Wayne Stark: Widely Honored For Service To A&M Students

By Lane B. Stephenson ’77

He never taught a class, but outside the classroom J. Wayne Stark ’39 loomed large in Aggieland for decades, teaching countless Texas A&M students to believe they could do more in life than they ever thought possible.

His influence—mentoring, culturally and otherwise—impacted Aggieland far beyond campus bounds and long after many of his protégés had graduated and gone on to launch stellar careers in a variety of endeavors, often in fields and at levels they never envisioned while pursuing their degrees.

For his unique service, Stark, a 1939 Texas A&M graduate who died in 1993, has been honored by campus-based and local entities to a degree unmatched by any other Aggie—with some of his top honors bestowed posthumously. The native of the West Texas town of Lamesa was named a Distinguished Alumnus in 2011 and elected into the Corps of Cadets Hall of Honor in 2012. Last year a $100,000 scholarship was established in Mays Business School and named in memory of Stark—made possible by a $75,000 donation by an anonymous Mays graduate and her husband.

Also, the J. Wayne Stark Northeast Trip is still an annual event, commemorating Stark’s leadership in arranging for top students to take organized visits to New York and Boston to tour museums and other cultural sites and visit top Eastern schools that they might be considering for graduate- or professional-school studies. Most recently, The Texas A&M University System Board of Regents formally authorized the naming of the main student offices in the Memorial Student Center in Stark’s honor—the J. Wayne Stark MSC Student Programs Suite. Honoring him in this manner was made possible by a $500,000 gift to the university by Jon L. Hagler ’58 and his wife, Jo Ann. He was one of the many former students mentored by Stark.

“One of the many, many students he influenced.” Stark received the Distinguished Achievement Award for Student Relations in 1968, one of the first such faculty/staff awards jointly presented by the university and The Association of Former Students. The Arts Council of the Brazos Valley bestowed upon him its Andy Anderson Award in 1985 for his community leadership, especially for his role in promoting the arts locally. Also, the main art gallery in the MSC bears his name—the J. Wayne Stark Art Galleries.

One of Stark’s most ardent admirers is Frank Muller ’65, one of the countless Aggies who benefitted enormously from Stark’s tutelage and then assisted him in later life in helping other Aggies.

After Stark identified him as a “fish” with what he perceived to be exceptional potential, Muller recalled being summoned into the office of the imposing MSC director, whose seemingly bigger-than-life
presence “scared him more than the upperclassmen in the Corps.”

“His pushing, his drive and his unique ability to see more inside you than you saw in yourself” set Stark apart and set the stage for relationships that lasted lifetimes, said Muller, who went on to a highly successful business career that often included traveling abroad.

He said no matter where he was—as with others who had been fortunate enough to have been similarly mentored—if Stark needed your help in helping another Aggie, “he would find you.” Muller recounted being in a meeting halfway around the world when an assistant interrupted to say that “a Mr. Stark is on the line for you and won’t take ‘no’ for an answer.”

Another big Stark admirer is Jim Reynolds. Stark hired him in 1978 as assistant director of the MSC, and he assumed overall responsibility for its operations when Stark formally retired in 1980.

Reynolds, who has since retired from the university, said Stark served as “godfather” for students who came from other countries to study at Texas A&M before there were enough of them to establish a separate office to accommodate them. Perhaps, not surprisingly, he also was the primary campus contact for Aggie moms, primarily through the Federation of Texas A&M Mothers Clubs.

“Wayne Stark gave Aggies the opportunity to have exposure to the arts, and he showed Aggies they could compete successfully in both national and international environments,” observed Reynolds.

Muller further emphasized that aspect of Stark’s service: “J. Wayne probably was more responsible for hundreds of first-generation Aggies going to travel the world as well as attending prestigious business schools like Harvard, Stanford and Wharton. In the end he could count his successes in the thousands of people that he pushed to a higher level that they did not know was there—a great Aggie and mentor.”

Stark even posthumously won accolades from The Battalion, the student newspaper, which recounted his contributions even though the writer and editors responsible for the article were likely still in grade school when Stark retired.

“Those who worked closely with J. Wayne Stark said he did more for students than perhaps any other faculty or staff member in the history of Texas A&M University,” editorialized The Battalion, for which he served as associate editor more than a half-century earlier.

After earning his Texas A&M degree in history, Stark enrolled at the University of Texas School of Law. He withdrew from his studies there because of World War II, during which he served as an officer in the Army. Following a brief stint in the private sector, he returned to Texas A&M in 1947 to oversee construction of the MSC, beginning a 33-year term as its director.

Stark is also widely known for having played major roles in developing such highly successful and influential programs as the Student Conference on National Affairs and the Opera and Performing Arts Society. SCONA gave numerous Aggies opportunities to develop their leadership and organizational skills in staging programs that brought to campus an array of top national figures and attracted students from numerous other colleges. OPAS opened the doors for organized efforts to attract top musical and entertainment programs benefiting both the campus community and the surrounding area—in the process benefitting students as well as local residents.

A life-size bronze bust of Stark is prominently located in a well-traveled area of the Rudder Theatre Complex, where most OPAS programs are presented.

When Stark formally retired he was named director emeritus, and continued to have an office on campus and served the university until shortly before his death. He held the title of special assistant to the president for cultural programs and was instrumental in raising funds for a variety of arts and other cultural programs, and he had key roles in bringing to the campus varied art collections.

For more about Stark, visit tx.ag/Stark1 and tx.ag/StarkHoH.

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