

TEXAS EXES 2005 ANNUAL REPORT

Full Circle: John Adkins became involved with the Texas Exes as a student. Now he's your president. The system works!

His friends teased him about his "coronation."

But it was the largest Texas Exes Council meeting in some time, as several dozen family and friends filed into the Etter-Harbin Alumni Center to listen to John Adkins undertake his first duty as president. And he attacked the job with the gusto that anyone familiar with him knew he would, burnt-orange PowerPoint slide show and all.

"John doesn't do anything halfway," says Judge Frank Rynd of Houston, who was friends with Adkins during law school.

"You know the game Where's Waldo?" asks John's wife, Cynthia. "The kids say, 'Where's Dad? Where's Dad tonight?' If he's going to accept something, he's going to give it all he's got. It's just a busy time for everybody right now. John is in Austin three times a week." Besides raising their children, Cynthia, a UT College of Education alumna, works part-time designing capital campaigns for non-profits, through Sterling Associates.

When he's not darting around the UT campus from advisory board to advisory board, Adkins is partner in the Houston office of the Strasburger & Price law firm. He represents financial institutions in lending transactions, regulatory situations, and mergers and acquisitions.

Asked what makes Adkins successful, Cynthia says without hesitation, "People skills. He's a very caring, thoughtful person. He listens well. He always takes time to help people, to listen to what their needs may be." What stands out about Adkins to Rynd is "the fact that he's a very decent person, he cares about people, and he works hard."

This need to connect to people is what brought Adkins to the University in the first place. He had agonized for months, maybe years, over whether to attend Rice or UT, as both traditions ran strong in his family. But in the final analysis, it was the camaraderie between the people he knew had gone to Texas that won him over. That — *this* — is what he has wanted since before he first stepped foot on the Forty Acres as a student in the fall of 1970.

Of his UT obsession, Cynthia says, "He absolutely loves that school more than anything in the world." She attributes much of John's passion, as he does, to the teachers he had in Plan II. "Margaret Berry was really instrumental. She pushed him."

"I think he liked UT from the moment he stepped foot on the campus," says Rynd. "The real diversity of the student body — I think he thought UT was unique in that regard."

Rynd remembers one distinctive feature of Adkins' student life: "During college he switched from a Corvair to an old station wagon that had been a relative's," says Rynd, "which was unusual for a student. You could always tell when John was at

a party because you'd see that station wagon out front."

Adkins has lived his whole life in Houston, with the exception of his time as UT student. He lives in the house he grew up in, the same house his grandparents (both Texas Exes) built with spare material from a hardware store they owned.

His father worked for Exxon in a sort of early information technology capacity. John remembers his father showing him computers that were as big as a building.

Adkins says he knew he wanted to be a lawyer from a young age. He's not sure why but blames Perry Mason and family friends he looked up to. He loves the sense of problem-solving and the trust that his clients vest in him. Being a corporate lawyer has led him into other business opportunities, including banking and a stint with American General, a diversified insurance and financial services company. But he says he's glad to be back practicing law. Adkins has one older brother, who is also a lawyer in Houston.



Adkins as a sophomore in the 1971 Cactus

Rynd says one of Adkins' distinguishing characteristics is organization. "He was organized, even back then [as a student]. He would keep a little calendar of things he needed to do. He seemed much more focused than I was."

Adkins has already brought that penchant for organization to bear on his job as president. He has three areas he would like to promote this year, what he calls "the three ships": membership, scholarship, and sportsmanship. (And he's quick to add a fourth "ship" that could aid the first three if it came to pass: national championship.)

- **Larger membership.** This is something he sees happening primarily through individual contacts and personal invitations. Why don't we have more members? "It's largely a matter of competing priorities. We haven't hit their hot-button yet. I'd love to see more people networking," he says.

- **Scholarships:** He'd like to augment our scholarship program, already the largest of its kind in the country, with a more public solicitation of funds — in other words, a capital campaign.

- But what really gets his blood pressure up is the issue of poor *sportsmanship* by fans. "It's embarrassing to me," he says in his customarily even, soft-spoken baritone, but with his already ruddy complexion taking on an even darker red, "to sit in the stands with my family and hear that kind of thing [profanity] being said around us." How to improve it? "A lot of that is just talking about it — foul language, alcohol abuse. We need to be proactive and preventative."



One of his most formative experiences on campus was serving on the board of Texas Student Publications, where he learned the committee process. It must have agreed with him, because by his own admission, he essentially never stopped serving on committees since that time, including UT committees. "I don't mean to diminish the purely academic side of going to classes and being around professors, but that campus involvement was very, very valuable for me."

Adkins' involvement with the Texas Exes goes back to his student days. While an undergrad, Adkins' friend Edward Guleke had been on a mission to get Adkins into the Friar Society, trying six times. In 1976, Guleke died in a mountain climbing accident. By that time, Adkins was in law school and was head of the Friars. The club raised money to honor Guleke and decided to establish a scholarship at the Texas Exes. John insisted on being part of the process. He remembers coming to several meetings with Susan Kessler (now associate executive director of the Association), who said, "While you're here, we've established this Student Involvement Committee. We'd like you, as head of the Friars, to be a part of it."

After graduating from law school, Adkins went to work at a bank owned by Distinguished Alumnus Rex Baker Jr., who was the father of Adkins roommate and good friend Rex Baker III. The Bakers were deeply involved in the Texas Exes Houston Chapter and so, shortly, was Adkins, eventually serving as the Chapter's president. Additionally, he has been active as an alumnus with the Friar Society, Liberal Arts Foundation, and helped the Texas Exes chapter in Austin County, where he has a ranch.

At the top of Adkins' list of heroes is Almetris Duren, a house mother for black women and advisor to the Dean of Students at UT for 24 years. "She and I traveled the state recruiting stu-

dents in 1981-82. In her own quiet way, she helped revolutionize this place."

After he had served on Association committees for 23 years he came to his last meeting before rotating off the Texas Exes Council. He had said his goodbyes and figured he was done at least for a while, when then-president Jane Monday pulled him aside and said, "We're not through with you yet. We want you to be our representative on the Athletics Council." To which he responded, "What's that?"

"John's always been in the academic side, so when he was appointed to the Athletics Council, our kids just started laughing: 'What does Dad know about athletics?!' " remembers Cynthia. "But there's so much that goes into that program. It gave him that last piece of his UT education." As a student his favorite pastime — as well as main athletic experience — was riding his bike along Town Lake. His exercise now is a daily walk at 5 a.m.

He's been more involved with the Texas Exes than with the law school alumni because, he says, he's more interested in being around people like his clients than fellow lawyers. "I talk about the law all day. When I come here, I want to be around a more diverse group of people," he says, just like when he was a student.

John and Cynthia met in the first grade and grew up six blocks apart, but did not become romantically involved until their 20th high school reunion. That was 15 years ago, and now John is father of two, ages 11 and 14, and stepfather of two grown children, 25 and 27. He says that without the two older children helping Cynthia with the two younger children, his busy lifestyle, including his involvement with the Texas Exes, would be hard to sustain.

And if Adkins' past is any indication, it's about to get busier around here. —Avrel Seale