



Connecting with Harriet and Joe B. Foster '56

Joe B. Foster '56 learned a lot about selfless service while at Texas A&M.

"Look at the Aggies who served in World War II," he says. "That always impressed me because I came there shortly after World War II and I knew what the history was. Aggies just did it. That is the way I would characterize what A&M people in general have done. They just did what needed to be done. They didn't expect any glory; they just did it."

Foster and his wife, Harriet, take the

same approach to their philanthropic support of A&M, which includes sponsoring the Selfless Service Core Value Wall on the grounds of the enhanced Clayton W. Williams, Jr. Alumni Center.

"Harriet and I both believe we have an obligation to society, to other people, to ourselves, to do something other than just earn a living and satisfy our appetites. And it's important to do it in a way that just accomplishes that. The object is not to draw attention to

yourself, it's to help somebody else."

Joe B. Foster, who was born in Arp, started school at A&M in 1952. He says it was no accident that he ended up at A&M.

"My dad went to A&M but he dropped out at the end of his freshman year and went to work in the oilfield, got married and just couldn't afford to return to A&M. So the assumption all the time I was growing up was that I would go to A&M and finish what he started. He studied petroleum engineering. I also studied petroleum engineering, and got a degree in business administration. So I wound up getting two degrees. I guess that made up for the one dad didn't get.

"I flirted a bit in high school with the Naval Academy and Rice, but in the end it was no real contest. I had the germ and I caught the disease."

Reporting to campus as a freshman is still a vivid memory. "I can still remember walking in that dorm, Dorm 15, and it was just a really stark place: Long halls and little rooms and dirty windows. I don't suppose it was all that Spartan for the times, but it was Spartan compared to home." It was a little too Spartan for his mother, who was initially concerned. "But that first day, Lt. Phillips from up in East Texas—he was the senior who greeted us—he made my mother feel so good. Now, there are a lot of things about Lt. Phillips that she never heard," he adds with a grin. "But she always depended on him to take care of me."

Joe, who was in F Battery Artillery, was a good student, working on a five-year dual-degree plan. "It was tough. My recollection is that when we enrolled as freshmen in 1952, there were 2,200. I think by the end of that freshman year, over half of that 2,200 were gone. About 400 of us graduated. They had their own way of controlling enrollment in those days; they didn't need an S.A.T. But I didn't have any notion that I was supposed to do anything other than work, so I never felt it was an undue load."

Although Harriet attended Rice, she also has a long history with A&M. Her first husband, now deceased, was a classmate of Joe's. "A&M was sort of our common bond. We knew a lot of the

same people, and all four of my children went there and my daughter-in-law. It's a big Aggie family!"

While her children were attending A&M, Harriet was very active in the A&M Mothers Clubs. "The first time I went to a meeting, a friend literally drug me there. I thought, 'The kids are out of high school now, so surely I don't have to do PTA anymore. But I found out the Aggie moms are a whole lot different from the PTA. The main reason the Aggie moms exist is to raise money for scholarships, and it's not like the PTA at all. I was involved for eight years with four kids, and I met a really terrific group of people.'"

The Fosters have personally funded many scholarships so that others can also benefit from the college experience as they did. "Both of us went to college, and all of our kids did," Harriet says. "We're at a time and place in our life that we can fund these scholarships, and we just think it's a real good place to put our money. Mainly it's just about giving back to something you benefitted from earlier in life. It's very important to give back."

Joe adds, "There's hardly anything more important you can do for somebody than help them get a college education. The difference between having a college education and a high school education is a quantum difference. It's life-changing."

An education at A&M is unlike any other, Joe says. "Fifty years ago, I was not aware that there was anything close to A&M. Now I'm aware that there are a lot of really great institutions out there. But A&M still remains unique in my opinion because of the way it combines academics and spirit and tradition and the sense of comradeship that it does even today.

"I've always said the Aggie Spirit is indefinable. It's a sense of values, a sense of comradeship you have with fellow Aggies, a sense somewhat of being the underdog and knowing that you're going to prevail. It's all those things. It's also a sense of loyalty to not only your peers but loyalty to the cause at hand. I think you learn these things at A&M to a greater extent than anywhere else."

Harriet agrees that there's something

At A Glance: Harriet and Joe B. Foster '56

FAMILY

The Fosters have been married for 19 years and have seven children between them: William Warren Foster, a 1983 graduate of the Kansas City Art Institute; Kenneth Knox Foster '85; Jennifer K Foster, a 1992 graduate of Whittier College; D. Bryan Ruez '80; Gretchen Ruez Tharp '81; the late Michael C. Ruez '82; and Richard C. Ruez, a 1984 graduate of Sam Houston State University.

EDUCATION & CAREER

Joe graduated from Texas A&M in 1956 with bachelor's degrees in petroleum engineering and general business. Harriet attended Rice University. "I didn't graduate but I definitely got an education," she says. After Joe graduated, he went to work for Tenneco Oil Co. as a junior petroleum engineer. He rose through the ranks, advancing to chairman of Tenneco Oil and executive vice president of its parent, Tenneco Inc. He left Tenneco in the late '80s and founded independent oil producer Newfield Exploration Co. He was CEO of Newfield until his retirement from active management in 2000, and he remained chairman of its board until 2005. In 1997, he was named a Distinguished Alumnus of Texas A&M. He has also been inducted into the Texas Business Hall of Fame and the Corps Hall of Honor, and he has received the Texas A&M College of Engineering Alumni Honor Award.

JOE'S ADVICE FOR ENTERING FRESHMEN

"Just hang in there. It's awfully easy to be intimidated at a big place like A&M. It was intimidating when it was 6,000 students 50 years ago. But just hang in there. It's going to get better."

THE FOSTERS' ADVICE FOR GRADUATING SENIORS

Harriet: "Go out there and do the best you can at whatever it is they give you to do. If it's something you don't like, you're not going to have to stay with it the rest of your life. But don't back away from anything; just get in there and stick with it." Joe: "Listen more than you talk. I hired some kids that came out of college and just really wanted to impress me. But the ones that come in and go to work and do what they are asked to do and exceed your expectations, those are the ones that move up the ladder. The other thing I'd say is to keep a life. If you are going to have a good work life, you have to have a good family life. Try to find the right balance. And always do your homework. Even in work, you have to do your homework. It's amazing how many people try to get by without doing that."

special about A&M and about Aggies. "For some reason or other, the Aggies seem to have more in common and keep up their friendships through the years better than people I know from other schools. I agree with Joe that it is a little bit undefinable. There is just a spirit there that always prevails."

Joe nods and adds, "A Spirit that can ne'er be told."

Joe, a former member of The Association of Former Student's Board of Directors, thinks the ongoing

enhancements to the Clayton W. Williams, Jr. Alumni Center will help perpetuate and strengthen that Aggie Spirit.

"It seemed to me that this project would give a focal point for people congregating on campus. I think you need gathering places. What did the Greeks call it—*agora*? You need those things to bring people together. I think The Association's building does that and I think these enhancements will help them do it better." 🍷