienced homelessness; he had also been homeless for three years before marrying Laura.

Houston took a second job at Las Vegas's McCarran Airport (now Harry Reid International Airport), consulting at a gym located on the bottom floor. A typical workday for Houston lasted 16 to 18 hours and included a four to five mile walk to and from the airport. After a year in Las Vegas, Houston was ready to come home to Nashville, but he didn't have a job lined up.

One day, while at a TITLE Boxing Club in Nashville, one of the trainers saw Houston working out and was impressed. (Houston has a black belt in martial arts.) The trainer introduced Houston to the owner. Three years later, Houston is a part owner of three TITLE Boxing Clubs, including the TITLE with the most active memberships in the country.

"It's unbelievable," Houston said. "I never would have thought I'd be where I'm at."

Houston recently published a book about his life titled, "Nothing Concealed: Veiled Secrecy Will Be Brought to Light."

When he was 10 years old, Houston recalls standing on top of a bridge. He considered jumping. Years of domestic violence and abuse had taken their toll. Houston's memoir is a raw

look into his life as a child, but he says writing has been cathartic. Houston describes "Nothing Concealed" as a coming-of-age story-meets-self-help book that offers a fresh perspective on accepting trauma.

"What you put out in the world can never be taken back," he said. "This has been the hardest thing I've ever done, but I think this is what I'm supposed to do. I want to relate to everyone. I was very open and vulnerable in this book, because that's where strength lies. I want to help others who are going through what I've been through. I want to tell people who are struggling, 'It's easy to quit. It's easy to give up. Don't listen to them. Follow your heart. Fight.'"

Houston has been featured on numerous podcasts, including "Stay Ready: The Podcast" with former Dallas Cowboys player Matt Overton, and was asked to be the keynote speaker at April's Tennessee Association of Mental Health Organizations conference.

Houston says he continues to put a lot of the lessons he learned at Tech into practice.

"I learned self-preservation at Tech," he said. "I learned financial aptitude. I learned to be humble and accept who I am. I learned that there is power in words, and what I say matters. When I was in college, I was reckless with my words. I didn't care who I hurt, because I was hurting. I also learned to accept that it really does take a community to help you. That speaks to my fraternity and why I started coming back and helping more with the organization. At Tech, I realized it's bigger than me. You are part of something bigger." 

# Tennessee Tech alumni create employment and community opportunities at The Exceptional Bean

Be kind. Drink coffee.

That's the motto of a coffee shop where two Tennessee Tech alumni are making Cookeville a more inclusive place for individuals with special needs. In July of 2022, Michael and Cigi England opened The Exceptional Bean, a nonprofit that provides employment opportunities in a supportive environment for individuals with disabilities. The Englands say they hope to cultivate a community of inclusivity where all members have purpose and value.

"Everyone wants to be seen," Cigi said. "Everyone wants to have a purpose. Everyone wants to be needed. But the world doesn't always allow that."

Michael and Cigi say The Exceptional Bean might not exist if it weren't for Tennessee Tech.

Cigi knew from an early age that she wanted to work in fashion. She chose Tech for its size and for a close-knit human ecology program where professors would know her name. She graduated from Tech in 2006 with a degree in human ecology and moved to Atlanta to work for AmericasMart, the largest home goods and apparel trade show in the country. But Cigi says something was missing — she didn't have a sense of community. In 2014, she moved back to Cookeville and opened Cigi's Boutique.

Michael admits his college journey was very different from his wife's. He entered Tech as a history major but wasn't committed to his education.

"I cannot stress this enough: I had no idea what I was doing," Michael said. "I was going to school because that's what everyone else was doing. It felt like my only option. If I'm being completely honest, I didn't want to go to Tech. I wanted to go to UT with my friends. I thought Knoxville was cooler than Cookeville, and that's where I wanted to be. But I came to Tennessee Tech and joined Kappa Sigma Fraternity. I made

friends and connections but was floating around with no goal, no plan. My grades weren't good. My attendance wasn't good."

Michael says despite all this, Tech history professor Michael "Birdie" Birdwell saw his potential.

"I remember one day Dr. Birdwell pulled me out into the hallway and said, 'You're one of the smartest students I have, but your attendance and performance are based on decisions you're making,'" Michael said. "He was right, and that stuck with me. He didn't have to do that — he had a lot of students — but he made me feel like I belonged at Tech."

Michael ultimately decided to withdraw from Tech and move back home to Crossville. He worked in commission-only sales for a while and later at the same tire company as his dad. But, like his future wife, he knew something was missing. A few years later, Michael met Cigi and moved back to Cookeville.

"My perspective had changed, and my life had changed dramatically," Michael said. "Leaving Tech and Cookeville the way I did — as a college dropout — always ate at me. It was something I wanted to correct, but I didn't know how."

Then Michael met Susan Wells, a lecturer in Tech's Department of Decision Sciences and Management. She offered to help him re-enroll. Michael was concerned that his GPA would prevent him from being admitted and that it would take too many years to complete a degree, but Wells was undeterred.

"She said, 'I've seen worse GPAs than yours — not many, but I've seen worse,'" Michael recalled. "'You can clean this up and do this in four years. You can be 39 years old with a degree or 39 years old without a degree. Who do you want to be?'" Susan Wells is an absolute asset to our university because she genuinely cares. And that ultimately is what Tech is all about."

Michael was re-admitted to Tech's College of Interdisciplinary Studies and says the faculty and staff created a schedule that accommodated his full-time job. In 2019, Michael graduated with his bachelor's degree.

"Going back to get my degree, I realized how much I genuinely liked Tennessee Tech," Michael said. "I was now looking at Tech through different eyes. I had this 'aha' moment. I was never a Volunteer. I was always a Golden Eagle. I just didn't know it at the time."

Michael and Cigi volunteer with several organizations that assist people with disabilities. Through Ainsley's Angels, Michael met Bradley Styer. Bradley has multiple disabilities, including cerebral palsy, and has used a wheelchair for most of his life. Michael, a runner, pushes Bradley in races.

"When I started running with Bradley, and I would push him in the wheelchair, we'd get going down the hill and he'd say 'Whoop!' I realized he's having more fun than any of us. I said to my trainer, 'You know, we haven't whoop'd a single time.'"

Michael and Cigi quickly discovered that their friends with disabilities couldn't go everywhere they could go.

"Not everywhere has a ramp or accessible restroom," Cigi said. "Bradley can't go just anywhere he wants, because the world wasn't built for Bradley."

They also noticed that their friends with special needs had trouble finding jobs.

"More than anything in life, Bradley wants a job," Cigi said. "There's nowhere for our friends to work. There's nowhere for them to have a community."

While watching television on a Sunday afternoon, the Englands saw a documentary on European coffee shops that serve as "the heartbeat of the community." It's where people get their news. It's where they go to mourn or celebrate. It's where everyone meets. They knew then what they wanted to create. While the Englands founded The Exceptional Bean, they are quick to correct people who say they are the owners.

"I am the founder, and Michael is the general manager," Cigi said. "We answer to a board of directors. And one year in, we are killing it! Business is going great! I'm a doubter, but I never doubted this. There's been no hesitation to come support it. And there's no hesitation for me to brag about it because our community made this."

Nearly every item inside The Exceptional Bean — whether it's a table, espresso machine or piece of art — bears a plaque with the name of a sponsor. And several of Tech's Greek organizations have volunteered to help out as well.

"People hear about this and want to be a part of it," Michael said. "Everyone knows someone who has a disability."

Michael and Cigi admit that opening The Exceptional Bean wasn't easy. Neither has a background in the restaurant business, coffee, nonprofits or special education.

"When we started, we didn't know what we didn't know, and every single day has come with new challenges," Michael said. "The one



Cigi and Michael England

thing that has been constant are our Bean Team members. They have faced every challenge that has been thrown at them. Every single Bean Team member is capable of things they didn't think possible just a short time ago. Some who said being a greeter was all they could do are now running the register. Some who said they would never be able to make the coffee drinks are now making the coffee drinks."

Cigi says she uses her Tech education every day at The Exceptional Bean. She credits accounting classes with Richard Rand and economics classes for lessons in how to run a business.

"I also have to give credit to Melinda Swafford and my child and family studies classes," Cigi said. "Dr. Swafford is a special needs mom, and she would always share real life-stories of the struggles and was very honest about it. She taught me how a special needs family interacts with the world."

Michael says it's been a long journey from an idea on a lazy Sunday to where they are today.

"There were so many times it would have been easy to give up," Michael said. "But it goes back to my experience at Tech. I took everything for granted. I had a healthy body. I was at a wonderful university. But I had a chip on my shoulder. Being employed is something I've

taken for granted my entire life. I can walk in almost anywhere and fill out an application and know that I have a shot. Bradley is more enthusiastic about working and life in general than anyone. People just need a chance. Once you get a chance, you can do anything."

When Bradley received his first paycheck from The Exceptional Bean, he knew exactly how he wanted to spend part of it. He took Michael and Cigi to dinner.

"He thought it was the greatest thing because, for once, he could do something like that," Cigi said.

Cigi says The Exceptional Bean has become more than just a place of employment. It's a community.

"One day, I saw a few employees being dropped off outside, and I realized they weren't on the schedule for that day," Cigi said. "So, I ran outside and reminded them of the schedule. They said, 'Oh, we know. We're just here to hang out.' We have employees who have their first apartments now because they have paying jobs. They are living independently for the first time. They are living their best lives."

Michael added that with the exception of one person who moved to be with a family member, they have had zero employee turnover.

"They embrace their opportunity and are grateful to have it," Michael said. "They now have a social circle and spend time with one another outside of work. They walk to the library together, they have dinner together, they share birthdays together, they support one another. Many have taken second jobs at other businesses using skills they learned at The Exceptional Bean. The Exceptional Bean has become what every workplace should strive to be."

The Exceptional Bean is located at 55 N. Walnut Ave., the former home of One Hour Martinizing. Michael and Cigi say people come for the mission but stay for the coffee.

"I think originally, people came for the mission," Michael said. "But I hope eventually people don't even know what the mission is. They just come because we have really good coffee and amazing customer service. In the beginning, we thought we would be leading and teaching, but we have come to realize that we are the ones being led and taught. We are grateful for our Upper Cumberland community and our Tennessee Tech family who have made all of this possible." ❖

## Lessons in the classroom and on the field prepared football alumnus to teach abroad

Luke Maynard, '21 early childhood education and '22 M.A., came to Tennessee Tech from Australia to play football for the Golden Eagles. Now, he is using his experience as an international student, combined with lessons in the classroom and on the football field, to teach English to children in other countries.

"Teaching is something I've wanted to do my entire life," Maynard said.

After completing three semesters of college work in Australia, Maynard transferred to Tech to finish his degree in education and play football. When he graduated from Tech, Maynard says he assumed he would find a teaching position in the United States or Australia. But then he saw an article online about English-speaking teachers from all over the world moving to non-English-speaking countries. Through previous travels, he had discovered a love for Latin America and accepted a position teaching kindergarten in Santa Marta, Colombia.

"The most rewarding part has been to see students acquire the English language," he said. "On the first day of school, they don't know what 'hello,' 'good morning' or 'how are you' mean. Now, my students come in every day and try to say good morning before I have the opportunity to say it to them."

Maynard says one of the most challenging tasks he faced was implementing classroom rules and routines when the students didn't speak English.

"In the beginning, none of my students understood what I was trying to tell them!" he said. "Of course, with 22 five-year-olds, chaos would ensue."

Maynard just completed his one-year contract in Colombia and will teach elementary school in Kuwait City, Kuwait, this fall.



Luke Maynard

"I chose Kuwait because the culture is so different from what we are used to in Western society, and even very different from the Latin American culture," he said. "I think gaining international experience in various regions of the world is priceless. It makes me a better, more culturally-diverse and more sensitive teacher."

Maynard says Tech prepared him for a teaching career through challenging classes, caring professors and impactful experiences on the football team. He adds that Julie Baker, associate dean of the College of Education, and Amy Brown, director of Teacher Education, were always in his corner, guiding him along the way.

"None of what I'm doing now would be possible without them," he said. "My professors truly cared about students' education. Their job was more than just a paycheck. During my time at Tech, I was fortunate to build great relationships with both my professors and my peers. My professors were influential in shaping me into the teacher I am today."

In addition to his College of Education classes, Maynard says his experience on Tech's football team had a significant role in preparing him to teach.

"As a student-athlete, you learn to utilize every moment of the day, because between football



Luke Maynard

commitments and classes, you don't have a lot of spare time," Maynard said. "Football helped me develop time management which, as a teacher, is an important skill to have. Additionally, as a student-athlete, you're going to have good plays and bad plays, and you need to quickly reflect on what you did right and wrong. Then, put the play behind you and focus on the next one. The same goes for teaching. There are some lessons that you think you've aced and others that did not

go anything how you envisioned, but either way, you need to reflect on them and then move on to the next lesson."

Maynard says he was fortunate to play football for Head Coach Dewayne Alexander and numerous assistant coaches during his time at Tech.

"Playing football for the Golden Eagles is one of the best things that has ever happened to me," Maynard said. "My coaches taught many life

lessons and pushed me to be the best athlete, student and citizen that I could be. I formed friendships and brotherhoods with many of my teammates, and something that gives me great pleasure now as an alumnus is seeing my former teammates succeed in their journey of life. I remember something Coach Alexander said to the seniors when we were finishing up our playing career: 'Don't be sad that it's over. Be glad that it happened. The best is yet to come.' Those words have really stuck with me."

Maynard says teaching English in another country has allowed him to experience a new culture on a deeper level, learn a new language, build connections with new people and make lifetime memories while traveling.

"A career in education is one of the most rewarding careers," Maynard said. "The reason teachers do what they do is to help students achieve that lightbulb moment when they learn something, and the first lightbulb moment is just as special to be a part of as the hundredth. It is definitely not an easy job, but finishing the workday after making an impact in a student's life makes it worth it."

Associate Dean Baker says it's no surprise that, with a positive attitude, motivation to learn and education degree from Tech, Maynard has embarked on a remarkable career abroad.

"We teach our teacher candidates to focus on the impact they will make on P-12 students, and that's certainly not limited to our state or our country," Baker said. "Luke is the perfect example of how our graduates are prepared to teach and truly be difference-makers anywhere in the world." 

## GOLDEN EAGLE TRAVEL

Tennessee Tech's travel program allows alumni and friends to explore the world with fellow Golden Eagles! We partner with companies who specialize in group travel, and we take care of all the details so you can relax and enjoy your vacation. Here's what we have planned for 2023-2024:

**Montreal & Quebec City Christmas Markets  
Dec. 7-11, 2023**

**African Safari  
Sept. 10-16, 2023 and Feb. 4-10, 2024**

**Great Trains & Grand Canyons  
March 3-8, 2024**

**Albuquerque Balloon Fiesta  
Oct. 9-14, 2024**

Due to limited space, we encourage you to sign up for the tours you are interested in as soon as possible. Visit [www.tntech.edu/goldeneagletravel](http://www.tntech.edu/goldeneagletravel) or email [alumni@tntech.edu](mailto:alumni@tntech.edu) for more information.

**Wings Up Across America!**

# Trailblazer Safaris owner credits Tech education, student-athlete experience for career in travel industry

Trailblazer Safaris owner Melisa Cansado says her Tennessee Tech world culture and business degree combined with her experience on the Tech tennis team gave her the entrepreneurial, business and networking skills to own her own business.

Originally from Argentina, Cansado, '05 world culture and business and '08 MBA, says Tech gave her the chance to play tennis — a sport she had played since she was a child — and earn an education at the same time. And Cansado says that education has been invaluable.

“Tech gave me the foundations to manage my own business,” she said. “It helped me run a business more professionally and be more organized — especially at the beginning when you are still small and can’t afford a secretary, accountant or anyone else to manage the day-to-day finances. I learned about market research, basic accounting, finance, marketing and many more tools that I could apply to my own business. At Tech, I felt the faculty genuinely cared. I wasn’t just another student trying to pass a class or another foreign student registering in the international education office.”

Cansado says Tech also allowed her to meet amazing people from all over the world, which exposed her to different cultures and ways of life, and adds that she was fortunate to do an exchange semester in Austria to finish her MBA.

“Without realizing it at the time, I was learning about networking and building relationships — a very valuable tool in my line of work,” she said.

In addition to her education, Cansado says the experience playing tennis for Tech taught her valuable life lessons outside of the classroom and allowed her to form lifelong friendships. Twenty

years later, she is still in touch with many of her teammates.

“Through Tech’s tennis team, I gained a new family,” she said. “These girls are my gemstones. We went through a lot together, overcame our differences and learned to work as a team. Being a student-athlete takes discipline. You have to juggle physical training, classes, practice, studying, homework and traveling to tournaments.”

After receiving her bachelor’s degree and MBA from Tech, Cansado returned to Argentina and worked for Citi Bank, then moved to Australia and managed a hotel, bar and restaurant. That’s where she met her future Trailblazer Safaris business partner. He had been working in Africa for almost 20 years and invited Cansado to join him in Africa, become partners and open Trailblazer Safaris.

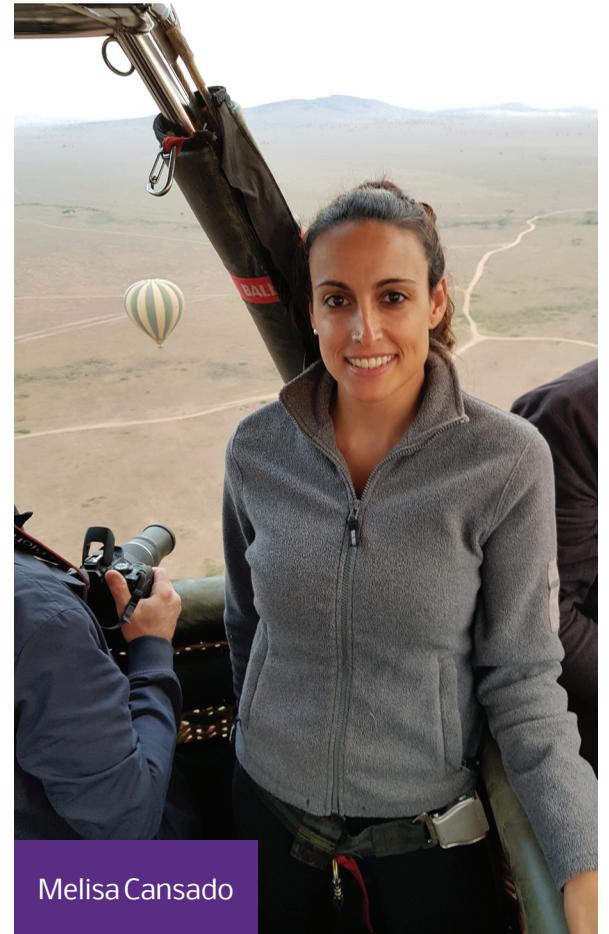
“We do custom-made safaris in Tanzania, Botswana, Zimbabwe and South Africa,” Cansado said. “I’d always worked for someone else, and I wanted to have something of my own — something I can put my personal touch on and something I can be proud of.”

Cansado admits that owning her own business has many challenges but says it’s very rewarding as well.

“I love nature, wildlife and learning about other cultures,” Cansado said. “I have traveled all over the world, but Africa broadened my mind and exposed me to so many different things that it keeps me humble. And I’m constantly learning.”

Cansado says Trailblazer Safaris never offers anything that she or her business partner haven’t experienced before.

“I always want to visit new lodges, try different activities and visit new places so that I can

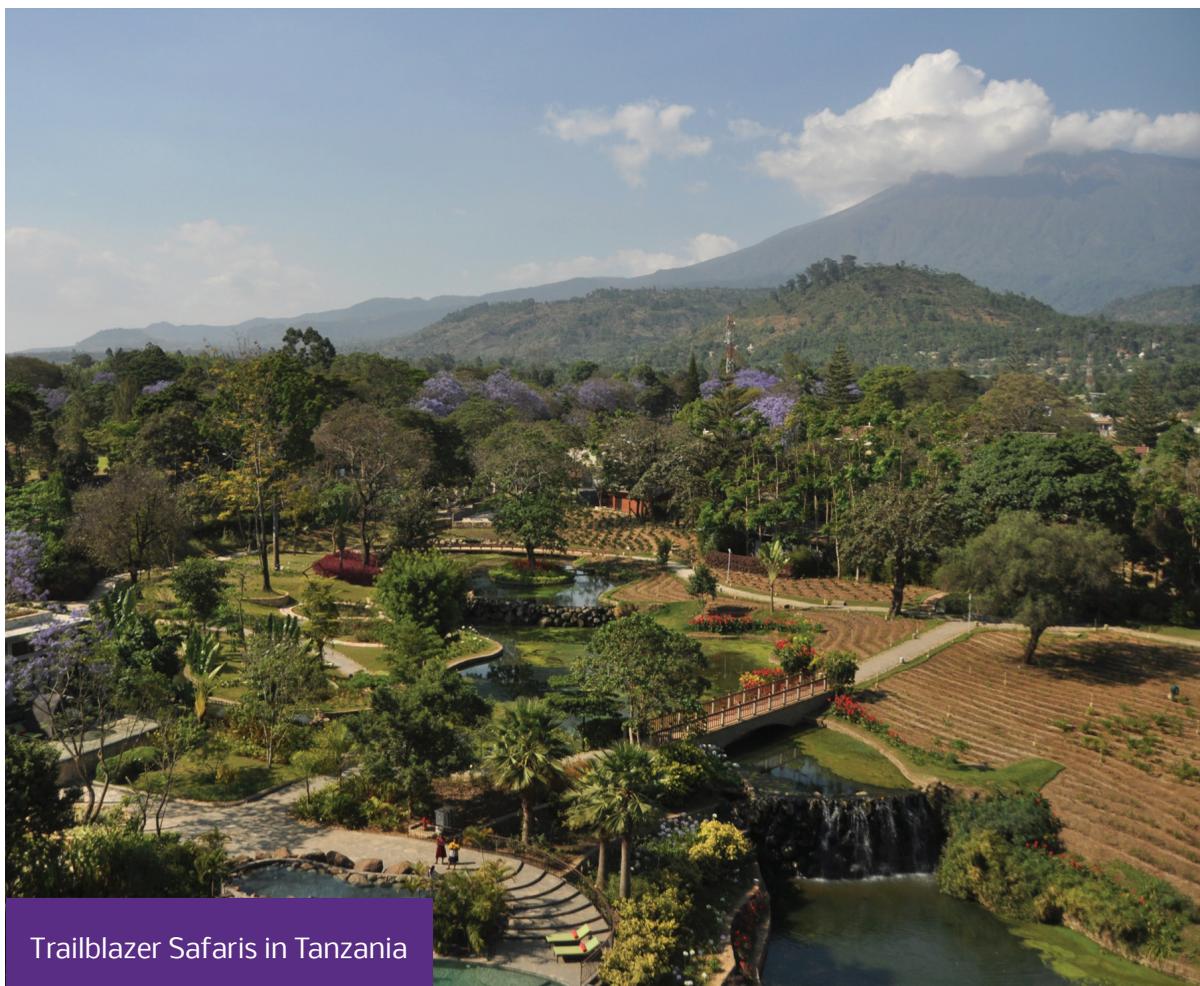


Melisa Cansado

recommend them to our clients...or not!” she said.

Tennessee Tech’s Crawford Alumni Center has partnered with Trailblazer Safaris to offer weeklong safari trips for Tech alumni and friends in September 2023 and February 2024. Visit [www.tntech.edu/goldeneagletravel](http://www.tntech.edu/goldeneagletravel) or contact Cansado at [info@trailblazersafaris.com](mailto:info@trailblazersafaris.com) for more information.

“I would love to share the magic of Tanzania with Tech alumni and show them the beauty of nature, the pristine landscapes and the unique cultures of their tribes,” Cansado said. “I look forward to sharing our experiences and stories about Tech over a bonfire in the middle of the Serengeti, all while creating new memories in Africa!”



Trailblazer Safaris in Tanzania

# Nursing alumni represent Tennessee Tech at Vanderbilt's Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital

Kelsea Anderson, '19 nursing, and Danielle "Dani" Keegan, '19 nursing, didn't select an easy career path after graduating from Tennessee Tech. Anderson and Keegan work in pediatric oncology at Vanderbilt's Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital and say that despite the challenges, they know they are doing the work they were meant to do.

The alumnae chose Tech because of the Whitson-Hester School of Nursing's reputation, and both say their nursing classes, professors and simulations in Tech's Sim Lab prepared them for their careers.

"Tech's nursing program teaches you to expect the unexpected all the time," Keegan said.

Anderson added, "As much as I dreaded them at the time, the clinicals and simulations were so helpful. In our specialized area, kids can get very, very sick very, very quickly. The simulations teach you to look for warning signs and know when to call the doctor. Looking back, those experiences did help me in the long run, and I am very thankful for them."

Anderson and Keegan say nursing professors Melissa Geist, Mary Lou Fornehed, Sue Piras and Jennifer Mabry were especially impactful on their education.

"I loved pharmacology with Dr. Geist," Anderson said. "She was amazing. She was so knowledgeable and so approachable. She was a great role model. My class also became very close with Dr. Fornehed. She truly cares about her students and everyone around her. One time I was worried about my grades. She was so kind, helpful and encouraging. She gave me a hug and told me I had it. She was someone I really looked up to."

Keegan added, "Dr. Piras was one of the hardest teachers I ever had, but she always made class fun. And Dr. Mabry was someone we could talk to if we were struggling. She would always be there for us."

Sue Piras, associate professor of nursing, says she is grateful to see students like Keegan who have taken knowledge from the Whitson-Hester School of Nursing and integrated it into their job of caring for others.

"When I hear, read or personally observe former nursing students who gently and kindly care for patients during times of critical and acute illness, I am thankful to be a part of the faculty who contributed to the formative years of their nursing development," Piras said.

Melissa Geist, professor of nursing, says the WHSON prides itself on training nurses in the art and science of nursing.

"Students like Kelsea embrace the challenges of complex pharmacology and pathophysiology courses," Geist said. "More importantly, as Kelsea demonstrates daily in her work as a pediatric oncology nurse, our graduates wrap this deep content knowledge in compassion and commitment to treating patients and their families with dignity when facing unimaginable circumstances."

Keegan says she always knew that wanted to go into pediatric oncology.

"I knew I wanted to be a nurse since middle school," she said. "And I always tried to find ways to be involved even before nursing school.



Dani Keegan and Kelsea Anderson

I volunteered at Camp Horizon where oncology patients can spend a week at Bethany Hills Camp. They have a summer camp devoted to them where they can just focus on being a kid. They can be around kids in the same situation with the same or a similar diagnosis. I did that my sophomore year in college — before I started nursing school — and that reaffirmed what I wanted to do."

Unlike Keegan, while Anderson knew she wanted to work in pediatrics, she hadn't planned on oncology when she started nursing school. But now she can't imagine doing anything else.

"Putting a smile on the kids' faces, being there to support the parents — I would not change it for anything in the world," Anderson said.

"You're with them during some of the darkest times in their life, and it is rewarding to be support for them. You really develop relationships with the kids and their families, so caring for them is one of the most rewarding things."

Keegan added, "Yes, there are some hard times, but there are a lot of really good moments where you get to celebrate with families. One of my favorite moments recently was when a little girl who had been sick for weeks and didn't feel like doing anything looked at me one day and wanted

me to play with her. I said to myself, 'Yeah, this is exactly why I do this.'"

Keegan says her co-workers are another rewarding aspect of the job.

"Our co-workers are our number one support system," Keegan said. "You come home and yes, you have a family or a significant other to talk to, but having a support system at work helps, because they also know these families. I love our co-workers. They are who make us who we are."

"As hard as the career is sometimes, it's one of the best decisions I've made," Anderson said. "You learn so much, and you meet so many people along the way. When you find something you are passionate about, it's one of the best decisions you can ever make."

Keegan says she would encourage students majoring in nursing to stick with it.

"It can be pretty rough, especially when you first start out," Keegan said. "Nothing can really prepare you for it. You may feel like you want to quit if you have a rough test or a rough semester. But at the end of the day, you know it's what you are meant to do." 

# Tommy Moffitt Strength and Conditioning Scholarship honors coach who inspires others

When Tennessee Tech's Department of Exercise Science and Physical Wellness presented the first Tommy Moffitt Strength and Conditioning Scholarship at its annual awards ceremony, there were a few people to recognize: the donors who established the scholarship, the man who inspired it and the young Tech graduate-turned Texas A&M coach who connected them all.

Jeff Piersall and his wife Judy, along with their Think Happy Thoughts Foundation, established the Tommy Moffitt Scholarship at Tech because of the impact Moffitt had on their son, Wes.

"For every person, there's someone who comes along who believes in you and ignites a spirit within you," Jeff said. "The situation with Coach Moffitt and Wes was one of those. Had it not been for Coach Moffitt, Wes would not be on the career path that he's on."

Moffitt says he chose to attend Tech because several of his family members graduated from Tech, including his older brother and his uncle, who was an All American in 1952. He also chose Tech so he could play football for the Golden Eagles.

"My experience was phenomenal," Moffitt said. "There's so much to do in the Upper Cumberland — every weekend was an adventure."

Moffitt graduated from Tech in 1987 with a degree in health and physical education. He knew he wanted to be a strength and conditioning coach and, after graduating from Tech, coached at the University of Tennessee (under head coach Phil Fulmer and with Peyton Manning as quarterback), then at the University of Miami. In 2000, he accepted a position at Louisiana State University where he worked for 22 years as the director of strength and conditioning and assistant athletic director.

Moffitt says he believes strength and conditioning is the greatest job one can have in the coaching profession.

"What we do isn't as results-oriented as winning and losing," he said. "So, the athletes are always a little more at ease in our department than they are at practice. It's a different atmosphere. You see them at their very best and at their most enthusiastic. Anyone who gets to do what I've done for more than 30 years is blessed to have the opportunity to spend time with some of the greatest young people."

When Wes Piersall graduated from Tech in 2016 with a degree in exercise science and physical wellness, he, too, knew he wanted to be a strength and conditioning coach. And when Wes applied for a coaching position at LSU, Moffitt didn't hesitate.

"When I saw that he was an alumnus of Tennessee Tech, I immediately hired him," Moffitt said. "I said to myself, 'If he's a graduate from Tech, from the same department as me, then he has to be a good guy.'"

Wes moved up the coaching ladder quickly and eventually accepted a strength and conditioning coach position at Texas A&M.

Wes's father Jeff, while not a Tech graduate himself, knows the value of a Tech education. He and his family live in Byrdstown, Tennessee, and they see Tech's impact on their community. And



Jeff Piersall, Judy Piersall, Hunter Barnhart, Tommy Moffitt, Wes Piersall and Associate Vice President of University Development for Tennessee Tech John Smith

they know what Tech (and Moffitt) did for Wes. That's why Jeff decided to establish the Tommy Moffitt Strength and Conditioning Scholarship — to honor Moffitt and to provide opportunities for Tech's EXPW majors.

"One thing Coach Moffitt would say is that Wes earned and worked for every opportunity," Jeff said. "He never felt entitled. Coach Moffitt and Wes will help but they cannot do the job for you. You must work hard, be dedicated and continue to learn and grow. If so, they will continue to help open doors, but you must step through that door."

Jeff established the scholarship through his Think Happy Thoughts Foundation, which was created in 2020 to support children, Christian organizations and education that inspires youth. Jeff is a graduate of Troy University and the University of Alabama-Birmingham, former award-winning basketball coach, entrepreneur and author of "Dogs Don't Bark at Parked Cars" which highlights timeless principles that remain constant in the lives and businesses of successful people, even with everchanging technology.

Moffitt, along with Jeff, Judy and Wes Piersall, attended Tech's EXPW awards banquet to present the first Tommy Moffitt Scholarship to the 2023-24 recipient, Hunter Barnhart, a senior EXPW major from Oneida, Tennessee.

"We really want to instill a strong belief system into our scholarship recipients so they become someone Tech will be proud of," Jeff said. "What you believe, you will become. Wes knew what he wanted to do since he was a sophomore in high school, and he pursued it."

When Moffitt returned to campus for the awards ceremony, he visited Memorial Gym and reminisced about his classes and professors.

"It was a truly remarkable experience to be able to stand in the gymnasium where I had played basketball and wrestled and practiced football," he said. "And it was remarkable to stand in the place where I took classes every day and speak to a group of amazing students who have done so well academically and who are ready to go out into the workforce. I went back to my old classrooms and remembered every class I had with LeBron Bell, Raymond "Bull" Brown, Raymond Drost and others. I will never, ever forget it."

While he has received awards and recognition over the years, Moffitt says he was shocked and humbled when he learned that the Piersalls named a scholarship in his honor.

"To have someone do that was truly remarkable," he said. "I've never been one to do something because of some calculated outcome. I hired Wes because he was a Tennessee Tech graduate. It was an opportunity for me to give back to a university that I love dearly and help a fellow graduate. Every time I return to Tech to visit, I am overcome with gratitude that my parents were able to afford to send me there and that I got a scholarship to play football. The amount of gratitude I have towards the Piersall family and Tennessee Tech University is indescribable." ❧

# Tennessee Tech psychology degree helps Cookeville police officer understand people she serves

Alannah Davis, '22 psychology, says she became a police officer because she wanted to be the change she hopes to see in the world.

"I wanted to be the person that I needed when I was younger," Davis said. "And I felt like if anyone was going to be that person, why couldn't it be me?"

While a degree is not required to be a police officer in Cookeville, Davis says her Tennessee Tech psychology degree helps her understand people — a critical component in law enforcement.

"You don't have to have a degree to do what I do, but it helps," she said. "Education is so important. I took abnormal psychology at Tech, and that really helped me understand people. I'm not a mental health professional, but I understand that sometimes people's minds work differently. You have to be patient with people and meet them on their level. That class helped me recognize some things people might be going through, and it taught me that I might need to break information down in different ways."

Stephanie Kazanas, associate professor of counseling and psychology, served as interim chair of the Department of Counseling and Psychology during Davis's senior year at Tech.

"We are so proud of Alannah," Kazanas said. "She's providing a shining example of what our psychology graduates can do! In our program, students have the opportunity to explore their interests and solidify their career goals. She did just that, and it's wonderful to see her excel and give back to our community."

Davis says she chose to attend Tech because when she visited campus, it felt like home.

"I went on a tour and met the advisors and people in psychology, and immediately I could tell I was so much more than a number," she said. "I felt like a person."

And that feeling continued once Davis enrolled in classes at Tech.

"I loved all of my advisors," she said. "They really made my time here. They made it worth showing up each day. If I had a hard class, they were so encouraging and really helped me push through it — past limits I didn't think I could get past."

While enrolled at Tech, Davis learned about the Cookeville Police Department's Citizens Academy class. Through this class, she participated in ride-alongs, received firearms training and learned more about what it really means to be a police officer.

"I got to meet the administrators and officers, and I loved the department," Davis said. "I could tell that these are people who are going to back me, and these are people who have the same



Cookeville Police Department officers Alannah Davis, Owen Tolbert and Clint Cannon receive the Life Saving Award for rescuing a woman from a hotel fire, April 9 (photo: Herald-Citizen)

values as me. I thought, "These are the people I want to work for."

Davis says that the most rewarding and the most challenging part of being a police officer is being with people on their worst days.

"You have to be there for a person's worst moments," she said. "And there's nothing you can say to make it better. And sometimes you have to be the bad guy and enforce laws that people may not like or understand. It's part of the job. But sometimes it's nice being able to be there for people on their worst days. We are making a difference for people on a personal level. And it helps for them to see that we are people, too. I want them to know that, even in the worst times, they have someone who is there for them."

After just a few months on the job, Davis faced the ultimate test when she and two other officers received a call about a hotel fire in Cookeville — and a woman was trapped inside one of the hotel rooms.

"We received a call for a structure fire, which is one of the highest-priority calls we get," Davis said. "We could see smoke through the window, and we could hear a woman yelling for help, but the door was locked."

Davis and the other officers broke the window to let the smoke out, kicked in the door and rescued the woman.

"This was someone's mom or sister," Davis said. "It could have been mine, and what would

I want someone to do? I would want someone to make every effort to rescue her."

Davis, along with officers Clint Cannon and Owen Tolbert, received the Cookeville Police Department Life Saving Award for their actions that day. Davis credits the training she received and her fellow officers for a good outcome.

"I couldn't have done it without those guys," Davis said. "I give a lot of credit to the training officer. I always ask about scenarios, and he is super helpful. This was a fire, and we aren't trained in fires like firefighters are. But we knew we had to do whatever we could to get the woman out."

In addition to the training she received, Davis says she credits her experience at Tech for preparing her for a career in law enforcement.

"Everyone at Tech pushed me to be the best version of myself that I could be," she said. "A lot of training for my job included perseverance and patience. You have to get through the good and the bad — you have to find your way. I was able to do that at Tech. Taking classes and forming different relationships helped shape and form who I am. I'm a different person than I was when I started college. I'm a lot more mature. I had to grow up. And I give all of that credit to Tech." ❧

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# Appalachian Center for Craft prepares fine arts graduate for career in teaching and blacksmithing

A love of anvils and blacksmithing led one aspiring artist and teacher to Tennessee Tech's Appalachian Center for Craft. Andrew Reist, '21 fine arts, says he chose to attend Tech because of its emphasis on STEAM education and because of the Craft Center's national reputation. STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art and math) incorporates art into the traditional scientific elements of STEM.

Reist is from Pennsylvania and, like many fine arts majors, chose Tech specifically because of the Craft Center, even though it was far from home.

"I was looking for STEAM education classes, and the Craft Center offered so many things that fit into STEAM as well," Reist said. "I really like STEAM education and combining art, technology and engineering together. Tennessee Tech is one of the best places to do that."

Kimberly Winkle, director of Tech's School of Art, Craft and Design, says the Craft Center is a unique educational facility and cultural center that combines teaching, research and cultural outreach and crafts marketing, all operating in partnership. It offers a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in five areas of concentration: glass, metals, clay, fibers and wood.

"Tennessee Tech is one of only three institutions of higher education where a student can earn a degree in blacksmithing," Winkle said. "Andrew's strong work ethic, dedication and discipline allowed him to complete his art education degree, hone his blacksmithing skills and achieve high levels of success as a student and now as an educator, blacksmith and entrepreneur."

Reist adds that the opportunity to live at the Craft Center was invaluable.

"One of my fondest memories was working at the Craft Center early in the morning," Reist said. "I would wake up at 5 a.m. and go out to the blacksmith studio and work from 5 to 9 a.m. After my classes, I'd go to the metals studio. I'd do that six or seven days a week."

Reist was interested in blacksmithing and anvils long before he came to Tech. He actually first developed a love for blacksmithing when he was just 12 years old. But it was at Tech's Craft Center that he made his first original anvil. Since then, his love for the craft has only grown, and now he is producing and selling 25-, 45- and 1,500-pound anvils as well as other blacksmithing tools.

Reist says his STEAM class with Jeremy Blair prepared him for a career in teaching and credits an independent study class with metals professor Daniel Randall for expanding his knowledge of casting and blacksmithing.

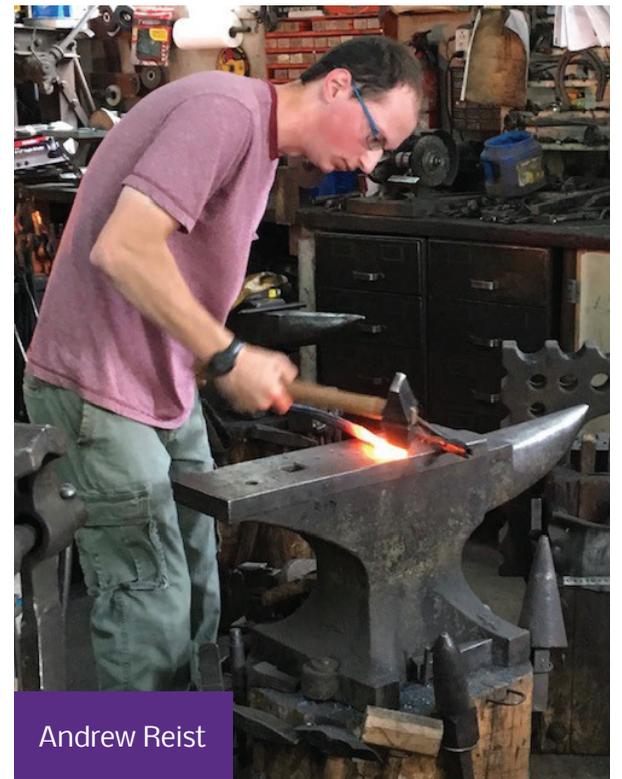
"Andrew was an exceptional student," Randall said. "He was driven by a passion for metalworking in a variety of applications from architectural ironwork to toolmaking. We worked collaboratively to identify specific goals and prepared Andrew for professional practice in the field through hands-on studio practice. His success is a great example of what our curriculum and studios offer students with a passion for making."

Blair adds that Reist is a great example of what a Tech graduate can do with a STEAM education.

"With an innate passion for art education and blacksmithing, Andrew fused both interests, resulting in a rewarding teaching career and a thriving business. His steadfast demeanor, coupled with his endless patience and kindness, serves as an extraordinary source of inspiration for his peers and students alike."

Today, Reist is an art teacher at Santa Fe Unit School, a K-12 school in Columbia, Tennessee, and owns Oak Lawn Blacksmith where he sells anvils and blacksmithing tools.

Oak Lawn Blacksmith is one of the few companies in the country that still makes anvils. Reist is particularly interested in older anvils and blacksmithing tools, especially those that date back to the 17th and 18th centuries, and admits that his love of anvils is a bit unusual but credits his father for inspiring the interest. Reist's



Andrew Reist

ancestors are from Germany, and his family has long collected historical objects, including anvils, blacksmithing tools and even Conestoga wagons.

"Anything old or unusual — we would collect it!" Reist said.

Reist says that thanks to the History Channel program "Forged in Fire," interest in anvils and blacksmithing tools has skyrocketed. Reist sells anvils through Etsy and Instagram and encourages other artists to consider starting their own business, even if it's a side business to another career. Reist has sold anvils to individuals in more than 15 countries including Australia, Brazil and Spain and says most of the people he sells to are blacksmiths, jewelry makers or collectors.

"Start small with selling just a few things, and work your way up," Reist said. "But no matter what, do something that you enjoy doing." 



Crawford Alumni Center staff: Brooke Fleenor, Kelly Chambers and Kathleen Lordo

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## SAVE THE DATE!

### Tennessee Tech's 92nd Annual Homecoming November 4, 2023

We hope you'll join us for the annual Homecoming parade, watch party and breakfast, football game and Tennessee Tech Alumni Association Awards! Colleges, departments and organizations will host reunions and events throughout the weekend as well. And we will honor the Class of 1973 as we welcome them to the Golden Grad Society!

### Wings Up Weekend April 12-14, 2024

Often seen as the "Homecoming of the Spring," Wings Up Weekend is a celebration of all things purple and gold with alumni gatherings, sporting events, festivals and performances for all ages.



Be sure to check out the Crawford Alumni Center website for more information about upcoming events!

[www.tntech.edu/alumni](http://www.tntech.edu/alumni)



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