

# GRATITUDE

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**Executive Director**

**Susan Luna-Hazlewood**

**Assistant Director, Communications**

**Kelly Chambers Mendiratta**

**Assistant Director, Annual Giving**

**Jessica Davis**

**Events Specialist**

**Raela Gore**

**Office Manager**

**Erin Knight**

**Events Coordinator**

**Alaina Richards**

**Annual Giving Coordinator for Athletics**

**Troy Wilson**

**ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTORS**

**News and Public Relations Director** – Jonathan Frank, *Office of Communications and Marketing*

**Graphic Artist** – Carson Smith, *Office of Communications and Marketing*

**Campus Box 1915, Cookeville, TN 38505**

**931-372-3205**

**[alumni@tntech.edu](mailto:alumni@tntech.edu)**

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

# *Dear Golden Eagle Community,*

At Tennessee Tech, progress is measured not only in new buildings or bold initiatives, but in the people who make it possible.

Tech continues to celebrate remarkable milestones. We've expanded our campus footprint, opened new and transformative facilities, launched innovative academic programs and strengthened our impact across the region and beyond. These accomplishments demonstrate that when vision meets commitment, extraordinary things can happen.

Behind every new building, every program and every opportunity created for our students, there is something more powerful at work: people who believe in this institution and choose to invest in its future. In this issue of Gratitude, you'll meet donors whose stories demonstrate this in powerful ways. Their support has helped shape Tech's recent successes and will play a vital role in what comes next.

And each story comes back to one unifying theme: a deep, personal connection between a university and its community.

At Tech, It's Personal is more than a message – it's a mindset. It's why we put people first: students who arrive with potential and leave prepared to lead, faculty and staff whose dedication drives discovery and our alumni and supporters whose generosity strengthens everything we do.

Now, we're ready to take It's Personal to a new level.

Something big is coming, driven by a single, transformative idea: What becomes possible when investing in people is our highest priority?

I look forward to sharing more with you in the coming months. But for now, I say thank you – for your belief in Tennessee Tech and in the people who call it home.

***With gratitude,***



***Philip B. Oldham***

***President***





# *Champions Clubs Launch a New Era for Golden Eagle Athletics*

**In** a year already defined by historic wins and championship moments, Tennessee Tech Athletics is building a united philanthropic movement designed to power sustained success in the new era of college athletics.

Through the launch of four Champions Clubs – the **Quarterback Club** (football), **Legacy Club** (women’s basketball), **6th Man Club** (men’s basketball) and **Dugout Club** (baseball), Golden Eagle Nation is rallying around a shared mission to compete and win at the highest level. Driving this effort is the new reality of college sports: revenue sharing, a structural shift that has reshaped recruiting and roster retention.

“Revenue sharing is not a trend – it is the new structure of college sports,” said **Director of Athletics Casey Fox**. “Programs that adapt will compete. Programs that hesitate will fall behind. Our path forward is clear: unite, invest and lead. Every championship program must have a championship-level support system, and the Champions Clubs empower our community to stand behind our student-athletes. This is how we build sustained success.”

**PHOTOGRAPHED:** Director of Athletics Casey Fox speaks to Quarterback Club members at a weekly Chalk Talk meeting



### Quarterback Club

Golden Eagle football is already making history. In 2025, the team went 11-1 overall and 8-0 in conference play – the first undefeated conference season in program history – securing its first outright OVC-Big South title since 1975.

But sustaining that momentum requires forward-thinking support.

“The Quarterback Club isn’t just a membership – it’s an invitation to the team behind the team,” said Head Football Coach Bobby Wilder. “In this new era of college athletics, sustainable support through revenue sharing is essential. If we want Golden Eagle football to thrive, we must build a strong, unified foundation.”

Through exclusive Chalk Talks, invitation-only events and recruiting discussions, Quarterback Club members have direct impact on the program.

“Our Chalk Talks give supporters behind-the-scenes access because we believe in transparency and shared vision,” Wilder said. “When you join the Quarterback Club, you’re not just watching Golden Eagle football – you’re helping shape it. This is a historic moment for our program, and revenue sharing will define how far we can go.”

**Sam Brooks** (*’92 health and physical education, ’08 M.A. and Tech football 1987-1990*) serves as the Quarterback Club’s first president.

“Stepping back into the program as QB Club president feels like coming home,” he said. “Playing for Tech in the late ’80s shaped the person I am

today, and there is a profound sense of personal fulfillment in giving back to the program that gave me so much. But the impact is even greater when we work together. I encourage every former player to join us – not just to revisit the past, but to actively invest in the next generation of Golden Eagles and ensure our legacy continues to thrive.”

**Philip Gibbons** has been the legendary voice of Cookeville’s The Country Giant 94.7 FM for 50 years and has welcomed the crowd at Tech football and basketball games since 1982. Many fans have heard his familiar voice echo throughout Tucker Stadium and the Hooper Eblen Center saying, “Let’s welcome our Tennessee Tech Golden Eagles!” In addition to his time, Gibbons has also pledged his monetary support to multiple sports within Tech Athletics for decades.

“I’ve been around Golden Eagle football a long time – behind the mic and in the stands – and to say the game has changed is an understatement,” Gibbons said. “It’s about revenue sharing and NIL, which isn’t optional anymore. Becoming a member of the QB Club is a tangible way of supporting the Golden Eagles. That’s why Sue and I joined the club. At our Chalk Talk meetings, you hear directly from Coach Wilder and his assistant coaches about recruiting strategy, managing the portal, NIL and film breakdowns. You walk out more invested, informed and more connected to the program. The future success of our athletic teams depends on the financial support of all our fans.”



### Legacy Club

Women’s basketball is built on legacy, and protecting that legacy requires alumni and fan support.

Under **Head Coach Kim Rosamond**, the 2024-25



women's basketball team captured both the OVC regular-season and tournament championships for the first time in 25 years, earned their 12th NCAA Tournament appearance, posted a 17-game winning streak and finished 14-0 at home. In the classroom, the team achieved a 3.699 GPA, ranking 13th nationally.

The Legacy Club ensures that standard continues and focuses on four pillars: recruit, develop, retain and sustain.

**Janet Bowling** (*'90 human ecology*) says she and her husband Kevin joined the Legacy Club because of their love for the women's basketball program.

"Since I was a little girl, Tennessee Tech basketball has been a part of my life," she said. "Going to games was a family event – a community event. I played volleyball for Tech and then became a manager for the women's basketball team. The community always wrapped their arms around the teams. We were family, and many of the people I met at Tech remain some of my closest friends. Getting inside updates and being able to support such a wonderful group of young women has been a great experience. Just getting to know the players shows me what a wonderful group of hard-working, dedicated players that our coaches recruit."

**PHOTOGRAPHED:** Women's basketball alumni, friends and fans gather for the Legacy Club kickoff event



### 6th Man Club

Every great team has a sixth man – the energy that shifts momentum. Men’s basketball is turning that idea into action.

**Jonathan Medley** (*'06 mechanical engineering*) joined not one but three Champions Clubs, including the 6th Man Club, because he says Tech Athletics has always been personal to his family.

“I was born and raised in Cookeville,” Medley said. “I’m a Tech alum, as are my wife, my sisters, my parents and even my grandparents. My wife played basketball here. My sisters played softball. These programs aren’t just teams to us – they’re part of our family history. Athletics gives our family something to rally around together. We plan our calendars around games. We create memories in the stands. For our family, supporting revenue sharing is about more than winning games. It’s about investing in the future of programs that mean something to this community.”



### Dugout Club

Baseball has always been about relationships, toughness and commitment, but the recruiting landscape has shifted dramatically. As Tech prepares to move into the Southern Conference, competitive revenue-sharing support is essential.

Founding members like former Golden Eagle baseball players **Mike Meihs** (*'04 secondary education, '08 M.A. and Tech baseball 1998–2001*)



**PHOTOGRAPHED:** Matt Bragga speaking at the Dugout Club First Pitch Banquet



and **Jake New** ('08 marketing and Tech baseball 2005-2008) have already stepped forward to launch the Dugout Club, rallying alumni with a clear message: The time to act is now.

“I am so excited for the formation of the Dugout Club,” Meihls said. “Tech baseball is what brought me to Cookeville and helped create the brotherhood that I have with my teammates. The purpose of the Dugout Club is to help those who love Tech baseball stay connected and involved with the program. Just like when we played together on the field, we need to rally around Coach Bragga and give him the support he needs to help Tech baseball pursue a national championship.”

Like Meihls, New says he wants to give back to Tech baseball because of what Tech Athletics and the university gave to him.

“My time at Tech propelled me to the things I still hold sacred in my life today,” New said. “I found the woman of my dreams at Tech, and my education

prepared me for the professional working industry. I was fortunate to accept a great job right out of school. We need Tech to remain competitive in today’s college landscape, and that requires some form of giving back. Tech will no doubt be successful if we can raise the funds needed to stay relevant through the ever-changing rules of college sports.”

### **Join the Team Behind the Team**

The early success of each Champions Club is a testament to its founding members – alumni and supporters who chose to lead and who believe deeply in protecting what they helped build. Their early commitments have created immediate momentum and credibility, allowing coaches to recruit with confidence and plan with stability. From packed Chalk Talks to growing membership and energized alumni, the momentum is visible. These founding donors have done more than give – they have set the standard.

“Our Champions Clubs connect members with our programs and give them a direct way to support

their growth,” Fox said. “I’ve seen firsthand how that support drives success and builds real investment in the program.”

All Tech alumni, friends and fans are welcome in a Champions Club. Annual and monthly payment options are available, and benefits include exclusive events, access to Champions Club merchandise, practice access, premium experiences and, most importantly, the satisfaction of directly impacting Golden Eagle student-athletes.

Fox says that Tech Athletics stands at a pivotal moment. Tech is not reacting to change – it is leading through change. Championships are being won. Conference titles are being secured. Academic excellence remains a hallmark. But sustaining

that success requires alignment between players, coaches and the broader Golden Eagle Nation.

“Championships aren’t built by players and coaches alone,” Fox said. “They’re built by an entire Golden Eagle Nation committed to excellence.”

Learn more or join a Champions Club at [TTUWingsUp.com](http://TTUWingsUp.com).

**PHOTOGRAPHED:** *Opposite - Members of the Golden Eagle baseball team speak to the crowd at the annual First Pitch Banquet*

*Below - Football alumni, friends and fans gather at Leslie Town Centre for the February 17 Spring Quarterback Club event*



# *Estate gift supports Football Revenue Sharing and honors 75 years of Robert Hill Johnson Award*

**C**ynthea Johnson Amason recently made a deeply personal and forward-thinking commitment to Tennessee Tech, announcing her decision to include the university in her estate plans to support football revenue sharing and the Robert Hill Johnson Award. Her gift honors the enduring legacy of her late uncle, **Robert Hill Johnson**, and celebrates a football program experiencing unprecedented momentum under transformational leadership.

Though Amason and her family are lifelong Tennessee Volunteers fans – and Amason herself is a University of Tennessee graduate – her connection to Tech runs far deeper than school colors. The reason, she says, is threefold.

“The first answer is the Robert Hill Johnson Award,” Amason said. “That award was incredibly important to my grandparents, and then to my mom and dad, because Robert Hill was my dad Bill’s older brother. He was tragically killed while he was a student coach at Tech. That loss shaped my father’s entire future.”

Robert Hill Johnson’s story is an important part of Tech football history. A talented athlete with a strong understanding of the game, he played at Baylor School in Chattanooga before joining the University of Alabama football program in 1949. After injuries ended his playing career, he transferred to Tech in 1951 to finish his degree and serve as an assistant coach. The Johnson family’s

connection to Tech and Robert Hill Johnson’s legacy were highlighted in a 2022 Impact Magazine article: [www.tntech.edu/impact/rhj](http://www.tntech.edu/impact/rhj).

Tragically, Johnson was killed in a car accident on January 14, 1952. He was just 24 years old. After Robert Hill’s death, the Tech community – led by students – called for a meaningful way to honor his memory. That call resulted in the creation of the Robert Hill Johnson Award, now recognized as the highest honor in Tech football. And on Thanksgiving Day in 1952, Tech President Everett Derryberry and Bill Johnson made the first presentation of



the Robert Hill Johnson Award during halftime of the game between the Golden Eagles and Middle Tennessee.

“My dad adored his older brother,” Amason said. “Anytime my dad had to make a decision, he would say, ‘What would Robert Hill do?’ I never met my uncle, but I am shaped by his influence because he was the biggest influence on my father.”

Amason’s connection to Tech is also rooted in cherished childhood memories and the university’s far-reaching impact on her hometown of Sparta and White County.

“My sisters and I can recount many happy days being on campus as we were growing up,” she said. “I went to cheerleading camp there for four years. My sisters attended basketball clinics. My very first concert was at Memorial Gym. I went to more football and basketball games than I can count.”

Beyond personal memories, Amason also credits Tech with shaping the educational and economic foundation of her community.

“Almost every teacher I ever had was a Tech graduate,” she said. “The leaders of my town and county are mostly Tech graduates. The influence Tech has on the Upper Cumberland region is undeniable. Even if you didn’t go there, you should be invested in its success.”

That belief has translated into generous support for Tech Athletics. While much of that support has focused on football, Amason has also become a strong advocate for the Golden Eagle women’s soccer team. She has built lasting relationships with Head Soccer Coach Corey Boyd and members of the team, demonstrating her commitment to helping the program grow and succeed.

“I didn’t know Cynthea before she began supporting our program, but through her generosity, we’ve developed a genuine connection and friendship,” Boyd said. “I’m incredibly grateful for the role she has come to play in my life and in the lives of the team members. Cynthea has given to our program in so many ways beyond her financial support. She has built meaningful relationships with our players and with our staff – becoming a trusted friend, mentor



**PHOTOGRAPHED:** Head Football Coach Bobby Wilder, Associate Athletic Director for Development Bobby Taylor, Cynthea Johnson Amason and Director of Athletics Casey Fox connect at a Quarterback Club event.

and advisor to many of us. Our players truly love her, and she regularly checks in to see how everyone is doing. I told Cynthea after our season that she was very much a part of our championships this year, because people like her make a real difference. She understands the challenges of athletics and the life lessons sports can teach young women and men.”

Amason says her commitment to Tech Athletics has only deepened after seeing firsthand the impact of her involvement – not only on the field, but in the lives of student-athletes as well.

That perspective was reinforced even further when she began hearing from recipients of the Robert Hill Johnson Award about what the honor meant to them.

“One winner told me that being elected by his teammates meant more to him than being inducted into the Tennessee Tech Hall of Fame,” she said. “It’s not about being the best player. It’s about being the best leader, the best person. That solidified for me that this award is worth continued support.”

The Robert Hill Johnson Award has expanded to include a scholarship for a deserving student-athlete and a stipend for student or graduate coaches – further extending its impact on the program.

Amason’s estate commitment also supports Tennessee Tech football revenue sharing, reflecting her belief in providing student-athletes with resources that help cover real-life needs beyond traditional scholarships.

“If we want to be successful and attract quality athletes, we have to have an organized, methodical way forward,” she said. “You can’t be a naysayer. You have to support the system that allows student-athletes to thrive.”

Amason’s commitment comes on the heels of a

record-breaking season for Golden Eagle football, fueled by the leadership of Head Coach Bobby Wilder and the vision of Tech President Phil Oldham.

“Coach Wilder is a game changer,” Amason said. “His energy, vision and work ethic are transformational. He makes everyone around him better. The proof is in the pudding – we have become successful at warp speed. Robert Hill would have loved Coach Wilder.”

Wilder says the Johnson family has been part of the heart and history of Tech football for generations.

“Cynthea, her mother Rena and their entire family have honored Robert Hill Johnson’s legacy in a way that continues to inspire our program every single day,” Wilder said. “The Robert Hill Johnson Award represents everything we want our players to be about – leadership, character, sacrifice and putting the team first. To have a family remain so committed to that legacy for 75 years is incredibly meaningful. Cynthea’s support of revenue sharing also shows tremendous vision for the future of college athletics. We are deeply grateful for the Johnson family and the example they set for what it means to invest in people and in the future of our program.”

The Robert Hill Johnson Award has been presented annually since 1952, with the recipient chosen each year by members of the Tech football team. Its winners represent a veritable Who’s Who of Golden Eagle greats, with many honorees later inducted into the Tennessee Tech Sports Hall of Fame. Three players – Larry Schreiber, Larry Shipp and Tim Benford – captured the award three times each. Astronaut Barry “Butch” Wilmore, who recently became a household name following a nine-month stay aboard the International Space Station, received the honor in 1985. Today, the Robert Hill Johnson Award stands as Tech football’s highest distinction and ranks among the longest continuously-presented honors in collegiate athletics.



**Seth Carlisle** (*'21 biology and '22 MBA*) was a member of the Golden Eagle football team from 2018 to 2022 and earned the award in 2020.

“Receiving the Robert Hill Johnson Award will always be one of the most special moments of my career at Tennessee Tech – not only because of what the award represents (performance, commitment, consistency) but because of who votes on the award and who the award represents,” Carlisle said. “Given the legacy that Robert Hill left at Tech, it is very fitting that the award be voted on by the team since ‘team’ was such a big part of his life.”

Before being selected as the 2020 recipient, Carlisle – like every player – cast his vote for a teammate to receive the honor.

“As a voter, I always thought about who performed at the highest level that season, as well as who always put the team first and truly represented what you want in a leader for your team. Every day, you walked by the plaque in the coach’s office and saw the history and countless Tech legends that have won the award in the past, and you’re reminded of

just how special the award is. It is humbling to be able to share a space on that plaque with them.”

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the Robert Hill Johnson Award, and on Nov. 14, the Johnson family and Tech Athletics will honor past recipients and the legacy of a young man whose character continues to define excellence in Golden Eagle football.

“For past, present and future recipients, I want them to know that Robert Hill Johnson was a gifted and talented athlete with a strategic football mind – but that’s not why people wanted an award in his honor,” Amason said. “It was because he was a servant leader who cared about and encouraged others and believed there is no ‘I’ in team.”

**PHOTOGRAPHED:** *Cynthea Johnson Amason cheers on the Golden Eagles at Tucker Stadium and is pictured with her sisters and nephews. From left front are Thomas Bronson, Robert Hill Bronson and John Bronson with Carolyn Johnson Bronson, Cynthea Johnson Amason and Cathryn Johnson Rolfe behind them.*

***Philanthropist  
Lanny Dunn  
creates three  
scholarships  
honoring family  
and supporting  
future students***



**L**ongtime Cookeville business leader and philanthropist Lanny Dunn has established three new endowed scholarships at Tennessee Tech, creating opportunities for future students while honoring the profound impact the university has had on his family and career.

The new endowments – the **William L. and Teresa C. Dunn Endowed Scholarship**, the **Wes Dunn Endowed Scholarship** and the **Jackie Dunn Endowed Scholarship** – will support students in areas meaningful to Dunn and his family. For Dunn, the scholarships are both an investment in the university’s future and a tribute to his children, both Tech graduates.

“I’ve been very blessed and very fortunate that I can give back,” Dunn said. “Tech has done a lot for me, my family and my business. I’m proud of my kids for attending there, and I’m grateful for what the university did for them and for the opportunities it gave to so many of the people who worked with me over the years.”

Dunn moved to Cookeville in the mid-1980s and founded Cumberland Auto Center, growing the dealership into a leading automotive business serving the Upper Cumberland region. Over four decades, Dunn employed hundreds of Tech students and alumni in part-time and full-time roles.

“Tech is one of the largest employers in Cookeville and has been instrumental in the growth and success of this community,” Dunn said. “I supported them, and they supported me. A lot of Tech students worked here while they were in school, and many of them went on to build great careers.”

Dunn’s son Wes graduated from Tech in 2000. As a walk-on in his freshman year, Wes was a five-year member of the Golden Eagle baseball team. He served as team captain during his senior year

and helped lead the program to two Ohio Valley Conference championships.

Dunn says the lessons learned through athletics helped shape his son’s leadership and work ethic. The Wes Dunn Endowed Scholarship will support future Golden Eagle baseball student-athletes.

“This scholarship not only honors Wes’s legacy in our program, but it also creates opportunities for future Golden Eagles to follow a similar path: compete at a high level, earn a great education and grow as leaders both on and off the field,” said Matt Bragga, head baseball coach. “We’re grateful to Lanny for investing in the future of Tech baseball and the student-athletes who will benefit from this scholarship for years to come.”



**PHOTOGRAPHED**

*Opposite - Lanny Dunn and wife Teresa Chasteen-Dunn*

*Above - Wes Dunn*

Dunn's daughter, Jackie, earned her bachelor's degree in nursing from Tech in 2007 and a master's degree in 2011 after previously completing an undergraduate degree in business at the University of Tennessee Knoxville. She now serves the Upper Cumberland as a nurse practitioner.

The Jackie Dunn Endowed Scholarship will support students pursuing degrees through the Whitson-Hester School of Nursing.

"This scholarship is a beautiful reflection of both generosity and purpose," said Kim Hanna, dean of the Whitson-Hester School of Nursing. "Lanny Dunn's commitment to Tech and the Upper Cumberland community has already touched so many lives, and through the Jackie Dunn Endowed Scholarship it will now shape the future of nursing as well. Jackie's career demonstrates a true heart for caring for others, and it's inspiring to see her father honor that calling in such a meaningful way."

Dunn says the scholarships are meant to recognize his children while encouraging them – and future recipients – to remain connected to the university that helped shape their lives.

In addition to honoring Wes and Jackie, Dunn established the William L. and Teresa C. Dunn Endowed Scholarship with his wife, Teresa Chasteen-Dunn, a member of the university's board of trustees and foundation board of directors and president and CEO of WIN Learning. The scholarship will support Tennessee students, with preference given to those from the Upper Cumberland and those pursuing degrees in engineering or education, particularly students who plan to become teachers.

The new scholarships build on Dunn's long history of support for Tech. In 2016, he made a transformational gift of the Golden Eagle Golf Club which supports Tech's men's and women's golf teams

and provides hands-on learning opportunities for students.

"One of the happiest days was when I was able to donate the golf course," Dunn said. "Tech is doing a great job with it, and it continues to help the university recruit student-athletes, coaches and staff. It's something I'm proud to have been able to do."

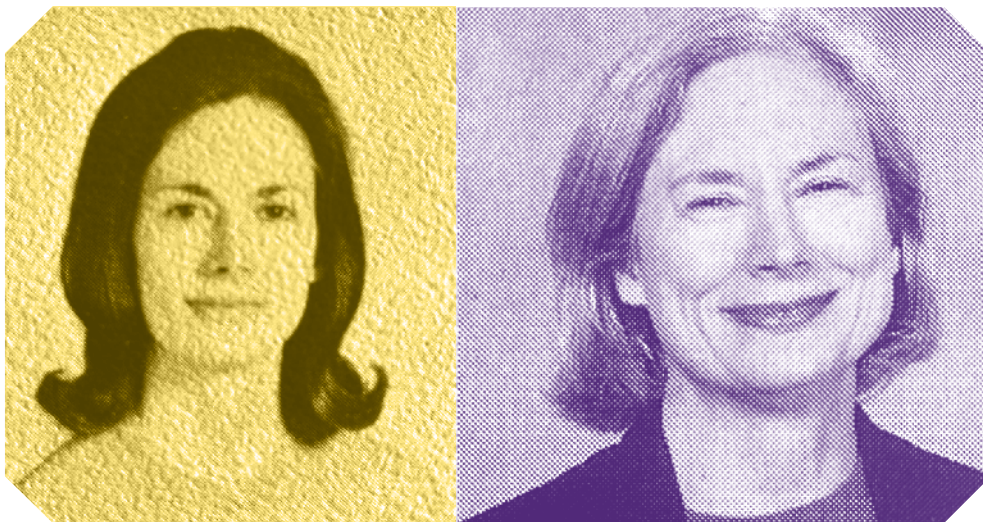
Reflecting on his decades in the Upper Cumberland, Dunn said the university's presence has played a central role in the region's success.

"If Tech is doing well, the community is doing well," Dunn said. "I'm humbled by my success, and I'm proud to be able to give back. Anyone who's had success didn't do it alone. We should look for ways to help those that follow us, and Tech is a great place to do that."



**PHOTOGRAPHED:** Jackie Dunn

# *Gretta Stanger Center dedicated at Tennessee Tech*



**T**his February, Tennessee Tech dedicated the Gretta Stanger Center, a campus hub designed to foster a sense of welcome, belonging and opportunity for every member of the Tech community.

The dedication ceremony honored the late **Gretta Stanger**, a tireless advocate for students and a longtime sociology professor who served the university for nearly 50 years. Stanger passed away in 2025, leaving behind a legacy defined by mentorship and a deep belief that everyone deserves to feel valued and supported.

Located in Room 339 of the Roaden University Center, the Gretta Stanger Center offers educational programming, guest speakers, film screenings, a specialized library and other resources, with a particular focus on the impact of gender in society. The center also publishes *Attune*, a student-edited journal released each semester that highlights student scholarship and creative work.

**PHOTOGRAPHED:** *Gretta Stanger is seen in one of her first and one of her final photos in Tennessee Tech's yearbook, "The Eagle." Stanger served at the university for nearly 50 years.*



“Dr. Stanger is the reason why we’re here today,” said Helen Hunt, director of the Gretta Stanger Center and associate professor of English at Tech. “She worked diligently over her long tenure at Tech to ensure that people from all backgrounds understand that they belong here. She believed in creating spaces where all students and employees felt valued and held the potential to succeed.”

Hunt noted that Stanger began the collection that now forms the core of the center’s library and established Attune as a platform for student voices.

The Gretta Stanger Center also hosts an annual Period Poverty Drive, in which center staff and volunteers gather menstrual products for the campus community and sponsor sustainable menstrual supplies, working to mitigate the way that poverty and lack of income can impact students – particularly first-generation college students – who struggle to afford hygiene products.

“We’ve always insisted that these issues impact everyone,” Hunt said. “Our center is for everyone because we cannot all experience belonging at Tech unless everyone cooperates to make that happen.”

Members of Stanger’s family attended the dedication and shared reflections on her life, passions and influence. Sasha Kuftinec, Stanger’s eldest niece, said the event was both emotional and affirming.

“This is really such an incredible thing to see – this [center] named after our aunt who has been doing this work for her entire life,” Kuftinec said.

**PHOTOGRAPHED:** Members of the late Gretta Stanger’s family pose with campus leaders during an open house for the new Gretta Stanger Center at Tennessee Tech. From left are Helen Hunt, director of the Gretta Stanger Center; Sasha Kuftinec, niece; Steven Kuftinec, nephew; Sonja Kuftinec, niece; Liv Stanger, daughter-in-law; Tiff Rector, executive director of planned giving; and Kevin Braswell, then-vice president for university advancement.



“To be able to honor her and to hear all of the ways in which she has touched everybody here is really heartwarming.”

Kuftinec also shared a glimpse of Stanger beyond the classroom.

“The other side of Gretta that has nothing to do with academics – she loved cats,” Kuftinec said with a laugh. “Not only did she have many of them at home, but she would also feed cats that hung out on campus.”

Stanger was known for working behind the scenes to empower others, Kuftinec added.

“She had a real knack for empowering other people to follow their passions,” she said. “I think that is a gift – when you can step out of the limelight and provide other people with that foundation.”  
At the conclusion of the luncheon, Stanger’s family

announced a generous gift to the Gretta Stanger Center. The donation will support scholarships and other student opportunities through the center.

“In her honor, from her estate, we would like to make a donation as a family and hope that scholarships can be provided, and other important work can continue in her name,” Kuftinec said.

Learn more about the Gretta Stanger Center and see upcoming events at [www.tntech.edu/gsc](http://www.tntech.edu/gsc).

**PHOTOGRAPHED:** Helen Hunt, director of the Gretta Stanger Center and associate professor of English, delivers remarks at the center’s dedication on February 6.

# *Tennessee Tech's I Heart Tech Students campaign sets new record for student giving*



**S**tudents at Tennessee Tech are proving that generosity begins on campus.

The university's eighth annual ***I Heart Tech Students*** campaign concluded on March 27 with a record number of student donors. More than 240

Tech students contributed nearly **\$20,000** to the programs, athletic teams and resources that matter most to them. Alumni, faculty, staff, friends and community members joined them, and in total, the campaign raised **\$540,423** for areas that directly support students.

A major catalyst behind the surge in student participation was a matching challenge from Trudy Harper, a two-time Tech graduate and member of the university's Board of Trustees. Harper pledged to contribute **\$100** for every **\$10** donated by a Tech student, allowing small gifts to create a much larger impact.

"I have always wished that we could find a way to help our students understand the value and the joy of giving back, especially while they are still in school," Harper said. "It occurred to me that if students thought they could make a bigger impact than their own gift in areas that interest or affect them the most, they might lean into giving. I am so proud of our students for stepping up to this challenge."

Throughout the campaign, Jessica Davis, assistant director of annual giving, met with students across campus – including in the University Center, at club meetings and at career fairs – to share the purpose of I Heart Tech Students and explain how Harper's matching challenge could amplify their gifts.

The message resonated with students, many of whom encouraged their peers to participate. Among them was Logan Merritt, a senior mechanical engineering major from Franklin County and captain of the Tech Baja SAE team. Merritt encouraged fellow Baja team members to take part in the campaign, and many did. Because of Harper's match, gifts of **\$10** or **\$25** from Baja team members quickly multiplied into hundreds of dollars in support of the team's student-built race car and competition efforts.

"The I Heart Tech Students campaign and Trustee Trudy Harper's match has been a massive boon to the Baja team," Merritt said. "Building our race car is something that all our members are extremely passionate about, so the opportunity to help fund

that dream means a lot to us. We have so many ideas that we want to test and build, and the extra money from this campaign really helps us push for that competitive edge."

In addition to the Baja team, students could direct their gifts to a wide range of programs and resources across campus, including academic departments, athletic teams and student support initiatives such as the Michelle Huddleston Memorial Food Pantry, Eagle Assistance Grant and Accessible Education Center, which provide essential assistance to students during challenging times.

University leaders say the campaign's success reflects a growing culture of philanthropy among Tech students.

"At its core, I Heart Tech Students is about investing in what matters most to Golden Eagles," Davis said. "Seeing students step up to support one another is one of the most inspiring parts of this campaign. Their generosity shows that even small gifts can make a meaningful difference."

The record-setting student participation in this year's campaign demonstrates that the next generation of alumni already understands the importance of giving back. And thanks to Harper's challenge, their generosity went even further – transforming simple acts of giving into lasting support for the Tech community.

"Watching our students embrace the spirit of giving is incredibly inspiring," Davis said. "They're already making a difference for the Golden Eagles who will follow them."

**PHOTOGRAPHED:** Assistant Director of Annual Giving Jessica Davis speaks with students in the Roaden University Center about the impact gifts to I Heart Tech Students have on future generations of Golden Eagles



# ***Tennessee Tech alumni lead effort to restore beloved Pep Truck***

**FOR** generations of Tennessee Tech alumni, few traditions capture the spirit of the Golden Eagles quite like the university's iconic pep truck, "Eagle Bait." Now, thanks to the dedication of Alpha Phi Omega alumni and supporters, the truck that once circled the football field each time Tech scored is being restored, preserving a symbol of service, school spirit and lifelong friendship.

From the mid-1960s through 1991, the pep truck was a central part of campus life. Donated by the Coca-Cola Bottling Company to the Tau Epsilon chapter of Alpha Phi Omega (APO), a national service fraternity, the vintage GMC truck quickly became a fixture at Tech athletic events and parades. At football games, it famously carried cheerleaders and made celebratory laps around Overall Field after every Golden Eagle touchdown.

For alumni like **Michael Garnto ('83 industrial technology)**, memories of the pep truck coincide with the friendships and service projects that defined his time in APO.

"My wife Marilyn Rockovich ('82 psychology) and I have stayed in touch with many of the friends we met at Tech," Garnto said. "The bonds we created had a lot to do with the mutual service projects that APO organized and facilitated, from Dance-a-Thons raising money for muscular dystrophy to raking leaves for elderly residents in Cookeville."

**Tucker Davis ('80 journalism and '82 M.A.)** says it's difficult to adequately express the significance APO played in his life.

"APO was the only service fraternity on campus at the time," Davis recalled. "APO provided opportunities to succeed and to fail. More importantly, we were provided opportunities to grow. We were inspired to become better people by brothers who had done so before us. All of this was

done in a spirit of service to others – a spirit which seemed to inspire us even further. We are all better for having been brothers in Alpha Phi Omega."

In addition to other service projects, APO members were responsible for maintaining and operating the pep truck. They ensured it was ready for football games, homecoming parades and campus celebrations.

"It gave us a purpose outside the traditional college education," Garnto said. "The pep truck was an essential part of the service Alpha Phi Omega provided to the university and the community."

**Larry Sharpe ('73 marketing and president of APO from 1972 to 1973)** remembers APO members working late into the night in the university motor pool garage to overhaul nearly every component of the truck.

"We changed out the motor, transmission and rewired the entire truck," Sharpe recalled. "Brothers were sanding, welding, repairing metal and getting everything ready for paint."

The work often stretched into the early morning hours as students balanced classes, homework and fraternity responsibilities.

"Many nights we worked until 1, 2 or even 4 a.m.," Sharpe said. "Everyone contributed and worked hard. The community in Cookeville helped us in every way they could. President Derryberry even came to one of our regular club meetings to offer his sincere delight and appreciation for a job well done."

**PHOTOGRAPHED:** Alpha Phi Omega members present President Phil Oldham with a \$20,000 check towards the restoration of the pep truck during the 2025 Homecoming football game. From left are Michael Garnto, Marilyn Rockovich Garnto, Bob Pickney, Tucker Davis, President Phil Oldham and Bob Luna

The pep truck served Tech for decades, leading homecoming parades and appearing at countless campus events. When a new track was installed around the football field in 1991, the truck could no longer make its famous victory laps and was eventually auctioned.

For years, it faded into obscurity until 2017, when a Tech alumnus spotted it for sale in Manchester, Tenn. Recognizing it immediately, he contacted the university, and the Tennessee Tech Alumni Association purchased the truck and returned it to campus. But the truck would require extensive work to restore it to its former glory.

**Michael Allen, Ph.D., ('89 mathematics, '11 mechanical engineering and '91 M.S.)**, a mathematics professor at Tech, vowed to get the truck back in running condition. Years earlier, his father, **Vernon Allen, Ph.D., ('52 chemistry)**, had been a chemistry professor at Tech and was the APO advisor who helped restore the truck when it was initially donated to the fraternity. Continuing that legacy, Michael and his son **Addison Allen ('19 engineering technology)** spent months working on the truck to get it ready in time for homecoming. Their efforts paid off when the revived pep truck rolled down Dixie Avenue in the 2017 Homecoming parade, carrying Grand Marshal **Charlie Hawkins ('53 industrial management)**.



After the Allen family's extensive work, the truck eventually became the capstone project for several engineering classes, and students brought new life to the longtime campus symbol. As renewed interest in the pep truck began to grow, so did conversations among alumni about how they could help ensure its future.

In 2025, a group of alumni led by Garnto, Davis and **Bob Pickney ('80 civil engineering)** organized a gathering of the newly-formed Tennessee Tech Alpha Phi Omega Alumni Association in Sevierville, Tenn. Alumni spanning the 1960s through the

1980s came together, reconnecting and sharing stories from their time on campus. Notably, Garnto, Davis and Pickney each married their college sweethearts – something they say only strengthens the lifelong bonds of APO. While reminiscing about late-night service projects and brotherhood, one topic quickly captured everyone's attention: restoring the pep truck.

“During the event, several alumni discussed our interest in supporting the Eagle Bait restoration project,” Garnto said. “It seemed like something we should embrace – supporting a piece of Tech history while also supporting current students.”

That conversation led to a coordinated fundraising effort by the Tennessee Tech APO Alumni Association, and the group made an initial

**\$20,000** donation during Tech's 2025 Homecoming celebration to help launch the restoration.

Tech has partnered with Tennessee Coachworks, a full-metal fabrication restoration shop, to rebuild the truck's body. The shop will restore and mount the body onto a frame and chassis designed and built by Tech students as part of a senior engineering project converting the truck into an electric vehicle. The Golden Eagle community can follow Eagle Bait's progress on the Tennessee Coachworks YouTube channel: [youtube.com/@Tennesseecoachworks](https://youtube.com/@Tennesseecoachworks).

Tennessee Coachworks and the College of Engineering aim to complete the pep truck in time for Homecoming 2026, with plans to officially unveil the restored vehicle during the weekend's festivities.

For the alumni supporting the project, restoring Eagle Bait is about more than preserving a vintage truck. It's about honoring the traditions, friendships

and service that define the Tech experience. "We hope the pep truck can represent the university at football games, parades and other events," Garnto said. "It will remind alumni of their time at Tech while introducing new students to a special part of the university's history."

While the organizers made a significant lead gift to start the restoration project, additional funds are needed. Garnto says he hopes alumni will contribute to ensure the truck's legacy continues for future generations of Golden Eagles.

To make a gift, visit [www.tntech.edu/giving](http://www.tntech.edu/giving) and select **Pep Truck Fund**.

As the project moves forward, alumni, students and supporters will once again see a familiar symbol of Tech spirit take shape – one that has carried the cheers of Golden Eagle fans for more than half a century.



**PHOTOGRAPHED:** Generative-AI produced rendering for goal of Pep Truck state once restoration project has been completed.



***Tennessee Tech dedicates  
Randall and Marjorie  
Warden Agriculture  
Innovation Center***

**LAST** December, Tennessee Tech welcomed students, alumni, administrators and community leaders at the dedication of a new facility designed to prepare students for the rapidly evolving future of agriculture: the **Randall and Marjorie Warden Agriculture Innovation Center**.

Located at Shipley Farm, the university's 300-acre working, teaching and research farm just minutes from Tech's main campus, the 10,000-square-foot center will serve as a hub for hands-on learning at the intersection of agriculture and advanced technology.

The facility will support instruction, research and workforce training not only for students in Tech's School of Agriculture, but also for visiting high school classes, professional agriculturalists and others across the Upper Cumberland region and beyond.

**Randall Warden**, one half of the building's namesake, is a 1976 graduate of Tech's School of Agriculture who went on to become a renowned leader in the soil testing industry. He and his wife, Marjorie, made a landmark gift to fund the building's construction. In recognition of their generous support, the Tennessee Tech Board of Trustees previously voted to name the facility in their honor.

"This is a great occasion," said Tennessee Tech **President Phil Oldham** at the dedication ceremony. "I want to personally thank the Wardens for their generosity and their support. I hope you're proud. I want to congratulate everybody whose vision has played a part in making this happen."

Oldham went on to explain the cutting-edge technologies that would be deployed in the center.

"Technologies like robotic harvesting, robotic weeding, autonomous tractors and smart farming will be brought to bear in this new building," said Oldham. "The building will also be used to develop virtual reality programs for agriculture education."

**Darron Smith**, dean of the College of Agriculture and Human Ecology, called the center's dedication "a great day for the School of Agriculture."

"We can't thank Randall and Marjorie enough for this," added Smith. "It's amazing to me, in my career in agriculture, where we've gone from straight farming and feed buckets to this high-tech smart farming. We as Tennessee Tech University want to be the leader in that arena, and that's what makes this building so important."

The School of Agriculture at Tennessee Tech, which is part of the College of Agriculture and Human Ecology, enrolled more than 330 students at the start of the fall 2025 semester and has experienced four consecutive years of enrollment growth.

Alongside Smith, the school's leadership team includes **James Baier**, assistant dean of the College of Agriculture and Human Ecology, and Jinfa Zhang, director of the School of Agriculture.

The school offers more than a dozen programs of study, including agribusiness management, animal science, horticulture and agricultural engineering technology, and plays a key role in preparing a skilled agricultural workforce for the region and state. Learn more at [www.tntech.edu/agriculture](http://www.tntech.edu/agriculture).

**PHOTOGRAPHED:** Darron Smith, dean of the College of Agriculture and Human Ecology at Tennessee Tech University (second from right) presents a placard to Randall and Marjorie Warden, namesakes for the newly-dedicated Randall and Marjorie Warden Agriculture Innovation Center, as emcee Bob Luna (right) looks on.

***Roger and Christine Jones  
Scholarship honors legendary  
Tennessee Tech librarians***

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A new scholarship at Tennessee Tech will honor the remarkable legacy of two of the institution's most beloved and influential figures, **Roger and Christine Jones**, whose combined 110 years of service helped shape generations of students and the university's library system.

Established by their daughter, **Jennifer Jones Bertram**, and her husband, **Dr. Phillip Bertram**, the **Roger and Christine Jones Scholarship** reflects the couple's lifelong commitment to education.

Roger and Christine devoted their careers to Tech's library, where they became synonymous with excellence in librarianship. Christine served more than 59 years as a librarian and special collections expert, while Roger dedicated 52 years to collection development and management. Their work spanned decades of transformation in library science, yet their focus remained constant: helping students learn, discover and succeed.

"Roger and Christine were a beloved part of the Tech family," said Bob Bell, Tennessee Tech President Emeritus. "They both had a smile and a laugh that could set anyone at ease. When you were with them, you felt like you were in a comfortable, family-style conversation. When their names are mentioned today, it just automatically triggers a smile and a pleasant memory of old friends. They were both student-focused, and they would be so delighted that a scholarship named in their honor will be helping students throughout the future."

The Joneses' impact continues to be felt across campus today. Their dedication to access, cataloging and collection development laid the foundation for many of the library's current systems. Megan Atkinson, director of Tech's archives and special collections, says even today, library employees continue to work with tools and resources developed by Roger and Christine.

*"I wouldn't have worked anywhere but Tech, even if I'd been offered all the money in the world."*

"Their strong commitment to local history, genealogy and, of course, the library is evident in Christine's archival collection, the cataloging she performed for our collections and the broad range of publications she and Roger developed on local and university topics," Atkinson said. "Christine was better than Google at providing patrons with meticulous descriptions to help them find materials. Her local history collecting also serves as a foundation for many of the subjects that patrons research in the archives today."

Roger and Christine's story is deeply intertwined with Tech itself. The couple first met in the university library, which was then located in Tech's Jere Whitson Building.

"I've heard my mother tell this story so many times," Jennifer recalled fondly. "They met as you climb the stairs of Jere Whitson, in that entrance hall. The light was coming through with the doors open, and my mother thought my father had the most beautiful eyes. It was a match made in the library."

It was the beginning of a partnership rooted in a shared love of books, learning and community.

After graduating from Tech – Roger with a degree in social sciences and Christine with a degree in business management – they both went on to earn degrees in library science and returned to serve the institution they cherished, where they remained for the entirety of their careers.

“When they moved into the new Volpe Library, one of my parents was on one end of the building, and one was on the other end, and they would meet in the middle and chat for a few minutes each day,” Jennifer said. “They had a deep love for each other. They were very lucky to find one another, and I am very lucky that I got to have them as parents.”

Jennifer says she and her parents have always thought of the library as the heart of the university.

“My parents loved helping people,” Jennifer said. “They loved learning and really enjoyed giving assistance to patrons, faculty and staff and thought that library work was just the most wonderful thing in the world. My mother was always afraid that people would find out that she had the most fabulous job and that someone might take it away.”

In December 2007, Roger and Christine retired after 110 years of combined service to the university, and the library hosted a reception in their honor.

In a Dec. 17, 2007, university article about their retirement, Roger was quoted as saying, “People sometimes ask us why we wanted to stay here for so long, but it’s simply because of our love and appreciation for Tennessee Tech.”

Christine agreed: “I wouldn’t have worked anywhere but Tech, even if I’d been offered all the money in the world.”

The Roger and Christine Jones Scholarship will support students in the fields Roger and Christine

loved: history and English. It also ensures their passion for education lives on through future generations of Golden Eagles.

“My parents loved learning, and they loved Tennessee Tech to the very end,” Jennifer said. “They wanted everyone to have the opportunity to study at the university level, and they would love the idea that a scholarship in their names will help people for many, many years do just that.”



**PHOTOGRAPHED:** Jennifer Jones Bertram with parents Roger and Christine Jones

# *Local family makes transformational gift to support student success at Tennessee Tech College of Business*

**A** generous gift from a family of longtime Tennessee Tech University supporters will expand opportunities for students to develop professional skills needed for career success.

**Thomas Lynn**, a two-time Tech graduate and member of the university's Board of Trustees, along with his wife, Kay, his sister, Pam Counce, and her husband, Dr. Danny Counce, have made a transformational gift to establish the **"Tommy Lynn Professional Readiness and Leadership Room"** in the College of Business' Professional Readiness and Leadership (PRL) suite.

The space honors the legacy of Thomas and Pam's late father, U.L. "Tommy" Lynn Jr., a respected banking leader in the Upper Cumberland who passed away in 2002.

The elder Lynn began his career as a farm agent with First National Bank in 1950 and rose through the ranks to become president by 1969. He later served as president and CEO of First American National Bank of Cookeville/Crossville before retiring in 1993 after more than four decades in banking leadership.

The room will be located on the first floor of Johnson Hall, currently undergoing a comprehensive renovation, and will be part of the college's Student Success Center.

*"We hope people realize how wonderful Tech is."*

In addition to naming the space, the Lynn and Counce families have endowed the Tommy Lynn Professional Readiness and Leadership Endowment to support PRL student-focused programs for years to come.

The PRL provides hands-on opportunities for students to build essential career skills, including leadership retreats, career fairs and immersive experiences like Dress and Dine, which teaches professional etiquette. The center is also home to the Scarlett & Murphy's Business Professional

Closet, offering free professional attire, and Level Up, a gamified program that rewards students for completing career-readiness milestones.

Lynn said the decision to support the PRL was inspired by its direct impact on students.

"First of all, as you know, they're renovating Johnson Hall. Years ago, we had sponsored a room in the old

Johnson Hall, and we felt like that was a good way to give back,” Lynn said. “So, when they said they were going to renovate the hall, we wanted to take a room. They said most of the students go through the PRL to learn how to do a resume, learn how to dress professionally and just how to conduct themselves in order to try to get a job.”

For **Kay Lynn**, a 1978 graduate who later earned her master’s degree from Tech, the gift reflects a lifelong connection to the university.

“Tennessee Tech has been a major part of our lives,” Kay said. “I met Thomas at Tennessee Tech after growing up in East Tennessee. Three of our four children graduated from there and we feel like it’s such a vital part of our community, so we wanted to support it.”

Kay, a member of Kappa Delta sorority, said those friendships remain an important part of her life.

“The memories that I have are through Kappa Delta



**PHOTOGRAPHED:** *Sherrie Cannon, associate director for professional development and College of Business student ambassador Charles Jones discuss future plans for Tech’s PRL program*

and the lifelong friendships,” she said. “In a few weeks, several of my Kappa Delta sisters are coming to stay for the weekend, and I’m excited to bring them back to campus.”

She added that the family was especially drawn to the PRL because of its tangible benefits for students.

“Anytime Thomas is around the students he is so impressed with the quality of the students and their interactions with everyone,” Kay said. “We felt like this was a good way to help a lot of students in a very practical way.”

**Pam Counce**, who began her connection to Tech as a child in the university’s nursery school and graduated in 1973, said her student experience helped inspire the family’s decision to give.

“I had a wonderful experience at the school,” Pam said. “Tech was such a friendly school, and the teachers were so good, so helpful.”

Like her sister-in-law, Pam was active in Kappa Delta and said those experiences helped shape her time at Tech. She also recalls Associate Professor Charlene Mullins, who taught her in nursery school and later in college.

“We feel good that we can do that, that we’re able to do that,” Pam said. “We hope people realize how wonderful Tech is.”

**Dr. Danny Counce**, a 1973 chemistry graduate who went on to a career as a radiologist, said his time at Tech laid the foundation for his success.

“The way I paid my way through school was working as the night watchman in the college infirmary,” Counce said. “When I got to medical school, Tech had prepared me very well.”

“Students graduating from Tech can be proud of their campus and how the university prepares them for what’s coming up,” he added.

Thomas Payne, dean of Tech’s College of Business, said the gift reflects the Lynn and Counce families’ commitment to student success.

“Thomas, Kay, Pam and Dr. Counce are examples to our students of the kind of career success they can one day hope to achieve, but also the kind of community leaders and people they should aspire to be,” Payne said. “They have been steadfast supporters of Tennessee Tech—and particularly the College of Business—for many years, and we are deeply grateful for this latest investment in our students and programs.”

**Sherrie Cannon**, associate director for professional development in the College of Business, said the endowment will have a lasting impact.

“When alumni and friends give to the PRL, they are directly supporting programs that help our students graduate career ready,” Cannon said. “The PRL is all about ensuring students have the skills, confidence and professionalism needed to succeed beyond the classroom. The Lynn and Counce families are not only generous benefactors—they are role models for our students.”

Originally opened in 1970, Johnson Hall has long served as the home of Tech’s College of Business. Its renovation will modernize approximately 68,000 square feet and add 10,000 square feet of new space designed to foster collaboration, research and student success. The project is expected to be completed in fall 2027.

Learn more about the PRL in the College of Business at Tennessee Tech University at [www.tntech.edu/business/readiness](http://www.tntech.edu/business/readiness).



**Mailing Address:**

Crawford Alumni Center  
Tennessee Tech University  
P.O. Box 5157  
Cookeville, TN 38505

**Street Address:**

705 N. Dixie Ave.  
Cookeville, TN 38501

**Please Send Gifts to:**

Tennessee Tech University Foundation  
P.O. Box 1915  
Cookeville, TN 38505

**CONTACT US**

931-372-3205  
[alumni@tntech.edu](mailto:alumni@tntech.edu)  
[www.tntech.edu/alumni](http://www.tntech.edu/alumni)