



Connecting With Rod Stepp '59

Roderick D. Stepp '59 was born in Wichita Falls during the Great Depression. Like most families of the time, the Stepps struggled to endure the longest, deepest and most widespread economic downturn of the 20th century. But thanks in large part to a scholarship provided by a generous donor, Rod Stepp would go on to become one of the great American success stories, applying education and hard work to turn a small, family-owned metal shop into a multimillion-dollar operation with six plants and hundreds of employees. Now he's determined to create similar opportunities for future generations.

"The Opportunity Award Scholarship was the deciding factor," Stepp said. "Without that scholarship, I would not have gone to A&M. Someone contributed money to fund that, and I feel indebted and want to pay that back. I genuinely believe that A&M played a major role in my achievements; therefore I feel an obligation to repay that debt. And the more I've been fortunate to give, the more I feel I owe."

As a student at Texas A&M, Stepp was a serious and ardent learner,

completing 156 hours in four years and graduating as a Distinguished Student and

Distinguished Military Graduate with a degree in geological engineering. He was also the editor of the 1959 *Aggieland* and a member of the Corps of Cadets and the Ross Volunteers.

"I did well at A&M and I came out prepared for the world," Stepp said. "When I put on those senior boots and that Aggie Ring, I remember I felt like 'I'm ready for the world, I'm prepared.' I felt self-confident. That is what A&M did for me."

His time as a cadet provided many cherished memories. He has detailed recall of the moment during his sophomore year when his unit, B Field Artillery, was announced as recipient of the General Moore Trophy as the top Corps unit. "I had goosebumps," he recalled. "I still get them now, just talking about it. It was a big deal to us to win that award." He also remembers the day he was selected as a Ross Volunteer, and later when his name was added to Who's Who in American Universities.



Rod Stepp during his senior year at Texas A&M.

He also remembers, and still uses, the practical skills he learned in the Corps.

"That 'other education' was as important as the classroom education, that leadership education you were receiving in the Corps of Cadets that you didn't even know you were receiving. It didn't seem significant at the time, but it builds confidence. You started out learning to take orders, and by the time you got out, you had learned to give orders. There is skill involved in both and we learned that almost by osmosis."

Stepp graduated in 1959 and began his career with Pan American Petroleum in Houston. He was called to service with the U.S. Army in 1961 and served two years as battery commander of a Nike missile site. He then returned briefly to Pan American before buying an interest in his family's small metal shop, which had started in 1958 and had four employees. Using his savings, plus money

from unused Army leave, he bought 10 percent of the metal shop for \$8,800. In August 1963, Stepp, his wife Claudia, who was expecting their second child, and their 3-year-old son headed to Fort Worth to live in a small house behind the shop until they could get a house of their own. "It was a gutsy move. I knew someday I was going out on my own, and I figured if I was going to go broke, I should do it while I was young enough to start over. So I deserve some credit for having guts. To this day I don't know why my wife went along with it, but it has all turned out wonderfully."

M&M Manufacturing has grown consistently over the years since. "We're not a great big company. We just took care of business, and we took care of it every day. We did it a little at a time, and we've built a heck of a business, with nearly \$100 million in sales," he said. "It is a great American success story, the kind of thing that I think can only be done in America. And the education I received at A&M was a big part of that. A&M helped me develop the qualities of discipline, steadfastness and mainly the self-confidence to just go get it."

As Stepp works on repaying his debt to A&M and providing similar opportunities for current and future students, he sees The Association of Former Students as a place where his donations get "the most bang for the buck."

"Since I understand how The Association works, I know that they promote Texas A&M and they do it in a first-class manner," he said. "The money feeds back into Texas A&M through faculty and student awards and providing a home for you to go when on campus. I just think the money spent there helps A&M, overall, in a greater way than perhaps other gifts can."

As an early supporter of The Association's building enhancement

project, Stepp is quoted on one of the six Core Value Walls as saying, "Loyalty is the genesis of all Aggie traditions." Stepp has repeatedly shown his loyalty to his alma mater, serving Texas A&M with his time and talent as member, president and Muster chair of the Fort Worth/Tarrant County A&M Club. He is a 35-year member of The Association's Century Club and has served as a member of the The Association of Former Students Board of Directors.

He also has served as president of the 12th Man Foundation, as chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Texas A&M Foundation, and as a member of the President's Board of Visitors. He

is a past Muster speaker and served on the Vision 2020 Council and One Spirit One Vision Campaign. Stepp co-funded and introduced a significant research project to the Energy Systems Laboratory at Texas A&M and co-funded a marketing project with Mays Business School.

"I am proud to have the diploma on my wall that I am looking at right now," Stepp said. "I think A&M students are more loyal to their university than are most other students. Most people respect Aggie loyalty—even alums of other schools. All the other traditions, the other core values, they are all important. But it all begins with loyalty."

AT A GLANCE: RODERICK D. STEPP '59

EDUCATION

Rod Stepp received a bachelor's degree in geological engineering from Texas A&M University in 1959. As a student, he was the editor of the 1959 *Aggieland* and a member of the Corps of Cadets and the Ross Volunteers. He was named Distinguished Student and Distinguished Military Graduate. In 2007, he was honored as a Distinguished Alumnus of Texas A&M.

FAMILY

Stepp's wife, Claudia, is a 1972 education graduate of Texas Wesleyan University and was recently honored as a distinguished alumnus of that school. Rod and Claudia live in Fort Worth and have two children, Randall Stepp and Rhonda Stepp Felton, and four grandchildren: Robert Randall Felton, Sonny Stepp, Megan Felton and Rachel Stepp. There are several other Aggies in the family, including Rod's brothers, Mike Stepp '63 and James Stepp '65, plus a double cousin, Ron Stepp '59.

CAREER

After graduating from A&M in 1959, Stepp began his career with Pan American Petroleum in Houston. In 1961, he was called to service with the U.S. Army, serving on active duty until April 1963. Afterward, he returned to Pan American briefly before purchasing an interest in a small family-owned metal shop in Fort Worth with four employees. M&M Manufacturing Co. has since grown to become a major manufacturer of construction-related products utilizing leading edge technology to create state-of-the-art manufacturing processes with six manufacturing plants and more than 700 employees.

ADVICE FOR INCOMING FRESHMEN

"Reflecting on my four years at A&M, I think a key to my academic success was to be consistent. Concentrate on both educations, both classwork and the 'other education.' You've got to be involved in both, but be consistent: not too much extracurricular and not too much academic. Try to discipline yourself. Enjoy the moment, recognize that you have four or five years there and you can enjoy it and have fun, but it is a job and you are preparing for the future. It can't be all fun and it can't be all work; it has to be somewhere in the middle."

ADVICE FOR GRADUATING SENIORS

"I was so tired of being broke and worrying about grades that when my last class was over, I was out of there. It never entered my mind to do any advanced degree. In hindsight, I should have at least considered it. You've got 40 or 50 or 60 years ahead of you to work, so don't be afraid—if it's financially possible—to look at an advanced degree, not necessarily in your field but maybe in a related field of some kind. And I've been telling people for years that life is too short to dislike what you do professionally. You need to sustain your spiritual values, and you need to put family first, but you have to select a field that you enjoy. Pay is not the most important thing, it is second. The most important thing is finding a profession that will give you fulfillment. I don't care if you are driving a garbage truck, if you like your work and do it well, pretty soon they'll have you in charge of that truck, then in charge of several trucks, and then running the whole sanitation department. It would be a lot more fun to just go fishing, but once you accept that you have to work, then find something you like to do. I think one reason I've been successful is that every day for 47 years, I couldn't wait to get to work, from the day I first started to now. It's just a lot easier if you like it. And if you enjoy it, you will do it well."