



Remembering Why I'm Here

Dr. R. Bowen Loftin '71

was named the 24th president of Texas A&M University on Feb. 12, 2010. He recently spent a Tuesday morning at the Clayton W. Williams, Jr. Alumni Center to visit with *Texas Aggie* about his ideas for Aggieland. Loftin revealed himself as a committed Aggie who receives guidance from Texas A&M's core values. Talking about growing up in Hearne and his famous bow tie, Loftin reiterated again and again that he's here for the students.

INTERVIEW BY PORTER S. GARNER III '79 & STEPHANIE JETER '06

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM LYLE



ABOVE LEFT: Dr. R. Bowen Loftin '71 with two Classmates, Association Board member Otway Denny Jr. '71 (left) and Association Past Chair Van Taylor '71.
RIGHT: Dr. R. Bowen Loftin '71 Loftin and Association of Former Students President and CEO Porter S. Garner III '79 in the Clayton W. Williams, Jr. Alumni Center.



Texas Aggie: *You were born in Hearne, grew up in Navasota and went to Texas A&M after high school graduation.*

Loftin: What choice did I have? [laughter] I bracketed the place, right? Twenty miles north. Twenty miles south.

TA: *Do you feel that your local roots and the fact that you are a former student will affect how you operate in the presidency?*

Loftin: I am who I am. I'm a product of this University. I'm a product of growing up in a small town in Texas. With all the values and environmental influences that comes with that. I am who I am.

TA: *What role, in your opinion, do former students play in the success of Texas A&M?*

Loftin: They play a fantastic role. There are so many dimensions in which they can engage. They clearly serve as ambassadors for this University; a lot of people learn about A&M from former students. Many of them are donors. Many of them give their time and talent to the University in so many different ways. Some serve on boards, like your Board. They come back to support our teams athletically. They do all kinds of things and that makes this place very special. There aren't many schools that can claim our

kind of loyalty, and I think that again sets us apart from so many universities around the world who don't have that. It's the Aggie Spirit.

TA: *What are things that former students can do to help Texas A&M University and help as you lead it?*

Loftin: I think, by and large, they're doing it right now. They support this organization, and you do so much for us. Their support provides money which is easy to calculate, but it's more than that. Think about this building [the Clayton W. Williams, Jr. Alumni Center]. You are a gateway to Texas A&M right now. Yes, we have a visitor center over in Rudder, but that's hard to get to. People don't know where to park or how to get there. But, they drive down George Bush Drive and they see this building. And what do they do? They turn in here. And you're ideally equipped. I mean, look what you have here. You're surrounded by what Texas A&M is. What better thing to do for us than have a place like this that welcomes people to this campus for the first time, and back for 100 times for that matter.

TA: *It's been nearly 40 years since your student days at A&M. Is there a particular Aggie memory that stands out in your mind?*

Loftin: I was at lunch in the Pavil-

ion with three students and they asked me the same question. I had to say it. It was 1969 and it was Bonfire. That sticks in my mind. Looking back on that, I did some foolish things, but the point is that it was a very neat experience to have. I understand, from that, the passion that former students bring to the Bonfire question, as do some of the current students here. At the same time, I'm tempering that with my own knowledge about what can happen. And so, that's my challenge.

TA: *You were a very serious student when attending Texas A&M—you even graduated a year early with a degree in physics. As a result of your studies, you were perhaps not seriously embedded into other aspects of the University as some other students were. Can you comment on that decision?*

Loftin: I had a goal when I came here. I really wanted to be a college professor. That was my dream and I knew I had to perform well academically. I knew that I had chosen a very serious major, and that took a lot of my time. I also didn't have any money. I was fortunate in two ways; I, first of all, had two scholarships that paid all of my school costs basically. And the Department of Physics gave me a part-time job that I could use to get my spending money. So I was able, from both sides, to get what I needed.



Between going to class 18 to 20 hours a semester, working part time, doing the class work I needed to do, there weren't many hours in the day left. At the same time I was able to sample the waters, though. That was the good thing about this. I could go to yell practice. I could go to games. My first game, I'll never forget, we got beat soundly. I can't remember the name of the team off the top of my head, but it was either late August or very early September 1967 and we had just finished the second deck on the east side of the stadium at that time. So, my seat was on the very top row of that. I was a good fish, you know? And I had the worst sunburn of my life. Facing that sun, it was bright day, hot, I got so sunburned that I couldn't even smile without hurting myself. We lost the first four games that year. And I thought, "This is a depressing semester for me to start off at A&M." Then we beat Texas Tech and that turned everything around. We won every game after that. We beat t.u., 10-7. We went to the Cotton Bowl January 1, 1968, and beat Alabama, and I watched Bear Bryant carry Gene Stallings off the field. That was a wonderful thing to see. My point is, I tried to take advantage of Texas A&M outside of the classroom, but I had to be very selective about how I did that.

TA: *On Sept. 13, 2008, Hurricane Ike came through Galveston and caused quite a bit of damage to campus structures and city infrastructure. When students couldn't go back to class, you, as A&M's CEO of the Galveston campus, led the movement of the entire Galveston campus operations to campus here in College Station. It is a feat still remembered as unprecedented in higher education. Tell me a bit about that day.*

Loftin: Well, let's back up because there's a little more to learn about that. I arrived on campus [in Galveston] in late May 2005. The very first day in the office I called my deputy and asked for the plans for hurricane season. He brought two binders in. One binder was a very elaborate process or plan on how you decide to evacuate—what models do you look at? What's your timeline to make your decision to get people off safely? The second binder was a big checklist of how you'd secure the campus—what you put inside buildings and what you took away with you so you minimized the damage if it came close. I asked where the third binder was. Where's the one that tells you what to do if the hurricane does hit you? They didn't have one. That year you may recall we had two hurricanes. Katrina never threatened us directly, but when Rita was coming close, I was in College Station for my weekly meetings. I

talked to Bob Gates about needing to possibly evacuate. He said, "Bowen, have you ever thought about what would happen if you couldn't return to campus because of hurricane damage?" He said we should really consider thinking about bringing our students here. The rest of that week we spent working as a team of Galveston and College Station people to put together a quick plan to bring people here if we had to. It turns out Rita went to the east of Galveston, we had minimal damage and not much was required. But we went back to Galveston and finished the plan. The background is important to have.

Fast forward now to 2008. We had Ike coming in and it looked pretty bad to me. We were watching it very closely and the models were shifting all the time. So we shut down the school on Wednesday at 2 p.m. and everybody was gone by 5 p.m. Ike came right over the campus on Saturday at 2:10 a.m. Though the campus itself was not heavily damaged in terms of major buildings, the city of Galveston was devastated. It appeared to me that it was going to take probably at least a month or two to get services back to the campus and housing for our students.

Our rule at that time was that if we can't get back in class within two weeks, we'd come to College Station. So Saturday morning at 2:10,

Ike came across Galveston and on Sunday, I made the call to bring us here. If we couldn't have recovered the semester, the students would have missed out. They wouldn't have been able to graduate when they wanted to and they'd be off track. They wouldn't be where they wanted to be. So it was essential that we get that done. We got about 2,000 people moved here and going again in about two weeks. The point was the obligation to the students. We had to get them into class.

TA: What do you feel will be Texas A&M's biggest challenges during the next 10 years?

Loftin: I think our biggest challenge right now is to keep the momentum going toward our long-range goal, as Vision 2020 articulates, in the face of serious economic issues in the state. I'm not sure how fast we'll see this economic problem going away. It has an impact on all of us and the long-range goal we set before ourselves now that we're having some uncertain times in terms of the resources we need to make it all happen. We'll make it work as best we can, but it does have an impact and there's no way you can say it doesn't. My days are consumed with a lot of budgetary work—a lot of ways to work with our structures and with our operations to get them as efficient as we can make them to keep the cost down, but it doesn't get easier.

Texas A&M has a very large physical plant. We have over 600 buildings on this campus and many of them are not in good repair at the moment, so we've been focusing for a number of years now on building new facilities. That's been a good thing for Texas A&M; I don't want to be misunderstood, but we haven't paid enough attention to what we already had. We aren't going to stop building new buildings here, but we're going to start to shift the center of mass away from new construction and to deferred maintenance and rehabilitation of our sound structures that we have in place right now. That's going to be a huge effort to get that changed. Those are the challenges I see in front of me. At the same time we really want to con-

tinue attracting the very best faculty to this campus. That's essential to our progress and to our students. Luckily we are not as impacted in this current situation as other states are, and so we do have some benefits there. We're reducing our expenditures a bit right now, but others have done it by a factor of four to five to six times what we have.

But on the bright side of it all is what Texas A&M has going for it. We have former students, and they are a great resource to us, not just financially, but in the terms of the Spirit they provide, in terms of the volunteerism that they really support, and so many things.

TA: Can you give me an example of former students' Spirit or volunteerism that you've seen?

Loftin: This goes back to Hurricane Ike. I just made the mention that we had many students without clothing or furniture, and guess what? We had truckloads! Aggie moms were driving U-Haul trucks and pulling trailers down here in such large numbers that we had to go to Riverside campus to house it all. Every student got what they needed. Every faculty member got what they needed. Every staff member got what they needed. We even had enough to give to charity after that. It was like the fishes and the loaves in the Bible. We started with so little we had so much at the end that we couldn't even take care of it all.

The Association gave financial support to our [Galveston] students here to buy lost books and all kinds of things they had to have to resume their studies in College Station. Those kinds of things don't happen everywhere. When something happens, you know you have someone to rely on.

TA: You have become somewhat known for that bow tie you're wearing. When did your style of necktie become a trademark?

Loftin: About 35 years ago. There's a story if you want to hear it. Most people who teach physics at a university dress pretty casually. When I taught at the University of Houston-Downtown, we all dressed pretty casually, either in slacks or a dress

shirt or collared shirt. Then the edict came down from on high that we should start wearing ties, and I wasn't too keen on that. So I decided I was going to rebel here and wear a bow tie instead of a long tie. So I did that and, after a while, realized that it worked very well because people remembered me. The fact that very few people wear bow ties and the fact that my given name is Bowen was a connector, as well.

TA: You must have quite a collection. How many bow ties do you have? Any interesting ones?

Loftin: I have a large collection, well over 100. I have some specialty bow ties. I have a holiday tie with flashing lights.

TA: I hear the bookstore recently sold out of A&M bow ties. You're starting a trend!

Loftin: I came in the office on President's Day and the entire staff on the 10th floor [of Rudder Tower, location of the president's office] was wearing bow ties. It was a variety of clip-on and hand-tied ties. Then Student Body President Kolin Loveless '09 was wearing a bow tie a couple days later. Then I guess you remember our basketball player that hurt his leg [Derrick Roland '10]. I guess it was the third game after that and he came to the game wearing a bow tie. Coat on, bow tie on, crutches and everything. I walked down there to talk to him and Coach Turgeon, and he said he was wearing it in my honor. We're keeping the bow tie population as sold by the bookstore very high right now.

TA: After you've served a long and successful tenure, what do you hope that people will remember about you when they look back at their time at Texas A&M?

Loftin: I want to be remembered as somebody who cared about the students, who really put them first. I think all of us do that but we don't always think of it that way. I was telling a student a while ago that that's what drives me. I try to remind myself why I'm here—that I'm here for those almost 50,000 students who are here.



And if you keep that in front of you, you'll make the right decisions. It's easy to get lost working on the budget or a utility problem or a facility problem or this or that. Every day I have about a thousand problems that need to be resolved some way. They're all connected indirectly to the students but not directly, so you can end up losing your way sometimes. That's my challenge is making sure every day I don't forget why I'm here.

TA: *As interim president, you wrote a letter to the Aggie Network that was published in Texas Aggie. It passionately referenced the Aggie core values and your adherence to them. Similarly, this is your opportunity as the 24th president of Texas A&M to talk to the Aggie Network in*

an official capacity. What would you like to say?

Loftin: I hope I've kept to what I promised in that letter. What I like to tell people is be who you are. Aggies are Aggies. We have some challenges dealing with our Agginess from time to time. Everyone brings such passion to what they do. The passion is genuine, but sometimes the knowledge behind it is incomplete. So, one of my challenges here is to educate people to what is real. People interpret everyday what they see going on at Texas A&M, and they do so in a context that can be driven by the press, by media—which doesn't always have all the pieces to it—by their own experiences, and by what they hear other people say.

I think one of the great challenges of which we need to remind ourselves

is that patience is required. Take your time. Listen and find out the truth before you make judgment. That's the kind of advice I want to give people. We judge our president a lot. I've judged my presidents here a lot in the past when I wasn't too happy about what happened at Texas A&M, either on the field of athletics or in other areas as well. I'll be judged, too. I'll be judged harshly by some, maybe not so harshly by others here. All I really ask for is a little patience, to at least take the time to find out the truth and then make your judgments. That's the kind of message I want to give to people right now. We owe it to each other to do that. I'll do it for you, you do it for me, and we'll be OK. 🍷

Educating The Educator

President Loftin has a visible dedication to current students and their education. Not so visible, however, is his experience as a physics student at Texas A&M from 1967 to 1970. "He was a good student, very hard working, very dedicated," said Dr. Tom Adair '57, one of his physics professors.

Since coming to Texas A&M in 1966, Adair has 44 years experience teaching Aggies. Those years of education are important, he said. "A degree will get you your first job, but after that, you need to keep working and learning. It all starts with education," he said.

Loftin "was just a hardworking kid in those days," Adair said. "I knew Bowen the whole time he was a student." Loftin was bright, succeeded academically and "was always one of our better students."

It was Adair who encouraged Loftin to continue his education at Rice University. Adair cheered when Loftin started teaching at the University of Houston and when Loftin was named vice president and chief executive officer of Texas A&M Galveston. And Adair couldn't have been prouder when Loftin was named president of Texas A&M University.