

GOT SOMETHING TO SAY?

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EDITORIAL

Think about family always, not just this weekend

Come Friday afternoon, Barfield Drawing Room will be teeming with parents, tickets will be sold out for Baylor football’s non-conference clash with Samford and families clad in green and gold will flood 5th Street. For many, the promise of Family Weekend brings eager anticipation.

Parents and siblings will come from all over to get a glimpse into life as a Baylor student. Many students, even the most stubborn, wait for the weekend to spend time with their loved ones. But for those of you who don’t have people visiting, know that Baylor Family Weekend isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Even the optimist can’t deny the slew of activities asking for an extra buck, or the sparse shelves in the bookstore following the yearly event.

In many ways, it’s a normal Baylor weekend — classes on Friday, a variety of weekend activities and a football game Saturday. Your test on Monday won’t budge, and your Sunday commitment is still on your schedule. For those whose families do attend, it can be challenging to balance ordinary commitments with spending time with them. Your parents will want a campus tour either way, and you might just not have time for it.

Whether you have family attending or not, consider that, like in many cases, the grass might not be greener on the other side. Students trying to juggle family time with their weekend studying will envy students with a weekend to themselves. Students studying in Moody over the weekend will look at the families strolling down Fountain Mall longingly.

It is helpful to consider the goal of Baylor’s Family Weekend, and that requires a jump back in time. The very first event was held in 1960. At this time, it was simply a one-day



James Ellis | Cartoonist

event for parents called Parents Day. After, it was converted to a weekend endeavor and appropriately called Parents Weekend. It wasn’t until 2013 that it was officially branded as Family Weekend to include siblings as well as parents. In 1962, the new event was gaining traction — and popularity. In the Sept. 30, 1962, edition of The Baylor Lariat, then-Baylor President Abner McCall shared a unique point of view on the reason for the event.

“About this time of year, students are getting homesick, so that’s why we

decided to ask you to visit us at this time — to cheer up the students and at the same time see our campus and what we’re doing here,” McCall said.

In 1962, the Baylor president believed the antidote to the fall homesickness strike was a familiar face — in this case, parents. Some would argue the original intention has been muddled by the opportunity to make a quick buck.

Regardless of what you believe, Family Weekend is an old, rich tradition that has brought a lot of

good to Baylor students. But we encourage you to remember that there is always time for your family. And the wonderful thing about familial love is that it isn’t bound by time or space. Despite the distance, your family is a phone call away. For some, Family Weekend is a reminder of relationships that are strained or destroyed. But family isn’t just those related by blood — family transcends DNA and distance. The essence of family is putting others above yourself and loving selflessly. If you

don’t have blood relatives to reach out to, remember those who have become your family and tell them how grateful you are.

So if you have family in town this weekend, cherish the time. Those of us who are upperclassmen can tell you it’s fleeting. If you don’t have family in town, use the events as reminders to reach out. And be grateful that while other students are being cooked alive at the 11 a.m. football game, you’ll be getting a head start on next week’s work.

Our parents were right, it really is that dang phone

STACIE BOYLS
Arts & Life Writer

On Aug. 1, 2003, MySpace debuted its revolutionary website, which combined discourse communities and a detailed, curated profile that was completely customizable. Every detail about yourself could be designed and showcased to anyone and everyone. Ultimately, his was the first form of social media to amass a cult following.

In the same year, 3G networks across households paved the way for cell phones to become perfect vehicles for the mobile internet — I am sure this was an extremely exciting development at the time. The early 2000s were filled with optimism about the growing field of technology and the increasing accessibility to the uncharted portions internet.

Society was enchanted by the novelty of chat rooms and amateur blogs, blocking our vision as to what effects access to everything could have. There was an honest

and earnest attempt to make this a genuine experience, not yet poisoned by consumerism and hustle culture.

As we reflect on the impact social media has had on our minds in 2025, it is much less positive. Social media has produced an anxiety-ridden, disconnected and apathetic generation. Our minds are filled with constant noise and comparison. Every major and minor tragedy is broadcast to us in grotesque detail.

Our attention span has become marketable and a source of profit. Without a moment to catch our breath, we are in a constant state of overstimulation. Nothing sums up this sentiment better than Bo Burnham’s hit song “Welcome to the Internet.” The lyrics and pacing of the song are meant to overwhelm your mind and invoke thought. The song uncovers the more sinister effects of internet use and our constant overexposure to world events.

We conveniently keep the devices responsible for this addiction right in our pockets, glued to our hands and ruining our posture. Our phones have made access to the internet a social necessity. The internet is ingrained into every detail of our day, from student research to casual posting.

Our entire society operates on the basis that you have a phone, or at

least some form of unbridled internet access. It is almost impossible to participate in the workforce and community without one. Phones weren’t always this addictive. For example, texting required intentional thought and attention and was only used for quick messages. It never replaced honest conversations like it has now. The same goes for social media; it was meant to be a supplement to connection, not an entire replacement.

In high school, my literature teacher said something in class that changed the way I perceived technology. He told our class that with every technological advancement society makes, we lose an element of our humanity. We trade in experience and connection for convenience and isolation. Advancements meant to make our lives easier have compromised a crucial aspect of the human experience.

He used cars and horses as an example. When society transitioned to cars, we lost our connection to horses and thus, another way for us to be good stewards of the Earth. We no longer relied on horses for transportation, so we neglected their care. It was no longer necessary for us to nurture a relationship with nature and these animals. This is

not to say that cars aren’t useful; they are extremely helpful and have served a great purpose since their inception. However, as a society, we have not made an effort to replace our connection to nature through other external means.

We have only continued to replace connections with convenience.

Our phones and social media are no different. No one could have predicted the impact that having these devices would have on us. I’m sure no one thought there would be any negative side effects to switching from horses to cars. But alas, here we are, more depressed and isolated than ever, an ironic predicament. We have more access to anything we want and can connect with anyone, but instead of encouraging community, our phones have eroded it.

Who needs real conversation when a simple social media post will do the trick? Why put effort into developing relationships when we can hook up through a dating app? These are all equal replacements, right? Wrong. Studies have proven that phone and social media usage are a primary source of our decreased well-being. Gen Z, the first major generation to experience this epidemic, has been identified as the loneliest generation to date, and it is no surprise why.

We can’t all throw our phones away or delete our social media. Our best combative tool to address this issue is self-awareness. Be cognizant of your social media and phone usage. Choose the less convenient option when possible. Hide your phone in another room when studying. Discipline yourself against using it when surrounded by friends and loved ones.

For the past year, I have been trying to limit my phone and social media use, and I can tell the difference it’s made. I am more present and generally less stressed. I sleep better and am more critical of the media I do consume. I thought I was going to miss all the references and pop culture moments, but I found out about whatever was necessary for me to know, regardless. Social media is not relaxing, so let’s stop treating it as if it were. I urge you to stop and smell the roses. Don’t be afraid of boredom, embrace it. Find new hobbies and reconnect to the world around you. Prioritize culture, community and true fulfillment rather than social media and superficial things.

Hang up, and hang out.
Stacie Boyls is a senior violin performance major from Tulsa, Okla. To keep up with her work follow her @Stacieboyls on Instagram.

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Competition brings AI startup craze to Waco



COLLABORATION Three business students utilizing the workstations in the Foster Business School computer lab, located on the second floor of the Business School.

JOSH SIATKOWSKI
Staff Writer

There are 498 private AI companies valued at over \$1 billion. A new initiative in the Hankamer School of Business has many hoping number 499 comes from Baylor.

“Think you’ve got the next big idea in AI?” asks the flyer for Baylor’s inaugural AI Venture Challenge, a Shark Tank-style startup competition in which Baylor students can win up to \$3,000 in funding for their AI business plans.

The challenge came from the desk of Business School Dean Dr. David Szymanski, who, in his first year at Baylor, has pushed for the adoption of AI across all business disciplines. Working alongside the entrepreneurship department, Szymanski wanted to lead something that combines a top-10 program with the popular technology.

“We have a top entrepreneurship and innovation program,” Szymanski said. “And so what you really want to do is ask the question, ‘What would a leader in this field do?’ ... It’s about being out in front, seeing things differently and seeing opportunities in the marketplace that other people don’t.”

panel of two entrepreneurship professors and one industry professional. About 25 teams have already expressed interest, but Grumbles said he’d like to see 75 or 100 teams apply and turn the challenge into a recurring event.

Students outside the business school are welcome — even encouraged — as Grumbles will meet with computer science students in their classes throughout the week. There’s also no limit on how developed one’s business plan can be. The submission can be a day-old idea or a more developed, already existing business.

“The term startup is fairly broad,” Grumbles said. “Companies that have been in business for two years are still considered new ventures. They can be brand new startup ideas that are still in the vetting stage, or ones that already have LLCs formed.”

Though a unique-to-Baylor challenge, the push to adopt AI in entrepreneurship is well underway. There are already over 10,000 AI startups existing worldwide, and the funding keeps coming. 1,300 of these have already crossed the \$100 million valuation threshold, and new self-made billionaires are popping up like never before.

“It’s about being out in front, seeing things differently and seeking opportunities in the marketplace that other people don’t.”

DR. DAVID SZYMANSKI
BUSINESS SCHOOL DEAN

For Szymanski, the answer is AI. From an institutional perspective, staying ahead of the workplace skills of the future is essential, Szymanski said. And on the student side, it’s a way to build AI proficiency and a chance to get a business off the ground.

Students with an idea must submit their business plans through a survey by Sept. 30. According to Dr. Lee Grumbles, assistant clinical professor in the entrepreneurship and corporate innovation department, the only requirements are that each team consists of one to three students, that all students are undergraduates and that the business is AI-based.

Following the initial questionnaire, the top 10 teams will advance to the final round on Oct. 21, which will involve a presentation before a

The funding for Baylor’s challenge might not make any billionaires, but winners will split a prize of \$5,000, which Grumbles said is for funding each team’s venture. First prize will be awarded \$3,000, while second and third will win \$1,500 and \$500, respectively; however, the flyer states that winnings can be paid in the form of a scholarship.

As AI continues to fast-track to the future, Szymanski hopes competitions and other AI initiatives become not just a new experience for Baylor students, but the norm.

“In another three to six months, we’re probably not going to have these separate conversations about AI,” Szymanski said. “It’s going to be a part of what we are and part of what we do.”

APPLY
HERE

AI takes passenger seat

Career Center introduces CoPilot

ARDEN BERRY
Staff Writer

To increase efficiency and help students succeed, the Career Center has created artificial intelligence programs through Microsoft Copilot.

Career Center Director Amy Rylander said the program began over the summer with teams creating user guides that described how students could ethically use AI while applying for jobs.

“We started learning about prompting AI to do things, and as we began writing the guides and began putting updates in them and editing them to be in a certain way, our data person took our guides and fed them into Copilot, and we created agents,” Rylander said. “So instead of just a user’s guide, we now have agents to help students right now with three areas.”

Rylander said these three areas were resume-building, interviewing and career discovery. She also said the Career Center sent out an email last week linking the Copilot Agents for these three areas.

“Agents use AI to perform tasks by reasoning, planning and learning — using provided information to execute actions and achieve predetermined goals for the user,” the email read.

To use these Copilot Agents, Rylander said students should log in to Microsoft Office with their Baylor email, then use the provided Copilot Agent links and follow the provided prompts. For example, the Career Discovery Agent would provide a prompt to give the agent, then would ask a set of questions and suggest potential career paths.

“It’ll help you take the skills that you’re learning in your major and the skills that you’ve learned along the way and tell you some things that might work for you, and then that’ll help with the search on what you might want to look for,” Rylander said.

Career Center Assistant Vice Provost Michael Estep said creating AI systems was a “proactive decision.”

“We’re always saying, ‘What are the things that students are looking for and need, and what can our staff do to make that happen?’” Estep said. “Do we go AI or not? We definitely needed to, just so we were ahead of the game.”

Estep said the AI systems would not replace the Career Center but would increase its efficiency, allowing the Career Center more time to help students in a more specialized way.

“Students want to come in, and they don’t want to meet with us 27 times,” Estep said. “We can actually even dive deeper into the relationships because, hopefully, we can help more students, because our goal is to help 100% of students, so I think that’s one of the



LOOKING FOR WORK Frisco freshman Rushil Nakka logs on to a Career Center computer to job hunt at the Sid Richardson building on Wednesday afternoon.

biggest pieces.”

However, Rylander said students should remember to use AI only as a tool, not as a replacement for their own experience.

“Use it ethically. AI does not take the place of your voice,” Rylander said. “It might spit out a bullet that says something, and I’ll say, ‘What did you mean by that?’ and get the whole story, because we want to make sure you don’t lose your voice and that you are not presenting yourself as something that you’re not.”

For the future, Rylander said the Career Center is currently working on Graduate School Planning and Career Communications Copilots. Estep also said Baylor has a contract with LinkedIn that will help students learn to use AI for their careers.

“AI has impacted the job market so significantly that students have to have that. It’s a mandatory skill now,” Estep said. “We’re going to start messaging out to students different certifications they can take within LinkedIn, that they can complete videos and short quizzes, and then actually be able to get certifications in different AI and large language model aspects and then put that on their resume.”

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Students unite to pray for Charlie Kirk

MACKENZIE GRIZZARD
Assistant News Editor
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Editor-in-Chief

In preparation to memorialize the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, hundreds of miniature American Flags surrounded more than 150 Baylor students gathered on Fountain Mall Wednesday night. With prayer and worship, students reflected on the assassination of Charlie Kirk, a conservative activist, who was killed earlier in the day at a Utah Valley University event.

Castle Rock, Colo., sophomore Ellie Bradford and Eagle, Colo., sophomore Grace Armstrong organized the gathering, which lasted for one hour, posting information on as many social media platforms as they could.

"Jesus called on me," Bradford said. "And I was like, [if] I can do something to influence someone, even if it's one person, something to call Jesus to live in love instead of hate and dividing people, then I want to do it."

Bradford and Armstrong stood atop the Rosenbalm Fountain, hands joined in prayer as the students in front of them huddled in their own prayer groups.

"[If] we can come together and not be divided by political party, but come together and be one nation under God – that's what we're called to be," Armstrong said.

Worship continued to ring out under the night sky, uniting the Baylor community amid the tragedy. For Tacoma, Wash., freshman Johnny Dickie, being surrounded by this community was "truly miraculous."

"Obviously, the events from today are horrific," Dickie said. "Prayers go out to him, but just seeing the Holy Spirit, the unity, the brotherhood, the sisterhood and all brothers and sisters of Christ coming together, being of different denominations or different political views ... is truly wonderful."

West Harrison, N.Y., junior and Turning Point USA at Baylor President and Treasurer Peter Fernandez attended Kirk's Student Action Summit in Tampa Bay, Fla., in July. While there, Fernandez won the opportunity to have breakfast with Kirk.

"One of the things that he said — sure, he can be controversial sometimes — but he said we need to keep having those conversations," Fernandez said. "We need to keep setting up those tables and having people with differing opinions come up and converse with them. It's when we stop having those conversations that we start thinking evil things and ignorant things about the other side."

For Fernandez, the message echoed on Wednesday afternoon displayed the damage of fighting over policy instead of having conversations surrounding it.

"If we continue to do that over and over again, we're going to end up in a situation like we have today, where somebody thinks that the most evil person in the world is a guy just using his First Amendment right," Fernandez said. "When we pose questions ... it's not about yes or no. It's about finding that common ground with that person, and if we don't have these conversations, we don't realize that we share so much more with these people than we don't."

Kirk stopped in Waco in 2021 as part of Turning Point USA's "Exposing Critical Racism Tour." Following the event, Kirk told Lariat TV News that he almost attended Baylor and fulfilled his goal of having "good discussion and dialogue" during his visit.

"So many people are here are not here because of a political movement, they're here because of Jesus," Fernandez said. "This is a God driven movement that's going on in this crowd right here. This is not because a political figure died. It's because a man of God died, and people of God came together to mourn."

Fernandez said he was unsure if Turning Point would return to tabling on Fountain Mall this week, but plans to focus on the rest of the events this semester from a religious perspective.

"I really do think it's ironic to even use the term 'turning point,' but I feel like it is a turning point in our country's history, not just from a political standpoint, but I feel like there's going to be a lot of people who come to Jesus because of this," Fernandez said.



Brady Harris | Photographer

WORSHIP A student musician passionately singing during the prayer gathering for Charlie Kirk Wednesday night at Fountain Mall.



Caleb Garcia | Photographer

TOGETHER Students stand together and pray at the Charlie Kirk Prayer Gathering on Wednesday night at Fountain Mall.



Brady Harris | Photographer

SOLIDARITY A group of students passionately worshipping during the prayer gathering for Charlie Kirk Wednesday night at Fountain Mall.



Caleb Garcia | Photographer

REMEMBRANCE Volunteers place American flags on Rosenbalm Fountain for the Charlie Kirk Prayer Gathering Wednesday night.



Caleb Garcia | Photographer

LEADERSHIP TPUSA Baylor Chapter President Peter Fernandez speaks on the death of Charlie Kirk, and the importance of prayer and unity.



Brady Harris | Photographer

UNITY Dallas Senior Nicky Rudd passionately speaking to the crowd of all those who attended during the prayer gathering for Charlie Kirk Wednesday night at Fountain Mall.



Caleb Garcia | Photographer

PATRIOTISM American flags cover the ground at Rosenbalm Fountain, a reminder of unity in the face of tragedy.

Bylines in bloodlines

The Baylor Lariat connects families across generations

HANNAH WEBB
Focus Editor

For 125 years, The Baylor Lariat has been more than just a campus newspaper. It has been a proving ground for young journalists, a late-night newsroom buzzing with deadlines and — uniquely for some — a family tradition passed from parent to child.

This Family Weekend, three Baylor families reflected on how The Lariat had shaped not only their college years, but also the careers and callings that followed for their children.

When Yale Youngblood arrived at Baylor in 1974, he quickly found his way into the newsroom. By spring of his freshman year, he was sports editor, later joining the three-person editorial board that guided the paper.

“The four best years of my life were the years I spent at Baylor,” he said. “The Lariat played a huge role because of the friendships, the knowledge I gained from wise mentors and the preparation it gave me for a career in journalism.”

Daniel Youngblood, his son, carried on the tradition decades later, working first as a sports reporter, then as sports editor. Like his father, he found that newsroom friendships became lifelong ones.

“Some of my best memories are just being outside Castellaw, throwing the football with friends after deadline,” Daniel said.

He still keeps up with many

of his fellow staffers. One of his best friends was his best man, and Daniel said they still talk about every Saturday Baylor game.

Journalism runs even deeper in the family for the Youngblood’s.

“My granddad was a sports writer and columnist too,” Daniel noted. “So I’m a third-generation journalist.”

For Yale, seeing his son take on the same newsroom he once called home was deeply meaningful.

“Luckily, technology had advanced to the point where I could see his work more often,” he said. “It was just a joy to keep the chain going and watch him grow and develop not only as a journalist, but as a young man. Baylor had a big influence on that.”

Yale admitted that while he had a great career, he is the “third-best writer” among the Youngblood bloodline. Today, Daniel runs a sports website in Abilene, where his father now freelances for him.

“We’ve come full circle,” Yale said. “I work for Daniel now — he’s my boss.”

Robert Darden’s name is well known on campus — both as a longtime faculty member and as a former Lariat staffer himself. As a student, he wrote music and movie reviews alongside editorial cartoons and illustrations, and served as editor-in-chief for Roundup yearbook. For his son Van Darden, following in those footsteps felt almost predetermined.

“It was maybe inevitable that I pursued this profession, given who my father is,” Van said. “He is my greatest source for inspiration, personally and professionally.”

As a staff writer, Van tackled challenging stories, from campus crime to controversial administrative plans. His reporting occasionally put him at odds with Baylor officials, but he never backed down.

“That taught me persistence and not to let someone in power push me back from the truth,” he said.

One investigation he co-reported revealed a secretive university plan that was being denied publicly. Their reporting forced the administration to abandon it.

“Those articles ended up picked up citywide, statewide and even nationally,” Van said. “It didn’t make me a lot of friends, but it was the right thing to do.”

Robert remembers the fallout with pride.

“I got some of the angriest letters from people furious with Van,” he said. “And I was so proud. That was journalism with a capital J. He chose the harder road because it was the truthful road.”

For Bailey Dixon, The Lariat was part of her Baylor story before she even enrolled. When she visited campus for Baylor Premiere in high school, her father, Matthew Brammer, insisted their first stop be the newsroom.

“We picked up some papers and took those back to the



Photo courtesy of Bailey Dixon

CONTINUING THE FAMILY LEGACY Bailey and Matthew Brammer pose outside McLane Stadium before a game during Baylor Premiere.

hotel room,” Dixon said. “That was my first Baylor experience. After that weekend, I said, ‘I want to go to Baylor, and I want to work on The Lariat.’”

Dixon joined the paper during her freshman year in 2016 and never looked back. She rose from a staff writer to page one editor, then served as editor-in-chief from 2017–2018 and spent her last year as Lariat TV News’ executive producer.

“I spent more time in the newsroom than in my dorm,” she said. “I basically lived there, but I loved it and wouldn’t have changed a thing.”

Brammer, who was a Lariat reporter himself in the late 1980s, said the newsroom shaped both their careers, and that he could see his daughter’s calling from an early age.

“She was writing newspapers in fifth grade,” he said. “She’s been writing for a long time. Writing is in her soul; it’s part of who she is.”

Dixon credits her parents for introducing her to the world of journalism.

“Both of my parents really instilled that love for storytelling,” Dixon said. “The things I learned and honed at The Lariat are still things that I take into what I do every day.”

Though their stories span decades, all three families point back to the same foundation: the newsroom as a crucible for growth, resilience and lifelong storytelling. The bylines were in the headline for these writers, and as The Lariat celebrates 125 years, the Youngbloods, Dardens and Brammers embody

the way journalism ties generations together.

“It was just a joy to keep the chain going,” Yale said of watching his son step into the same newsroom he once called home.

Robert echoed that sentiment after his son’s toughest assignments: “I couldn’t be prouder that he went this route — not because it was easy, but because he had stories to tell that were important.”

And Brammer put it simply: “Writing is in her blood. She was born for this.”

And for Van, the mission hasn’t changed.

“Journalism remains a noble pursuit,” he said. “The pursuit of truth is as important today as it was 125 years ago.”

International students reimagine Family Weekend

MADISON HUNT
Staff Writer

For some, Family Weekend is a beloved reunion, but for international students, it’s often an event stitched together by a phone or video call. The event becomes less about who can attend and more about how to feel when home is across the world.

Family Weekend will feature activities for all, including food trucks and vendors for Taste of Waco, a Lauren Daigle concert and a football game to kick off Saturday. But for some, other activities are on the agenda.

A graduate student from China, Xuechen Peng said she’s playing piano in the School of Music and applying for her doctorate degree this semester. Between her practice schedule, drafting emails or teaching students, she’ll spend her free time getting all the rest she can get.

“We as students in the School of Music live a very different life from most people on campus,” Peng said. “International students in the School of Music know how busy we get — auditions, booked jobs and everything in between.”

Peng said it’s difficult to balance music and studying. For many students juggling demanding majors and other commitments, they don’t have time to participate in traditions like Family Weekend.



Lariat photo

GLOBAL FAMILY The Center of Global Engagement and international student and scholar services will host an International Tailgate before the Samford game.



Photo courtesy of Baylor University

FIGHTING TRAFFIC Families plan around the ongoing construction efforts in Waco and surrounding areas for the weekend events.

Alumni to face I-35 construction for Family Weekend

ARDEN BERRY
Staff Writer

This year, even the construction on I-35 isn’t enough to stop alumni parents from traveling to see both their students and their alma mater for Family Weekend starting this Saturday.

Baylor’s 2025 Family Weekend will be headlined by a Lauren Daigle concert, Taste of Waco, After Dark and the football’s final non-conference game against Samford.

Baylor alumna Elisha Dillon said she and her husband have traveled to Waco from Plano for several Family Weekends to see their daughters. This year, they plan to visit their youngest daughter, Plano senior Lauren Dillon.

“We always enjoy seeing our daughter after she’s been back at school for a few weeks,” Elisha Dillon said. “We like visiting with her and her friends.”

Though this semester’s construction poses a unique challenge when traveling and navigating Waco, Dillon has a plan.

“We’ll be coming in from Plano and we’re planning on coming in pretty early in the day on Friday to hopefully miss a lot of traffic,” Dillon said. “We will do our best to take backstreets as we travel off-campus this weekend, and plan to avoid [I-35] as much as possible.”

Baylor alumni Jeff and Kirsten Fair, who are planning to visit their daughter, Allen senior Abby Fair, said they have been visiting

throughout their daughter’s time at Baylor as well.

“We’re always amazed at the improvements,” Kirsten Fair said. “Every single time we come back, something’s better or bigger or newer. And not just with the campus, but even the city.”

Kirsten said her most memorable Family Weekend event was the tailgate before the football game during her daughter’s freshman year.

“Fall of 2022, it was the first time I could wear my shirt that says, ‘Baylor mom,’ and I was so excited about that,” Kirsten Fair said. “I mean, we have a million Baylor things and we’re proud Baylor graduates, but that tailgate was especially fun because my parents came and my younger sister and her whole family and then lots and lots of friends.”

Jeff Fair also said they would adjust their travel plans for construction, but that he was not concerned about driving around Waco.

“I mean, we’ve been driving to Waco for the weekends for forever — over 20 years,” he said. “I would say this year in particular, I mean, we’ll leave probably half an hour earlier than we normally would have. But we kind of know the ways around.”

Despite the extensive construction, these alumni families, with their knowledge of the area and connection to Baylor, are willing to make the trip.

“Coming back to campus always makes me happy,” Dillon said. “Baylor is such a special place to me and our family.”



Courtesy of Parallel Collective

BREAKING GROUND A mock-up submitted by Parallel to the City of Waco shows the exterior of the proposed complex, which will sit on 5th Street between Bagby and James Avenues.

SEVENTH & JAMES from A1

value or if any other parties made offers for the land and only said “we listed the property on the open market and had several interested parties.”

Regardless of its sale price, the deal is a monumental shift to Waco’s student housing market, as it will add another Texas-sized living space among the likes of Park Place, University Point and The View to the Baylor bubble. But it’s also a substantial change for the church and its congregation of roughly 180, made up mostly of professors and families.

Conoway said initial conversations about the physical future of the 127-year-old church began four years ago.

“We knew there would be some very expensive items in our future and wanted to plan for them before they became a crisis,” Conoway said.

After hiring an architecture firm to evaluate the use of the current facilities, the report came back with a suggestion to sell two acres of land and tear down the current sanctuary, which was built in the 1950s.

Although the new space will better fit the current congregation, which is much smaller than in years before, parting with a building that had been central to the lives of so many members was difficult, Conoway said.

Tulia fourth-year Truett Seminary student Bryce Shelton, who attends Seventh and James and has worked as a custodian at the church, witnessed those challenges firsthand.

“One of the major concerns was the sense of nostalgia,” Shelton said. “A lot of our members have been going there since the 1950s. Some of them were Baylor students who went to Seventh and

James and then settled in Waco and have been going for the past 50-60 years. Most of their lives have been centered in that sanctuary.”

These concerns were met face-to-face in numerous town halls held by the church.

“After those discussions, it really proved that the whole congregation was ready for [the sale],” Shelton said.

Even though Conoway and the congregation feel they made the right choice, the development won’t be without its own challenges. Upon the demolition of the current sanctuary next year, the church will be without a sanctuary for a few years, meeting on Sundays in an auxiliary building.

But the sale also presents new opportunities, such as 600 “new neighbors” that Conoway said he was excited to meet and welcome to the church.

WEEKEND PREVIEW from A1

Saturday football game against Samford.

“Students bring their families to each event, and they meet one another for the first time, bonding over their mutual love for our university,” Cantu said. “The conversations and memories made during Family Weekend make all the planning and execution of the event worth it.”

With a tradition as old as Family Weekend, Cantu said knowing its place in Baylor’s history greatly influenced her planning for the event. For years, Family Weekend has brought many individuals together into one big Baylor family, and Cantu said she wanted to replicate that in this year’s event.

“The best part of being involved in this event is that each year we replicate the previous one and try to raise the bar every time,” Cantu said. “The core of the weekend remains the same each year, and that’s what truly makes Family Weekend special.”

FAMILY WEEKEND SCHEDULE

Meet the Faculty & Welcome Hour
2-4 p.m. Friday
Hurd Welcome Center

Lauren Daigle in Concert
7:30 p.m. Friday
Foster Pavilion

Taste of Waco
5-8 p.m. Friday
Fountain Mall

After Dark
6:30 p.m. & 9:30 p.m. Friday
Waco Hall

Family Weekend Tailgate
8-10:30 a.m. Saturday
Touchdown Alley

Baylor football vs. Samford
11 a.m. Saturday
McLane Stadium

65 YEARS OF FAMILY from A1

parents to “meet the school” for themselves.

“We want parents to see Baylor as it is every day in one weekend,” Lee said. “Parents come here to pick up their sons and daughters at the end of the semester, but when they come up for the weekends, they feel left out.”

Throughout the years, Rivera said the theme of the weekend has been connection. Early renditions of Parents Day connected parents with Baylor faculty and staff. As Parents Weekend, it became a method of connecting parents to Baylor culture and activities. Now, Family Weekend is one of the many Baylor events that foster connection and unity.

“Parents Weekend is as much about bringing people together as it is about anything else,” Rivera said. “It’s just another avenue that we can do that.”

Alongside many Bears, Rivera said the Baylor family is about more than just one weekend during the year. There are constant opportunities to foster connection with others, not just one’s nuclear family, she said.

“The reason why, within Baylor, the president wants us to focus more on the Baylor family is when you have a close-knit group of people, you have connection and belonging,” Rivera said. “And in order to cultivate that sense of belonging, you have to have people constantly, intentionally bringing you back to the family.”

The theme of connection and community translates throughout the campus, according to San Antonio freshman Hailey Davis. She said the reunion with her family is important to her, but it isn’t the essence of the event.

“It really brings them into the community and expands our community,” Davis said.

After a visit to Baylor’s 1973 fall Parents Weekend, Wayman Norman, a Baylor parent, sent a letter to McCall. After relaying some of his favorite events — After Dark, the Symphony Orchestra performance and the football game, he closed the letter.

“I thank God constantly for Baylor and what it has meant in my life and my family’s,” Norman said in the letter.

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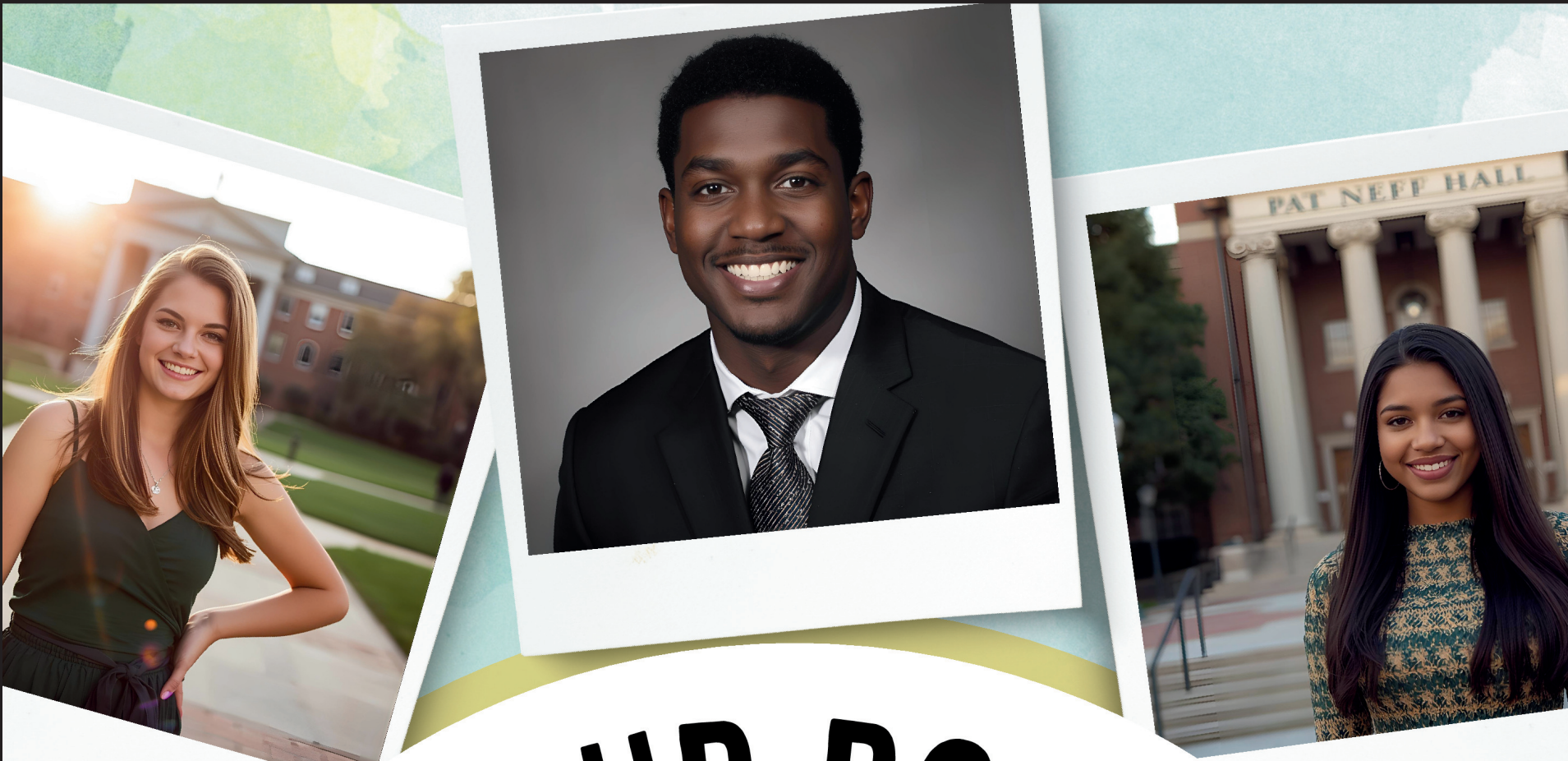
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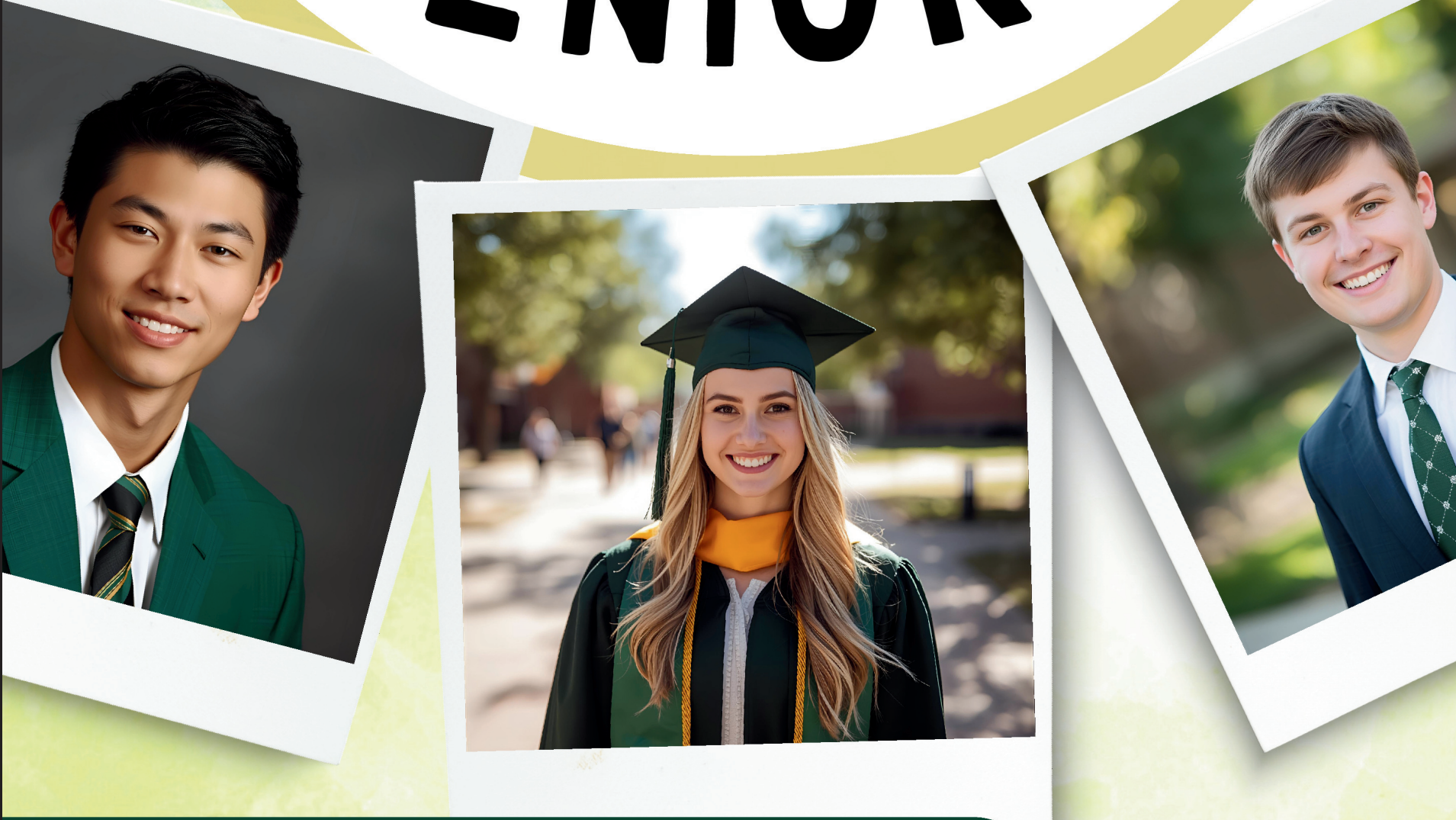




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FRESHMAN PHENOM

Libero Morgan Madison has starred for the Bears, racking up a team-high 92 digs (3.83 per set).
pg. B2



Baylor football kicks off its Family Weekend game vs. Samford at 11 a.m. Saturday at McLane Stadium

For all Baylor Athletics coverage, visit baylorlariat.com/sports

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Robertson ascends Heisman watch lists after prolific start

JACKSON POSEY
Sports Editor

One year ago, Sawyer Robertson was riding the pine. The Mississippi State transfer sat for two seasons in Starkville before transferring to Baylor, where he lost position battles to Blake Shapen and Dequan Finn. He stuck around.

With Finn injured heading into Week 3 of the 2024 season, Robertson stepped into the starting role and flourished, finishing fifth nationally in quarterback rating and leading the Bears to six straight wins to close the regular season.

One year later, all thoughts of the bench are in the rearview mirror.

Robertson won AP Player of the Week honors for his performance against No. 17 SMU (1-1), and now heads into Week 3 as a legitimate Heisman Trophy contender.

"Sawyer's been ripping it," redshirt junior offensive lineman Kaden Sieracki said. "He's been dicing up the defenses."

Robertson completed 34-of-50 passes for 440 yards and four touchdowns Saturday, leading the Bears (1-1) to a 48-45 double-overtime victory over the Mustangs. Stretching back to last season, he's racked up over 400 yards passing in each of his past three games: LSU, Auburn and SMU. All told, he completed 61.1% of his passes for 1,304 yards, nine touchdowns and one interception in that span. National pundits are taking notice.

"The guy's got all the skillset that you want," CBS Sports analyst Danny Kanell said. "He's got a cannon for an arm. ... He looked like the best quarterback in the country. In the end, somebody else may win the Heisman, somebody else may have a team that's better, but for me, he's the best quarterback in college football."

Despite only playing two games — some teams have played three — Robertson leads all Power-conference quarterbacks in passing yards (859) and ranks second in touchdown passes without an interception (seven). He's outpacing the Big 12's second-place passing yards-per-game leader, Arizona's Noah Fifita, by 162.5 yards. In a conference of gunslingers, he's quickest on the draw.

"You can't take Sawyer for granted," head coach Dave Aranda said after Saturday's victory. "[For] us, for Baylor, to have Sawyer Robertson, you can't take it for granted."

SMU halfback TJ Harden's third rushing touchdown put the Mustangs up 38-24 with 8:38 to play. The rest of the way, Robertson went 6-for-9 for 112 yards and two touchdowns to force overtime — and the rest, as they say, is history.

"It was just a one-play-at-a-time mentality," Robertson said. "In my brain, I was thinking that we've got to make something shake and pretty fast. Thankfully, we did, and then we had to get the ball back and go do it again. Pretty crazy."

The Bears' first score down

the stretch came on a 48-yard heave to redshirt senior Josh Cameron, who wrestled through two tacklers into the end zone to cut the lead to seven. With 34 seconds to play, sitting just outside the red zone, Robertson found senior wideout Kobe Prentice — who'd split the defense up the seam — for a game-tying 21-yard touchdown.

"The game has slowed down so much for me," Robertson said. "I'm so in the mindset of doing everything I can to win the game. Leave it all out there. I don't know how many more times I'll be able to play — we had some guys go down with injuries today, and it could've easily been me. So I'm playing every snap like it's [my] last and those things take care of themselves."

Cameron's game-high 151 yards receiving paints an incomplete picture of Baylor's passing game. Eight players have caught a pass, and five have crossed the century mark — including Cameron and sixth-year Ashtyn Hawkins crossing the 200-yard mark.

"They're balling out," Sieracki said. "Sawyer has been throwing for 400 yards or whatever, and so I think watching those guys, the athletes out there make plays, and watching Ashtyn jump like 50 inches, it's pretty sweet to watch. It's fun watching those guys be athletes."

Robertson and the Bears will play a tune-up game against FCS Samford (0-2) Saturday before heading into Big 12 play. The nation's most chaotic conference has already



Mary Thurmond | Photo Editor
GOING FOR IT ALL Through two games, redshirt senior quarterback Sawyer Robertson has completed 62.2% of his passes for 859 passing yards, seven touchdowns and no interceptions.

begun to swing topsy-turvy, as preseason darlings (and soon-to-be Baylor opponents) Arizona State and Kansas State have struggled against lower-level competition.

Led by the nation's No. 1-ranked passing attack, Baylor will host the Sun Devils (1-1) next week before heading north to face the hapless Oklahoma State Cowboys (1-1). In the meantime, the Bears will look to keep offensive coordinator Jake Spavital's high-flying offense limber against the Bulldogs.

"It's really cool to see how explosive they are and just how well they work together, like seeing Sawyer and Spav and the relationship they have," redshirt junior safety Michael Allen said. "It's been a blast."

Undefeated Baylor soccer aims for Big 12 title

MARISSA ESSENBURG
Sports Writer

For the first time in years, Baylor soccer (4-0-2) has the experience, depth and style of play to make a legitimate run at a Big 12 championship.

Last season, the Bears ended 10th in the Big 12, finishing 8-8-5 overall and 2-5-4 in conference play. It was a season defined by inches, where one goal here or one finish there could have flipped Baylor's fate. That narrow margin left the Bears frustrated but motivated, knowing just a few different results could have changed everything.

"Last season, our RPI ended at 70," senior forward Tyler Isgrig said. "There are 64 teams that make the tournament, so we just missed it — we were right there. We tied a lot of games against good schools. Those games we either lost 1-0 or tied taught us that if we can find a way to win in those close games, that's what extends our season."

That realization has raised the bar for 2025, shifting the conversation from simply competing in games to chasing championships.

Baylor's attack isn't just about scoring more goals — it's about raising the program's ceiling. Senior forward Tyler Isgrig said the expectations this season are higher than ever.

"NCAA tournament is a given," Isgrig said. "We have to be there. We must."



Brady Harris | Photographer
ALL I DO IS WIN Baylor soccer is 4-0-2 with wins over Texas and No. 17 Mississippi State. With Big 12 play kicking off next week, the Bears' sights are set on the conference title race.

"But also, we are very, very capable of doing that," Isgrig continued. "This year's Big 12 tournament doesn't have as many teams, and the championship will be hosted at Betty Lou [Mays Field], so that's definitely another motivator. We are hoping to aim for the automatic bid, but with the pieces we have together this year,

I believe we are in a place where we can do that."

That confidence is rooted in head coach Michelle Lenard's attacking philosophy. She consistently stresses that Baylor's identity won't come from simply grinding out defensive results, but from pushing forward.

"We don't want to get scored

on, but we want to score goals — that's what soccer is about, that's what makes it beautiful and fun," Lenard said.

As she reflects on her four years at Baylor, Lenard said she's seen the culture of the program mature alongside a shift in playing style.

"Shifting the style of play meant

we had to prove we could play that way and attract the type of players that suited it," Lenard said. "Now we're seeing that after a couple of years, and when you add in these great kids who are hard workers and great human beings, it shows."

"Some of them want to be pros and play at the next level, so they're highly motivated to keep developing during their time at Baylor. You use the word 'mature,' and that's exactly what it is."

Isgrig leads the charge up top, but she's far from alone. With a steady midfield behind her and a front line that blends speed with skill — a pair of transfer juniors, Purdue's Lauren Omholt and Houston's Aryanna Jimison, have added plenty to the attack — Baylor has the tools to turn tight matches into statement wins.

If the Bears can finish the opportunities that slipped away last year, they have the firepower to jump from the middle of the pack to become Big 12 title contenders.

Championships are built on experience and depth, and Baylor's defense — seasoned and battle-tested — has the tools to carry them to the finish line.

Baylor returns its entire back line for the third straight season, stabilized by senior goalkeeper Azul Alvarez, and it shows. The Bears have conceded just one goal across their last five matches.

‘Phenomenal’ freshman Madison breaks out



Photo courtesy of Baylor Athletics

DIGGING DEEP Freshman libero Morgan Madison finished the Bears’ season-opening tournament in Baton Rouge, La., with 50 digs to three errors.

JEFFREY COHEN
Sports Writer

Following the departure of All-Big 12 libero Lauren Briseño, who recorded over 1,200 career digs in Waco, Baylor volleyball was looking for someone to take the reins. Enter true freshman Morgan Madison.

“Morgan did a phenomenal job — absolutely phenomenal,” McGyure said. “Normally, you’re worried about the freshmen and what [they’re] going to look like opening weekend.”

Madison finished the Bears’ first tournament in Baton Rouge, La., with 50 digs to three errors. She led Baylor in digs in all three games and was the match leader against No. 10 SMU and LSU.

Her performance won her Big 12 Rookie of the Week honors, drawing praise in her first action as a Bear.

“It’s just kind of insane, because the Big 12 is such a good conference,” Madison said. “I know so many other freshmen in the conference that I’m also competing with, but it was amazing to see that.”

Madison’s competitiveness was a key factor in transitioning to high-major competition.

“She’s competitive ... that’s why she did well,” McGyure said. “Her desire to win supersedes anxiety.”

That drive allowed her to focus on the game and get the job done, rather than getting distracted by the new collegiate environment.

“She’s really focused,” McGyure said. “She’s more upset if she can’t get the ball or something there, and I think it drowns everything else out.”

McGuyre expected some growing pains in the first weekend, as freshmen tend to make some mistakes as

they learn what it’s like to play college volleyball. Madison exceeded expectations.

“We’ve had great liberos come through Baylor — Shanel [Bramschreiber], Big 12 Libero of the Year, Briseño, All-Conference,” McGyure said. “Even for them, freshman year, it took a little bit of time to get going in.”

The same is true for every position. Former Baylor middle blocker Shelly Fanning had a difficult start to her college career. She went on to be All-Big 12 four times and a 2019 All-American.

In Madison’s case, she found her rhythm right away.

“I think of Shelly Fanning ... she hit negative at Colorado State opening weekend,” McGyure said. “I was prepared for the right conversations that maybe we needed, and Morgan specifically didn’t need to have that.”

Madison credits junior

libero Tehani Ulufatu as a part of her early success. Madison said their connection has made the game feel simpler.

“When we were together, it just felt clear, a good duo back there,” Madison said.

Ulufatu has played clean volleyball, recording 45 digs to one reception error. Her veteran presence and play have complemented the Bears well in the early season.

Madison plays off of her teammates and the connection she has with them, but says she tries to give back to the team through her energy and performance.

“My calm comes through energy, so when I’m really high, that’s when I’m playing my best,” Madison said. “Staying calm is like cheering everyone else on.”

The Bears will hit the road to play No. 11 Florida at noon Sunday. The game will be broadcast on ESPN2.

Baylor adds hometown goal-scorer Omholt to frontline

MARISSA ESSENBURG
Sports Writer

When Lauren Omholt walked onto the field in a Baylor uniform for the first time this spring, it marked more than just a new season — it was a homecoming.

The junior forward from McKinney had spent two years at Purdue, carving out her place in the Big Ten, before deciding her next chapter would be closer to home. Now, as Baylor opens the season, Omholt has become one of the Bears’ most promising new weapons.

“It’s been awesome to be here,” Omholt said. “I love being back in Texas and closer to home so my parents and family can come watch my games, and it’s been great to reconnect with former teammates. And just getting the chance to play in the Big 12 too — I’m excited.”



Brady Harris | Photographer

FIRING IT FORWARD Junior forward Lauren Omholt winds up to make a shot on the goal in the Bears’ 1-0 win against Texas Sept. 4 at Betty Lou Mays Field.

The former top recruit carried big expectations into her college career. Ranked No. 12 in Texas by Prep Soccer, No. 29 in the state by Top Drawer Soccer and No. 55 nationally among forwards, Omholt had already made a name for herself before stepping onto the field.

“I was super fortunate to play at the highest levels growing up,” Omholt said. “I was at Solar Soccer Club for six years, and they prepared me and developed me into the player I am today. That put me in such a good position to go into college, play right away in the Big Ten as a freshman and make an impact.”

Omholt’s first stop was West Lafayette, Ind., where she committed to Purdue as a sophomore at McKinney Boyd High School — nearly 900 miles from her hometown.

Omholt contributed right away at Purdue, appearing in all 36 matches across two years. She started 17 of 18 games as a freshman, earning Big Ten All-Freshman Team honors while leading the team with 15 shots on goal. She continued to build in her sophomore campaign, tying career

highs in appearances and goals while setting a new personal best in shot-on-goal percentage (.727).

The experience taught her valuable lessons, but after two years, she knew she wanted a change.

“I really was looking for a program with a super healthy culture, and Baylor was that for me,” Omholt said. “It’s been the biggest blessing being here in an environment where everyone is encouraging each other both spiritually and on the field.”

It was a decision that brought her back to Texas, where Baylor offered a chance to play closer to home for a program ready to embrace her.

“Lauren’s addition has been huge for us,” head coach Michelle Lenard said. “She’s added pace to our attack, she can stretch defenses and she gives us another dimension. We have a lot of individual attacking threats, as well as a much better collective idea of how we want to operate in

the final third. Lauren Omholt is a big piece of that.”

Beyond the training and the wins, Omholt’s faith has reshaped how she views the game.

“One big thing that has shifted my mindset is realizing that I’m playing for something bigger than just myself,” Omholt said. “Playing for the glory of God, my teammates and using that as my ‘why.’”

Omholt isn’t the only one who sees the bigger picture.

Since arriving in the spring, she built quick chemistry with her midfield and formed a dynamic partnership alongside senior forward Tyler Isgrig, giving Baylor a one-two punch that’s tough to contain.

“Having another threat — someone like Lauren who’s a traditional winger and can really stretch a defense, and she’s so fast — has been a huge help,” Isgrig said. “It’s also allowed me to play more

in the midfield, knowing we have threats like her up top. She wants to score, she wants to create, and with her willingness and athleticism, it helps everyone on the field.”

Omholt has already made her presence known in her first six games, scoring the first goal of the season for the Bears off a cross from sophomore Alysiah Lockette.

“It was super exciting,” Omholt said. “We were really trying to find a way to start the season strong — not with a loss, obviously. Alysiah did so well to beat her defender and put in an amazing cross, and I knew I needed to do whatever I could to get on the end of it.”

The Bears enter their final nonconference match with momentum, depth and the kind of weapons they haven’t had in years, and are looking to close the slate undefeated ahead of Big 12 play.

From being a top Texas recruit

out of high school, to leaving the state for Purdue, to returning to Waco as a centerpiece of Baylor’s attack, Omholt’s story has already come full circle. But in many ways, her biggest chapter is still being written.

“I wanted to be part of a program that could make those tournament and postseason runs,” Omholt said.

As she prepares for her first Big 12 slate in green and gold, Omholt isn’t just a transfer finding her footing. She’s a difference-maker ready to leave her mark — and maybe bring Baylor closer to the championship stage it’s chasing.

“I think we’re definitely going to take people by surprise this season,” Omholt said. “We have such a solid mix of veteran leadership and newcomers, and when you stack it up, we have so much talent all around that Baylor hasn’t had until now. I absolutely think we can make deep runs into the postseason.”



Brady Harris | Photographer

ON THE ATTACK Junior midfielder Aryanna Jimison defends the ball against a slew of Texas players in the Bears’ 1-0 win against Texas on Sept. 4 at Betty Lou Mays Field.

BIG 12 CONTENDERS from B1

That experience sets the stage for 2025. Seniors Hannah and Hallie Augustyn, graduate Blythe Obar, junior Natalie Vatter and Alvarez headline a defense that will anchor the team’s push for a Big 12 title.

“The [Augustyn] twins, Blythe and Nat all have a ton of experience,” Isgrig said. “Their comfort on the ball, our build, staying calm under pressure and their ability to put out fires when needed really show. Their experience in those moments shines, and it’s great to have that not only in the back but also through our midfield and forwards.”

Lenard highlighted the defensive contributions of Obar and Hallie Augustyn, who rank fourth on the team in points.

“Hallie and Blythe are two of the best shot blockers in the league,” Lenard said. “They’re great one-on-one

defenders, super disciplined and really hardworking.”

Standing in their way is a gauntlet of Big 12 heavyweights and a road that won’t come easy.

Atop the gauntlet sits TCU, Baylor’s biggest test. The Horned Frogs finished at the top of the conference in 2024, going undefeated with a 9-0-2 record to claim their third Big 12 regular-season title in four years.

But TCU isn’t the only hurdle. Baylor finished near the bottom of the pack last season, chasing a crowded field of contenders. Oklahoma State, Texas Tech, West Virginia, BYU, Kansas, Arizona, Colorado and Utah all finished ahead of the Bears in 2024.

Baylor sits at 4-0-2 with an .833 winning percentage, riding back-to-back-to-back statement wins over Texas, No. 17 Mississippi State and Texas State. The Bears now

return home to face Abilene Christian, aiming to cap their non-conference slate with a win to keep their unbeaten run alive.

With momentum on their side, the Bears are hungry — and ready — to hoist a trophy no one on the roster has ever hoisted up.

“Definitely making it to the NCAA tournament, that’s just one of our goals,” graduate midfielder Kai Hayes said. “A Big 12 championship right here on Betty Lou would be a dream, and we have a lot of faith and belief that’s been instilled in all of us that anything is possible, especially through Christ. We’re just using the talents he’s given us to glorify him and take on whatever he puts in front of us.”

The Bears will play their last non-conference match at 7 p.m. Sunday against Abilene Christian (3-4-0) at Betty Lou Mays Field.

Sports



LEADERSHIP Baylor football head coach Dave Aranda secured the Bears' first ranked win since the 2022 Sugar Bowl with a 48-45 double-overtime win over No. 17 SMU Saturday at Gerald J. Ford Stadium in Dallas.



TAKEDOWN Fifth-year senior defensive lineman David Marshall Jr. rumbles into the SMU backfield to secure a TFL.



VICTORY Baylor's defense rushes the field to celebrate knocking off No. 17 SMU in overtime.



GAME WINNER Redshirt freshman kicker Connor Hawkins boots an extra point from the 3 yard line in Baylor's 48-45 double-overtime win over No. 17 SMU.



CARRY THE LOAD Redshirt sophomore running back Bryson Washington pushes through the defense for a touchdown to send the Bears into overtime.



A TRIP UP I-35 Baylor fans made the 100-mile trip north to root on the Bears during their double-overtime win in Dallas.



HOLD ON Redshirt senior wide receiver Josh Cameron evades shakes a tackle after catching the ball, eventually scoring a 48-yard touchdown.



POSTGAME The Bears huddle in prayer following their 48-45 double-overtime win over No. 17 SMU proportions.



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Photo courtesy of Baylor Athletics

THE PERFECT PAIR Freshman outside hitter Ksenia Rakhmanchik looks on as senior middle blocker Anastasiia Nikolnikova lines up to spike.

Double Trouble

Volleyball’s eastern European duo looks to contribute while transitioning to new team, country

JEFFREY COHEN
Sports Writer

The road to Baylor was long for Anastasiia Nikolnikova and Ksenia Rakhmanchik, a pair of new volleyball arrivals from Eastern Europe, but they found their own ways to Waco.

Nikolnikova, a senior Syracuse transfer originally from Kyiv, Ukraine, wasn't always a volleyball player. Before she ever hit the court, she lived for the pool.

"I actually started kind of late," Nikolnikova said. "I started when I was in seventh grade. Before that, I was swimming."

It took one encounter with a coach to change her life.

"I was swimming for five years," Nikolnikova said. "One day, randomly, we were doing PT at the gym, and a ... local volleyball coach saw me, and she was so excited."

Nikolnikova's height — listed at 6-foot-4 — won the attention of a coach who saw her physical potential. She answered the call and hasn't looked back since.

"She's like, 'Please, you need to try it. You need to try it. You need to come here,'" Nikolnikova said. "I came to practice, and literally since day one, I absolutely fell in love with this sport."

Rakhmanchik, a freshman outside hitter, found the sport earlier in her life. She grew up playing volleyball in her hometown of Minsk, Belarus.

Rakhmanchik won first place in nine tournaments with her club team RGUOR 2008, the Junior National Team of Belarus, including the Olympic Days of Youth tournament five times. She also earned a Belarus national championship and the Best Outside Hitter award through the club team.

After a successful Belarusian career, Rakhmanchik pivoted to a collegiate career in the US.

"I played volleyball in Belarus for eight years, and then I had suggested to be a professional volleyball player," Rakhmanchik said. "I started to find about volleyball, like world volleyball, and I think America was the best suggestion because it's not [just] about volleyball, but about study also."

Rakhmanchik's agent advised her to choose Baylor over the other teams on her radar.

"I had an agent, and for me, it was the best level in volleyball," Rakhmanchik said. "Volleyball for me is everything, and Baylor was the best with what I had."

Nikolnikova's journey to Waco was more circuitous. She began her collegiate career at the College of Southern Idaho, playing two seasons at the junior college. She won NJCAA Region 18 Player of the Year and NJCAA First Team All-American honors.

Nikolnikova then transferred to Syracuse, where she finished top 10 in the ACC with 1.16 blocks per set in her only season in the conference.

When she entered the transfer portal, Baylor made the first move.

"I never heard of Baylor before they actually contacted me when I entered the transfer portal," Nikolnikova said. "As they contacted me, I actually did my little research, and I definitely became really excited."

She started to become more familiar with the program and the school after communicating with the coaching staff. Before long, she became more invested in becoming a Bear.

"I just love how good Baylor is, and I definitely wanted to be part of this family," Nikolnikova said. "I wanted to be part of this legacy of the Baylor Bears."

After three years of college volleyball stateside, Nikolnikova said the transition to Baylor wasn't too difficult. After all, she said, Waco reminded her of Twin Falls, Idaho, where she played her first two seasons in the US.

"Waco reminded me a little bit of the town I used to live back when I went to JUCO," Nikolnikova said. "It's kind of like the same vibes, [with] bigger cities an hour, two hours away, and it's not super small or super big."

Rakhmanchik, playing in the US for the first time, has had a more difficult time adjusting to playing college volleyball and living in the US.

"It was hard for me," Rakhmanchik said. "Now it's easier, but still hard because the game is different, and it's so hard, especially for me emotionally."

Nikolnikova has helped Rakhmanchik along the way, including assistance with the language barrier.

"For me, it's a little bit easier because she speaks in Russian," Rakhmanchik said. "I speak in Russian, so sometimes when I didn't understand something, she helped me."

The two have seen growth since joining the Bears in the offseason. Nikolnikova has improved alongside a veteran middle blocker group that also features junior Victoria Davis and graduate Gabrielle Essix.

"Watching them play — watching those block moves, watching how their attitude towards the game, their attitude towards blocking — is definitely very helpful," Nikolnikova said. "I'm a better person; I'm a better player right now because of them."

While the pair continues its transition to Baylor, victory is still at the front of their minds. The Bears are ranked No. 20 and started the season 5-1, with their only loss coming against No. 10 SMU in five sets.

"We have in the locker room a huge whiteboard," Nikolnikova said. "It has goals. We have like 50 of them, and it's from bigger things, like the natty, to smaller things, and we're working hard to achieve those goals."

Baylor will return to the court at noon Sunday, when they will face off against No. 11 Florida at the O'Connell Center in Gainesville, Fla.



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FOOD RECS:

Take a chance on these underrated restaurants, and you might discover your new favorite spot on **pg. B7**



Whether you're craving a fizzy soda concoction, authentic tacos, a Texas-sized burger or fried chicken that hits the spot, these locations prove that Waco's best flavors sometimes come from the least expected places.

WEEKEND FUN

Want to show your family the best of your Baylor stomping grounds but don't know where to start? Look no further than **pg. B6**

BaylorLariat.com

'An incredible stage presence'

Lauren Daigle to perform at Foster Pavilion Friday

OLIVIA TURNER
Arts & Life Editor

Baylor announced in April that one of the biggest names in Christian contemporary music, Lauren Daigle, will be coming to Baylor to perform at Foster Pavilion. Now, with only a day to go before the show, Daigle will soon become the second performer in a ten-show series that will take place at Foster Pavilion over the next two years.

The two-time Grammy winner and singer of "America the Beautiful" at the 2025 Super Bowl will take the stage at 7:30 p.m. on Friday, with doors opening at 6:30 p.m. Her sold-out show will kick off Family Weekend at Baylor and a home football game vs. Samford, according to Steve Richo, one of the founders of Noise New Media. The Nashville marketing agency has been working with both Baylor and Daigle's team to bring the show to life.

"The evening before a home game at McLane Stadium — what better time to have an A-list artist come to campus?" Richo said. "This really fits the venue size that she is focusing on this year and bringing that message to those types of arenas, large and small. Every seat in Foster Pavilion is a premium product. We got just under 5,900 seats in there in a concert configuration, so it's going to be a big show."

“

The evening before a home game at McLane Stadium — what better time to have an A-list artist come to campus?

STEVE RICHOCO-FOUNDER OF NOISE NEW MEDIA



Photo courtesy of Baylor University

THESE ARE THE DAYS As the second-to-last stop on her Kaleidoscope Tour across America, Daigle will perform at Foster Pavilion on Friday.

Jason Cook, vice president of marketing and communications at Baylor, said the show is bound to appease family attendees and students alike. In terms of the set, he described the event as a "full production."

"That's four backup singers, a three-member horn section, a percussion pit, in addition to normal musicians," Cook said. "So it's going to be a pretty big spectacle that we're going to have here."

For event parking, spaces can be reserved both at the Hurd Welcome Center and in the Pavilion Garage adjacent to the arena through the Foster Pavilion ticket website. These limited

spots are priced from \$25 to \$35 and sell quickly.

As of now, it is unknown if there will be any openers for the show. Cook said artist merchandise will be sold inside the arena. There may also be some pre-show activities on the Turner Plaza outside the Pavilion, he said.

Even those who aren't familiar with Daigle's music will likely enjoy the show, according to Jason Kane, the entertainment booking arm of Noise New Media, who has worked with Daigle's team.

"I think the combination of Lauren Daigle at Baylor is a tremendous mix," Kane said. "It

just seems like a hand-in-glove kind of fit. Her appeal is beyond just the Christian message — it's great music and a great entertainment experience that uplifts the message."

Cook spoke to Daigle's power in the Christian music genre, as well as the many other genres she has branched out into.

"She is extremely creative, not only by what she wears as part of her concert wardrobe, but in terms of her musical style and ability," Cook said. "She just has an incredible stage presence, and it will be a time of celebration, it will be a time of reflection and a time of worship all put into one concert package."

After Dark to showcase Baylor talent for Family Weekend

STACIE BOYLS
Arts & Life Writer

Baylor Student Productions will present its annual After Dark Variety Show on Friday, Sept. 12, at Waco Hall with performances at 6:30 p.m. and 9:30 p.m.

This longstanding Baylor tradition premieres university talent across students and faculty alike. From solo performances to organized dances and comedic acts, this show invites talent of all kinds to take center stage.

"We get to highlight in the community with not many restrictions as you would see on a stage in the theater department — or even for Pigskin and Sing — where it's a pretty specific type of act," San Diego senior Giavanna Russo, After Dark's executive producer, said. "I'm really excited about the whole show coming together."

Beaumont senior Major Hargraves, an After Dark performer, has found the experience particularly rewarding, citing making people smile or laugh as his main inspiration for his act.

"People get it when you're doing something ridiculous just for the joy of it," Hargraves said. "There's something in me that wants to just make people smile — to take something really simple or dumb and put a lot of effort into it. That's funny to me."

Tickets for the event are available through the Waco Hall Ticket Office. Admission for the 9:30 p.m. show is discounted for Baylor students, with all seats priced at \$15.



Lariat file photo

YOU SHOULD BE DANCING Lyrical dancers from one of the showings from 2021 execute fan kicks in front of the glowing "After Dark" show sign.

The event has been part of Baylor's Family Weekend for 29 years, making it a staple Baylor tradition alongside Pigskin and Sing. For many Baylor families, the show has become a highlight of the fall semester, providing a space for students and parents alike to embrace the diversity of Baylor.

"People say that their parents loved it, which I think is so cute because it is Family Weekend," Russo said. "I went with my parents as a freshman, and my roommate brought her [parents]. I just love getting to see the families experience our community because we're used to it as Baylor students."

Hargraves commented on his excitement to join fellow students as a contributor to this tradition, emphasizing his gratitude as a Baylor student.

"I am like super blessed to be

here, and it's awesome to participate in traditions that have been around for so long," he said. "I got to participate in Sing this past year, and coming back to Waco Hall and doing After Dark after Sing just makes it feel special."

Planning for the show began in April, with final productions being produced within a week of when auditions were held. Russo said the mix of student and faculty performers reflects Baylor's emphasis on community and tradition, while creating a diverse performance and entertainment experience.

Russo said she encourages students and families to attend the show, or even to consider auditioning for future performances. She said she also encourages students who are interested in the behind-the-scenes action to consider joining Student Productions.



Lariat file photo

JAMMIN' OUT Clayton, Calif., junior Ben Williamson shared his talent through his performance of "Little Wing" by Jimi Hendrix at After Dark 2024.

"You get an hour and a half of really good entertainment, and you get to tell people about the beatboxing student that you saw on stage," he said.

Hargraves also encouraged students to embrace their whimsy and audition for the show in the future.

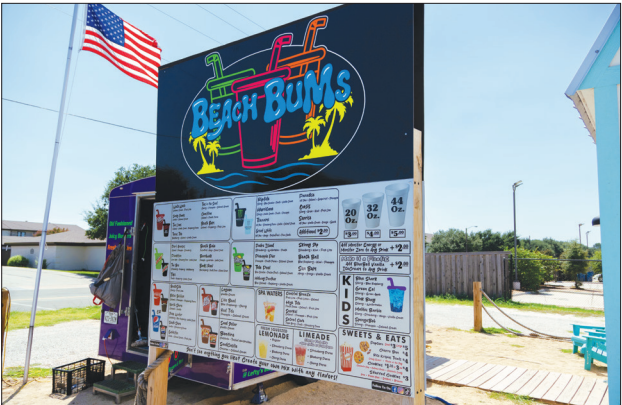
"Look, man, you got the rest of your life to work; this is a great side quest," he said. "Have side quests in your college career, explore and have fun. If you want to do After Dark, make sure you're bringing something original — and there's nothing more original than being authentically you and just playing."

Forgotten food spots to try during Family Weekend

LEXIE RODENBAUGH
Arts & Life Writer

Buzz-worthy food spots are part of what makes Waco distinguishable from other Texas cities and college towns. Magnolia, Union Hall, Milo and other staples of the city’s dining scene are often at the top of Baylor students’ “must-visit” list. But for every trendy brunch or coffee shop that makes its rounds on Instagram, there are smaller, less flashy places waiting quietly for people to discover them.

If you’ve been searching for something off the beaten path for your next night out, perhaps spots that don’t require a long wait time or an influencer’s recommendation, you’re in luck. These local gems may not get the same spotlight, but they’re just as worthy of attention. Check out these tucked-away Waco food joints with your family this weekend.



Brady Harris | Photographer

BEACH BUMS

If you blink while driving down Hewitt Drive, you might miss Beach Bums. This small shack opened in July 2024, just before Sip City arrived on the scene, which meant it didn’t get the wave of publicity it might have deserved. But for those in the know, it’s become a favorite for a midday pick-me-up.

Beach Bums specializes in dirty sodas — a concept that takes classic fountain drinks and upgrades them with cream, fruit purées, syrups and add-ins. Think Dr Pepper with coconut and lime, or Sprite with raspberry and cream. The combinations are nearly endless, and half the fun is experimenting to find your go-to order.

There’s also something charmingly unpretentious about the place. Unlike larger chains or trendy setups, Beach Bums feels laid-back — like a friend’s backyard hangout. The staff, and usually the owner himself, serve up sodas and smiles with ease, and the colorful menu boards spark curiosity with names you’ll want to try just for the novelty. It’s a place that feels like it belongs to locals more than tourists, and that’s exactly what makes it special.

For anyone who wants an alternative to coffee shop runs or feels like Baylor’s Moody Starbucks line is an eternity, Beach Bums is an underrated lifesaver.

Beach Bums is located at 153 Regal Drive in Hewitt. Store hours are 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday to Friday and 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Saturday. The shop is closed on Sunday.



Brady Harris | Photographer

TAQUERIA ZACATECAS

Waco is full of taco options, but few manage to capture the spirit of authentic street tacos like Taqueria Zacatecas. Nestled on La Salle Ave., it’s a no-frills spot that doesn’t need flashy décor or oversized signs to prove its worth. Here, the tacos speak for themselves.

The tortillas are fresh, the meats are flavorful and the salsas pack just the right punch. Whether you’re a fan of al pastor, barbacoa or carnitas, you’ll find tacos that taste like they came straight from a family recipe passed down through generations. This is the kind of place where locals stop by for lunch during the workday or late-night cravings, and once you’ve tried it, you’ll understand why.

Part of what makes Taqueria Zacatecas so refreshing is its authenticity. In a city where new restaurants often focus on fusion concepts or aesthetic presentation, this taqueria doesn’t feel the need to reinvent itself. It’s simply great tacos, served at a great price, with all the tradition and care that makes Mexican street food such a beloved staple. If you’ve only eaten at the chain taco spots around town, this place might just change your definition of what a taco can be.

Taqueria Zacatecas is located at 2311 La Salle Ave. Store hours are 9 a.m. to 11 p.m. Monday to Thursday and 9 a.m. to 3:30 a.m. on Friday and Saturday. The shop is closed on Sunday.



Brady Harris | Photographer

TOM'S BURGERS

Burgers are a universal comfort food, but Tom’s Burgers on Sanger Ave. manages to elevate them by staying true to one thing:

Texas. Every ingredient is sourced locally, giving their menu an unmistakably fresh and regional taste. From the juicy patties to the soft buns and crisp toppings, everything feels rooted in Waco’s identity.

Tom’s has the vibe of an old-school burger joint but with a modern twist. The burgers are hearty, the fries are perfectly crispy and the milkshakes are the cherry on top. It’s the kind of spot where you can sit down, forget about everything else for a while and enjoy a meal that’s satisfying in all the right ways.

What’s especially impressive about Tom’s is its dedication to highlighting local producers. In a world of fast food shortcuts and frozen ingredients, this commitment sets them apart. It’s not just a burger; it’s a celebration of Texas pride wrapped up in a sesame seed bun.

Tom’s Burgers is located at 6818 Sanger Ave. Store hours are 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday to Friday. The shop is closed on Saturday and Sunday.



Brady Harris | Photographer

KRISPY CHICKEN

If comfort food is what you’re after, Krispy Chicken deserves a spot on your radar. Tucked away from the flashier downtown dining scene sits an unsuspecting shack on Franklin Ave., which has been serving up some of the best fried chicken in town since 1982.

This spot doesn’t rely on fancy branding or Instagrammable décor — it’s all about the fried chicken. What makes Krispy Chicken a hidden gem is its consistency. The menu keeps things straightforward: crispy, golden-brown chicken that’s seasoned just right, with sides that round out the meal. You know exactly what you’re going to get every time you stop by — a plate that’s hot, filling and comforting.

In a city where new restaurants sometimes lean more on aesthetics than taste, Krispy Chicken proves that simple, well-made food never goes out of style.

Krispy Chicken is located at 2307 Franklin Ave. Store hours are 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday to Friday. The shop is closed Saturday and Sunday.

Whether you’re craving a fizzy soda concoction, authentic tacos, a Texas-sized burger or fried chicken that hits the spot, these locations prove that Waco’s best flavors sometimes come from the least expected places.

So, the next time you find yourself hungry and wanting something different, skip the usual go-to spots and take a detour. You just might discover your new favorite restaurant.

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