

THE PEOPLE'S UNIVERSITY: UH ALUMNI MEMORIES THROUGH THE DECADES

By Jeff Sutton

Birch Blaylock, considered the first student to register in 1927 at what became the University of Houston, expressed astonishment when he returned to the campus forty-four years later for the first time in the early 1970s: "Imagine having 366 acres and 46 buildings. We had to scumble for a classroom at old San Jac. They moved us all over the place." No doubt students from the 1970s are astonished when they return to the campus today. Indeed, the University has grown so rapidly over its 85 year history that each generation of students has experienced a somewhat different place.

Some of UH's first graduates left their marks on the city in big ways, while others made more subtle but nonetheless significant contributions. Judge Roy Hofheinz, who got his law degree at UH in 1931 at age nineteen, went on to serve in several state and local elected positions, including Harris County judge from 1936 to 1944. Most importantly, he helped bring Major League Baseball and the Astrodome to Houston. Less well known is Edith Carlton Lord. She broke barriers as one of the earliest women students and one of the few who was married. She competed on the 1934

women's basketball team, which along with the men's ice hockey team comprised the UH athletics program. In addition, she represented UH at intercollegiate debates as one of two women on the six-student team. By 1935, Lord had joined the faculty where she inspired others to reach beyond society's limitations.

The growing number of former students who wanted to maintain contact with and sustain the University led to the formation of the University of Houston Alumni Association (UHAA) in 1940. Today it has over 18,000 members who subscribe to the organization's core values: commitment, leadership, integrity, inclusiveness, fun, and teamwork. Most of the segments that follow, featuring alumni from each decade since UHAA's founding, are written from interviews done by Jeff Sutton, the association's director of communications. Two are drawn from articles written by Michelle Klump for the "You are the Pride" series at UH. While things have changed from the 1940s until today, two things remain constant in these alumni reflections on the University of Houston: UH provided them a gateway to opportunity, and each witnessed the positive impact that the University of Houston has had on the community.

Students walk in front of the Ezekiel Cullen Building, circa 1950s.

Photo courtesy of the Digital Library,
Special Collections, University of
Houston Libraries.

WELCOME WILSON, SR. ('49)

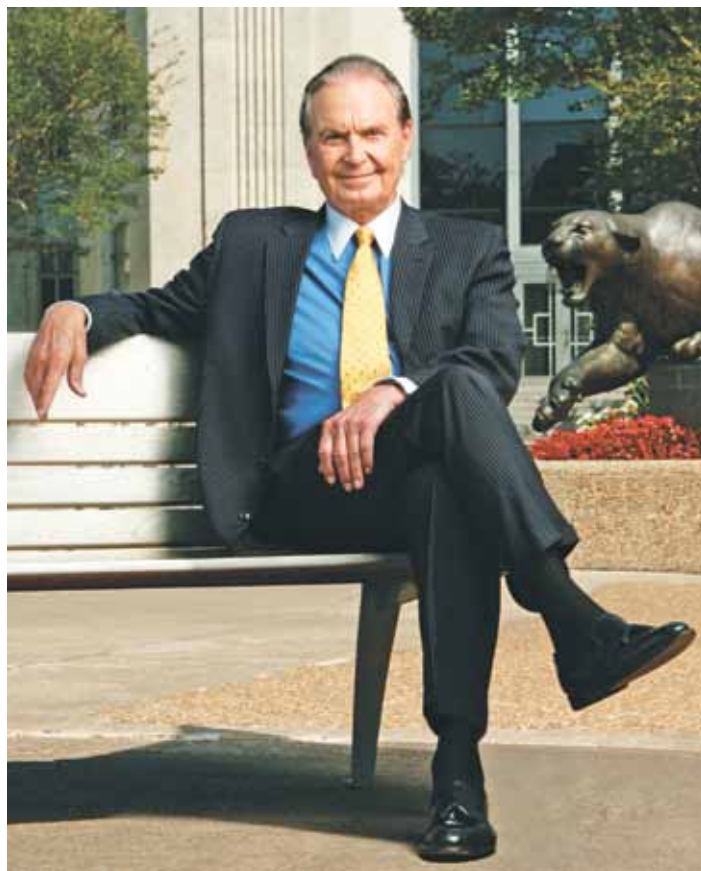
Welcome Wilson Sr. recalled that the University of Houston was exactly the same age he was—seventeen—in 1944, the year he graduated from high school in his hometown of Brownsville, Texas. Following graduation he enrolled in Brownsville Junior College and registered for the draft. He received orders to report on September 17, 1945, but his orders were cancelled after the U.S. bombing of Japan in August.

Most Brownsville students bound for college attended the University of Texas or Texas A&M, not the University of Houston. In fact, Wilson had never heard of the University. His father, however, had “great faith in the city of Houston” and thought UH was the better choice. Wilson explained, he “felt like the city of Houston was going to be the center of the business universe in years to come . . . and going to school in Houston would give us a leg up.”

Perhaps the biggest difference then and now were the expectations parents and their college students held for each other. Wilson remembered, “My father told us when he dropped us off, ‘Boys, I’ve paid your first semester’s tuition. I’ve paid your first month’s rent on this house trailer (\$10). Here’s \$50 each. Anything that you need, call me on the telephone, and I will explain how you can do without it.’ We never heard from him financially again.”

With 10,000 students enrolled at UH by 1946, Wilson thought it was an exciting place with returning G.I.s and a cross-section of students. “My brother and I lived in Trailer number 67 . . . [which was] about the length of a big SUV. There was a bunk at each end and in the middle was a small kitchenette and the bathroom was a block and a half away.”

In the post-war years, “UH was populated with people who had very little money but had a great deal of energy,”



Welcome Wilson Sr. served as chairman of the UH Board of Regents from September 2007 through August 2010.

Photo courtesy of UH Alumni Association.

Wilson explained. He and his brother, Jack Wilson Jr., worked for the campus newspaper at \$1.00 per hour and sold advertising. Wilson started a newspaper for Trailer Village and sold ads for that as well. Because UH was new, it had established few rules for this sort of thing. Wilson, noted, “We didn’t ask permission to do it, we just did it.”

When Frontier Fiesta resumed after the war, the Wilson brothers had a comedy singing routine. The following year they got Humphrey Bogart to come and worked with a Ford dealer to donate a new car for the beard contest. Wilson recalled, “There must have been 1,000 people growing beards, including me.” Wilson married his college sweetheart, Joanne Guest, the day he graduated from UH in 1949. He was twenty-one, and she was eighteen. “We’re now in our 64th year of marriage,” he noted proudly.

As the former chair of the UH Board of Regents, Wilson reflected on the University’s place in the world, “I think more than most universities, UH is going to be inter-woven with the business and civic community in Houston. . . . UH is in Houston, the energy capital of the world. I think that we’re going to produce a model in working with business and industry in producing exactly the kind of graduates that they need. . . . It’s going to be a seamless transition . . . that’s going to be a model for the country and has really strengthened our ties to the community in the last five years.”



Traveling by train, Welcome Wilson and Joanne Guest took advantage of the opportunity to get a little rest. The two married the day after Wilson graduated from UH.

Photo courtesy of UH Alumni Association.

RICHARD COSELLI ('55, J.D. '58)

Richard Coselli was born in Galveston but came to Houston not long after, making him “almost a native,” he said. He graduated from St. Thomas High School in 1950 and recalled that his choice to come to the University of Houston seemed like the natural thing to do. He admitted that Notre Dame was a tempting alternative, but “that was way north and east of Conroe.” In those early days, Coselli recalled UH had just three buildings, and the vast majority of students worked to pay their tuition at the small private university or had come on the G.I. Bill. He worked thirty to forty hours a week at his father’s grocery store as he pursued degrees in business administration and law.

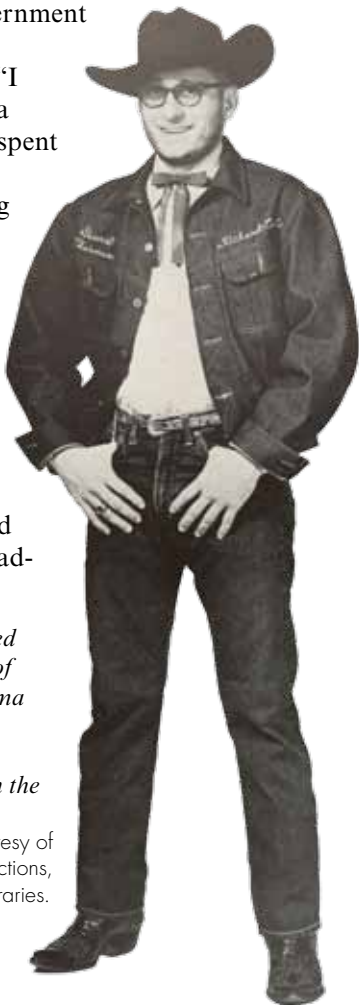
In 1953, Coselli became the chairman of Frontier Fiesta, which the students labeled “The Greatest College Show on Earth.” This was no small feat in the mid-1950s. The event ran for a week and drew 110,000 to 120,000 people. Coselli organized a staff of 300 and 3,000 volunteers. Twenty-four student organizations, primarily fraternities and sororities, produced twelve revue shows, and campus service organizations took care of concessions.

During his law school days, Coselli took an active role in student government, calling it a natural progression from his earlier activities. He explained, “If you’re involved in one thing you’re involved in the other because they are hand in hand.” His final year in law school, he also served as student body president, much to the consternation of the dean who thought being a full time student, working, and heading student government was too much.

Coselli managed just fine. “I was always determined to be a lawyer,” he recalled. Having spent the past sixty years as a property lawyer, it is not surprising that he felt his property law professor, Dwight Olds, had the biggest impact on him as a student. Coselli noted that the field did not always receive its due among other lawyers because property lawyers did not spend time at the courthouse. “They thought of us as sitting around with a green eye shade and reading abstracts,” he quipped.

In 1957, the Houstonian identified Richard Coselli as the chairman of Frontier Fiesta, a member of Sigma Chi, bailiff for Delta Theta Phi, associate justice for the Student Supreme Court, and senator from the College of Law.

Photo from 1957 *Houstonian*, courtesy of the Digital Library, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.



Chair of Frontier Fiesta, Richard Coselli (seated center) discusses the new outfit for Yosemite Sam with committee members Jim Baker, Jon Campbell, Bob Meyer, Bruce Albitz, and Jim Stallworth.

Photo from 1957 *Houstonian*, courtesy of the Digital Library, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

Richard Coselli has known every UH president except the first, E. E. Oberholtzer. From his days as a student through his involvement as a member and past-president of the Alumni Association he has found them all to be highly accessible. UH, in turn, helped to make him a success by showing him the “joy of working with people,” people who worked together to grow the city. He added, “I always pictured Houston having three crown jewels. One is the University of Houston, the other is the medical center, and the third is the port. They’re what make Houston thrive.”

LIZ GHRIST (M.ED. '67)

Liz Ghrist symbolizes many of the non-traditional students who have attended UH both as undergraduate and graduate students. A native Houstonian, Ghrist lived in Arizona before returning to her hometown with her husband and children in 1958. She had been out of college for fourteen years and was raising four children when she made



The Board of Regents members, left to right, are: C. F. Kendall, Xavier C. Lemond, Elizabeth Ghrist, Chancellor Alexander F. Schilt, Kenneth L. Lay, John Cater, and Dorothy Jena Alcorn.

Photo by Mona Chadwick, from 1990 *Houstonian*, courtesy of the Digital Library, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.



Former Harris County commissioner Liz Ghrist points out that the buildings on the University of Houston campus reflect the names of people who came to know and care about the fact that Houston needs a major university.

Photo by ©Nash Baker.

the decision to go back to school for her M.Ed. Her reason for choosing the University of Houston was simple, “I lived in Houston. It was the university in town.”

Balancing the demands of school and family, Ghrist earned her master’s by attending night school, taking three hours a semester. At the same time, she became heavily involved volunteering for the Harris County Republican Party. “We came back to Houston and decided we were Republican and not Democratic. (At the time, Texas was considered a single-party state.) I started out at as a lowly volunteer but immediately latched onto George Bush’s campaign for county commissioner,” Ghrist added. A tireless volunteer, she took part in multiple campaigns and held important roles in various county groups, including secretary of the Harris County Republican Women and president of a neighborhood Republican Women’s organization.

In 1988, Ghrist was asked to stand in as county commissioner for Precinct Three for one year. During that period, she played an instrumental role in projects to widen Memorial Drive and Voss Road, as well as efforts to convince Compaq Computer Corporation to stay in Houston when the company prepared to relocate. Her work did not stop there, however. “Another project that I got started,

that I was so proud of, is the restoration of our courthouse downtown.” She continued, “Twenty years ago it was a dream, and just this year it was completed!” The \$65 million renovation received the President’s Award from the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance.

Ghrist’s involvement in the city of Houston and Harris County certainly included UH. Shortly after completing her year as county commissioner, James Hofheinz in Governor Bill Clements’s appointment offices asked her what she wanted to do for the state of Texas, and she selected serving on the University of Houston Board of Regents. Ghrist recalled, “The most important thing I probably contributed at that time was to recommend Bill Hobby as chancellor [1995-1997].” Ghrist has remained active with the University, serving on the UH Alumni Association board of directors, including a stint as the board’s chair, and as the association’s president.

Ghrist expressed her pride in UH, the city, and the county, when she concluded, “I love the fact that the University of Houston has become what it is today and what it will be in the future because Houston is the city of the future, and Harris County is the county of the future.”

ALONZO CANTU ('78)

Following in the footsteps of his older sister, Elvia ('74), Alonzo Cantu came to the University of Houston to study pharmacy. After working in a pharmacy one summer, however, he quickly realized pharmacy life was not for him and changed his major to finance. The rest is history.

Cantu came from a close-knit Hispanic-American family in McAllen, Texas, and found it hard being away from home, even the short distance to Houston. He credited Southwest Airlines’ economical fares for helping him overcome his homesickness, adding, “In those days, flying back to the Valley was just \$32, round trip.” Finding other students of Hispanic descent from the Rio Grande Valley helped him to feel more comfortable on the UH campus as well. Because they shared similar backgrounds and were also uncomfortable with being away from home for the first time, the “Valleyites” found time to get together and share their feelings. Cantu remembered the group as a cross-section of students, “Some of them were in law school, pharmacy school or business, and a couple of them were athletes – one on the track team and the other on the football team.”

When he was not busy studying or flying home to McAllen, Cantu participated in various student activities, the most memorable being the 1976 football game between UH and the Texas Longhorns in Austin. The Cougars won the game 30-0 on their way to the Southwest Conference Championship. “It was played before one of the biggest crowds ever, and was a very exciting game. Plus, the fact that we beat UT made it even better,” Cantu recalled.

When he returned to McAllen with his degree, Cantu first started building homes with his father before venturing out on his own. His businesses began to succeed despite a devaluation of the peso, interest rates as high as 15-16%, and a hard freeze that crippled the Valley’s agricultural industry.



Alonzo Cantu received the Presidential Medallion from Chancellor and President Renu Khator in May 2012. The medallion represents the highest honor awarded to those who have improved the University community, either through their presence as inspirational guests or as long-term supporters of the University's mission.

Photo courtesy of the University of Houston.

Cantu explained, "I think my business degree helped me deal with and adapt to those big obstacles."

Besides giving him a great start in his career, Cantu credits his time at the Bauer School of Business with teaching him that business also carried social responsibilities. "That kind of stuck with me, so I get involved with a lot of organizations, whether non-profit or for-profit, that help the communities here in the Valley," Cantu added.

Cantu has always had a passion for education. Today he works to make students in the Rio Grande Valley aware of the opportunities available at the University of Houston. "I think that education is the best way to get to the next level, and we have a lot of Hispanics here in the Valley who only need an opportunity. So I'm going to do my best to get them to go to UH and enroll in the professional schools — the law school, the pharmacy school, the optometry school, the architecture school, and the business school."

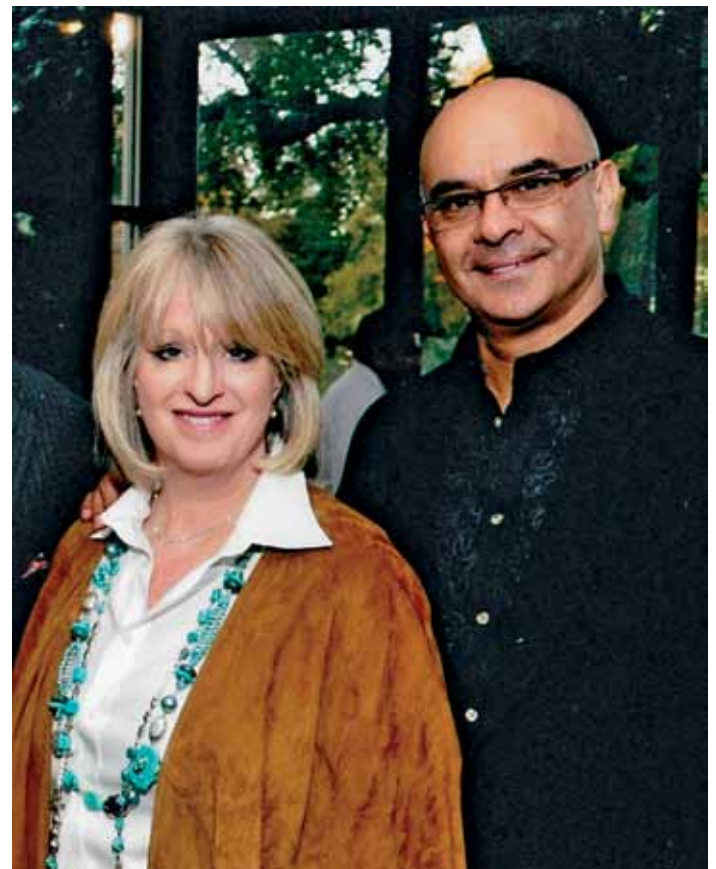
Now when Cantu steps back onto the UH campus and sees the many changes that have taken place since he was a student, he can only look around and say, "Incredible! I think more of the alumni need to go back and look at what's there now, what's happening, and what's going to happen there in the next five years."

MELISSA ('77, M.ED. '83) AND RICK NORIEGA ('85)

When UH began collecting stories of alumni for its "You are the Pride" series, Michelle Klump interviewed Melissa and Rick Noriega, the only couple on the list. As Klump noted in her article, the pair share a passion for giving back not only to the University but also to the community in a big way.

Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Melissa Meisgeier came to Houston at age three. She attended Scarborough High School before enrolling at UH where her father, Charles Meisgeier, was the founding chair of the College of Education's Educational Psychology Department. While working on her B.S. in psychology, Melissa served as president of Phi Mu Fraternity and vice president of the Pan-Hellenic Council, and ran for homecoming queen. She found that "the extra-curricular activities were very valuable" because she learned how to read budgets, to plan events, and to meet and talk to people. Melissa went on to earn her master's in education counseling at UH in 1983.

Rick's family came to Houston from Atlanta, and he grew up watching UH athletes excel in football, basketball, golf, and track. The son of a World War II veteran,



Melissa and Rick Noriega have dedicated their lives to public service, and yet they still devote time and energy to support the University of Houston in many ways. Council Member Noriega recently sponsored mayoral proclamations honoring Houston History and the University's eighty-fifth anniversary.

Photo courtesy of Council Member Melissa Noriega.

he joined the U.S. Army Reserves during the Iran hostage crisis in 1979. When a UH assistant professor of military science came to recruit ROTC candidates, Rick took advantage of the opportunity to earn a scholarship to finish his degree and a commission as a second lieutenant. Majoring in journalism with a minor in military science, Rick wrote for the *Daily Cougar*, and remembers Professor Ted Stanton instilling in him the importance of writing well. “That is something that has stayed with me and is something I use every day,” he told Klump.

Like many other UH students, Rick worked and he appreciated that UH gave him the flexibility to do so. “My experience was a lot of what I think Mr. Hugh Roy Cullen talked about, of having a quality institution for the working men and women of Houston, where they could achieve their dreams and educational desires while at the same time working,” he explained. “So I’m really grateful for the experience and for the university maintaining that value here in the great city of Houston.”

Klump noted that although the couple disagrees on some of the details, eventually it was their loyalty to Cougar alumni activities that caused their paths to cross when Rick organized an off-campus St. Patrick’s Day event and Melissa was the only person who came. They married on Valentine’s Day 1991.

The Noriegas have spent much of their adult lives in various aspects of community service. Rick served eleven years as Texas state representative for Houston’s District 145, thirty years in the military, and is currently president of ADVANCE, a non-profit organization, which offers educational programs for children and parents as well as support to at-risk communities. Melissa worked for the Houston Independent School District for twenty-seven years and filled in for Rick in the Texas House while he was deployed in Afghanistan. She currently serves as Houston City Council Member, At-large Position Three.

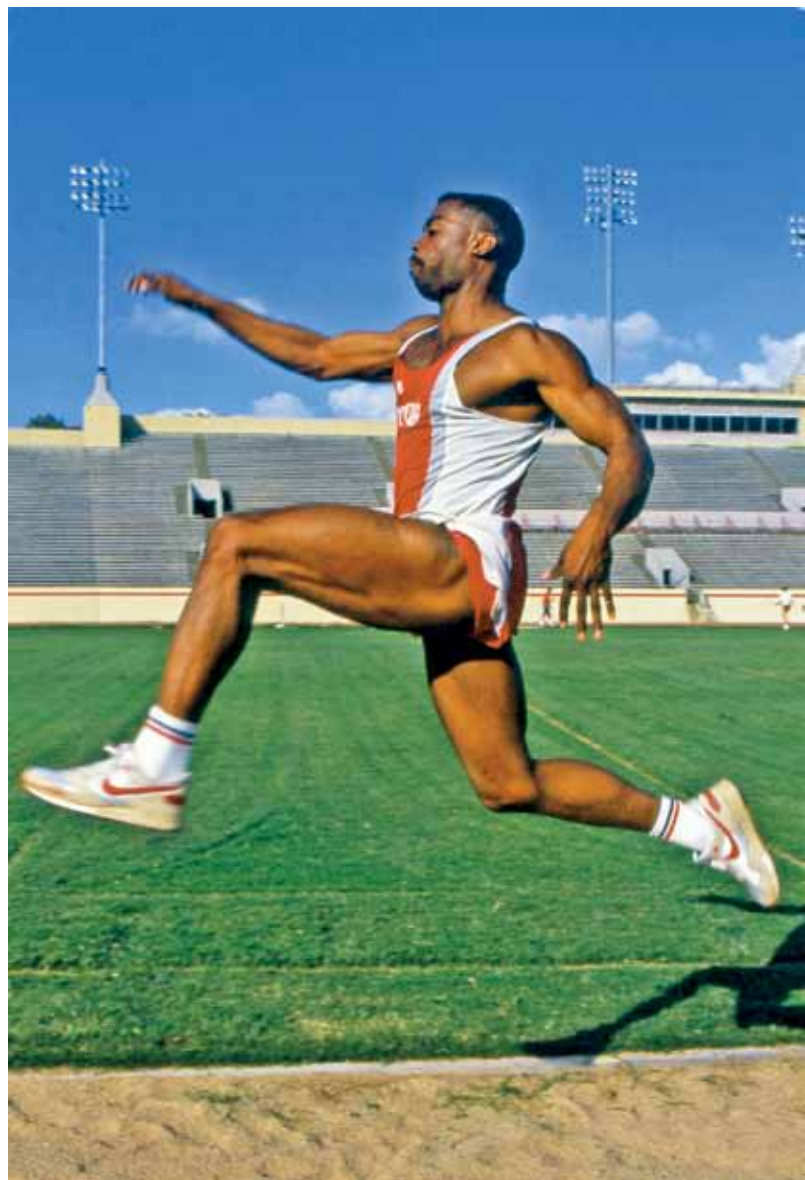
Melissa entered politics after volunteering with Rick when Mayor Bill White appointed him to be the incident commander for Hurricane Katrina evacuees at Houston’s George R. Brown Convention Center. She recalled, “I have never been so proud to be from Houston. I decided to run for City Council because I saw what Houstonians could do when they set their minds to it.” Rick explained, “We feel called to public service. It is more rewarding than any new job title—knowing that you are advancing the ball down the field and trying to make the world a better place. . . . That has kind of been our family mission statement.”

Both Lifetime members of the UH Alumni Association, the Noriegas credit UH with providing the foundation for much of their success. “I think the city of Houston and the University of Houston are marching hand in hand toward whatever the future is going to bring,” Melissa told Klump. “I think the world is changing so rapidly that you are going to have to have the kind of intellectual heft . . . that comes with Tier One status for Houston.” Rick agreed, adding, “It seems to always be getting better. I truly believe that the best days at UH are yet to come.”

LEROY BURRELL ('91)

Leroy Burrell is regarded as one of the best athletes ever to call the University of Houston home. It is fitting, therefore, that the mother of another one of UH’s best track & field athletes played a role in his attending UH. Carl Lewis’s mother, a high school track coach, had noticed Burrell’s name in newsletters with regional results. “Evelyn Lewis was still coaching high school track in the south Jersey area and saw my name at the top of this list in five events and sent it to Coach [Tom] Tellez and told him ‘Hey, I think this is a kid you might want to look at,’” Burrell recalled.

After a phone call from Tellez and a visit to the UH campus, Burrell was ready to join the Cougars. He immedi-



In 1986, Leroy Burrell broke UH’s freshman long jump record held by Carl Lewis, when he leaped 26’ 9” at a dual meet against UCLA. As a senior in 1990, he won the NCAA Indoor Long Jump title for the second straight year with a leap of 27 feet.

Photo courtesy of UH Alumni Association.



Following the 2011 Conference USA Indoor Track & Field Championships, Leroy Burrell was named Men's Indoor Track & Field Coach of the Year. Photo courtesy of UH Alumni Association.

ately made an impact, setting a new freshman record in the long jump with a distance of 26' 9" before an injury at the Southwest Conference championship forced him to miss a year of competition.

During his sophomore year, Burrell earned his first All-America recognition in the long jump. The next year, he won his first NCAA championship, taking first in the long jump at the NCAA Indoor meet with a distance of 26' 5.50." In total, Burrell won three NCAA championships and as a senior received the "Jumbo Elliott Award" given to the nation's top track & field athlete.

As a professional athlete, Burrell twice set the world record in the 100-meter dash. In 1991, he set his first world record with a time of 9.90 seconds, beating Lewis's previous best of 9.92. Three years later, he again bested Lewis with a time of 9.85. He won an Olympic gold medal in 1992 in the 4x100 relay and a pair of gold medals in the event at the 1991 and 1993 World Championships.

When Burrell retired from competition in 1998, the University of Houston selected him to succeed Tellez as the head track & field coach. During his first two seasons at the program's helm, Burrell was named C-USA Coach of the Year for both the Indoor and Outdoor season. In discussing what coaching at UH has meant to him, Burrell commented, "It's truly a blessing to get the opportunity to lead the program that you grew up in. It's been great."

Having spent years here as a student athlete and now in his fifteenth season as head coach, Burrell has seen a great deal of change on campus. "I look back and picture the number of buildings that are here now, that weren't here when I came. The sheer number of buildings that are here now is just astounding." Burrell continued, "The university is still relatively young and for what it's accomplished in that short period of time is pretty amazing."

MICHELLE COLVARD ('00)

Michelle Colvard was born with spina bifida, requiring her to use a wheelchair for most of her life. As a child she found that frustrating and disliked feeling "set apart" from her classmates. She did not want to be identified by her disability. Colvard told Michelle Klump that eventually it occurred to her "that there are a lot of people who didn't have the opportunities that I did. They didn't have the parents that I did. . . . They weren't being able to benefit fully from life because they were either putting themselves in a box, or other people were putting them in a box."

When she arrived at UH, Colvard found the experience liberating. "It was like I just woke up," she explained. "I absolutely loved it. I loved that it was all about you. The professors may give you homework or an assignment, but it is up to you to finish it. . . . I totally thrived in that environment."

Wanting to study how people react to life's problems, Colvard majored in psychology and studied child behavior in families with domestic violence. After graduating in 2000, her position as special coordinator for the research project became a full-time job, and she worked at UH for



Michelle Colvard is an advocate for people with disabilities and a research administration manager at M. D. Anderson Cancer Center. She was named Ms. Wheelchair Texas in 2008 and Ms. Wheelchair America in 2009. Photo by F. Carter Smith.

over four years before enrolling in the master's program at the University of Texas School of Public Health. "While I was at UH, I learned a lot of the discipline that you need to go to grad school and to think critically," she said. "I had some excellent professors that really taught me well, and helped me, really encouraged me to think for myself."

While still in graduate school, Colvard was appointed to the Houston Commission on Disabilities and later became executive director of the Mayor's Office of People with Disabilities, enabling her to become an advocate for others with disabilities.

With encouragement from her husband and friends, Colvard entered the Ms. Wheelchair Texas pageant in 2008. She won and went on to be named Ms. Wheelchair America in 2009. She saw it as a chance to show people that having a disability does not prevent you from pursuing higher education, holding a full-time job, or being successful.

Colvard is devoted to personal fitness and encourages others to follow suit. She enjoys wheelchair sports, including wheelchair soccer and basketball tournaments held at the UH Campus Recreation and Wellness Center. Additionally, she is a passionate autocross racer.

Today, Colvard works as a research administration manager at M. D. Anderson Cancer Center. Saying her own challenges pale in comparison to those battling cancer, Colvard told Klump that they inspire her to continue encouraging those with disabilities "to develop the same independence" that she learned first from her parents and then as a student at the University of Houston. Colvard explained, "My message is no matter who you are, where you came from, you can change your path, you can change your destiny." She believes life is an adventure and that people must take advantage of that, adding, "Don't let opportunities pass you by."

PRINCE WILSON ('11)

Born and raised in India, Prince Wilson came to the United States in 2004 as a high school student whose biggest hurdle was overcoming the language barrier. He developed an interest in volunteering and received an award for logging 150 hours of volunteer service.

Once Wilson started his college career at UH, he became involved on campus, starting with the National Society of Collegiate Scholars. After serving as the organization's president, he joined the Student Government Association (SGA), running for vice president. Wilson described his choices, "I'm not going to get involved in a hundred different things, but if I pick and choose, I will do my best."

Wilson was heavily involved in campus affairs for SGA. As vice president during his junior year, he actively campaigned for passage of Proposition 4 to set up a fund for state universities vying to become national research institutions. The bill passed with over 56 percent of voters approving the measure. Wilson explained SGA's efforts to inform the community, "The main goal was, wherever we go, talk about Prop 4. It wasn't just for UH. It was a collaborative effort for other campuses in the state of Texas."

During his senior year, Wilson was serving as SGA presi-



Prince Wilson served as president of the UH Student Government Association in 2011.

Photo from 2011 Houstonian, courtesy of the Digital Library, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

dent when news came that UH received its Tier One designation from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. He remembered, "It was surprising. Looking at the numbers, more than any other student, I knew we were going to reach that level. I never knew it was going to be that fast. I thought in 2014 or maybe 2013."

"As a student, doing this work was a sacrifice. It was a sacrifice of our grades and social time." He added, "The relationships I created at UH; I still keep in close touch with the folks in SGA. It's like any family. Getting involved on campus, especially for me being the student body president, I was involved in the process of shaping this university."

Wilson's tenure as SGA president ended March 31, 2011. The following day, he and his brother, a CPA, started an accounting firm. Wilson handles management, marketing, and operations for the firm, in addition to making contacts in the Houston business community. Wilson is currently in the Executive MBA program at Texas Woman's University, hoping to move into business administration. He married his wife, Sinu, in January of 2012.

Jeff Sutton is a graduate of Southwestern University and director of communications for the UH Alumni Association.

For information on the UH Alumni Association, visit www.houstonalumni.com. To read more "You are the Pride" stories, visit www.uh.edu/pride-stories/index.php.