Leadership by Example

Meeting Five Student Leaders Who Help Set the Pace on Campus

By Stephanie Jeter ‘06

On a campus where everyday discoveries affect the world, student leadership twists through and transforms the College Station prairie like the roots of the old oaks lining campus. At Texas A&M, students don’t share everything in common, but are each spurred on in unity. Student leadership helps guide the future of a 132-year past.

It’s in the lively blue eyes of the student body president, the shine of the Corps commander’s brass and the animated enthusiasm from a Greek leader. It’s in the MSC president’s memories and the head yell leader’s scratchy throat. They’re not the only stars of campus, but together they form a brilliant snapshot of what student leadership looks like at Texas A&M University. Because at Texas A&M, everyone serves, and they do it all under the same College Station skyline.
Mark Gold ’09 says he sometimes gets nervous speaking before a crowd. It never shows. He’s a rock on stage, a rock that smiles a lot. If it were possible to make eye contact with every person in the crowd, Gold would be the one to do it. Already, he’s making connections, slapping high fives as Fish Camp volunteers rush by and catching up with those he hasn’t seen since the start of summer. He takes one last look at his speaking notes before the introduction blares through the speakers: “Let’s everybody welcome your student body president, Mark Gold.”

And he’s off—a rocket of enthusiasm as he bounds to the center of Reed Arena.

It’s Fish Camp season at this point of August for the SBP. Every four days, before the next session takes off in buses for the specialized camp geared toward welcoming new students, Gold greets the rowdy group as the student face of the University. “At these Fish Camp sendoffs, the energy is electric,” Gold said over the crowd’s roar. Earlier that morning, he had to duck out of a meeting early to make it on time to Reed Arena, from where the buses would depart. The University was looking for ways to improve the performance of a street on main campus. They asked Gold to show up to the meeting and offer University officials the student opinion. Gold scribbled notes in the margins of all the handouts. The information sheets passed out at the meeting were already text heavy. With Gold’s extra thoughts, the page almost swam with words.

“I like the visuals. They help me explain things to my team and to the student body,” he said. It’s important that everyone understand, because come the next meeting, Gold expected to come back with thoughts from members of the student body.

Now it was off to talk to the newest members. His parking spot helps get him out of some time crunches, but this time, he knew he’d have to sneak out a little early. He doesn’t like to miss meetings. It’s a statement his calendar reflects. “That’s probably the biggest time commitment,” he said. Gold meets and shares the students’ voice with some of the most authoritative characters on campus. No matter whom he’s speaking with, Gold said, only one thing matters. “I am always thinking about students,” he said, even if he’s disagreed with and even if he’s in the minority.

“I always ask if we can increase the number of committee members so more students can be present,” Gold said.

He works the issues as they come. The phone rings a lot, in fact, it’s ringing right now. Even though he has more things to do, and another meeting to get to, he answers. “I used to write things down more, kind of like a to-do list, but I realized that the list got so long, I wasn’t able to get to everything,” he said. “If I wait, sometimes it doesn’t happen.”

So he answers the students’ call to lead, every time. 👏
He moves through the Quad’s weathered red-brick buildings, under the shade line of a dozen trees, over the concrete sidewalk. Past the arches made of brick to the corner of C.P. Fountain Hall, where a group of freshman Corps recruits are in training. The new students stand at attention. Marching is today’s order, but like most things within the Texas A&M Corps of Cadets, the command to train isn’t about marching in stride, said Corps Commander Jordan Reid ’09.

As the leader of a 132-year A&M tradition, Reid is looking for the result. “Everything we do has a purpose,” he said.

As he spoke, a group of red-faced freshman ran past, splitting the air with their cadence. The Army-style jodie had an even beat. “Everything is geared toward success,” he continued. Training produces leaders. “Our goal is to have the most well-prepared freshmen on campus,” Reid said. Freshmen are on his brain right now. It’s day four of the Corps of Cadets’ Freshmen Orientation Week. On day five, he’ll climb the stairs in front of Rudder Tower and address the Class of 2012 cadets as their commander. He’ll offer his wisdom and the promise that, with each year, the cadets will grow stronger in leadership, resilient in adversity and solid in ethics. Then he’ll ceremoniously remove his four-diamond brass from his right shoulder and toss it to the crowd of freshmen as a symbol of the pass-down nature of leadership.

Four steps and four class years: “There’s followship, direct leadership, indirect leadership and executive leadership,” he rattled off. Everyone has a job. Freshmen are trained in followship, being a member of a team and learning how to follow directions, Reid said. “Sophomores are the example, the demonstrators,” Reid said. “They are responsible for those freshmen.” Juniors teach the sophomores and help them understand their purpose, and senior executive leaders help set policy, he said. “It’s a bittersweet moment as seniors as it’s the last chance to really impact the group.”

Reid is an executive leader, in a way, the executive leader. “At the end of the day I’m responsible. I set the vision and focus,” he said, but points to his 23-member staff for recognition. He’s festooned with leadership, what with his weekly meetings with the general, Sundays with his staff and commanders, and other responsibilities to make sure the corps is connected with the student body. It would be easy for him to get wrapped up contemplating his position, but he doesn’t. “The overall purpose and effects of what you do (as corps commander) is not on an expressional level. I try not to think about what I’m doing, but think about how the corps can be made better today,” he said.

“At our core is training leaders,” Reid said. “There’s no purpose if they’re not serving.” He says that’s true for him, too.
In the meeting room, they call her Madam President. Roberts Rules of Order demands it. But in her world where Greek traditions reign, she knows that the people and council’s legacy are more important than her position.

Amber Jordan ’10 leads Texas A&M’s National Pan-Hellenic Council, all eight of its nationally affiliated fraternities and sororities. Though an active student, council isn’t something that can be put on the backburner, just as she can’t ignore the vote waiting on the tap of her gavel.

From the front of the room she sees lives changed. Nothing drastic, she said. It’s all understated: students getting involved, showing respect, gaining knowledge, practicing leadership, and celebrating brotherhood and sisterhood.

Nationally, sororities and fraternities break into four historic groups, the Inter-Fraternity Council, the Multicultural Greek Council, the Collegiate Pan-Hellenic Council and the National Pan-Hellenic Council. Though they’re all Greek, the breakup allows Jordan to solely focus on NPHC.

That’s what she’s doing this August day, preparing for a retreat meant for her and her council officers. “We’ll discuss goals for NPHC,” she said. The retreat hasn’t happened yet, but as president, Jordan knows where the council needs to improve. When you know something as well as Jordan knows Greek life, it’s easy to spot the holes.

“We’ll discuss more Greek unity and targeting more freshmen,” she said. A personal item of business she expects to bring up is injecting more professionalism into council meetings. “It helps us be more effective and take care of business.”

On the business side, Jordan has been studying NPHC’s constitution. With the fall school semester yet to arrive, she’s still preparing for that first question. “I can’t speak or go against anything in the constitution.” Right now, it’s one of her strongest tools to assist the council, the constitution and her schedule book, because outside of her weekly meetings with her council officers and the council’s general body, she just opened a letter inviting her to lunch at a University vice president’s house. “This is to request that you serve as a member of the Student Leader Communications Group,” the stationary reads.

Jordan would love to, she said. She’s already preparing ahead.

“I’ll carry my heels,” she said. “I get out of class at 5:10; this meeting starts at 5:30.”

Jordan has always been a leader, just never in this way. She has a way with organizing people, she said, but sometimes the significance of her position just “hits me over the head.”

“I’m just a business student from Dallas,” she tells the invitation creased open on the round table. It’s a table similar to the one from which she conducts meetings with her council officers. They’re an important part of the council’s success, she said. “I’m never alone in the decisions I have to make,” she said. “We’re a democracy, and I’m just the face.”

She’s a face whose hands are always busy.
Welcome to the office of Memorial Student Center President Nick Petree ’09. It’s square with a back wall that doubles as a bookshelf and built-in desk, but it’s not used as such. Instead, a collection of quotes lean against its flat surface. A few Benjamin Knox prints fill the whitespace, and a grouping of three-ring binders sit upright in the shelf.

Former MSC presidents have left other things behind in the MSC second-story office. There’s a fish named Mace who’s on loan until its owner gets back from a job overseas. The Aggie art was a gift from his mother: “For my last birthday, I got six ties and office decorations,” Petree laughs at the obvious reality that student leadership really does change things. The couch Petree claims on the rare long nights he chooses to sleep in his office sits on the opposite side of the room.

Petree’s in the middle of it all, checking e-mails.

“The e-mails always start early, so I try to be in the office early,” he said. “I’ve tried to treat A&M as a full-time job this year, getting here at 8 a.m.” His cell phone doubles as an alarm clock in the morning. The sound could rattle a window.

As MSC president, Petree helps lead the MSC’s 19 committees and six resource areas with a student base of 1,200. Once his name was placed at the top of the organizational chart, Nick Petree became president and CEO of one of the largest student unions in the country.

Sometimes he feels his greatest demand as a student leader is to attend a slew of meetings. The goal is to leave for home around 5 p.m., but “on a relatively busy day, I get out of the office at 9 p.m.,” he said.

Yet, “this is the absolute great-
est thing I could be doing with my time,” he said.

Student leaders seek office because they want to give back to the University, Petree said. “My best opportunity to give back is by giving back through service A&M offers.”

Up until four years ago, he wasn’t interested in leadership or service. “I just played basketball,” he said. “I just played basketball,” he said. “That was what was important. But when I got to A&M and just saw how this school touches people’s lives—and then it did the same for me—it was profound.”

The first semester of Petree’s freshman year, Hurricane Katrina funneled thousands of displaced citizens to find shelter in College Station. “I volunteered at Reed Arena,” he said. “Honestly, it was one of the first volunteer opportunities I’d ever taken advantage of.”

Since then, there’s no looking back. “Involvement gives you something you can’t get out of books,” he said. “Some people don’t understand how something could take up so much time, be such a commitment, but when you know someone is waiting on your part of the equation and a team comes together; it’s hard to describe.”

So he won’t search for the words. He suspects both current and former students understand where he’s coming from.

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Head Yell Leader

Head yell leader Lans Martin ’09 is crisply ironed, energetic and, like yell leaders before him, completely devoted to Texas A&M. He loves the Spirit, the Aggie family, the traditions. And, not surprisingly, he’s got a little story for you.

It was enthusiasm that compelled Martin to run for yell leader. He wanted to respond in leadership to what Texas A&M had provided him in experience. There’s something special about Aggieland, he said. He’s at home in a family of 48,000.

Martin’s outpouring of gratitude landed him on the ticket. A majority of student votes handed him the opportunity. And now, he lives it.

Martin said he knows that people view yell leaders as “the face of A&M.” He knows that no matter if he’s on the court leading yells for volleyball or basketball, on the field yelling for the soccer team or running the sidelines of Kyle Field, Martin is representing Texas A&M. No matter if he’s in class, at dinner, studying at the library or walking campus, he is representing Texas A&M. No matter where, “I represent A&M in everything I do,” he said.

Being natural in that spotlight didn’t come automatically, Martin said, but “it taught me how to be part of something greater than myself.”

Texas A&M is different: Traditions bind current and former students together, he said. A continual willingness to serve keeps Aggies involved. Shared core values ensure that a student leaves better than he came. “And at Texas A&M we have the best fans anywhere,” Martin said. “It’s exciting to be part of that.”

Leading yells is a yell leaders’ main job—“That’s our name,” Martin said—but the role has some spring to it, as the yell leaders bounce out of the Aggie sporting arena and into public speaking roles.

The yell leaders’ calendar is kept online. “We have one to two events a day,” Martin said. Most anyone can request a formal visit by the boys in white: student organizations, former student groups, Aggie Mom Clubs. With regards to Martin’s schedule, “it’s kind of like you’re on call all the time,” he said.

Pair that with his Corps of Cadets responsibilities and school requirements, and Martin entertains full days. But those responsibilities are an opportunity, Martin said. He and the other yell leaders have a role in the best University in the world, Martin said. “We’re all five just normal students blessed with this position,” he said. Because in his role, Martin can work to make Texas A&M just a little bit better. For a student loyal to the 12th Man, service is an outpouring of passion.

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