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Different Paths to Aggieland

The desks in the classroom are matching and organized. The walls are a consistent crème. Light streams through an undraped window to reveal a standard class in session. Matching, organized, consistent, standard—but looks can be deceiving. While uniformity may be reflected in the décor, the students working within are anything but.

By Stephanie Jeter '06

NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS

At Texas A&M, the category “nontraditional student” includes all those older than 24 who are seeking an undergraduate degree, anyone with children, anyone married, anyone out of school for a while before re-enrolling, anyone with military service, and any students who are divorced or widowed. The Department of Student Life says that there are 1,247 nontraditional students enrolled at A&M for the spring 2009 semester.

John Smith Murchison '10 never intended to be “nontraditional.” He certainly wouldn’t call himself that. Adventurous, yes. Determined, absolutely. Disciplined—couldn’t have said it better himself.

But, “nontraditional,” that just doesn’t fit.

Murchison is a senior political science major. He’s married. He and his wife welcomed their first baby in June 2007. It’s a girl.

Traditional enough.

In 2006, he applied and was accepted to Texas A&M after more than 10 years in the United States Marines. Murchison had just turned 30. His wife, a Brit whom he met when they both worked for the British Foreign Service, would stay in South America.

His story is one of personal commitment and sacrifice. As he wrote in his

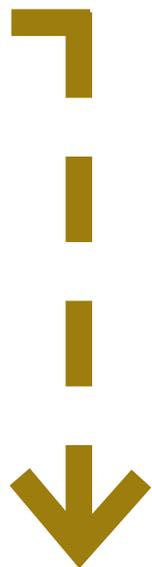
statement of purpose, “I’m not going to try. I’m going to do.”

Murchison meant it. It’s a mindset that comes from living life before college, he said, from being at a different point in his life compared to the “traditional” high school grads applying to Texas A&M from their school’s computer lab.

When Murchison graduated high school in 1995, he joined the Marines.

“Well, I’ll do four years,” he remembers thinking. “I’ll do four years, see what’s going on, and then move back to Texas.”

Those four years passed quickly.



As a U.S. Marine, Murchison spent 10 years living all over the world. With his wife, Vanessa, and daughter, Chaiya, Murchison is photographed in London in the Brick Lane area (opposite), and solo in Barbados (below). He said having the opportunity to live and serve overseas helped him gain a strong sense of perspective before starting his education at Texas A&M.





“I liked the Marine Corps,” he said. It offered travel, excitement and growth, so he reenlisted for another four. This time Murchison joined up on a special-duty security assignment. He guarded national embassies and state buildings in Istanbul, Turkey; Rome, Italy; and Sarajevo, Bosnia.

“I’d seen things people can’t imagine,” he said.

Like in August 1999, while Murchison was stationed in Turkey, the most powerful earthquake to hit the country shook the town to rubble, killing thousands of people. The final death count is still debated.

“It’s things you can’t imagine,” he said.

On Sept. 11, 2001, when Islamist terrorists hijacked four commercial passenger jet airliners in the U.S. and deliberately crashed two into the Twin Towers in New York City, Murchison was standing post in Rome.

“People were running around trying

to figure out what was going on,” he said. Rome is a big tourist area, he explained. “People were crying and asking all sorts of questions.”

Murchison doesn’t mind sharing his stories, he said. But they don’t always tell the story.

His life reaches wide. He has run the Spanish steps as part of training, dodged cars in Rome. His training runs took him to the Vatican and along the sea wall in Istanbul.

The military was a career he chose. He wasn’t quite ready for a four-year university back then, but time changed that. He’d been taking college courses online and at community campuses for several years when a back injury brought him back to the states for three months of treatment. Being back in the U.S., he decided to apply to Texas A&M. Several months later, in late November 2006, coming out of the jungle in South America, his cell phone rang. Caller ID

“I was just trying to be a good wife and mother,” she said.
“I always knew that I needed to go back to school, I just kept telling myself that it wasn’t the right time.”



Fulton’s office smells like chocolate. “They always say surround yourself with what you love.” So she does, both educationally and personally. As a graduate student, she has already penned health-related curriculum for youth and looks forward to diving even deeper in the field that she loves.



Quast earned his Aggie Ring through hard work, but was awarded it through a special memory. At The Association of Former Student's annual Run For The Ring 5K run, a friend won a certificate for a free Aggie Ring. She gave it to Quast, and later presented his Ring to him while his wife, Janice Quast '97 (not pictured), and daughter, Elizabeth, watched proudly.

“I just wasn’t prepared,” he said. Add in bad study habits and the cushion of a family business that he knew would soften any scholastic fall.

said it was his mom. She had good news.

Fast forward a couple months and Murchison was sitting in a Texas A&M classroom. Looking left and right, he remembers thinking, “I’m going to work harder than these guys.” Marine training continues to come in handy. “A&M has some very smart intellectual kids, but I’ll take my life experience up against them...My experience is to take all this stuff and use it as a building block to continue to build my life.”

Disciplined or not, the distractions were still there.

The Office of Student Life at Texas A&M University, when speaking about nontraditional students, said distractions are almost the rule.

“The thing about your nontraditional students is they’re most likely juggling more than just an education,” said Becky McNair, who works in the Office of Student Life. “They’re juggling careers, they’re juggling childcare issues.”

The Office is there to help with those

struggles, she said. “We can assist by putting them together with other students who may also have children,” she said. Mentors can be provided, transportation issues can be addressed, technology issues in class can be facilitated.

“I cannot tell you how scared I was when I wrote my first paper,” said Daphne Fulton ’06. She’s a 54-year-old doctoral student in the School of Rural Public Health with expectations for an August or December graduation.

She tried college after high school graduation “but really, I wasn’t that prepared for what I wanted to do,” she said. Instead Fulton got married and moved to College Station for her husband’s graduate work.

“I was just trying to be a good wife and mother,” she said. “I always knew that I needed to go back to school, I just kept telling myself that it wasn’t the right time.”

Then one day she decided that there’s no such thing as the right time. If she was to make a change, she was doing it today.





She's been in school since 1997.

"I gave up a lot of time with my kids," she said. "I actually changed my job," quitting her full-time position at the medical school to work part-time at a local hospital.

By choosing to be a wife, mother, employee and student, Fulton learned early on the power of commitments. Children's schedules were posted on the wall, study time was planned and respected, and because education takes money, funds were tight. But there's a freedom that comes from commitment, she said.

"It's really easier being an older student than being a younger student," she said. "We've pretty much figured out what we want to do already. There are no social distractions."

You have your children and your family, she said, "so when you learn something, you can automatically apply it."

Plus, when everyone in the family is making sacrifices, results hold more importance.

It was hard, she said. It is hard. Fulton once rented a room at a hotel where her husband was manager just to have a quiet place to study. But, she believes in her work. As a student in the School of Rural Public Health, Fulton has a passion for being in the community as an encourager and teacher for health.

"I knew that I would be going back to school," she said. "I would encourage any adult to go back to school."

She has that conversation often. "They tell me, 'I'm 60, I can't go back to school now.' You're the perfect age for school," she said. "Look at what all you know."

When Jeremy Quast '07 was a student at Texas A&M, he entered the classroom with 10 years of work experience already behind him.

Quast had also tried college upon high school graduation. "I just wasn't prepared," he said. Add in bad study habits and the cushion of a family business that he knew would soften any scholastic fall. It all led Quast to take

"I needed to become more of a scientist than a technician," Nzaramba said. "I felt the need to go to school."



Before graduating in December, Nzaramba traveled to present his research at different professional events. No matter where, he said, his Aggie Ring started numerous conversations. The Aggie family is important to him, he said. Now a graduate, Nzaramba said his experience in Aggieland will continue to play a part in his life.

a 10-year break from his quest toward higher education.

He was young with no wife and no kids. But when the wife and baby came along, “I realized that completing my degree was important as a goal, as an achievement,” he said. “It would be something to tell my kids: that it took a while, but they have to finish college as well.”

Quast is now a former student and works in sales in College Station. The memories he made to get to that point still flow easily.

Quast’s actual path to Texas A&M “was the very definition of irony,” he said. As the husband of a former student, he’d heard it all multiple times—how the traditions bind, the indescribable feeling of Aggieland, and the opinion that Texas A&M is the best school in the nation.

“I’d heard it all,” he said, and his wife encouraged him to join the Aggie family.

“The application was sent in,” Quast acquiesced, but his teasing didn’t stop—until he was accepted.

The family moved from Dallas to a home in Bryan.

Quast’s A&M experience set in motion a life-altering series of changes: the rapid transformation into a passionate Aggie, along with the introduction to early mornings and late nights.

“It was a humbling experience,” Quast said. “I worked at Sears, I had to work weekends. I worked after class. I stayed up late studying. I had to bring in some money for the family. It was tough.”

Costs had to be cut. No cable TV. He rode his bike to class. No more eating out. “Every day I made a sandwich and put chips in my bag and ate on campus,” he said.

When his wife’s job had her commuting to Austin for a few months, “I was essentially single dad-ing it,” Quast said. His degree was a family effort, so when he walked the stage, memories like competing in his department’s Quiz Bowl and winning nationals didn’t mean as much as the fact that he did it.

“I did it, and I did it with my family,” Quast said.

Even with a strong family unit, Stefanie Stesancic said nontraditional students

often gain encouragement by linking up with other students in similar situations.

Though Ndambe Nzaramba ’08 isn’t a nontraditional student by definition, his experience as an international graduate student lives out Stesancic’s mission.

Right before graduating with his undergraduate from a university in Uganda, Nzaramba was in a bus wreck that took his right arm below the elbow. As a man pursuing a career and life in agriculture, the loss of his limb was perceived as a loss of potential.

It wasn’t.

“I was fascinated with plants and animals as something that would make a difference,” Nzaramba said. A difference was what he was set to make.

Upon graduating, Nzaramba took a job as an agricultural research scientist in Rwanda with just his undergraduate degree—a position he relates to the American title of technician. He studied coffee for a year, beans for two, and then potatoes. Quickly though, the Rwandan agriculturalist could see his reflection in the glass ceiling. His arm proved to be a limitation in the labor-intensive field of agriculture.

That, and something else—his home country of Rwanda was still healing from genocide. His parents fled in 1963, and Nzaramba was born in Uganda in exile. He had teachers who mentored him, but didn’t have someone who could teach him all he needed to know to make a difference.

“I needed to become more of a scientist than a technician,” Nzaramba said. “I felt the need to go to school.”

When he applied, he really applied. Admission counselors picked up on Nzaramba’s name everywhere from England to the Netherlands, and South Africa. “I had admission to all the schools where I applied,” Nzaramba said. Everyone said yes, but none could offer funding.

“Finally I came to learn about a pilot project,” Nzaramba said. Put on by Texas A&M University and Michigan State, its purpose was to help Rwanda develop an agriculture research and experiment base. The program took care of housing and helped with funding. The program would get him where he

wanted to be professionally, but left him with the choice of where he wanted to be physically. Texas A&M or Michigan, Nzaramba remembers being asked.

The coordinator of the program was an Aggie, Nzaramba said. He shared the following advice: “Don’t even think about it,” Nzaramba remembers. “Go to Aggieland.” It’s warm, it’s tropical, you’ll love it, Nzaramba was told.

He does.

He’s an Aggie. He starts his e-mails with “Howdy,” no matter in what language the proceeding message is written. He wears his Aggie Ring. He’s attended yell practice and sporting events. The different culture of yell practice was at first a bit unsettling, but “not shocking as I have been to Europe.”

He’s been able to diversify his knowledge, bringing statistics and mathematics to solve biological problems.

Life as an international student does have its difficulties. Three weeks after arriving at A&M was Sept. 11, 2001. “If you were an international student then, you would be a little worried,” he said. Would the government allow you to stay? Will you be allowed back into school?

For Nzaramba, these worries were unfounded. At Texas A&M, he has access to more resources, more journal articles and newer text—“the text books in Uganda had information that was already decades old,” he said. Teachers care more about opening students’ minds than just reproducing information, he said. He’s cultivated friends along with knowledge, taking part in Texas A&M’s “other education.”

He received his Ph.D. in December. His mother made her first trip to America to watch him walk across the stage, a walk that represented seven years at Texas A&M, a changed past and an altered present and future.

As Nzaramba noted—and as Murchison, Fulton and Quest noted as well—even with its struggle, studying at Texas A&M, continuing his education, coming back for an education “is worth it.” 🍓

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