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**BEST FRIENDS,
TEAMMATES GRADUATE
TOGETHER** **pg. 6**

GRADUATION EDITION

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GRADUATION EDITION

Gears, grace and graduation: *Ethan Bratton's Tarleton story*

BY ANDREW UTTERBACK
Multimedia Journalist

A friend sent me an Instagram Reel a while ago about a cool 4th gen Ford Mustang. It was by an account called the Covert Garage, and it had over 300k views and over 30k likes.

A few weeks later, I sat down and talked to Ethan Bratton, a senior who graduates this semester from Tarleton State University. He's a friend I met at a Paradigm worship night, a business owner/content creator/future pastor and just so happens to also own the Covert Garage. Small world.

Ethan grew up in Round Rock, Texas and graduated from Round Rock High School, where he was the president of the fishing team. At that point in his life, he wanted to be a professional fisherman. That's how he found out about Tarleton.

Ethan is a car enthusiast and his first time seeing Tarleton in person was the day he bought his truck.

"We bought my truck in Comanche. It was my dad's truck at the time, and we came down, bought it, and said hey, we're so close to Tarleton, let's just swing by," Ethan said.

He went back and did a college tour in November of his senior year and said everyone he met was "super nice" and he loved the size of Tarleton.

"It wasn't too big, but it was big enough. I was a UT fan. Hook 'em, right? But I didn't wanna go to a school as big as UT. It wasn't my thing, and Tarleton was just the right size for me," Ethan said.

Ethan started out college majoring in agribusiness. He grew up working on his grandma's farm and didn't want to work behind a desk all day, so the agriculture path made sense at the time.

Eventually, he dropped the agribusiness and added a minor in marketing to help with the social media content creation which he was working. He came back for a master's in communications.

Ethan is the founder of Covert Garage where he sells magnetic license plate covers as well as merch. The business expanded into a YouTube channel where he films everything from car builds to autocross runs.

"More recently, it's transitioned into a more faith based company. So, our mission statement is to use our love of cars to further God's kingdom. So we still have the license plate covers and all that, but we now have faith based automotive apparel," Ethan said.

By the time he graduates, Ethan will have been at Tarleton for almost six years.

"It's crazy how much [Tarleton] has grown just in the time I've been here" Ethan said.

"Even [Stephenville] in general. You look at everything that's new, like the Hobby Lobby, Poseidon; that whole shopping center was not here when I came here. My buddy Jacob's parents came to Tarleton in the 90s and when they were here, you could still drive down the roads in Tarleton that are all blocked off."

Ethan is optimistic about the record breaking growth that Tarleton is seeing, but says that parking and housing need to improve to accommodate all of the new students.

"We have to have the infrastructure for it," Ethan said.

During his time on campus, Ethan competed on the track team where he is featured on Tarleton's all-time top-10 record book in four events as well

as being named to the Academic All-WAC team in two seasons.

He was also a student athlete during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Every day would get our temperature taken before we could go in the weight room. So we'd have to get there at five in the morning to go to the trainers, get our temperature taken, get a wristband that says we're good and then we can go to the weight room and start working out," Ethan said.

Ethan saw this time as the perfect moment to start his business.

"I don't like saying 'oh life sucks.' So I said, 'sweet, well, I'm gonna start this business.' I made the most of it. One of my favorite quotes is 'if you have the courage to create your own conditions, the rain is just rain,'" Ethan said.

Ethan's plans after college will prominently feature his business.

"I've seen a lot of growth in unexpected ways this year. Now, the business has grown [and] honoring God is its main goal. That's the most important thing to me. Yes, I want it to be super successful, but if it can impact the life of just one person, then that's more important to me than making a million dollars," he said.

Ethan said his business is his primary focus right now, his long term goal is ministry.

"Being a pastor was never on the radar, I hated speaking in front of people, I didn't raise my hand in class. That kind of just took a 180," Ethan said.

Ethan and his fiancée Hallie Thomas get married two weeks after they graduate. They both are planning to start a college ministry similar to Paradigm. They will move to whatever city the ministry leads them.

Ethan will continue his YouTube channel and content creation even while pastoring. He hopes to eventually be able to hire enough people to run the business full time, so he can just check in a few times a week and focus on ministry. His goal is to make enough money to not take payment from the church he pastors.

"That would be the dream. Where I don't have to be influenced by money at all in my ministry, and it's just purely for God, doing what God called me to do. If I can devote my entire pastor salary into supporting the ministry, doing things in the community, and putting on events, then that would be great. That's the ultimate goal," Ethan said.

Ethan's advice to new freshmen is to watch the kinds of people they hang out with.

"You're gonna run into people who are part of the wrong crowd and you don't want to be a part of that crowd. Don't be scared to stop hanging out with those people. I've gained so many friends in my time in college. I've also had to lose some because they were just going down the wrong path and trying to drag me with them. Sometimes you have to be willing to cut people out of your life for that," Ethan said.

He also says to have fun, but the right kind of fun.

"The other thing is to have fun, right? Don't be scared. 2 Timothy 1:7- 'The Lord did not give you a spirit of fear, but one of power, love and sound judgment.' Go live life and do it in a way that reflects your character in a good way," Ethan said. "I try to always do things that represent Jesus in a good way, right? If I'm gonna bear His name as a Christian, then I'm gonna try to



Ethan Bratton prepares for the shot put.

PHOTO COURTESY TARLETON ATHLETICS

bear his attitudes and actions as well. Enjoying college doesn't mean you have to get stuck in the wrong crowd."

Ethan said he is thankful for his friends, family and fiancée for their help through his college journey.

"My fiancée, she's been a big part of the last year-and-a-half of my life, getting me through grad school. She helped bring out the call to ministry that I have now," Ethan said.

He also thanked his family for coming to his track meets, encouraging him to keep going and supporting him through all of college. He also thanked Jesus, saying He was the reason he came back for a masters degree.

"It just occurred to me, maybe God has me where he wants me. That's when I came back for my master's degree and because of that, I met most of the people who I consider some of

my closest friends," Ethan said.

Ethan's message to the world would be that God made you for more.

"God loves us so much. He cares for us and we are made to be more than we could ever imagine. I never thought I would be where I am now, so just know that as you go throughout your life, God has big plans for you. Jeremiah 29:11, right? He's got big, good plans for you. All it takes is a little bit of obedience

and a little bit of faith," Ethan said.

"Rejoice in the hardships and then the most difficult things in your life just become things, right? Don't take life too seriously. Have fun. Laugh at the mistakes. Don't beat yourself up. Have grace on others and have grace on yourself too."

GRADUATION EDITION

The ‘purrfect’ example of perseverance: Leah Lopez

BY ANNABETH JOHNSON

Multimedia Journalist

Leah Lopez noticed the potential of Tarleton State University four years ago when she was college scouting. The graduate student was drawn to the agricultural feel of Tarleton as well as the pre-veterinary program it offered.

From a young age, Lopez knew that she wanted to pursue a career in veterinary medicine.

In sixth grade, she completed a school project on finding future careers that lit the flame of her passion for helping heal large animals in the area of medical services.

Unfortunately, Lopez began noticing pain and problems with her legs around the time she started showing goats as a part of FFA. While training the goats, she would get pushed around causing minor displacements in her back. These displacements then affected the functions of her legs.

After years of searching for the cause of her leg issues, doctors were finally able to identify the source as the back problems that had added up over the years.

After attending chiropractor appointments, Lopez was back on her feet chasing after her career that would now involve the medical aid of specifically smaller animals.

Lopez is still on track to pursuing her dream career by graduating this December with a diploma that will read completion in all courses of Animal Science Pre-Veterinary Medicine with a minor in business. She will be the first in her family to walk the stage in purple as a graduate of Tarleton.

When she was not focusing on her academics, Lopez spent the rest of her time involved in the student ministry of Paradigm.

During the past two years at Tarleton, Lopez attended the weekly college worship night at Paradigm and led a small bible study group once a week.

Lopez and her Challenge or small group partner, Allison Jones, taught lessons over the passages from the Holy Bible that the group would read together. They led an all-girls group that Lopez grew very close to.

“It is a really good community of believers,” Lopez said. “[I am] glad to have been plugged into that.”

Lopez also completed two different internships during her college career. Lopez was a part of an internship for a year and a half at G-Farms which sells grass-fed beef and delivers their products to different houses and production plants all across Texas.

At her G-Farms internship, Lopez held the position of a business intern whose responsibilities were to help with the company’s social media pages, ride along to make deliveries and answer phone calls.

During break periods off of school due to holidays, she shadowed at Treasured Pets Veterinary Hospital in her hometown of Forney, Texas. Lopez would draw blood, place catheters and sit in on surgeries of the small ‘pocket pets’ that the hospital would accept.

Aside from her academics, Paradigm and her internships, Lopez enjoyed relaxing during her free time by reading, hanging out with friends, finishing puzzles, and binge-watching her comfort show: “Gilmore Girls.”

While Lopez experienced many highs during her college years, she also had to overcome many obstacles.

With such a passion for her career, Lopez often became overwhelmed with the weight of her classes. She had to find a pattern and balance between her classes and her other daily activities which she eventually was able to obtain.

MacKenzie Watson first met her best friend one Sunday morning a year and a half ago. Their friendship and connection only grew as the years progressed.

Being so close to Lopez, Watson shared what she values most in her friend that she made during their time together.

“She is very intelligent but also very intentional with it,” Watson said. “Just the joy she has with it and the passion she has for her career is very admirable. She is very intentional with the time she spends with people.”

Allison Jones has been friends with Lopez for over two years. During her involvement in Paradigm, the two met through their Challenge Group where Lopez was Allison’s group leader.

Over the past two years, the two have grown very close and Jones reflected on the qualities she admires and the growth that she observed in Lopez during her college years.

“She is very intentional with people that she is friends with,” Jones said. “I have seen her grow in her confidence and how friendly and outgoing she is with people.”

Having first crossed paths 3 years ago when they signed up to be members of the same Challenge Group at Paradigm Emma Bowman.

From seeing her shift from a member of a group to leading her very own, Bowman shared her appreciation for Leah in her most exemplary qualities.

“She has such a servant’s heart,” Bowman said. “She cares so much about everyone she meets and she is such a hard worker. She always puts in so much work into everything she does.”

With her college career coming to an end, Lopez has exciting plans post-graduation as she applied to vet school and was accepted.

Lopez’s top three options for vet schools include Ross University in Saint Kitts, St. Georges’s University in Grenada



PHOTO COURTESY ASHLEY MURPHY

Leah Lopez 2024 Graduate of Animal Science Pre-Veterinary Medicine and a minor in Business.

and Texas A&M University in College Station.

Until she leaves for her school of choice in the fall of 2025, Lopez will continue to work at Treasured Pets Veterinary Hospital.

Upon looking back on the past four years, Lopez leaves some advice for her freshman self.

“[Do] not to stress about everything,” Lopez said. “It is going to work out. Freshman year me was worried about getting A’s and good grades. It is important but it is not the most important thing. That [grade] doesn’t define you.”

With a very successful past four years and a promising future, one can only celebrate Leah Lopez at the end of a chapter and the turning of a new page of her life.

Congratulations, Leah, and may you never forget the gates are always open at Tarleton State University.

GRADUATION EDITION

Shaylin Carter: A pixelated journey

BY ASHTYN HANSARD

Executive Produce

Video games may just be a hobby for some people, but for Shaylin Carter, it's much more than that.

Carter, a senior Digital Media Studies major, has already begun building her own future in video game creation. Her work ethic and motivation has propelled her forward and paid off well in the end.

Carter is originally from Fort Worth and went to school in a much bigger area than Tarleton. From there, she went to Oklahoma State University for a year before transferring to Tarleton State University to pursue a different major and experience Tarleton's video game development program.

Transferring from a bigger school to a smaller one can be a culture shock, especially when growing up in such a big city.

"It was hard to go from such a big environment to a small one," Carter said. "I definitely knew I needed it because I was gonna have a lot more one-on-one time with my professors. I was also going to be able to grow a lot more independently versus, like, just being another person in the crowd."

Transferring after spending a year at a university can be overwhelming, even if it's back to your home state. Carter had these worries when she first transferred to Tarleton, but soon overcame them. She found that joining many organizations helped her settle in comfortably.

"I joined as much as I could so that I could meet more people, and then that, like, settling experience would be a little bit better for me," Carter said.

In her years at Tarleton, Carter has been a Residential Leader, a historian in the Phi Mu sorority, a member of Honors College and is currently the Secretary Media Officer for the Texan Esports team.

Carter, like many students, had her first experience in video games with the popular game, Minecraft. As she grew older, Carter discovered a sense of satisfaction after finishing escape rooms, which later helped inspire her next big project.

With her major, Carter had to create a senior capstone project to present before she graduated. Due to her passion for video game development, Carter decided to create her own horror video game.

"It's going to be like an escape room," Carter said. "So you're not only gonna be escaping throughout this house, but you're also gonna be figuring out this

story while you're going through it."

However, it's not going to be any ordinary escape room game. Carter shared that she also has an interest in true crime and set to combine the two together in the video game's storyline.

"I thought, how cool would it be if I could combine that? Where the player goes through an escape room while learning a true crime case, whether it be fictional or nonfiction, and then just be able to solve it as they're going?" Carter said.

"It's kind of combining the, like, big franchise of true crime and then the big franchise of, like, escape rooms, puzzles and stuff, and then try to put them together."

This game has been a long term project for Carter. She first started working on the game in January and has continued to work on it throughout the year. To improve her own knowledge and understanding the work it takes to create a video game, she created everything by hand, refusing to take shortcuts.

"The coding and everything in the background has been built by me versus importing my own engines, which could have been a lot easier," Carter said. "But I wanted to learn, and so I knew I needed to learn that stuff before even trying to join the video game world outside of this, and so I was like, okay, what's gonna teach me? Just build your own first game."

Carter has spent over a thousand hours creating this game, spending four to five hours a day working on it after her classes. Her game will be published on Steam in February 2025, and will be available for PC users to purchase.

Carter has proven her incredible perseverance in building this game while going to class and maintaining her grades. It seems almost impossible, but she found a way to make it work.

Carter added pieces of her family to her video game in a few different ways. For example, her family's handwriting is shown on documents that appear in the game. She also has had friends and family voice act some characters for the game.

While creating the game still does take up much of her time, Carter doesn't seem to mind it at all.

"It's kind of like that saying, 'You'll never work a day in your life if you love what you do.' That's what it feels like," Carter said. "It's like doing the game design work isn't work for me. I just love to do it. And I would do it at any second of the day. I'm actually working on it right now just for fun."

Along with creating her own video game, Carters

role in Texan Esports is an important one. While she only just recently gained this position, Carter has been a part of the club since fall of 2023.

The Texan Esports have not only been extremely supportive of Carter's project, but have even offered help with whatever tasks she needs to complete.

"It's awesome," Carter said. "It's just like a constant support system, and they don't ever stop supporting me. They're always asking me about my game, when it's gonna come out and when they can play it."

Not only has Esports helped support Carter while creating her game, but they've also created a trusting atmosphere for everyone in the club.

"There's no divide between the guys and the girls. They are so incredibly accepting," Carter said. "I have so many friends in it that are just like, they don't judge. They always wanna play with you and have fun with you."

Throughout her time at Tarleton, Carter has found herself feeling like she was missing something. She soon discovered what it was: faith.

Although she stepped out of her faith for a while, Carter found herself being called back to it. After reconnecting with her faith, she found herself with a completely new outlook on her life.

"I think that just growing my faith has helped, like people around me, become more positive," Carter said. "My whole attitude this whole entire semester has completely changed because I feel like the purpose is there and the meaning is there."

Carter, throughout her time here at Tarleton, has learned many important things, including some she wishes she knew at the beginning of her time here.

"I saw a quote a while ago and it said, 'It's okay to be happy now versus chase after happiness,'" Carter said. "I think it helped me realize that it's okay to accept what you've done now and be proud of yourself instead of always trying to chase after something else."

Carter plans to attend the University of Utah and get her master's in video game production. She will begin class in fall 2025. Until then, she plans to publish her game in February and attend a game developer conference (GDC) in March where she'll display her finished video game.

Congratulations, Shaylin.



Shaylin Carter

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A friendship made of steel: Carlee Sims and Kaycee Thomas

BY MACKENZIE JOHNSON

Multimedia Journalist

It is scientifically believed that there are several factors subconsciously taken into account when presented with the opportunity to befriend someone.

In elementary school, these factors aren't quite as prominent. Friends are simply made over shared goldfish crumbs during snack time and metal swing sets and plastic slides at recess.

Although this route could still be attempted when navigating friendships outside of primary school, it's not recommended.

Instead, deciding friendship factors for young adults range from anywhere to similar morals, shared interests, first impressions and potentially less notably, height.

At least that's the premise that upcoming Tarleton graduates Kaycee Thomas and Carlee Sims began building their friendship upon.

As college freshmen on Tarleton's rodeo team, the two met at a party the weekend of the Tarleton Stampede Rodeo, the home college rodeo held every spring of the season for the southwest region.

Sims found herself without a ride home and naturally, sought about solving this problem by staking out the tallest person in the vicinity. This person was Thomas.

They may not have known each other yet on a personal level that fateful evening, but they would soon become inseparable.

Although Thomas and Sims don't share the similarity of height, they do share the most treasured passion in their lives – that of rodeo.

Rodeo is something that has been ingrained in both of their lives since the beginning, even if they didn't fully tap into it until junior high.

The cowgirls come from completely different zip codes with Thomas from



PHOTO COURTESY HADLEY ANNE PHOTOGRAPHY

Carlee Sims (left) and Kaycee Thomas (right) have been inseparable since they first met freshman year of college. Rodeoing for Tarleton has only flourished that friendship.

Carpenter, Wyoming, and Sims from San Angelo, Texas.

Although always involved in horses, Thomas was also occupied with showing lambs and pigs growing up while Sims was consumed with several school sports. When barrel racing started taking priority over those activities, the two fully immersed themselves and never looked back.

That dedication has only heightened since rodeoing for Tarleton.

"This is the only time in your life that you're ever going to rodeo for a team," Sims said. "It's not just you.

Your responsibilities and standards are upheld higher... It's for a team."

Although being a part of Tarleton rodeo is a full time devotion, that commitment isn't one sided.

"With those responsibilities, you also have teammates to lean on and help you if you need it," Thomas said. "It's cool to be a part of a team. If you've broken down on the side of the road, blown a tire or anything like that, they're going to be there for you."

Not only is it special to be a part of a team, but it's special to be a part of one so competitive.

"People are intimidated by the way people work around here," Sims said of the Stephenville rodeo community. "It's a whole different scene. Mark (Eakin) expects so much of us compared to other rodeo schools, and that's part of being on a team. Mark being that way just really helps all of us grow as individuals within and outside of rodeo."

Alongside Head Rodeo Coach Eakin, Brittany Stewart, associate head rodeo coach for Tarleton, is another individual worth crediting for the growth of Tarleton rodeo students, but she

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reflects that credit back onto the students themselves, especially when looking at Thomas and Sims.

“A friendship like the one Kaycee & Carlee have is a part of coaching that I truly enjoy,” Stewart said. “Carlee held an internship and student worker position with us, and since you very rarely see one without the other, Kaycee helped out a lot, too. The miles that we travel and the ups and downs on the rodeo road is unlike any other sport, so having a teammate and friend that you can trust is so important, and these two are that.”

The two’s friendship is a unique one, fostered through not only the struggles and triumphs college rodeo has to offer, but life in general when you’re at the college age.

“In high school, I feel like everyone is trying to prove themselves,” Thomas said. “College is different. Everyone is focusing on themselves and their opportunities. None of the drama and things like that matter, so I feel like you can have much more genuine relationships in the college atmosphere.”

Thomas and Sims are about as genuine as you can get.

“Through high school, I never really had a best friend – somebody that I could trust with everything and would always be there for me with no judgment at all,” Sims said. “God definitely brought Kaycee in my life for a reason, and I’m very thankful for that.”

Sims’ mom is just as thankful for Kaycee’s loyal friendship.

“It was through the Tarleton rodeo program that Carlee Jo and Kaycee became the best of friends,” Michelle Sims said. “They hold each other accountable even through the ups and downs of rodeo. My husband Chad and I feel like we have gained another daughter with Kaycee. She fits right in with our family and is truly a blessing.”

Although it’s not the entire basis of how close Thomas and Sims are, the demand of college rodeo is one that plays a large part in that dynamic.

“College rodeo has been an experience for me because it has taught me so much patience,” Sims said. “It’s not always your time to shine, and the hard stuff is going to make you stronger. Just because you don’t do good at the college rodeos doesn’t mean that you’re not a good individual. It’s such a short period of our lives.”

College rodeo has been equally as much of a learning process for Thomas.

“College rodeo has taught me you have to work your tail off,” Thomas said. “You can’t take any off days. The days that you’re not riding your horse, somebody else is. You have to push yourself to be the absolute best that you can, and the people you surround yourself with are the level that you’re going

to compete at. If you’re around people that aren’t determined and have the same goals as you, you’re not going to grow and get anywhere either.”

College rodeo is hard. The weekends are long, the weekdays preparing for it are even longer, and the competition is a knife fight. But that pressure is not one that bleeds over into the friendship of Thomas and Sims.

“I don’t feel like it’s ever a competition between us two,” Sims said. “That’s why it works. I want Kaycee to win just as much as I want myself to win. And if she wins and I don’t, I would rather her take that.”

Through the lens of Thomas, it’s viewed no differently.

“We both just try to keep the mood light,” Thomas said. “We joke around and just have a good time, but we’re also very focused, and we hold each other accountable.”

Tarleton rodeo’s weight and workout room is one of the places this accountability is often upheld.

“We both go to workouts a lot, and that’s one thing that’s benefited our friendship so much,” Sims said. “Tyler (Frank) is like a life coach to us and a very good friend of ours, so I feel like both mentally and on the strength side of things, we get help with success in the arena and in our careers.”

Frank is Tarleton rodeo’s strength and conditioning coach and has seen first hand how Thomas and Sims uplift one another.

“Carlee and Kaycee are the perfect balance in all aspects, and it shows in their friendship,” Frank said. “Whether it’s being each other’s competitive hauling partner who pushes each other to be as successful as they can be or coming into the gym together and goofing off, they are always smiling and laughing loud enough that I can hear them over the speakers. There is never a dull moment when they are around, and watching them walk the stage to graduate and start the next chapter of their lives will be one of the most bittersweet moments of my coaching career.”

They’ll both be walking the stage in December, but plan to stay in Stephenville for graduate school. Thomas, a business management major, will be continuing that educational path by starting her Master of Business Administration in January. Sims is an agribusiness major and will be pursuing a Master of Agricultural Economics.

Every rodeo athlete is given five years of college rodeo eligibility, and since the pair is graduating a semester early, they still have a year and a half left to rodeo for Tarleton together.

A balance like Thomas and Sims is the blueprint for nearly every authentic friendship, in and outside of college rodeo.

“We’re both morally very similar and that just made

us becoming friends so easy,” Thomas said. “Carlee’s literally the only person I could live with, travel with and be with all the time... I run myself in circles a lot of the time and she’s that reality check I need.”

Although Thomas considers Sims’ rationality to be the glue that holds her together, Sims views Thomas’ peppy nature just the same way.

“Our friendship being 50/50 is what keeps us grounded,” Sims said. “It’s not like one person makes all the decisions and the other person just follows, it’s give and take. I’ve never really had that in a person before. I was always the one that just did whatever the other one wanted to do. That’s why we work so well – we’d do anything for each other.”

With Thomas living over 10 hours away from home, her dad is someone who greatly values Sims always being there in his daughter’s corner.

“I am so glad they found each other,” Matt Thomas said. “They stick by each other through the good and tough times. They bring out the best in one another, learn from one another and rely on one another, and they are both better for it. You just sleep better at night knowing Kaycee has that in her life.”

The task of building friendships in college is no doubt an intimidating one.

Very rarely do the closest of confidants simply fall out of the sky and into waiting laps. Effort has to be put in to make meaningful friendships, and this often starts outside the lines of comfortability.

“You have to get involved because if not, you’ll be left in the dust,” Sims said. “You have to be outgoing and step outside of your boundaries, and that was something really hard for me coming to college. Be open to doing things, and don’t be afraid to take the risk and ask to do something with people you don’t necessarily know yet.”

Thomas views the importance of getting involved on a similar basis – a basis that requires following through on those initial encounters.

“You have to make those connections and take opportunities into your own hands,” Thomas said. “Don’t wait for other people to hand things to you because they’re not going to. After Carlee and I met, two days later I was asking her if she wanted to go eat at Fuzzy’s with me, and now she’s one of my best friends... I always say iron sharpens iron, and Carlee is just that for me.”

The phrase iron sharpens iron is one that perfectly exemplifies the tightly knit bond between the two throughout their journey of college rodeo, and although that’s certainly true, the friendship of Carlee Sims and Kaycee Thomas isn’t just that of a chemical element, but is now more of an alloyed steel they’ll take beyond the college rodeo arena.



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Overcoming obstacles:

Alyssa Zuniga has reached the finish line for graduation

BY LESLIE POSADAS
Contributing Writer

Despite being legally blind, Alyssa Zuniga, a psychology student at Tarleton State University, will reach the light at the end of the tunnel this December.

Zuniga's journey at Tarleton began as a music major, but challenges along the way led her to change her path to psychology.

"The first time I felt like giving up was actually my freshman year," Zuniga said. "I wanted to quit college because it was hard."

Being legally blind and attending college is a rare combination but Zuniga defied the odds and continued to strive.

With the support of her mother, twin sister, marching band director Gary Westbrook and clarinet professor Dmytro Perevertailenko, Zuniga will be walking the stage at graduation this December.

As Zuniga's time at Tarleton ends, she looks back on her past.

"The only thing that I am really proud of myself for accomplishing is the fact that I never really quit," Zuniga said.

One of Zuniga's favorite memories came during the spring semester of 2021 when she performed her first halftime show with the Tarleton band.

The band played "El Diablo" from the stands, as they were unable to march.

Looking back on that experience, Zuniga is now filled with a sense of pride as this season the band was able to march to the same song and complete the full performance they had missed before.

"This season right now is giving me a lot of closure," she said. "It's helping me get over a lot of the stuff that was frustrating me the past four years."

Throughout her time at Tarleton, Zuniga not only strived in her academic life but also impacted the lives of others. This past spring, Westbrook experienced that impact.

"Alyssa discovered that my family was going through a tough time, and quietly and

without fanfare, she just started sending me songs that were meaningful to her," Westbrook said. "These notes were such a blessing to me, and I have encouraged her to continue doing this in other areas of others' lives."

During their time together as professor and student, Westbrook describes Zuniga as selfless.

"She never seeks the spotlight, never does anything for recognition and never strives to be seen," Westbrook said.

Although Westbrook is unsure of what the future holds for Zuniga, he knows what she leaves behind.

"She leaves mighty big shoes behind to fill," Westbrook said. "I hope her impact is that selflessness is not a weakness but the most amazing strength you can demonstrate and that WE is stronger than ME."

Westbrook hopes Zuniga continues to face life challenges after graduation with the same strength and determination she has shown so far.

"Do not let the world change you, but go forth and let who you are bring about change to the world," he said.

Looking ahead Zuniga is also unsure of what lies in her future but knows she would like to work one-on-one with other people, whether that be students or even people with similar disabilities.

"I want to be an academic advisor because I like helping people, especially in a one-on-one kind of situation," Zuniga said.

During Zuniga's time at Tarleton, she made the mistake of not reaching out and finding people to talk to about certain stuff. This is why she encourages students to reach out and find their people.

"It's important to find somebody that you can talk to, especially somebody who will actually listen," she said. "Because I didn't have that when I was here, simply because I didn't reach out."

This has become another factor of why

Zuniga's goal is to become an academic advisor, she hopes to be that helping hand when a student is reaching out for one.

Perevertailenko has also had the privilege of experiencing Zuniga's journey at Tarleton.

Looking back at when Zuniga began taking clarinet classes from him, Perevertailenko remembers her as nervous, shy and immature but all that changed when she came back from one of her many breaks.

"She definitely seemed like she had grown mentally, she was talking more like an adult," Perevertailenko said.

Although Perevertailenko could not understand why someone who is legally blind and a psychology major would want to continue clarinet classes, he was impressed by Zuniga.

"I don't think I've ever had anyone with that type of disability, but she still did it," Perevertailenko said. "Normally, you would think that person would just quit and do something else, but she didn't quit."

From the beginning, Perevertailenko was struck by Zuniga's genuine joy while playing the clarinet and her enthusiastic involvement in the band.

"She's always enjoyed playing clarinet, that's the thing, I can tell that she truly enjoys it, the music lessons, and then probably the band as well," he said.

Zuniga's passion and dedication only strengthened Perevertailenko's confidence in his teaching approach.

"You don't always have to be the best, because, of course, my job is to teach them how to be better players. But sometimes it's not even about that," Perevertailenko said. "It's just about you doing it and being exposed to enjoying it, just something that makes you happy."

As Zuniga gets ready to cross the stage this December, Westbrook will look back on their years together and remember her impact.

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GRADUATION EDITION

From State Trooper to engineering student

BY BROOKLYN MCKINNEY
Multimedia Journalist

While some parents went to the same college as their kids, not very many get to say that they went to college with their kids. However, this is the case for Jeffrey Shinn at Tarleton State University, with his son Grayson.

“My dad’s always been a person that’s kind of open to doing everything. He gets real into doing what he does. So, like, whenever he was formerly a DPS Trooper and he retired just a few years ago, he decided to come back to school for engineering,” Grayson said.

Before coming to Tarleton, Jeffrey graduated from Texas Tech in 2002 with a degree in political science and then worked as a state trooper until his retirement in 2021. He decided to go back to school to pursue his interest in engineering, just a year before Grayson graduated high school in 2023.

“I know those two things don’t sound like they go together, law enforcement and mechanical engineering, but accident investigation is all about finding speeds on vehicles and all that kind of stuff,” Jeffrey said. “And so you use force, energy and motion when you’re calculating these things. So it’s a lot of mechanical engineering. So mechanical engineering combines a lot of different things that you need in order to do crash reconstruction kind of stuff.”

After graduating in December, Jeffrey has a job lined up with an accident reconstruction company investigating how different accidents on the road occurred for insurance companies or lawsuits.

His son Grayson has always shared his interest in engineering since he was young.

“Building things was like my passion, I had Legos and everything. I used to keep parts from random things and build them, and whenever I got the chance to actually make something with him those were probably some of the best memories,” Grayson said.

Grayson decided to attend Tarleton with his dad because of their close relationship, and there was already a lot that he loved about the campus.

“I just thought I’d come to Tarleton because UTA (University of Texas at Arlington) is kind of huge and impersonal. Tarleton is smaller, I know all of the professors here. You know, I’ve had multiple classes with each engineering professor, and so I like the feel of Tarleton a lot more than a big, huge university and Tech was kind of the same way,” Jeffrey said.

For Grayson, having the same professors as his dad just a few years later can get kind of weird sometimes, but he wouldn’t have it any other way.

“A lot of these professors that know my dad, they expect highly of me, because of course they had my dad that they taught as well. So, they expect that knowledge to kind of pass down and to help me through,” Grayson said.

Being on the same college campus as his dad definitely has its benefits, like getting extra help with classes and eating out together.

“If I ever need anything brought down from the house, he’s got me. I had several times where he’s helped me out with that. Every once in a while I’d come down, eat lunch with him and everything,” Grayson said. “The other day at the Dairy Queen, that’s like his number one place right there is... He always goes to the Dairy Queen and then gets the cheese bites.”

Jeffrey has not only been a mentor to his son during his time at Tarleton but also an advisor for Tarleton’s Rocket Club.

“Last year, I had no experience with rocketry other than shooting the little rockets off, you know, one-foot-long rockets, but they didn’t have anybody else to lead the rocket team,” Jeffrey said. “Everyone else had graduated from the year before, and so I kind of became the de facto leader of it. And none of my students that I had had any rocketry experience. So we had to figure it out as we went, and we ended up building a rocket and launched it a couple times pretty successfully.”

Being a nontraditional student in his early forties came with its challenges for Jeffrey. Between learning how to use newer apps like Canvas and getting sick long enough to set his class schedule back an entire semester, it was a lot.

“The challenges I faced were not your typical things,” Jeffrey said. “Like for me, it was figuring out all of the little things that you don’t think about, like trying to figure out Canvas. The first semester I was here, I think with one of the professors we had to turn in our first test on canvas and I was like, ‘How do you do that?’”

Jeffrey had to learn how to balance his responsibilities with Tarleton and advising the Rocket Club with his life at home as a dad and husband. His wife, Jennifer, works as a hospice nurse and they’ve been married for 22 years.

“I saw a t-shirt the other day that said ‘raising my husband is exhausting,’ I was like yeah, sounds about



PHOTO BY SHAYLYN LANE

Jeffrey Shinn with a rocket.

right,” Jeffrey said.

Jeffrey is actually following in his dad’s footsteps with engineering, and can’t wait to see his son Grayson do the same.

“Hopefully here in about two and a half years, we’ll have another engineer in the family. My dad’s an engineer, so at least three engineers,” Jeffrey said.

GRADUATION EDITION

Faith and family help pave the way for Makaela Lively

BRENNA DEMPSEY

Multimedia Journalists

Makaela Lively is making her way to the next chapter of her story: graduate life.

She is excited to be earning her degree in animal science with a concentration in production along with an equine certificate.

This is her senior year, and she graduates on Dec. 13 where she will pursue a career centered around breeding and training horses.

“I would love to end up owning my own business where I breed and train horses,” Makaela said. “Mainly quarter horses and paint horses too, for roping and barrel racing.”

Two years ago, Makaela took a class that changed her perspective: Horse handling techniques with Bobbie Walton. She knew she wanted to breed and train horses but after the class, she discovered her interest in raising foals.

“I thought it was going to be like riding and stuff but whenever I took that class I kind of learned how much I liked working with the babies,” Makaela said. “So, I was like ‘I’ll breed my own and train the babies before I sell them to other people, so they have a better start in life and so they’re more likely to have good homes and people don’t have to struggle if they’re new to horses.’”

This is also something that brings her closer to her family.

“In the breeding aspect, my great grandpa bred horses. I never got to meet him, but I always just thought that was really cool he did that and so that kind of fueled that side of my passion,” Makaela said.

She has known this was the field for her ever since she was a girl.

“I grew up around animals, I did 4H, stock shows and livestock judging and all the horse stuff so it kind of just was a given going into ag,” Makaela said.

She was raised close to what some people call the heart of Texas about 15 minutes east of Llano at Buchanan Dam.

Her family has been there to inspire her throughout her childhood and into adulthood.

“My dad was really big into cowboying and stuff growing up,” Makaela said. “He worked with his dad on ranches and stuff and so I kind of got the whole horse bug from him. He got sick of it because he had to do that for work all the time as a kid and so he grew out of it growing up but they—my parents—got

me a pony whenever I was little and so it kind of was just a domino effect of like ‘yeah I’m not getting out of this any time soon.’”

She and her family have a close bond, and she is thankful for the support her parents show her.

“They are so supportive of like helping me out with tuition and rent and stuff and horses in general especially. They are definitely my number one supporters for sure and so it’s just great being able to have parents like that because I know not everybody is as fortunate,” Makaela said.

Even though she knew nothing about Tarleton before her mother suggested she apply, Makaela knew it was going to be the right fit for her and the goals she has. She knew the second she stepped on campus this was what she was looking for.

“The first time I ever visited campus actually was for orientation and so that kind of just solidified everything. Like I love how small the campus is like while it’s expanding now, it was small,” Makaela said.

It gave her a sense of community that you just can not find on a bigger campus.

While Makaela is not on the Tarleton Rodeo team, she goes to jackpots on her own to enjoy time with her horses and practice. Makaela got to hone her craft after the COVID-19 lockdown.

“I’ve been heading and team roping for four years, I guess, almost five. I started whenever the pandemic hit, and everything shut down. I was like ‘well, I guess I’m going to do something new’ so I got into that and then just recently this summer I started barrel racing and then I started break away roping this semester,” Makaela said.

Makaela faced some challenges along the way especially when it came to horses injuring themselves.

She learned a lot from her first roping horse Vander. He was 21 when he first came to be a part of their family. Unfortunately, he was forced to retire after sustaining an injury from slipping in the mud while out to pasture. The adjustment was a struggle for Makaela to make because of all the time they had spent learning together.

He is still comfortably living on their farm and enjoying the fruits of his hard work.

“He was amazing for teaching me the ropes to learn how to get up to the steer, rope it, dally, turn off and stay controlled and stuff and so he was really great,” Makaela said.

Another roadblock she faced was during the

summer of 2023 when she went to buy a horse to fill Vander’s shoes.

The seller was dishonest about an old injury the mare, Stormy, had. Makaela still loves her dearly and said she would have still got her even if the injury had been disclosed.

Since Makaela was not told about the injury, she could not help prevent it from getting worse.

During spring break in 2024, she had gone lame and after a visit to the vet, she found out that half of one of her joints had calcified together making it so she could not work anymore.

Makaela now has a colt to work with named Sparrow who is almost six months old. She has known him since he was seven days old.

She is also in the process of buying a mare named Shaggy to ride in break away and barrel racing events.

These challenges she faced taught her different lessons that will follow her into the future. It has also spurred her desire to learn more about how to care for the variety of things that can happen when someone deals with horses.

Makaela is finishing an equine sales prep and marketing class with Walton at the equine center where she works to train and get the groundwork done for the yearlings there.

She gets practice through this class, and it has opened the door to gain experience for things she will be doing in the future. The class took the students to the sale where she got to learn the process.

At the sale, Makaela got to experience what to do when selling horses. She personally worked with the yearlings at Tarleton raising them up over the semester and preparing them for the next step in their lives where they go on to their new homes.

While Makaela is very passionate about equine and rodeo, she also has a love for art and is working on exploring where that takes her. She has found some mediums she likes to work with.

“I mainly do graphite, acrylic paint and then I’ve kind of done some pastel pencils,” Makaela said.

Makaela said she feels called to pursue art but is not sure where or what her plans with it are yet.

“Life’s just been kind of crazy, but I do hope if like the horses don’t work out or something or if I’m like in a middle between job season or something that’s something that I could fall back on to,” Makaela said.

Her faith in God has helped her navigate life and the difficulties it has thrown at her by finding security in his presence.

GRADUATION EDITION



Makaela Lively and her colt Sparrow pose for a picture together.

PHOTO COURTESY MAKAEALA LIVELY

“It’s just helped me to be like ‘okay so, whatever happens, happens it’s all going to work out fine in the end.’ Especially with exams and stuff, I used to be so stressed out but now I’m like ‘okay, I study to the best of my ability and God please help me remember that it’s going to be fine’ and it’s just helped lower the stress in my life a lot through that and helped me through like other life issues outside of school,” Makaela said.

The youth pastor at the church she went to in high school recommended she check out the Baptist Student Ministries (BSM) at Tarleton and so she did.

Makaela ended up volunteering

by starting out with the “noon lunch bunch” and worked with that for two years. Part of what she did would be working with the local churches to set up and bring free lunches to the students here at Tarleton every Wednesday.

Makaela was also a team lead at the BSM where she got to share the love of Christ with her fellow students. The team leads were behind all the planning, organizing and many other assorted things. She did this for two years as well.

“When I was on the noon lunch crew, me another girl had met this girl and basically –like not it was our doing, it was definitely God, but we were able to like share the love of Christ to this girl

and the entire trajectory of her life was completely different and so just seeing God work through even little situations like that where we’re just talking to somebody at lunch and then Jesus just like changes their life completely. It’s crazy so it was and is awesome to see that stuff,” Makaela said.

She later went on to become part of the 402 crew who set up, plan and take down everything for the Bible study they host on Thursdays.

Her priority after graduation is to find a job.

She submitted her resume to a position with a barrel trainer which she is really hoping to get.

“It depends on what God wants me

to do and where he wants me to go. I’d love to stay up here and work because there’s like so much rodeo central stuff here and like I just want to stay in the industry, but I mean there’s also stuff back home.”

A verse that inspires her to keep moving forward despite the uncertainty is Jeremiah 29:11.

“‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you plans to give you hope and a future.’ That’s one that I heavily rely on especially these past few years when like everything would just like go up in the air and I’m like I have no clue what I’m going to do but it’s all going be okay,” Makaela said.

GRADUATION EDITION

Campbell Burnett: The science behind her smile

BY BROOKLYN MCKINNEY

Multimedia Journalist

The first thing I noticed about Campbell Burnett was her radiant smile. She's not one of those people who just smile to seem polite or get by, she gets that sparkle in her eyes and then her joy becomes contagious, filling up the entire room.

I had the privilege of working with her last semester at Tarleton State University's Student Media office for the JTAC Newspaper, and she was not only an amazing editor, but also one of the most genuine and kindhearted souls I have ever met.

I still remember reading her comments on my articles while editing, and they always made me smile.

While Burnett has graced this campus for the past four years with her joy, passion, and dedication, she will graduate in December.

During her time studying Biomedical Science at Tarleton, she excelled in her classes, maintaining almost all A's while balancing her responsibilities as a content editor for the JTAC Newspaper.

"Working for the JTAC was probably the highlight of my time here. I mean, working my way up as the content editor," Burnett said. "It was an amazing experience, especially because of Ashton, she was an awesome boss, and Jennifer too. They're my girls."

Ashton Cox, former editor-in-chief of the JTAC holds their friendship close to her heart.

"Campbell will always show up no matter the situation. She will speak her mind and be honest with you, especially when you need it the most," Cox said. "I cherish Campbell and the friendship we have built, and the best thing about her is that she makes it known that the feelings are reciprocated. You never have to worry about whether Campbell appreciates you or not because she will show it one way or another."

C decided to write for the JTAC for the same reason she chose to minor in English; she loves to read and also enjoys writing. In fact, one of her favorite classes she took at Tarleton was Folklore with Dr. Kristina Downs.

"I took it because of like the Taylor Swift album, you know? So I was like, 'Oh, folklore, Taylor Swift'. So I took the class, and of course, it had nothing to do with Taylor Swift," Burnett said. "But still, Folklore is such an amazing subject to learn about. And it's so vast, like almost everything is Folklore if you really bring it down to a science or simple terms."

Being a student of the Honors College at Tarleton not only led to Burnett exploring her passion for English but also the streets of Italy while learning about literature, philosophy and Italian language and history.

"It was a mix of everything, and it was super hard, but super rewarding. It was like a win-win experience because like you're in Italy and you get to do all of these amazing things. I go super homesick, I will say that, but it was awesome overall," Campbell said.

Because of her enthusiasm toward literature classes, Tarleton Honor's college advisor Betti Cryer encouraged Burnett to complete a minor in English while studying Biomedical Science.

"She was like, 'Take the whole classes as your electives that are english, and you'll have your English minor'. So I was like, 'okay'. So I mean, it just kind of worked out serendipitously," Burnett said.

As a very busy student, Burnett recommends mapping out tasks in Microsoft Calendar to improve time management.

"I plan out my day, I plan out my nights, and then I work off of that. So, whenever I have gaps in between classes, gaps in between school and home, or like, whenever I don't have something planned that evening, I fill



PHOTO BY BURNETT'S PHOTO

Campbell Burnett sitting at the Ring Statue with the Purple Poo.

it in with something that's productive," Burnett said. "So if I'm like, 'Oh, I haven't studied in a little bit', I'll put some time in there. But if I'm like, 'Oh, I've been studying this whole week', like I need some hobby time, then I'll put that in there. It's all on my Microsoft calendar, and she is my holy grail, period."

Some of Burnett's hobbies that help her unwind include cooking and sewing.

"I haven't started making clothing yet, but I love to sew. I picked it up about a year ago, and I haven't turned back since. It's been such a useful hobby too. Like dude, I'm telling you, [Tarleton] needs to have sewing classes and stuff like that because it's such a nice, relaxing hobby to get into," Burnett said.

Not only is Campbell dedicated to her studies, but she is also a very family-oriented person. When she saw her family in any of the students or faculty at Tarleton she was bound to love them.

"My favorite teacher was probably Dr. Margolis. He taught a government

class and he's retired, and I had him this last semester here. He brought snacks every day to class, and he was the best man ever," Burnett said. "He reminded me of my grandpa, and I love him to bits. I hope I see him again sometime in this lifetime. He was amazing."

While she is currently unsure about what she wants to do in the medical field, Burnett's next step is to study for the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT). Wherever medical school takes her, Campbell will always be intelligent, hard-working, loyal and well, Campbell.

When asked if there was anything she would tell Burnett right now, former coworker and friend Cox offered her words of encouragement.

"Campbell, never give up. Use that dedication you have, and use it towards anything that comes your way," Cox said. "You have so much potential. Never change. I am so glad that I had the opportunity to meet you, and I'm sure many others feel the same."

I feel the same, and I hope that Campbell never stops smiling.

GRADUATION EDITION

Lauren Stacy is a star on and off the field

BY DREW FLEMING

Multimedia Journalist

Lauren Stacy began her journey at Tarleton in fall 2021, and is graduating on Dec. 13. She was born in Arlington, Texas and was raised in Mansfield, Texas. She was raised by her parents, Cindy and Jesse, as well as her brother, Tyler.

Looking back at her childhood and what has inspired her the most, Stacy said without a doubt it is her parents' work ethic.

"All they do has inspired me to always put my best foot forward in everything," Stacy said.

Stacy began her college career as a criminal justice major, but switched to kinesiology her second semester. She chose her major because she realized her interest in the body and how it moves.

"I found my passion in dance and I thought kinesiology would be the best route to help become a successful dance coach," Stacy said.

Stacy is a four year member of the Texan Stars dance team. Throughout her time as a Texan Star, Stacy served as game day leader her junior year and captain her senior year. She has been to the National Dance Alliance (NDA) finals with her team for the past three years. While at the NDA competition in Daytona Beach, Stacy has helped her team place second in the nation the last three years in the competition.

"The Texan Stars have made my college experience," Stacy said. "We truly see each other at our best and our worst. This team has made me into the person I am today and has taught me so much about myself. I know I will have my teammates in my life forever and I wouldn't trade them for the world. It's not always easy but it's always worth it. I would not have made it through college without the support and encouragement of the stars."

Kayleigh Maracchini is a sophomore at Tarleton and Texan Star with Stacy.

"Lauren has been such an inspiring captain and teammate on Texan Stars this year. She has shown us what it's like to show up for your team no matter what and doing so in a positive light," Maracchini said. "I'm so grateful I've gotten the chance to be on the team with her and can't wait to see what else she can accomplish."

In the fall of 2022, Stacy decided to go Greek and ran home to the Delta Zeta sorority. In her time as a Delta Zeta, Stacy has served two years in a row as the

yell leader for the Xi Nu chapter.

"I think my biggest blessing from Delta Zeta was being involved in a yell contest. It allowed me to use my passion for dance and coaching in a completely new environment," Stacy said. "The girls I met through the yell contest have genuinely made me a better person and I couldn't be more grateful. I have gained connections that will last a lifetime."

Alexa Segovia is a senior at Tarleton, she has been a member of Delta Zeta for four years. Segovia is Stacy's, "big sister," in Delta Zeta.

"When I met Lauren she quickly became someone I loved. I took her as my little and have been filled with gratitude since that day! While we are both extremely busy I always know she's got my back just like I have hers," Segovia said. "Tarleton has given me a lot but my friendship with Lauren is by far the best thing! I am going to miss her so much but I know she's going to change so many lives because she changed mine"

It is clear that Stacy has not only made the most of her time here at Tarleton, but also impacted many people positively while being a part of the Texan Stars and Delta Zeta.

Her list of achievements here at Tarleton State University doesn't stop there. Stacy has left her mark on Tarleton through serving as a Tarleton Transition Mentor both her junior and senior year. She is a member of the Student Government Association and held a position as the Athletics Congress Person.

"TTM gave me the opportunity to pour into people, while people poured into me. Being able to watch my baby ducks grow into amazing people has been so rewarding. I also got to learn so much about Tarleton and its traditions. I grew a bigger love for this amazing school during this experience," Stacy said.

Because of her extensive involvement on campus, this fall Stacy had the honor of being elected to serve on Tarleton's homecoming court. Homecoming court is for students with immense involvement on campus and commitment to Tarleton.

"It was such a cool experience to be on homecoming court. It's just cool to know I made an impact at Tarleton because it's made such an impact on me. The people on the court were the best. I got to meet new people and learn new things about myself and the school. The support I received was amazing and I'm so grateful I had this opportunity," Stacy said.

It is clear that Stacy found a home here at Tarleton and left her mark at the university.

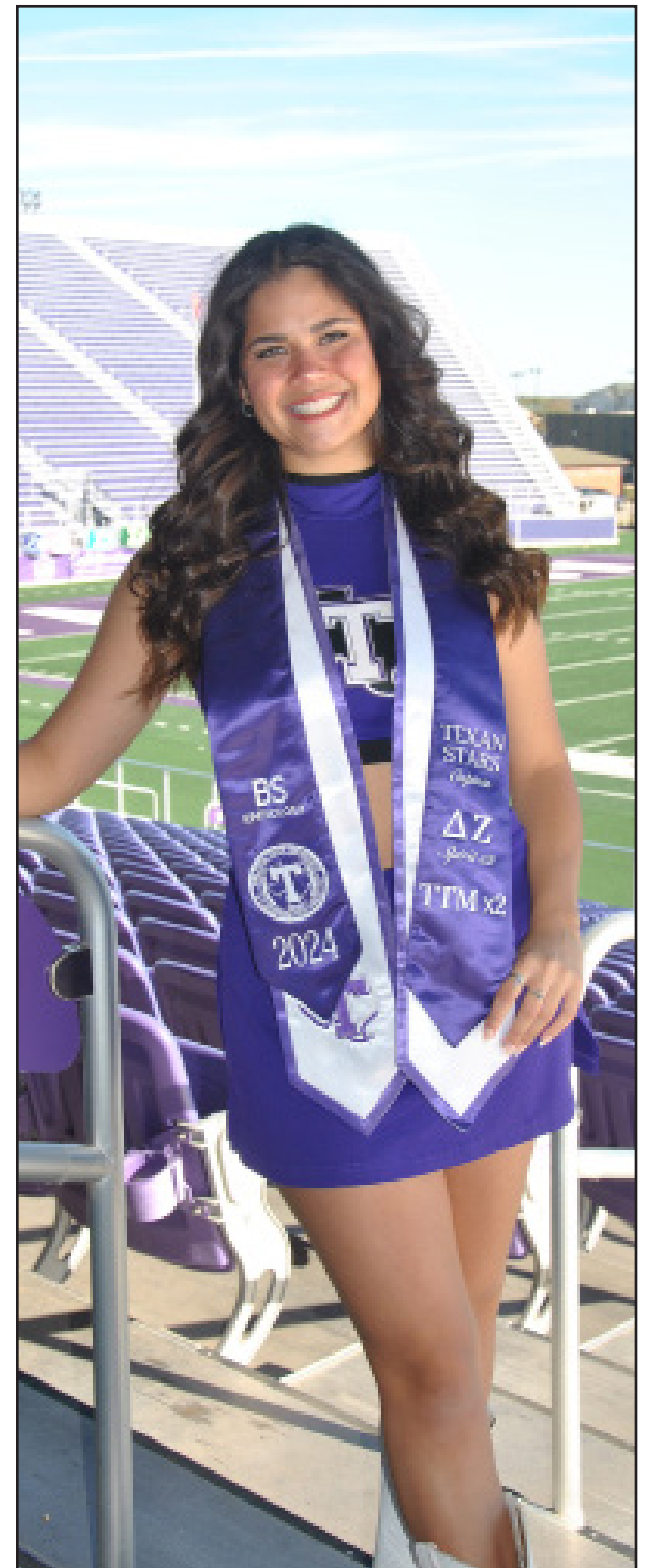


PHOTO BY AZA RAINEY

Lauren Stacy in her Texan Star uniform and graduation stole at Memorial Stadium.

GRADUATION EDITION

Cadet Major Brown prepares to serve his country

BY BETHANY KILPATRICK

Contributing Writer

Jacob Brown, better known as Cadet Major Brown, within the Tarleton Texan Corps of Cadets, will graduate from Tarleton State University on Dec. 13, 2024.

Brown began his journey at Tarleton in 2021 and will complete it with a bachelor's in history, a minor in criminal justice and a minor in leadership studies. After commissioning on Dec. 12, 2024, he will walk the stage in uniform as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army.

"It has been a great four years. I am excited for the next phase," Brown said.

Brown and his graduating cadets will find out what branch they will enter on December 5, 2024.

"I just know that I will be joining the Army. For us December grads it has been exhilarating," Brown said. "My top three [choices] are infantry, field artillery and military intelligence."

After graduation and commissioning, Brown will take the next steps to begin his career in the Army.

"Once you graduate and commission you have to wait around a little bit, and then you go to your basic course, which will teach you how to do your job, for about eight weeks to nine months depending on your job," Brown said. "Then after that, you actually get to start your job as an officer. I have a little more schooling to go."

Serving in the military has been a concept that Brown and his family have always been familiar with.

"My dad was in the Army and my grandfather was in the Navy," Brown said. "My other grandfather was in the Air Force and the Coast Guard. We have been in the Army before the revolution. My ancestors were militiamen, so we have always liked to joke that it is the



PHOTO COURTESY JACOB BROWN

Brown in uniform showing his optimistic spirit.

family business."

Serving his country is something that Brown has desired to do for quite some time and has put forth a great effort to be able to do.

"Getting to be a leader, truly in the sense of creating plans, and leading soldiers is the thing that I have been

looking forward to for four years, or more than four years," Brown said. "I have always wanted to be an Army officer."

Brown is originally from New Hampshire and had lived in Germany for many years before his time at Tarleton.

"My dad was in the military, so I moved around a lot," Brown said. "His first duty station was Wurzburg, Germany, so we were there for two years. Then we moved within Germany to Grafenwoehr for another four years. I was living in Germany and getting to travel around a bit."

GRADUATION EDITION

Brown recalls traveling overseas to Kaiserslautern, Germany to visit his family during holiday breaks as a student at Tarleton.

“During my freshman and sophomore year here I would go back and visit [my family] in Germany, and during winter and summer break,” Brown said.

Brown met his wife, Melanie Zoch, during his freshmen year of high school and married her in October of this year.

“My wife is already commissioned,” Brown said. “She is an active duty medical officer, so she is finishing up her basic course right now.”

Brown is excited to begin his career in the Army alongside his spouse.

“We will be moving to Fort Riley, Kansas here in December,” Brown said. “December 27 is when we take ownership of the house. We have already signed for our on-base house. It will be pretty fun.”

During his time as a Tarleton student and cadet, Brown became involved within the special teams the Corps offers, including the Ranger Challenge Team, which is a team that competes against other schools in infantry skills, physical capabilities, rifle marksmanship etc.

“I was a member of the Ranger Challenge Team for two years,” Brown said. “I got to compete last year, and then I did it my freshmen year.”

Brown was not only a part of the Wainwright Rifle Team, a special drill and ceremony team that performs complex rifle spins and tricks, but was the commander of it his junior year.

“I have been a member of that [The Wainwright Rifle Team] the whole time I have been in the Corps,” Brown said. “I joined it my freshmen year and then I commanded it my junior year. Then this year I was just a training officer for it.”

During his senior year, Brown stepped into a new leadership role.

“This year I was the Army FTX (Field Training Exercises) Planner, so our big operation we do over three days out of Fort Walters and Mineral

Wells, I was the lead for that, so I got to plan that operation. It was a lot of fun,” Brown said.

After planning and executing a successful three-day training exercise for many cadets within the Corps, Brown feels proud of the work he accomplished.

“Anything where I got to be in charge and lead, was always rewarding,” Brown said. “Having the semester to work with our cadre, plan pretty much a company-level operation, get to execute it and see it and unfold before me, was probably the most rewarding thing that I have done, and it is the most close like job here that will resemble what we do in the Army as an officer, so it is great training for that.”

Operations officer, or Cadet Lt. Col. Jake Broadway, remembers meeting Brown for the first time years ago.

“I met him freshman year when we were getting Texan IDs together,” Broadway said. “This was after we shaved our heads, so we were all bald and we were all waiting in this line, and Brown remembers talking to me, but I never talked to him because I was like, ‘Look at this loser. Look at this bald loser right next to me.’”

After a comical introduction to one another, a friendship between Broadway and Brown began to develop.

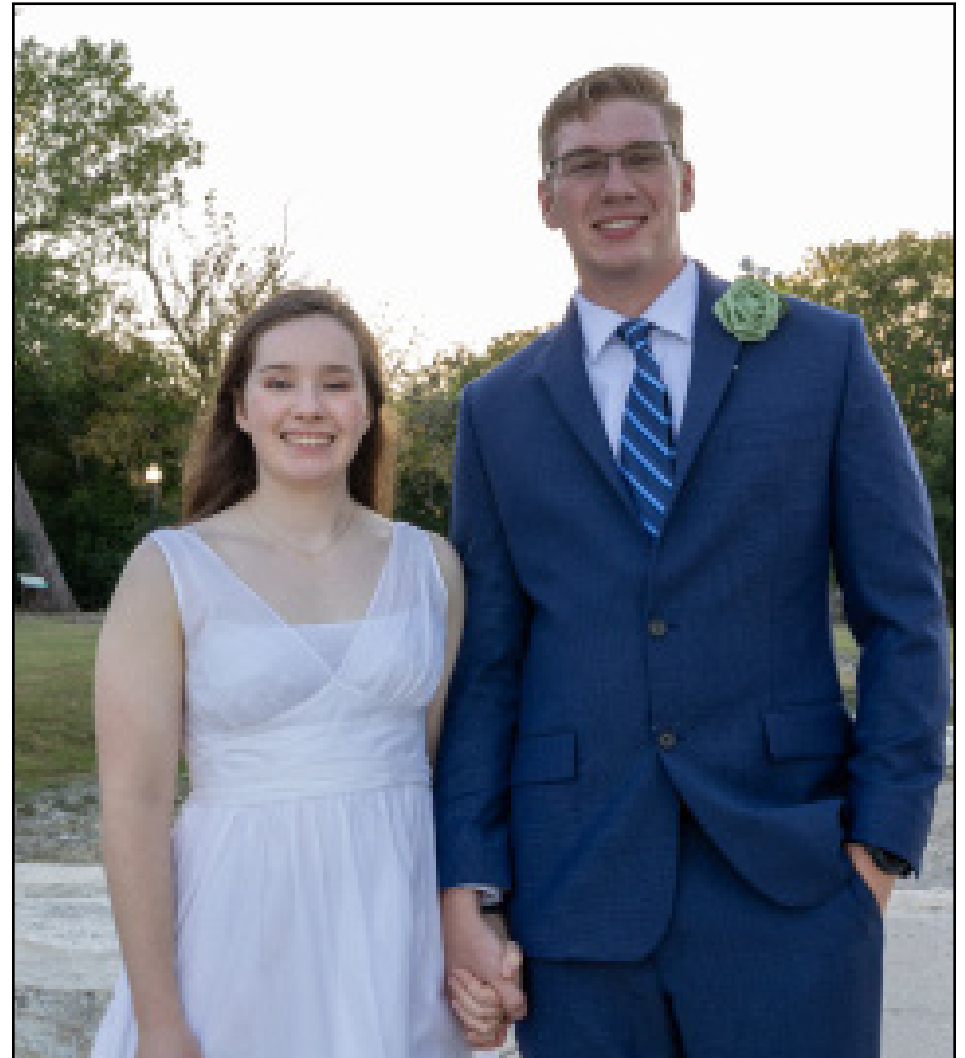
“When we actually started to be friends and everything, that was my sophomore year or junior year, when I moved out and started living with him,” Broadway said. “We have been dormmates since then.”

The two cadets have become close friends and have grown to know each other quite well.

“I think he is a great, great leader,” Broadway said. “He is very charismatic, which you do not see a whole lot in leaders. He is very intelligent.”

While his leadership skills make Brown stand out, so does his comedic personality.

“I think there are a million funny stories that I have with that guy,”



COURTESY OF JACOB BROWN

Brown and his wife, Melanie Zoch holding hands.

Broadway said. “And every day I make a new one with him.”

Homecoming week was always a special time for Brown.

“My best memories here were anything with homecoming,” Brown said. “Last year I got to help light the bonfire. I was not part of the actual ceremony, I was just in the back with the risk management guys. That was a lot of fun.”

While new doors are opening for Brown, others are closing as his time at Tarleton comes to an end.

“It has been pretty normal for four years having a place to wake up and come to every day,” Brown said. “So leaving that routine and the people

here, it is going to be tough.”

Having an optimistic take on life and the many challenges that it brings is something that has made Brown stand out to his peers.

“I would definitely tell him to keep on being himself,” Broadway said. “Personally, I feel like I am a little bit more of a negative-thinking kind of guy. I am very easy to see the bad parts, but his character and his overall personality are that he is always seeing the good in everything he does. He is a great guy.”

Though leaving behind what he knows and loves is challenging, Brown is one step closer to beginning the life he has worked diligently for.

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Dancing to his own beat: *Isaiah Laque's leave a legacy at Tarleton*

BY CAROLINE CRAIN

Multimedia Journalist

From halftime performances to homecoming celebrations, Isaiah Laque has been a familiar face in nearly every corner of campus life. His energy, passion and drive have left a mark on Tarleton State University in ways very few can match.

Now, as Laque gets ready to graduate with a degree in kinesiology, he reflects on the moments that defined his college years, the lessons learned and the lasting impact he aims to leave behind.

Laque made history at Tarleton as the first and only male member of the TSU dance team, the Texan Stars. It wasn't just about breaking gender norms- it was about proving to himself that he could rise to the challenge and excel in an environment that was demanding.

"At first, I felt the pressure of the world," Laque said. "But then I really honed in on my skills and my performance level, and just set the bar for myself to keep raising it and beating myself every day."

Laque's journey with dance began in highschool. Since then, he has faced times where putting his participation on hold was the choice he had to make.

His path, however, was deeply influenced by the loss of his brother, who passed away just two weeks before Laque graduated high school. Laque's passion for dancing became intertwined with his desire to honor his brother's memory.

"If I know that I can, I know that he would want to, so that's what I use to keep pushing when times are hard—even when I'm performing I think of that," Laque said. "He loved to dance, so that's the biggest thing: if I know he had no control of giving that up, why

would I give that up mentally? That's what I used to push me."

Despite the many challenges that arose on the way, dance became more than just an activity to Laque. It was something that drove him forward.

"At this point in my life, it gives me purpose," Laque said. "My biggest thing this past year was I didn't want to lose something that means so much to me because of other people. In the beginning, it was fun, something I could be good at. But I've realized you can't dance without passion and love for it."

The Texan Stars helped him discover his true potential—not just as a performer, but as someone who could inspire others with his passion and dedication.

Ancheska Parchman began her role as head dance coach for the Texan Stars this semester. Although her time with Laque hasn't been long, she reflected on the impact that he will leave at Tarleton.

"He definitely changes the game for this campus, and I don't know if he realizes that at all, but what he contributes to the team is giving Tarleton itself a new perspective on what a dancer can be."

Parchman talked about how the word 'legacy' has been such a prominent one for the team this semester. Laque's journey reflects this notion.

"I think he's going to show a lot of people that you can be yourself and still do what you love. And I think that's a huge legacy in itself."

Laque found another community within his fraternity, Kappa Delta Rho. He created deep connections during moments of both celebration and hardship.

"I lost a blood brother, but then I gained 700," Laque said. "It's crazy, but

it has been one of the best experiences while being here, truly."

Laque didn't just take part in campus life—he actively helped shape it. In his time with the organization, Laque held several chairs, joined the Order of Omega, earned a social media internship with the national fraternity and worked as Vice President of Recruitment for the Interfraternity Council (IFC).

His efforts didn't go unnoticed, and his leadership left a lasting imprint on the university's Greek life.

Kory Walker was Tarleton's Kappa Delta Rho president for 2024. He spoke on some of Laque's qualities that made him stand out as a fraternity brother.

"He's very personal, he gets along with everybody, he has never met a stranger, he is very genuine, very knowledgeable about a lot of things and kind hearted," Walker said. "You probably really won't meet a better person than him."

Walker said that Laque's legacy will be evident in both the organization and the university.

"The legacy he's going to leave with KDR specifically is that go-getter mentality. He's the first one to get there and the last one to leave. He always wants to help out no matter what. There aren't many people who could fill his shoes, and it will probably take three or four guys to fill the spot he's going to leave behind," Walker said. "At Tarleton, he embodies the core values that the school preaches. He's always the one to reach out, and no matter the slander against his name, he's always going to wish the best for others."

Laque's dedication to the Tarleton community extended through his role as a Tarleton Transition Mentor (TTM). It was in this role that he explored a passion in helping others find their

place at the university.

"There's no other experience like being a TTM," Laque said. "I did everything I did to show my love for Tarleton and help new students experience it the way I had. I wanted to fill their cup and show them what Tarleton had done for me and what it could do for them."

In his second year as a TTM, Laque became a facilitator, training younger TTMs. This experience was particularly meaningful for him.

"It was an amazing opportunity because I was teaching people how to pour into others," Laque said. "To do that, you have to have a certain level of passion and vulnerability. There were many times we would cry in the teachings, just showing these kids what it meant to them and what it meant to us. Being a facilitator was probably my best year because just teaching them was awesome."

One of Laque's proudest moments came when he was crowned Homecoming King in 2023. For him, it was a moment that reaffirmed his belief in his journey and the sacrifices his family had made for him to be at Tarleton.

"It was just such a surreal experience," Laque said. "It helped me show my family that I am making a difference here. They've sacrificed so much—time and financially—for me to be here. My mom was at the game and got a video of me winning, and it just made everything feel like it had come full circle."

Laque's role as Homecoming King was a natural extension of the leadership he displayed throughout his time at Tarleton, which in part began when he was selected to join the Tarleton Ambassadors as a freshman. As a part of the Ambassadors, Laque

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upheld traditions, provided community service, represented the university at various events and made connections with alumni, faculty, donors and guests.

Laque's genuine love for Tarleton was evident in everything he did, whether in the classroom, on the dance floor or during his extracurricular leadership. His passion for supporting the Tarleton community became his mission, and he worked hard to build connections with people from all walks of life.

After graduation in December, Laque plans to continue his education and get his Master's degree. His eventual goal is to coach a college dance team, but he is also interested in exploring the fields of marketing and social media.

Another goal of Laque's is to move to Colorado and dance with the Denver Broncos cheerleaders.

Despite his busy schedule, which included being on the Dean's List, managing extracurricular activities and finding his way as a first generation college student, Laque's commitment to excellence never wavered.

At times, he has encountered negativity from those unwilling to accept him for his unique, boundary-pushing identity.

"It does suck, at the end of the day, that some people are like that, but their heart full of hate is not going to change my heart full of love," Laque said.

Laque refuses to compromise his identity, standing firm in who he is.

"I'm not going to change myself just to be in something," Laque said. "I'm going to be me, and you either take it or you don't. And if you don't, I'm still going to be doing me and moving on."

Marco Salazar, the Coordinator for Campus Life & Family Engagement at Tarleton, grew close with Laque in their time working together on the IFC.

"There's not a lot of students that are always so confident in themselves, everything that they do, who they are, because they might feel judged in a sense, but Isaiah is definitely that type of person that doesn't care what anyone thinks or has to say," Salazar said. "He's always going to be happy for himself, have a good time for himself and make sure everyone else is having a good time too"

Salazar expressed that Laque's trueness to himself will reflect in his legacy.

"He'll definitely leave that mindset of be you, be the difference and just go crazy. Have a good time and leave the impact. Make everyone remember your name because everyone will."

Isaiah Laque's legacy at Tarleton is one of authenticity, empowerment and passion. His story is one of overcoming obstacles, embracing vulnerability and living a life true to oneself.

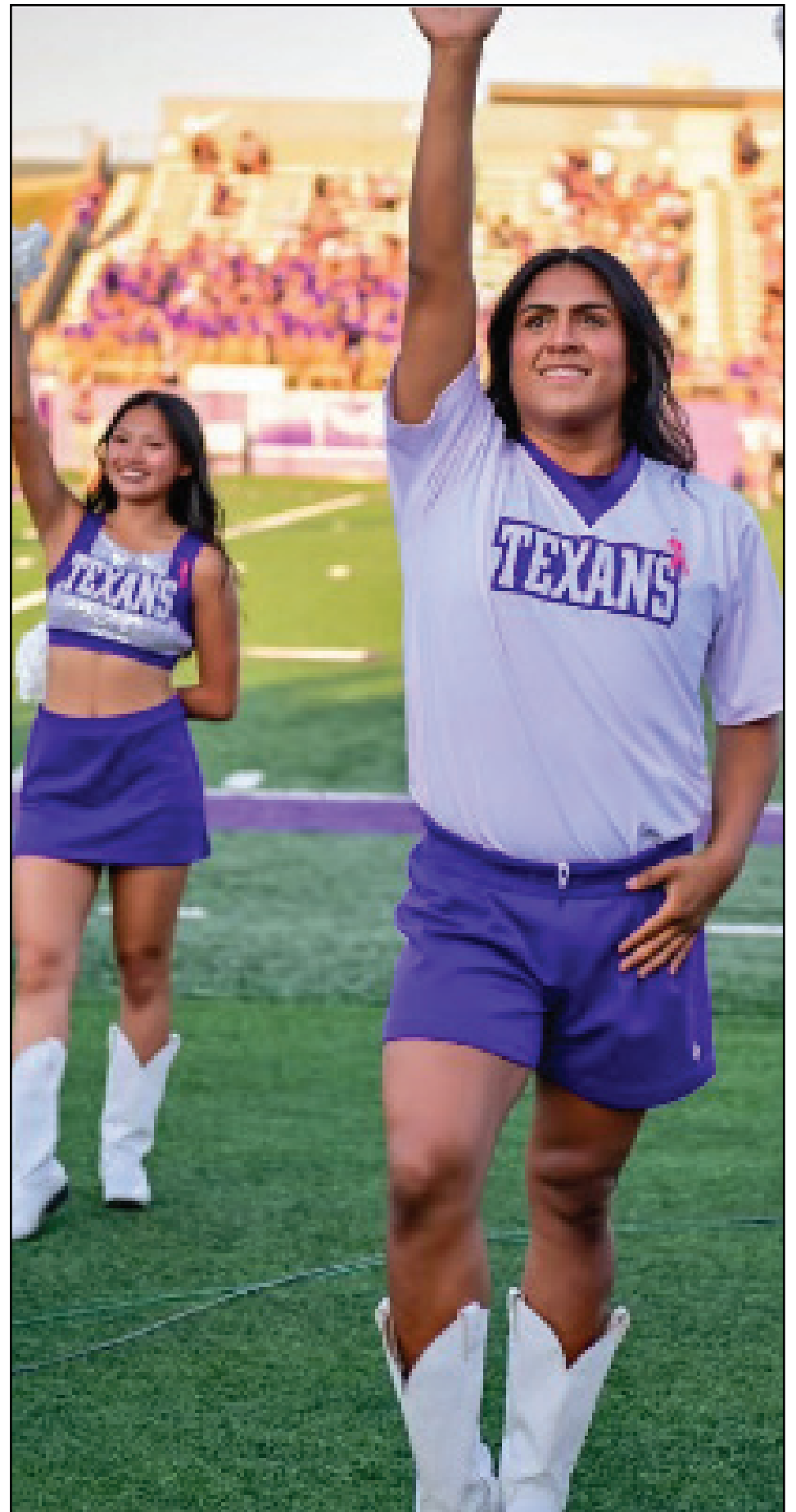
As he prepares to leave Tarleton, Laque wants to be remembered for his unwavering belief in being yourself and inspiring others to do the same.

"The legacy I want to leave behind is to let people, predominantly like me, know that it's okay to be yourself," Laque said. "A quote that I've always said since I started at Tarleton is, 'don't put your potential in somebody else's hands.' If I had listened to the comments or things people told me, I wouldn't be where I am today. Limiting your own potential because of somebody else is just handing yourself failure."

Laque's journey at Tarleton may be concluding, but the legacy of his lessons and the marks he has left will continue to inspire and shape the Tarleton community for many years to come.

PHOTO COURTESY GENE KOLVIG

Isaiah Laque, the first and only male dancer in Tarleton history, performing with the Texan Stars at a Tarleton football game.



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Joseph DuFrain: Father, husband, student, photographer

BY LINDSEY HUGHES
Multimedia Journalist

Joseph DuFrain is a Tarleton State University student who is majoring in digital media studies and minoring in communications. He leads a life that is in some ways very similar to other upcoming graduates. DuFrain goes to classes, turns in assignments, commutes to school several times a week and works hard to further his career. However, these parts of his life are where many of the similarities end.

Unlike most “traditional” college students, DuFrain is not only a full-time student, but also a full-time husband and father. Having a family while also juggling school and building a career for himself, is not an easy task.

“You have to make a lot of sacrifices...you really have to figure out what the most important things are,” DuFrain said.

DuFrain, his wife Megan and eight-month old baby Lincoln live in Weatherford, where he commutes back and forth to school. He has been married for three years and has been a full-time student during the entirety of that time. Balancing college life with a newborn and a family comes with a unique set of challenges, long commutes, career setbacks, social stigma and time management are just some of the ones he has been faced with. Despite all of the trials and difficulties he has faced, DuFrain says that he would sacrifice everything for his wife and son.

“They are the most important people in my life, they are going to be the most important people in my life for the rest of my life,” DuFrain said, “My family is the most important thing... it’s something that I put both feet into.”

For many students’ college is a fun time, a time for freedom, a time for studying by day and partying by night, a time where many “real-life” responsibilities seem like a lifetime away. For DuFrain, these

responsibilities are oh so present and have altered his college experience immensely.

Instead of going to parties at night, he goes home to take care of his wife and child. Instead of relaxing on his weekends, he works to further his career while also being a present parent and spending time with Lincoln. Instead of sleeping in, he wakes up between 4:30 a.m. and 6 a.m. every day to get everything done that is needed of him. These differences in his college experience, however, have only made him a stronger, more dedicated person.

“I have had to be sharper with my time, be really deliberate with every minute of the day...my job right now is to be a dad, and then to be a student,” DuFrain said, “It’s definitely challenging to now have another person that you are taking responsibility for, before it was just taking care of myself. My wife and I balanced the responsibility of taking care of each other... now we think about him first, and then everything else.”

Outside of his family, DuFrain has also had to learn how to manage his time efficiently to be the best student he can be, especially when having so many responsibilities outside of school.

“My first semester at Tarleton I was in a math class, and I approached it the same way I had always approached school... I did all of the fun stuff first and then focused on the stuff that I needed to do. The final grades came in and I failed that class,” DuFrain said, “That was a big wake up call, I don’t think a lot of students realize that they need to actually learn.”

Approaching school with a more mature attitude has allowed DuFrain to not only succeed in his classes but has also led him to be able to more effectively further his career. His interest in photography started when he was young and spiraled into something that he knew he wanted to make a

career out of.

His love for taking photos led him to his internship with Tarleton Athletics, which he has been actively a part of for over two years. He chose to pursue the creative path, focusing on photography, videography, graphic design and other creative aspects of sports communication.

From his internship with Tarleton athletics, he was offered a job at Weatherford College, where he hopes to work his way up the professional ladder. He wants to eventually be a creative director for sports communications.

“Ultimately I do want to be either a director of social media and content creation or an executive content creator in creative media for the Rangers, Dallas Cowboys or a major university,” DuFrain said, “Definitely somewhere that has a solid fall sports program that includes football, rodeo and gymnastics.”

His senior capstone is one of many projects that he has worked on that accurately showcases his talent and eye for photography. He took several models and worked with light and shadow to produce beautiful black and white portraits.

Two of the models he worked with during his capstone project were Emilia Perez and Avi Morsbach.

Perez is a Tarleton sophomore criminal justice major. This was her first time working with DuFrain, as well as her first time ever modeling. Modeling for a photographer’s specific vision is not always an easy task, but Perez says that with DuFrain behind the lens, it wasn’t difficult at all.

“He was super easy to work with. He created an environment where I felt like I could express myself and be comfortable,” Perez said, “He made me feel like I was also a part of it... modeling for photography is not in my comfort zone, but he really inspired

me to push myself and try something different.”

Morsbach was another model that DuFrain used for his capstone. She too had not known him before working as a model for him, but has now done several photoshoots with him. She says that the atmosphere he creates while working makes it easy for his subjects to succeed.

“He is an extremely creative photographer and knows how to adjust to what works best for the model...If i could describe him in three words, it would be creative, professional and dedicated. It is evident through working with Joseph and from his work that he is passionate about what he does.” Morsbach said.

Setting goals for himself and then working hard to follow through on those goals has gotten DuFrain to where he is today. He has spent the majority of his college career striving to gather the skills that will one day get him to exactly where he has fought so hard to be. Creating healthy and productive habits for himself has allowed him to accomplish many of his goals already.

“You are capable of doing everything you set your mind to...I’m proof of that, I put my mind to having a job lined up after I graduated, and I’m starting my job the week before I graduate,” DuFrain said.

He also expressed how important his support system was for his success in every aspect of life, family, school and career. Having strong support around you is essential for any college student, however it’s even more so when you aren’t just looking after yourself, but also a family.

“Your support system is so important. You have to have someone there to lean on when those days are hard. For me it’s my wife... my family is that for me,” DuFrain said.

Life is stressful, college is stressful, all career paths at some points are

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PHOTO COURTESY VANESSARENEEPHOTOGRAPHY

Joseph DuFrain with his baby and camera for senior graduation pictures.

stressful and juggling all of it while also dedicating yourself to being the best husband and father possible, amplifies those stressors tenfold. At the end of the day however, the harder the journey, the more rewarding the destination. DuFrain is proof that dedication, passion, love and above all faith, can take you all the way to the end.

“If anybody is in a current situation where they are trying to balance all the stresses in life, even if you’re not religious, have a foundation of faith...

that foundation is what I go back to every single time. I didn’t always go back on my faith, but the Heavenly Father really is in the details,” DuFrain said.

His family is DuFrains’ biggest support and biggest blessing. Outside of his faith, his family is what he turned to throughout even the most difficult parts of his college career.

“I could not be more grateful for Megan, and for her family taking me in as a part of their family, and for my family back in Missouri. Its hard

for them to see me living so far away from them, but they’re supporting me regardless.” DuFrain said.

He hopes that his journey will inspire others to know that no matter how difficult the road is, anything is possible, and he hopes that his son and future children will learn from him that there is a greater purpose for even the worst days.

“That’s what I hope my kids can learn from me, there are going to be some days where they just kick you in the teeth, you are going to be down on

your knees, and you are going to say ‘why is this happening to me’, and its to build you up and to make you stronger,” DuFrain said.

Throughout all of the highs and lows of his college life, DuFrain persevered and even excelled. While his college experience didn’t always look “normal”, it was uniquely his, and uniquely amazing. After graduation he will be moving into a new phase of life, a phase that is filled with many of the things he has hoped and prayed for.

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Diana Estrada: a first-gen student with ‘a servant’s heart’

BY GAVIN PATRICK
Multimedia Journalist

Diana Estrada was still in her mother’s belly when her parents crossed the border into the United States.

They were just 24. Their whole lives were ahead of them. They only knew Spanish. They never finished college. All but one family member still lived in Mexico.

In Diana’s words, “they left everything behind.”

It was time to move on. They were preparing to start a family of their own and wanted to leave it in a better place than they came from.

“They had to work two, sometimes three jobs at a time,” Diana said. “So, I just wanted to better myself and make sure those sacrifices didn’t go to waste.”

Diana was born just two months after her parents settled in Stephenville. Fast-forward 22 years, and she is graduating from Tarleton State University as a first-generation student.

Safe to say, the move was worth it.

“That was always the plan since they came to the U.S.,” Diana said. “And I never doubted throughout grade school that I’d go to college.”

It may be normal nowadays to know a first-generation student. Today, one third of college students are first-gen, and of that group, 70% are Latino, according to U.S. News & World Report.

Diana is a proud member of that 70%. She graduates Tarleton with a bachelor’s degree in Biomedical Science, plus a minor in Spanish, and will apply for dental school in the summer, hoping to start the following summer in 2026.

Diana and her cousin, Marvin -- who also graduates Tarleton this month, with an accounting degree -- mark the second and third of her generation to graduate college. Soon, that number could be eight, as six of her other

cousins are currently pursuing college degrees.

Family is one of the biggest parts of Diana’s life, in every sense of the word. Of her mom’s half (her dad’s side lives in Mexico), Diana has a combined eight aunts and uncles, 20 cousins, plus her younger brother and sister -- Natalie, who’s 16, and Mateo, who’s 8.

Growing up, Diana would spend every holiday with her mom’s side of the family. The hosts would rotate each time, and the love would spread accordingly, which, in Diana’s Mexican-American family, is always.

“We’re a very close-knit family. We’re pretty loud,” Diana said with a laugh. “So whenever we get together, it’s all the aunts in the kitchen laughing, all the cousins in one room playing on whatever console we have and all the dads in the living room doing whatever dads do. It’s always been very fun.”

Diana sure does love her family. Part of what attracted her to dentistry is the work-life balance it brings. A lot of dental practices are only open four days a week, so with her time-off, it’s easy to see where that time would go.

Diana also pointed out the “attention to detail” it takes to be a dentist as what mainly attracted her. In her words, she’s “a control freak” and “like[s] to know what’s going on at all times” -- especially in people’s mouths, apparently.

In fact, Diana actually finds dentist appointments to be an enjoyable experience.

“I don’t know why, specifically, but oral health has always been something very important to me,” Diana said. “I always take very good care of my teeth, I make sure to floss every day. But specifically what made me want to become a dentist [is] seeing a couple of examples around Stephenville being a larger part of the community, not just helping people in the office. [That’s] what kind of guided me.”

That’s the thing with Diana -- she

tends to put others first. A Tarleton faculty member who’s become close to Diana over the years, Dr. Faulkenberry, said it best:

She “has a servant’s heart.”

“She sees a need, and she works to find ways to fill that need -- not necessarily that she has to fill the need, but she finds ways to bring resources together to fill the needs,” Faulkenberry said. “She’s a forward thinker.”

Diana singled out Dr. Faulkenberry as a professor she connected with in her time at Tarleton, even though she never had a class with her.

“She was just somebody who I always saw on campus and I could always greet, and she would always have a smile on her face,” Diana said. “She made coming to Tarleton, as a student, a lot easier and a lot more welcoming.”

Faulkenberry, now the Dean of the Honors College, first met Diana a week before her first semester at STEM Basecamp. Incoming students from math, science and engineering fields were put through a “boot-camp” in math, and they heard presentations about academic success, campus resources and got to meet professors in the College of Science and Mathematics.

“I remember Diana being quiet,” Faulkenberry said, smiling. “She didn’t really talk a whole lot and was really kind of shy -- but very, very sweet, and I could tell that she was very bright and was going to do great things.”

That she did. Two years later, in the summer of 2023, Diana used her forward-thinking and created the “Women in STEM” club with a couple of her friends from the Honors College.

This is something Diana is very passionate about.

“What we hoped this club would do for our members is create a community, help create connections and build a sense of place for other students like us,” Diana said. “The founding members

are all Biomedical Science majors, and we stuck together through the first few years of college. When we realized how helpful those kinds of connections were, we decided to expand that and provide that opportunity for everyone.”

In the first year and a half, the club has had many volunteer opportunities, it’s collaborated with other campus organizations and it’s also brought in guest speakers from around campus, some of whom talked about their struggles being a woman in a male-dominated field.

One day, Diana and another founding member, Jasmine Muñoz, approached Dr. Faulkenberry and asked if she would be a guest speaker one night. Let’s just say, they had her at hello.

“I was so stinkin’ proud of those young ladies for seeing a need and filling it with this organization that can benefit all students across campus,” Faulkenberry said. “It says ‘Women in STEM,’ but it’s open to any of the students who might be interested to find this sort of support group as they [navigate] being a student in STEM ... I was just overjoyed.”

Heading the “Women in STEM” club is not the only impact Diana has made outside the classroom.

Since her sophomore year at Stephenville High School, Diana has been involved in Tarleton’s Upward Bound program. The program is one of three divisions in the university’s TRIO family, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, designed to help first-gen and low income students get to college.

Diana became very close with the Upward Bound faculty over the years. They helped her with schoolwork, prepare for the SAT and ACT, apply for college and scholarships -- and once Diana started at Tarleton, she was hired as a student-worker in the Upward Bound office.

“I help in whatever way is needed,” Diana said. “Right now, we’re going through our recruitment period, so I’ve

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been attending all those meetings. I [also] tutor the students that need help in different classes during our Saturday meetings.”

Diana, who turned 22 this month, hasn’t even scratched the surface of what her career will be in dentistry and, yet, is already giving back to her community. It’s a defining part of her character.

Diana’s story could not be told, either, without mentioning redemption.

Her family had redeemed itself before she was born, even, by finding new life in America. This year, Diana found her redemption in the classroom. To her credit, she wasn’t the first to make a D in Biochemistry.

“I will admit that I didn’t put in as much work as I probably should have,” Diana said. “It was, I think, a year ago ... It was a rough semester, and I started to procrastinate a lot. I think it was just -- I was kind of tired of the repetitive [pattern of] going to class, going to labs, working. I was just getting tired of it, and I stopped putting as much focus on it. I started slacking a lot.”

It was an uncharacteristic failure for Diana, who had never failed a class in her life before this one. However, and predictably so, she retook Biochemistry this semester and bounced back with an A, with the final grades pending.

“That was a wake-up call, for sure,” Diana said. “It was a wake-up call [in] that it wasn’t gonna be as easy as I thought, but I was actually gonna have to push through some of these higher-level classes, [and] I was going to have to work for the grades I want.”

Diana credits her work-ethic to her parents, who, like mentioned before, sometimes had to work multiple jobs to provide for Diana and her siblings. But Diana also gives a big nod to her time in band, where she went on to become Drum Major, Clarinet Section Leader and “unofficial Quartermaster.”

“I started band in sixth grade, all the way through senior year of high school,” Diana said. “Band is really what allowed me to grow a lot both in leadership, socially, to develop



PHOTO BY CAITLYN MOYER

Diana Estrada stands between her father, Miguel Estrada, sister, Natalie, Brother, Mateo, and mother, Juanita Luna, for a group photo.

my work ethic. It helps in so many tremendous ways. I made so many friends in there as well, so that helped a lot with the social aspect ... My time in band was something I will forever be grateful for.”

Diana loved band so much that, “for a while,” she even considered majoring in music instead of Biomedical Science. In the end, though, she wasn’t quite sure of herself.

“I don’t think I was good enough,” Diana said with a laugh.

It’s clear where Diana’s heart resides. Ever since freshman biology class in high school, Diana knew she wanted to do something where she could “better understand how life works.” Even in her final semester, she felt her General Physiology class reinforce the interest she has in pursuing her career plan.

“Just in general, all my science classes -- they’re the ones that interest me the most,” Diana said. “So, I know

I picked the right degree and know I am doing a degree for a career that I’ll actually enjoy.”

Along the way, Diana will never forget her Mexican heritage, which has, most definitely, shaped the person she’s become -- seen, in part, by her Spanish minor.

Tarleton’s Associate Professor of Spanish, Dr. Cecilia Marrugo, had classes with Diana over multiple semesters. They built a bond through their “shared love for the Spanish language and culture.” She also helped Diana with a project she did this semester to satisfy her Honors Contract.

“We developed a special connection through thoughtful classroom discussions, where Diana often brought fresh perspectives that challenged and inspired me and her classmates alike,” Marrugo said. “... She learned to navigate college life’s obstacles

with resilience and determination, emerging as a well-rounded, thoughtful individual ready to make a positive impact on the world.”

Diana doesn’t like to brag about herself, but she sure has left her mark in so many ways in and out of the classroom. Her impact is felt by her family, friends, teachers and, probably, others she hasn’t even met.

Diana can be defined by many things, such as “intelligent,” “kind” and “patriotic,” along with, per Dr. Faulkenberry, her “sweet smile that can light up a room.”

All of these qualities will do Diana very well as she strives to, in her words, better her “little bubble of the world.”

“One thing that Dr. Faulkenberry always says is, ‘You can’t change the world, but you can change the part of the world that you are a part of,’” Diana said. “So, I guess that’s what I would strive for the most.”

GRADUATION EDITION

Hooper defies medical odds, earns degree

BY HAELEY CARPENTER

Managing Editor

No one goes into the emergency room for a common cold expecting that they would walk out with a brain scan of an inoperable AVM but that is what happened to Jorden “J” Hooper in June of 2022.

An AVM is an arteriovenous malformation, which is an abnormal connection with arteries and veins in Jordens case, in her brain. The percentage of it rupturing is your age, so for Jorden she was diagnosed at 18 so she had a 18% every day of it rupturing.

“If it would have ruptured I would have immediately died,” Jorden said.

I had a government class with Jorden here at Tarleton State University the semester before she was diagnosed and we became fast friends. I was one of the first people she called when she got the news of her AVM.

The two options were radiation surgery or surgery to remove it. The AVM was in a sweet spot where it was too big to do one and too small to do the other.

Jorden moved home over the summer so that she could go to all of her appointments and simply moved her schooling online. Moving home after finding her freedom at school was hard.

“It felt like I was taking a step back,” Jorden said.

Doctor appointment after doctor appointment led to the doctors eventually agreeing that they would start with radiation to hopefully shrink the AVM and then in two years (the time it would take for the radiation to fully work) reevaluate and maybe do the surgery to remove it. Radiation surgery, which is a non-invasive procedure that deposits a large amount of radiation at one time to a very precise area.

“They were like ‘you either die or you do this’ so I was like ‘alright’. [Radiation] was such a new thing that it was kind of scary to listen about but we didn’t have another choice,” Jorden said.

Her parents were unsure and scared about the whole thing.

“[We were] freaked out because we had never heard of it before, we didn’t know what it was until we saw the neurosurgeon and learned more about it and was able to process it then,” Jorden’s mom Jenifer said.

In August of 2022, Jorden and her doctors started the preparation for the surgery. She had to get fitted for a type of face mask that they use during the procedure- I told her to bedazzle it but the doctors



PHOTO BY JASON HOOPER

Jorden Hooper posing in front of the Barry B. Thompson Student Center.

wouldn’t let her so she painted it instead.

The procedure went as planned and Jorden’s medical emergency turned into a waiting game.

The radiation proved to be affecting Jorden six months after the procedure. The negative side effects were kicking in; from fainting and seizures to hair falling out and memory issues. She was fatigued all the time.

She also had to go through over 75 tests including but not limited to X-rays, CT scans, CT angiography, MRIs, fMRIs, MRAs, EEGs and even a couple EMGs which was a type of electrocution.

As Jorden starred in her own medical show, I became a supporting character for her. As much as it might suck to admit, if it weren’t for the AVM, we might not be as close as we are today.

Since Jorden and I lived so far away, we talked all the time because we couldn’t hang out with each other. She leaned on me so she had an escape from being a patient.

From dating stories, book recommendations and school work, whether it was serious topics or trying to be the comic relief, we kept in touch as much as we could.

GRADUATION EDITION

Trying to make light of such a serious medical diagnosis is hard but, boy, did we do it.

We named her AVM Becky.

It was easier to talk about it as if it was some crappy roommate or friend rather than a deadly threat on Jorden's life. She would often text me that "Becky is being mean again" or "You'll never guess what Becky did today."

It made things easier for her to deal with while we waited because the doctors wanted to wait a full two years to let the radiation work.

"I use humor to cope because if you're not laughing about it, then what else are you gonna do?" Jorden said.

Until more bad news came.

The radiation caused a stress aneurysm which was attached to the AVM and the artery feeding into it.

That was the thought, at least, until more brain scans showed it was actually two aneurysms which couldn't be treated because Jorden wasn't allowed to take blood thinners until Becky was gone.

In October 2023 she started losing function. It started with her left and dominant hand at only 18% function and then her whole arm started to go, then the whole left half of her body.

"My first thought when they told me that my brain was dying and that my hand was dying, my first thought was 'don't take my leg,'" Jorden said.

She started occupational therapy for two hours a day for 10 months straight with the hope that she might gain function back but the chances were slim to none.

Through all of the terrible days because of side effects from medications, the AVM, and both aneurysms, I still saw Jorden smile. She had started accepting that her life was just like this now and she tried to stay positive for all of it.

"At the beginning, the brain swelling made me numb, almost, I didn't have any feelings," Jorden said.

Every doctor's appointment he went into where they gave her bad news, her

response was to keep doing what they needed her to do.

"They told me to jump and I did it, because what else can you do?" Jorden said. "I think with therapy I was more determined with that because it's something you can physically see."

As if going through all of that wasn't enough, the whole time she was also a full time student and had a full time job.

Most students struggle with their course work and can only work so much before it gets to be too much but imagine doing it all when your brain is literally killing you.

"I really, really had to lower everything. Work less hours, do less hours [in school]. I was a full time patient; that was a full time job," Jorden said.

Her parents had to help her with that.

"We had to step in and make her drop classes and take back hours at work," Jenifer said.

On Feb. 23, 2024, I burst into tears in the middle of Caam's because I got the text with a picture proving that Becky was finally dying.

But it wasn't the end of it.

"As cliché as it sounds, I was partially relieved," Jorden said. "But part of me was still mad because my arm and hand weren't healing. It's frustrating when your brain is healing but your body doesn't."

Jorden has regained almost full function of the left side of her body except in her hand, arm and face. She is done with therapy but still does exercises regularly and has two more scans until she is released.

The AVM (Becky) is on its way to dead and even though it took so much of her life away from her, Jorden didn't let it take her spirit.

She graduates Tarleton in December 2024 with a Bachelor of Science in psychology and is now focusing on graduate school which she plans to start in the fall of 2025 at Tarleton.

After school, the goal is to become a counselor and therapist but in the



PHOTO BY JASON HOOPER

Jorden Hooper smiling about her future on the rockwall at Heritage Park.

long run she sees herself as a forensic psychologist. Her dream is to interview serial killers to get inside their heads.

"I don't care about the behavior, I care about the 'why.' Why do people do the things they do?" Jorden said.

If Jorden can get through life balancing an AVM, two aneurysms, college and work, I have no doubt in my mind that she will achieve her dreams.

Jorden has loved her classes in her undergraduate but is enthusiastic about her next chapter.

"I'm excited [to graduate]. I'm surprised about how I didn't get behind because my doctors told me so many times to stop school and that was

the only time I didn't listen to them. School was a really good distraction," Jorden said.

Despite all she has been through, Jorden is graduating and her parents are beyond proud of her.

"[She is] one of the strongest people I know, and not just because she's my daughter," Jenifer said. "No matter what life throws at her, she takes the bull by its horns and leads it. We're so proud. It's really cool, she's come a long way. She would have done it anyways but on top of dealing with medical stuff, she still did it. She never missed a beat."

Congratulations, J, I am so beyond proud of you.

GRADUATION EDITION

Rudolph turns passion into purpose

BY COLTON BRADBERRY

Multimedia Journalist

At 36, Jade Rudolph is preparing to graduate from Tarleton State University this December. As a nontraditional student, he has taken an unconventional path to earning his degree, blending a passion for music with a drive to succeed in business.

Rudolph's story begins in the Stephenville area, where he spent his childhood attending school from pre-K through eighth grade, before moving to Colorado.

"About half my life I grew up in the Stephenville, Lipan and Dublin area," Rudolph said. "And then for high school, I went up to Colorado and made my first attempt at college there."

Years later, Rudolph returned to Texas and enrolled at Ranger College, where he earned an associate degree before transferring to Tarleton. He decided to major in marketing and minor in music—two fields that mirror his lifelong passions.

Rudolph has been immersed in the music industry for over 20 years. He spent his early 20s as a touring musician before starting his own record label at 23. While the label didn't succeed, the experience taught him invaluable lessons about business and the challenges of breaking into the industry.

"I started promoting and organizing shows in Denver," Rudolph said. "We were selling out clubs and that's when a radio station noticed me. They asked me to do an interview on air and during the commercial break, the station owner told me I had a voice for radio and he offered me a radio show."

After spending time in Colorado working at the radio station, Rudolph eventually settled in California. It was there that his passion for music and radio took a significant turn. While searching for a platform to host his own radio show, Rudolph realized that no existing service aligned with his vision.

Rather than compromising, he decided to create his own platform.

In November 2017, Rudaroo Radio was born, founded on the principle of being "the home of the underground."

For Rudolph, the platform wasn't just a business—it was a way to support emerging artists and build a community around shared values of creativity and collaboration. Over the past seven years, Rudaroo Radio has grown steadily, fueled by Rudolph's commitment to giving underdog musicians a voice in an increasingly crowded industry.

"I wanted a platform that fit the mold of local

music but in a worldwide context," Rudolph said. "When I couldn't find one, I decided to create it myself. Rudaroo Radio became a way to not just share music, but to build a community for artists who might otherwise go unnoticed."

Today, Rudaroo Radio has expanded its reach to Texas, where Rudolph works alongside another Tarleton graduate, Justin Cummins. They plan to move the station to Denver in January to tap into a larger market.

Rudolph's decision to major in marketing was driven by his entrepreneurial spirit and a clear understanding of what his business needed to thrive. For Rudolph, earning a degree wasn't just about personal growth, it was a strategic move to strengthen his business and secure its future in a competitive industry.

"I had a lot of musical knowledge and customer service experience, but marketing was the missing piece," Rudolph said. "When seeking investors, having a degree gives you credibility."

Rudolph credits Tarleton with helping him refine his skills and broaden his perspective.

"I've learned so much about how to market to younger generations," Rudolph said. "Being in my 30s, I wouldn't normally have the chance to hang out with 19 and 20-year-olds."

Rudolph hasn't just attended classes, he's fully immersed himself in campus life. He served as vice president of the choir last year and is an assistant grand treasurer for Kappa Sigma, where he's a founding father of the fraternity's Tarleton chapter.

"I probably dove into college life more than most 30-somethings," Rudolph said. "It reinvigorated the youth in me. I feel 22 again."

Rudolph also worked as music director for the school's radio station, an experience he cherished but had to step away from due to his demanding schedule.

Rudolph is also a musician with a single, "Now This Is What I Call Livin'," available on his YouTube channel. Though he performs live regularly, he has been intentional about delaying a larger release of his work.

"I have several albums' worth of material, but I want to release it professionally," Rudolph said. "I'm waiting until I can find the right studio and producers to match the vision I have in my head."

Throughout his time at Tarleton, Rudolph has found inspiration and guidance from several professors who left a lasting impact on his academic and personal growth.

Among them is Dr. Troy Robertson, who Rudolph described as a model of grace, empathy and professionalism. As a professor and mentor, Dr. Robertson has not only provided expertise in music but has also demonstrated an unwavering ability to handle every situation with composure and kindness.

"For lack of a better phrase, I've never seen someone with such good bedside manner. When he's in front of a class he has the ability to deal with every type of situation with grace and poise and it's very impressive," Rudolph said.

Robertson spoke highly of Rudolph, noting the unique perspective he brings to the classroom.

"He's a non-traditional student and has led a very interesting life," Robertson said.

Rudolph also highlighted the significant impact of Bill Leaverton, a professor whose no-nonsense approach to teaching left a lasting impression. For Rudolph, Leaverton's straightforward style was both refreshing and insightful, offering students a glimpse into the realities of their education and their future careers.

"I haven't had a teacher be so blunt and forward and truthful about their own situation, about the class situation or the school's situation. That level of honesty is something I've really appreciated," Rudolph said.

Another standout professor for Rudolph was Dr. Pellegrino, whose teaching philosophy stood out for its emphasis on critical thinking and independent learning.

"He makes you really, sort of investigate your own methods, of how to access information and to gain knowledge. He teaches you more about how to gain knowledge than knowledge," Rudolph said.

After earning his degree, Rudolph is eager to return to Denver, a city that has played a significant role in his journey. With several of his employees joining him, he plans to expand Rudaroo Radio into the heart of Colorado's vibrant music scene.

While he's excited about the opportunities awaiting him in Denver, Rudolph looks back on his time at Tarleton with deep appreciation. For him, the university has been more than just a place to earn a degree—it's been a transformative chapter filled with personal and professional growth.

"Tarleton has been an amazing experience," Rudolph said. "I'm proud to be a Texan and I'm ready for what's next."

GRADUATION EDITION

Lehman goes from classroom to clinic

BY HELENA KNUTSON
Multimedia Journalist

As she prepares to walk the field, Madison (Maddie) Lehman, a senior kinesiology major, reflects on her many activities, friendships, and accomplishments at Tarleton State University.

Lehman, originally from Houston, TX, came to Tarleton in the fall of 2021. Since then, Maddie has been involved in several organizations, such as holding positions in her sorority, working as a Rho Gamma, being on the homecoming court and being a member of the National Society of Leadership and Success.

However, Lehman's most rewarding position was her terms serving on the panhellenic executive board.

"But I do think that I grew more as a leader, and I could tell that I did because people started coming to me asking me questions on things only I knew the answers; you're only one of my exec members, and they trusted me with that information, leading them to the right spot. Even if I didn't know what the exact answer was. So, I definitely honed my skills on how I wanted to be a leader versus how everyone thinks a leader should be portrayed because everybody's their own different kind of leader," Lehman said.

Leham serves as the vice president of programming on the panhellenic board, where she created events for the panhellenic community service project Circle of Sisterhood, which helps bring education to women and girls around the world.

Lehman worked with several other board members, one of whom was her good friend Paris Hairston, a junior marketing major.

"Working with Maddie on a professional level was amazing because she always got all of her stuff in on time, and a lot of people think she doesn't have her life together or she has stuff all over the place because she is so involved, but she always finds a way to get it done," Hairston said. "Connection with her on a personal level, I love her. I just think Maddie Lehman is somebody everyone deserves to have in their life, just cause she is funny and she has all the good qualities people want in a friend."

Another accomplishment Lehman was proud of was her position on the homecoming court this year.

"I literally was telling everyone like I wanted to get Queen, but I was like, 'I'm literally just happy I made court. Everybody was like, 'Oh like, you're like you're gonna get it.' I was telling Aspen, 'like,



PHOTO BY STEPHENIE NELSON

Madison Lehman throwing her graduation cap at the camera.

you're gonna get it,' you know, Morgan Waters. I was like, 'You're gonna get it,' you know? But I was just happy to be on court," said Lehman

Besides being involved in school, Lehman does work outside of school, such as her internship at Crosstimer Family Chiropractic and her work as a dance teacher at Studio 614, where she teaches preschool acrobatics and cheer.

In addition to her extracurricular activities and work, Lehman maintained a good academic standing with the university and Honors College at Tarleton.

A junior kinesiology major, Ellie Sandoval shares a strength and conditioning class with Lehman and has witnessed her hard work ethic.

"Maddie is such a hard-working and caring person. She strives to be the best and makes all situations better, even when they are hard. She is always ready to learn and help others with any situation that they may encounter," Sandoval said.

Along with Sandoval, others, such as her professor, Rachel Elms, can attest to Lehman's hard work.

Elms has been Lehman's professor for a few semesters now and shares a student-teacher

relationship and a friendship with Lehman.

"She has a great ethic and was always present in class. She went above and beyond in course assignments and projects. It was apparent that she has a passion for the kinesiology field that will take her far beyond graduation," Elms said.

Although Lehman's college career may seem perfect, she has faced adversity in her time at Tarleton, but nonetheless has overcome it and come out on the other side.

"You get what you put in, and it was just harder to start that, like to put myself out there and like be myself. I felt like I was trying to fit in with everybody else, but then you find more people, and it just gets easier," Lehman said.

When she came to Tarleton, Lehman found it difficult to make those connections; however, she has impacted the people around her since then.

"I think the way that Maddie greets everybody with kindness, and I know that seems so cliches, but she is just so nice to everybody, and she always has a smile on her face and she is just a person to bring you up, and she always a bright light to have around you," Hairston said.

Lehman didn't originally come to Tarleton with hopes of becoming a chiropractor.

Her original dream was to be an athletic trainer, but after realizing her dream of starting a family, Lehman thought a change of major might better suit that dream. Lehman decided on her new career path after shadowing her cousin, who is a chiropractor.

"I went home. I think this was over one of the Thanksgiving breaks and I shadowed my cousin, and she's a chiropractor. And then I decided I wanted to do chiropractic. So they changed me from athletic training to EHP exercise, allied health professions, and I think after I changed that, like all my classes, everything kind of became more clear about what I wanted to do, and I was excited to do it," Lehman said.

After graduating from Tarleton, Lehman plans to attend chiropractic school in Pasadena. After receiving her certification, she plans to work at a chiropractor's practice and eventually take over or open her own. Along with becoming a chiropractor, Lehman hopes to get her cosmetologist license and do nails and hair on the side.

GRADUATION EDITION

Goodbye to the Texan News Service

BY JAXON HANSARD

Sports Editor

With the colder weather and holidays coming around Tarleton and other universities will be congratulating and graduation a fall class of 2024 college graduates.

I will be one of them and while it can be very exciting and overwhelming at times it signals an end of a chapter in my book.

Coming into college I would not have thought that I would be graduating four years later to go write sports stories for a county newspaper. I came here with not a solid idea of what I wanted to so I would start with a business degree because business equals money right?

Then with the extra free time I had because of school and the lingering effects of COVID, I rediscovered my love for sports.

After a year and a few weeks I would change my major to sports communication. I figured if I was already consuming sports content a majority of the time why not try to get a job in it?

I would have to learn (or improve) to write about what I like so I took a news writing and gathering class taught by Mr. Lewter. He was an interesting teacher that would become important in my college life. Lewter approached me towards the end of the semester about what I wanted to do as a career and my interest.

He presented an interesting opportunity to me to test myself and try something new but something I was apparently good enough to catch his eye about with newswriting.

I later joined the Texan News Service (TNS) While there were always early struggles I enjoyed what I was doing. I could always have done better and sometimes I would criticize myself too much or have an idea for a story or fix for my most recent work till later but I enjoyed the process.

Writing was fun and I had a goal with it. Besides the most important final score that people wanted, I was able to bring a more feature-style approach to the sports stories that would focus on the players and coaches and their contributions. I wanted students to be more informed on Tarleton teams other than, “they lost they suck or they won they’re good”.

The players have skills and the coaches are there to put them in the best situations, there’s flow and styles to each game that affect how Tarleton plays. I wanted the audience to know that while being able to highlight certain things I noticed that affected the Texan’s play. While it was only three semesters, a lot happened to me and the Texan News Service.

Writing for Lewter has a great experience. I saw a few different editors and chiefs and with each one the office and news flowed differently. I was able to see the staff grow from eight to 17, We started a new website and were able to write more stories and share more stories with an audience and families online, We acquired Tarleton’s historic JTAC paper and got to be more recognized. I made some friends and memories in my time writing for the TNS/JTAC and I will take them and their lessons with me as long as I remember.

One thing I will miss is the structure and space that the newsroom offers. I had classes in the newsroom so I had to be there but other times it was open just to work, wait, write, and talk with whoever. I always knew what I would be doing on Tuesdays. I knew the people that I would be around and we were all just a little nosey which isn’t a bad thing I think.



PHOTO BY REESE KEELING

Senior sports editor Jaxon Hansard with his sports story in the J-TAC.

GRADUATION EDITION

Gratitude and farewell to my mentors

Dear Tarleton Family,

As my time at Tarleton State University draws to a close, I find myself reflecting on the incredible journey I've had here. It's difficult to put into words the gratitude I feel for the people who have shaped my experience, but I will do my best to honor them in this farewell letter. Each of these individuals has profoundly impacted my life, and this is my opportunity to express my thanks.

First and foremost, I must acknowledge Kirk Wise, a teacher and mentor in sports communication.

His class reignited my passion for audio and video editing, a flame that had dimmed over the years. Kirk's teaching style and enthusiasm for the craft made every class an adventure, sparking my excitement to continue pursuing a career in this field. He didn't just teach; he inspired me, and for that, I am forever grateful. Kirk, thank you for reminding me why I fell in love with storytelling through media in the first place.

Next, I want to thank Shalya Moose, our Communications Specialist, Student Media Advisor, teacher and mentor. Ms. Moose was the instructor of my first art class at Tarleton. Her passion and commitment, not just to her art but to her students, left a lasting impression on me. She believed in my potential even when I doubted myself, and she supported me. Ms. Moose, your guidance and encouragement have meant the world to me. Thank you for being my rock and my cheerleader.

Austin Lewter, an instructor and mentor in Journalism and Broadcasting, and my boss at the TNS, is another person who deserves my heartfelt thanks. Mr. Lewter helped me uncover my passion for journalism.

He taught me the importance of delving into the heart of a story, of

uncovering not just what people do, but why they do it. His mentorship pushed me to become a better writer and storyteller. Austin, your lessons will stay with me forever, and I'll carry your wisdom into every story I tell.

I must also express my gratitude to Lance McFarlin, my boss at KXTR 100.7 The Planet and KTRL 90.5. Lance gave me a glimpse into the world of radio and solidified my passion for audio production. He showed me what it's like to work in a professional station and helped me discover the path I want to take in my career. Lance, thank you for setting me up for success and for sharing your expertise with me.

And now, I come to the person who has had the most profound impact on my life: Dr. Manon Shockey, Director of Student Development and Mentoring. Dr. Shockey is not just a mentor; she is a beacon of light, a source of hope, and the embodiment of grace and selflessness. Her role in my life transcends that of an advisor or teacher. She has been my lifeline, my confidant and my guiding star.

In April of 2019, my dad was diagnosed with stage 4 prostate cancer, a special BRCA-2 gene mutation. It was a devastating time for my family and me. The prognosis seemed to worsen every day, and by the time I started my freshman year, I was drowning in a sea of anxiety, depression, and despair. I stopped attending classes, abandoned my assignments and fell into a deep pit of hopelessness. My academic performance plummeted and I was eventually placed on academic suspension.

It was during this dark chapter of my life that I met Dr. Shockey. My mom and I had a meeting with Tarleton staff to discuss my suspension, and that's when Dr. Shockey entered my life. From the moment we met, I felt an inexplicable sense of comfort and



PHOTO BY REESE KEELING

Senior multimedia journalist Thomas Engelbert.

reassurance. Dr. Shockey saw beyond my struggles; she saw my potential. She didn't just help me academically; she helped me rebuild my life.

We began meeting weekly, sometimes even twice a week. Our conversations weren't just about schoolwork; they were about life. She created a safe space where I could open up about my fears, my grief, and my dreams. She listened with empathy and offered guidance with compassion. Dr. Shockey taught me how to find strength in vulnerability and how to navigate life's challenges with resilience and grace.

As my dad's condition worsened, my bond with Dr. Shockey grew stronger. She became a constant source of support and encouragement. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the world seemed to come to a standstill, Dr. Shockey was there for me. The pandemic, though challenging, gave me precious time with my dad, and Dr. Shockey's presence during this period was invaluable. She helped me find meaning and purpose in the midst

of chaos.

When my dad passed away in November of 2021, it was the hardest thing I've ever experienced. The days that followed were a blur of grief and numbness. I remember sitting in the lobby of our church during my dad's memorial service, overwhelmed and overstimulated, trying to retreat into myself. And then, out of the crowd, I heard someone call my name. It was Dr. Shockey. She had come to the memorial, unannounced, to support me. Her presence at that moment was like a flash of light in the darkest night. I will never forget the comfort and solace she brought me that day.

Dr. Shockey is more than a mentor to me. She is hope personified. She is the embodiment of kindness and selflessness. She is a shining example of what it means to truly care for others. Dr. Shockey, you have saved me in more ways than I can count. You pulled me out of the pit I had dug for myself, set me on solid ground, and gave me the tools to thrive. You are my hero, my guiding light, and my eternal source of inspiration. Thank you, from the depths of my heart, for everything you have done for me. I owe my success to you.

As I say goodbye to Tarleton, I do so with a heart full of gratitude. To my teachers, mentors, and friends, thank you for believing in me, for challenging me, and for helping me become the person I am today. To my family, thank you for your unwavering support and love. And to Dr. Manon Shockey, thank you for being my light in the darkest of times. You have left an indelible mark on my life, and I will carry your lessons with me always.

Farewell, Tarleton. You will always be a part of me.

**With gratitude and love,
Thomas Engelbert**

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