



# BAYLOR LARIAT

News for the students by the students

Tuesday, May 5, 2026

baylorlariat.com



### OPINION | A2

**SIGNING OFF:**  
Every good adventure starts somewhere — for me it was The Lariat



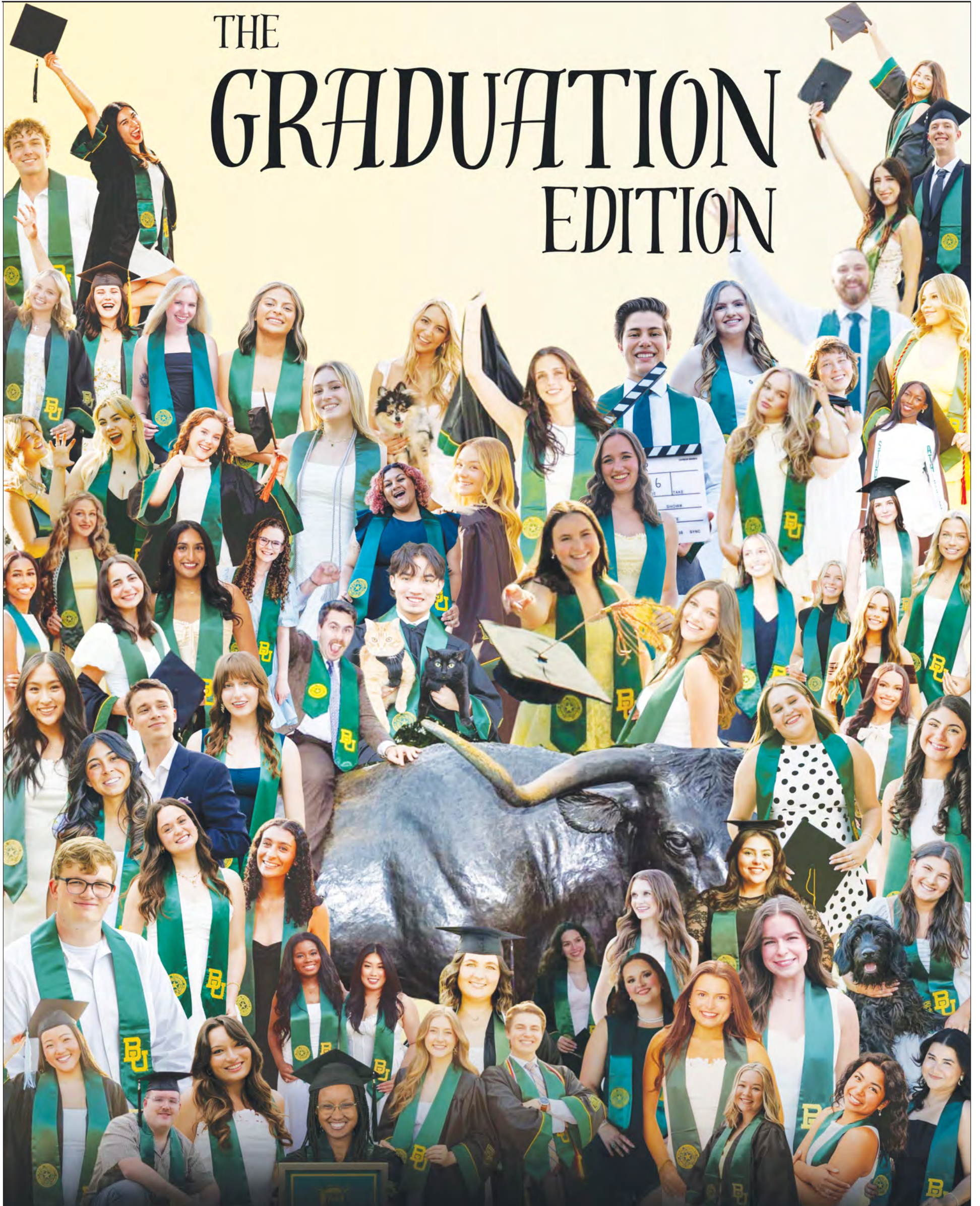
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Waco's former premier sporting venue hosted Babe Ruth & more



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**VOICE OF SUCCESS:**  
Meet the professor who announces names during commencement



## THE GRADUATION EDITION

### Baylor redefines what it means to be a first-gen grad

**RHEA CHOUDHARY**  
Staff Writer

For students who are the first generation in their families to graduate from college, several initiatives aid them in their journey from the first day on campus to walking the stage.

Initiatives like the First in Line Success Academy (FILSA), the First in Line Leadership Scholarship, the First Abroad Fellows program or the Bear Textbook Scholarship, Baylor provides resources to support first-

generation students with organized support. These programs consist of financial assistance, a mentor who contacts the student at the beginning of their college career and a fully funded global experience, all of which students have described as beneficial in helping them become more knowledgeable with their career goals.

Kiera Griffin, senior Science Research Fellow from Conroe, described those opportunities as what developed her understanding of what she hoped to achieve when starting at Baylor.

Now preparing to pursue a PhD in genetics and genomics at Baylor College of Medicine, Griffin said she entered college unsure of how to go about accomplishing her goals.

"I always really wanted to be a scientist, but I didn't really know what that meant," Griffin said. "Being a Baylor student and getting connected here has really shown me just how much is possible, no matter where you're starting from, especially when you have good mentors in your life."

That accessibility for Griffin extended past

learning exciting things in the science building classrooms. Last May, Griffin participated in a fully-funded First Abroad Fellows mission trip to the Dominican Republic, where she and other first-generation students built a house in three days, which was an experience made possible through her First in Line Leadership Scholarship.

"We talk about wanting to do good things, but getting to actually go out and do that was

**FIRST-GEN GRADS >>A7**

# NOTES TO NAILED IT



**GOT SOMETHING TO SAY?**

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# Letter from the editor: Signing off

**FOSTER NICHOLAS**  
Editor-in-Chief

It's funny how the smallest things can make an impression on us. And across nine semesters at The Lariat, there have been plenty. But sometimes the spark for reminiscing comes out of nowhere.

A few weeks ago, an AI-voiced ad popped up in the middle of a YouTube video showing off a new mobile game. The first line, "Every good adventure starts alone," stuck with me.

It wasn't too far from reality for me. From waitlist to late-May admission, the first semester of freshman year was a blur. Coming on the heels of COVID-19 and an overadmitted class, hotels were packed with students and dorms were booked, so I stayed off campus with my wonderful cousins — but that, along with a persistent barrier of social anxiety, left me without a Baylor community.

Then I found The Lariat.

I knew this was where I would fit in before I came, as I aspired to be a play-by-play broadcaster. In fact, I would stop by my old adviser, Mr. Gietzen's, office weekly and ask if he was ready for someone to restart Baylor Lariat Radio. After a year of waiting for a chance and a semester reporting on Arts & Life, I was given the shot to do solo football broadcasts my sophomore year.

That one opportunity paved the path to dozens of friendships, broadcasts on ESPN+, a writing role with 247Sports and a dream internship with the Denver Nuggets. But still, looking back, my time working with passionate student journalists at The Lariat will be the best. Mostly because of the friends I picked up during this "adventure."



Sam Gassaway | Photo Editor

When I decided to come back for one more year as a master's student, it wasn't because I was in love with the idea of working in journalism or covering news. In fact, I had already made up my mind that a career in the media wasn't for me. I stepped into the role of editor-in-chief because it offered an opportunity to give back to the place and people who made my experience worthwhile.

I couldn't be more grateful that I did.

So yes, in my year at the helm, we

took a lot of big swings. We pushed the boundaries of what it means to be student journalists because there are too many important stories to be told. From being told there would be consequences if we covered events to defending the role of journalism, we did exactly what I set out for us to do — produce professional content that you, our readers, care about.

I spent countless hours working with this staff to produce high-quality content and made sure every swing we took was well produced and worth

it. Without the talent and dedication of each person who called themselves a Lariateer this year, we wouldn't have been named the best student newspaper in Texas/Oklahoma.

To my staff, advisers, our readers and everyone who supports The Lariat every day, thank you for trusting me and continuing to support student journalism.

I'll miss late-night Andy's runs, traveling to cover the biggest Baylor sporting events, shooting hoops in the newsroom and even waking up

before 6 a.m. to rush over to campus to deliver papers. Above all else, I'll miss the people in the newsroom whose voices constantly make me smile. And while I'm still searching for what comes next, I'm excited for the chance to start another adventure.

So, although "every good adventure starts alone," I'm glad I've picked up the friends and self-confidence at The Lariat to make the next one even better than the first.

*Signing off,*  
Foster Nicholas | Editor-in-Chief

# Dylan Fink's official guide to graduating seniors

**DYLAN FINK**  
Sports Writer

Well, the time of year is upon us.

After (hopefully) just four quick years, the Class of 2026 graduation is just around the corner. With the big day approaching, the homestretch can often feel stressful and overbearing. That's why I have compiled a list of tips and suggestions for the current graduating class to make their last week at Baylor the best one yet.

I present to all the seniors on Baylor's campus: Dylan Fink's official guide to graduating seniors.

## DON'T FORGET TO BUY THE REGALIA

This may seem expected. Seriously, who would ever forget to go get the robes you have to graduate in? Simple, right? Wrong.

Let me tell you the story of Rob Fink. Graduation day rolls around, and my own father in 1997 is more excited than anyone to become the newest Baylor alumnus in the family. Feeling fresh after applying the timeless combo of Irish Spring and Degree deodorant, Rob discovers there is no regalia in his closet.

Missing the iconic green-and-gold-hinted robes, my father did what anyone in his situation would do. He walked the stage in the Ferrell

Center in a Simpsons T-shirt, home-bleached jeans and with pride in his heart.

As much aura as Rob Fink had on graduation day, your mother's wrath is not worth the photo op of shaking the president's hand with "Eat my shorts" painted across one's chest.

## ENJOY FOUNTAIN MALL, TAKE A SWIM!

Nothing beats the end-of-the-day view as you walk home from class and look at the beauty that is Fountain Mall. That being said, the average Baylor senior has never taken advantage of the area's best quality: a nice dip in the fountain after the most droning lecture you've ever heard.

One of the first things they tell you at Line Camp is, no matter what you do, do not swim in the fountain. I'm here to tell you that, actually, you can get in that pumping water whenever you want. Realistically, who's stopping you? Baylor Police Department may have a complaint or two about it, but no level of arrest can harm a good time.

I still reminisce with a grin about my own freshman year when Alexander Residence Hall lost water for a week. We often spent an evening in the fountain to wash up. After all, nothing makes the most beautiful site on campus better than a bubble bath with your friends.

## DON'T BE AFRAID TO SKIP THAT CLASS

If I miss my 8 a.m. one more time, I will not

graduate. So do what you wish with this one.

## REMINISCENCE ON THE HIGHEST HIGHS OF BAYLOR ATHLETICS

OK, so maybe Baylor Athletics didn't get anything more remarkable than an eight-win season and a few round-of-32 exits, but don't give up faith yet. Who cares that we're the first graduating class in over a decade to leave Baylor without ever seeing a Big 12 championship game appearance in football?

The true test of a collegiate fan is how they follow their school after they graduate. Besides, the transfer portal just opened up for basketball. I know we whiffed on the last guy, and the one before that and the one before that ... but trust me, this new one really is the one man.

## GET THOSE SENIOR PHOTOS DONE

Everybody knows that the most important part about graduating is getting really tough photos on campus to post on social media.

Ten years from now, when you're working 40 hours a week and are thinking back on the best parts of college, you'll be so thankful that you spent \$300 on the 10 most over-edited photos with max exposure that you took in front of the Judge Baylor statue.

I mean, how else are we supposed to think about memories? By actually remembering them?

## VISIT ARMSTRONG BROWNING BASEMENT

I have discussed the immaculate beauty of the cellars of Armstrong Browning in my previous publication, "Ranking Baylor bathrooms from worst to best."

But seeing as my time with The Lariat is coming to an end, I want to take the opportunity to brush on this subject once again.

If you haven't taken advantage of the pleasures of the Armstrong Browning basement, please do so before it's too late. We're all about to head off into the real world, and the rumor is it can be quite cruel. Choose to live at least once before you walk that stage in May.

Take the trip to south campus and find your own inner peace on the coveted marbled seats that are tucked away in the Armstrong Browning Library's basement chambers.

## ENJOY EVERY LAST MOMENT

In all seriousness, my time at Baylor has been the best four years of my life, and I truly hope it has been the same for everyone else.

Here on this campus, I have made the best of friends and had the greatest of experiences, and I could not be more thankful for it.

With roughly a week left until it's all over, take in every moment. Don't let the last bit of time we have left at this wonderful place go to waste. Gather your friends, find your favorite spots on campus and reminisce about old memories as you make a few last new ones.

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# AI is moving fast. Can education keep up?

**JOSH SIATKOWSKI**  
Staff Writer

In computer science, universities are falling behind the rapidly evolving AI ecosystem — even professors admit it.

“I think computer science is still a very promising major,” said Dr. Chen Zhao, assistant professor in the computer science department. “But the only thing I worry about is [that] the things students learn in school are outdated.”

When the release of ChatGPT brought large language models to the forefront in 2022, it also sparked a flurry of private-sector breakthroughs. Bigger and better models and the introduction of AI agents have created a challenging disparity between newly relevant skills and what’s taught in the classroom.

“I think this is hard because if you want to fill in the gap, you need to ask the universities to have a more advanced class,” Zhao said. “For example, we do not have a class that’s only focused on large language models.”

of technological innovation, the gap between education and industry innovation has made the most competitive jobs even tougher to secure. Upland, Calif., senior Omar Darwish, an incoming data engineer for IBM, had to do most of his AI learning outside the classroom. He knocked on the door of every computer science professor looking for research opportunities as a sophomore, landed multiple internships — including a machine-learning role at financial firm Hilltop Holdings — and even started his own company to understand the state of the industry today.

“It definitely was a very, very large amount of commitment and work that started very early,” Darwish said.

Darwish agreed with Zhao that Baylor’s curriculum is outdated. But that’s not unique to Baylor, nor is it necessarily a problem. The challenge, he said, is the lack of a “build culture,” in which students are encouraged and expected to start projects outside the classroom.

“If you’re at a school like the University of Waterloo, or a school like Georgia Tech, ... it really doesn’t matter if the curriculum is outdated or not applicable because there’s a build culture there,” Darwish said. “There’s a culture where every student that you talk to at the University of Waterloo is a founder ... In that culture, it doesn’t matter if the curriculum is outdated because you are a part of an atmosphere that encourages learning more, that encourages learning what isn’t necessarily being taught in class.”

But even as new research puts fundamental computer science skills further back in the annals of technology, it doesn’t mean those classroom lessons are irrelevant — even if students don’t end up using them on the job.

“I can think of so many things in my classes that I’m just never going to use,” Lubbock junior and computer science major Carter Lewis said. “I think it’s to teach you how to learn new technologies and how to learn new skills, so that whenever we enter the workforce, we’re able to keep up with new technologies. And so because of that, I think I will have the ability to keep learning and to stay on pace.”

Lewis is currently a software engineering intern at Texas Farm Bureau Insurance, and this summer he’ll join the IT department of defense company Textron. For him and the many others who opt for computer science roles outside the realm of Big Tech, Baylor’s curriculum and some personability were all it took to land a solid job. And while AI will definitely impact both software development



Sam Gassaway | Photo Editor

**PROMPTING** AI has become a staple in many students’ work and study routines.

and IT roles, Lewis doesn’t see it as something that can replace the numerous human-led tasks required to get a project from beginning to end.

“I think a couple of years ago, I really started to research [AI] and look into it,” he said. “I was a little worried. Once you start using AI to complete whole projects, you realize that AI is just not very good at completing entire projects.”

For Zhao and Darwish, both of whom believe in AI’s capabilities, this is also true. Software jobs might look different in the future, but they won’t go away — not for the ones who adopt the revolution, at least.

“I’ve never been particularly afraid because I know that there’s a level of intellectual proficiency and creativity that’s required to be a software engineer, that’s required to be a data scientist, that’s required to be a data engineer,” Darwish said. “You have to be able to solve problems, complex problems. That’s something that I don’t think artificial intelligence is at the point of being able to do right now. But even when it does get there, I think there’s always going to need to be an engineer there to interface with it, and also, part of being an engineer is being somebody who’s personable, being able to talk to people.”

And it won’t just be soft skills that matter as

AI adoption increases, Zhao said. As industry-specific LLM development (as opposed to typical universal models) grows more common, so will jobs in that area.

“A lot of companies actually, they are recruiting [software development engineers] that can develop those kinds of software for them, for a specific business, for specific domains,” Zhao said. “That’s a long-term job. ... There are a lot of downstream tasks.”

But at the same time, the job market for tech could still compress to a “very, very competitive” level, Zhao said. The key to standing out, Darwish said, is not only to use AI for technical projects but to refine nontechnical ones to become irreplaceable. That idea is why he signed on for the client-facing, consulting-based position at IBM instead of a strictly code-based job at Cisco.

“Cisco is very technical — headphones on, hood on, slinging-code-all-day type of role,” Darwish said. “Those are the ones that are threatened ... Those are the roles where you can be replaced. But if you’re an engineer that can speak the business and also solve problems on the back, that’s not replaceable by artificial intelligence.”

“I know there’s a level of proficiency and creativity that’s required to be a data scientist, that’s required to be a data engineer.”

**OMAR DARWISH**  
UPLAND, CALIF., SENIOR

Zhao, whose work focuses on fairness in machine learning and AI, is at the forefront of this revolution. He said that breakthrough papers — increasingly published by private tech companies and not universities — are coming out so fast that even researchers are struggling to keep up.

“I tell my own PhD students, ‘If one project cannot be accepted as a paper in six months, then you do not have a chance to resubmit,’” he said.

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Photo courtesy of Joshua Browder

**CAP 'N GOWN** Norman, Okla., senior Joshua Browder poses in his graduation regalia outside Draper Academic Building.



Photo courtesy of Rylee Robertson

**HOME SWEET HOME** Fort Worth senior Rylee Robertson poses in front of Memorial Residence Hall.



Photo courtesy of Samuel Koo

**END OF AN ERA** After four years, Los Angeles senior Samuel Koo prepares to graduate.

# Community worth staying 4 years for

## Seniors find community through four years in Honors Residential College

**ABBY RATHBURN**  
Staff Writer

Four years after freshman move-in, the Honors Residential College dorms remain home to many graduating seniors today.

While many students started looking for off-campus housing for their freshman or sophomore years, some seniors found the community of Memorial and Alexander Residence Halls worth sticking around for.

Plano senior Mary Dickinson said the community was what kept her on campus for all four years of college.

"[It's] really important to me to have people surrounding me who, not necessarily are like-minded, but are like-minded in the sense that they're pursuing God through intellectual means," Dickinson said.

While Dickinson was drawn to the HRC for academic similarities, Los Angeles senior Samuel Koo said he enjoyed the diversity of people he met through living in the HRC.

"I think the unique part about the HRC is that you become friends with people that you probably would not have been friends with in the past," Koo said. "For me, I'm very much a city kid, but now I have friends who are from the country, you know, from rural areas, who have different interests than me."

While many seniors stayed for the community and friendships that surrounded them, some also stayed for convenience. Climax, Mich., senior Lydia Allabaugh said it was far more convenient for her to continue living on campus past the two-year contract.

"A big part of the reason I wanted to stay on campus was because I didn't have a car, so I knew that unless I lived in an apartment right off campus, I would need to get a car, and that wasn't an option," Allabaugh said.

San Angelo senior Becca Lui echoed the convenience. While the cost for off-campus housing can vary compared to on-campus prices, Lui's decision to stay on campus was more economical than

the alternative.

"Usually it's more expensive to stay on campus, and I know that rates for apartments can be a lot cheaper, but the HRC does give their scholarship for leadership, so that helps a lot," Lui said.

The Honors Residential College, with its recent renovations, also offers its students more shared items for cooking, hanging out and studying. Fort Worth senior Rylee Robertson said these qualities of the HRC made her want to stay.

"I think it's big, especially being honors, and with the amount of work that we do with our program and how specific it is, it gives us the opportunity to have more study spaces," Robertson said.

Even so, these seniors aren't oblivious to the difficulties of living on campus versus off.

"When I want to use the kitchen, I have to go down two flights of stairs and through a bunch of doors," Dickinson said. "I want to do laundry, I have to use these janky machines, and I'm not

sure if they'll work and fight other people for space in the laundry room, so definitely there are inconveniences to it."

Because of these inconveniences, Dickinson said she is ready to have her own kitchen and space after graduation. Nevertheless, she said she is still happy with her decision to live on campus because of the care from the people around her.

Norman, Okla., senior Joshua Browder said living in the HRC has shown him more about the source of his identity.

"Something that I learned very quickly my first year is that people genuinely did not care at all about whatever I was doing, academically or what I'd done in high school," Browder said. "The thing is that people cared about me for, first of all, [was] who I was in Christ, and they showed me that by trying to take the time to get to know me and hang out with me and invest in me without some kind of prerequisite."

Student experiences in 2-year dorms vary

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# Laparoscopy lab gives medical students hands-on experience

**AARAH SARDESAI**  
Intern

Baylor's Laparoscopy Lab, known across campus simply as Laparo, gives freshmen hands-on surgical training and a full year of guided research experience before they ever apply to medical school.

The yearlong course, housed in the Earle Hall pre-health program, is entirely student-run. Junior teaching assistants lead lectures and build the curriculum, while sophomore research mentors guide small groups of freshmen through designing and conducting IRB-approved studies.

"It's an introductory lab where we simulate laparoscopic surgery with a box and all the tools that come with it," Cypress freshman Madhumita Donavalli said. "We use those same boxes to conduct research. We come up with research questions, run experiments, analyze the results statistically and draw conclusions."

The course mirrors the structure of a traditional research lab. During the fall semester, students learn foundational concepts in healthcare, surgical technique and research ethics while developing their research questions and writing their introductions, according to Naperville, Ill., freshman Vrinda Tadepalli.

"There's a heart unit, an insurance unit and overall healthcare content," Tadepalli said. "It's entirely student-run. The TAs teach everything and create the coursework, and the research mentors guide students through their papers."

In the spring, students begin running experiments, not only for their own projects but also as participants in their peers' studies. By the end of the year, each team compiles its data into a research poster and presents its findings, often marking students' first experience with academic presentation.

Beyond technical skills, students say the program builds confidence and community.

"It's a very close-knit group," Donavalli said. "We support each other and uplift each other in the pre-health community, which can be so hard sometimes."

Laparo was originally created by a small group of undergraduates who wanted to make research more accessible to early pre-health majors. Today, the program continues to be shaped by the students who run it.

San Jose, Calif., sophomore Ananya Bharathapudi and Chicago sophomore Anishvaran Manohar, both TAs in the lab, said much of their work happens behind the scenes, planning curriculum, organizing events and supporting research mentors.

"The typical role of a Laparo TA is to give the lecture and to build the course in general with a lot of behind-the-scenes work, but we also do a lot of work with community building," Bharathapudi said.

Manohar said the student-led structure is what makes the program so impactful.

"By being in Laparo for two years, TAs gain a lot of knowledge about what Laparo really is and what initiatives you want to take," Manohar said. "We'll be going into the summer planning all of the events and the curriculum and trying to make the best possible class environment for our future students."

Laparoscopy, the minimally invasive surgical technique at the center of the course, is practiced using FLS-certified training boxes and tools such as Maryland dissectors. Students complete skill assessments like the pegboard and circle-cutting practicals, which mirror the procedures medical students use to earn laparoscopic certification.

This year, TAs and research mentors plan to introduce live demonstrations of these procedures to help students better visualize the techniques.

"This will help them visually see the FLS-certified procedures of laparoscopic surgery right in front of their eyes," Manohar said.

Students are encouraged to design research projects that reflect their interests. Donavalli explored how solar-powered lights could expand access to laparoscopic surgery in underserved communities. Manohar's group tested whether attaching a laser to a laparoscopic tool could improve visibility during procedures.

The program's structure, freshmen as students, sophomores as research mentors and juniors as TAs, creates a built-in mentorship pipeline that many students say defines their experience.

"My research mentor, who is also my TA, has been such a monumental part of my journey," Bharathapudi said. "We build in that guidance so freshmen aren't lost and know exactly who they can go to for help."

For many, Laparo becomes more than a class.

"Once you're in Laparo, you're in Laparo," Bharathapudi said. "We're basically a safety net. I found my best friends in Laparo. I can't even imagine undergrad without it."

When asked to summarize the experience in one sentence, Manohar didn't hesitate.

"Laparo gave me a home," Manohar said. "It's a place where I feel safe and confident stepping up and conducting research as a freshman, and mentoring students throughout their time at Baylor."

# Student nonprofit 'Bear-ly Used' to return

**JOSH SIATKOWSKI**  
Staff Writer

Last year, two Baylor business students formed a nonprofit to collect dorm items during move-out and donate them to charities in need. Now after Bear-ly Used's first year of operations, which donated over 13 storage pods worth of appliances, furniture and other goods, the team is back with bigger plans.

"We planned this out for eight months, and then we delivered last year," Edmond, Okla., junior Josh Yoon said. "And this year we're doing it again but also making it better and adding a lot more onto ... what we did last year."

Yoon and his co-founder, Austin senior Nolan La, started Bear-ly Used to find better homes for the items piling up in dumpsters during finals week.

"There were just a ton of things in these overfilled dumpsters that people could utilize that were just being thrown away," Yoon said. "I wanted to create something around making that more sustainable and also giving back to the community because it's all stuff that could be used again."

The duo set a high bar last year. Alongside volunteers who put in over 100 hours, the team connected 11 nonprofits with lightly used goods. Organizations like Lovely Village, a community for survivors of sexual trauma and trafficking, are among the many groups that served their beneficiaries with donated goods from

Bear-ly Used.

"Lovely Village received vacuums, brooms, cleaning supplies, laundry baskets, trash cans, an office chair, storage drawers (multiple sets), small appliances like coffee makers and an air fryer, as well as toilet paper, tissue boxes, trash bags, hand wipes and paper towels," an email from Lovely Village to the Bear-ly Used team reads. "Most of these items will be used in our residential facility that will be opening next year, or given to women that we are currently serving."

Other partner nonprofits included Green City Recycler, which received over 2,000 pounds of goods, and Education Service Center, which gave items to students, teachers and families — including fans for homes without air conditioning.

"Last year, we saw that multiple partners of ours really had a strong impact from the items," La said. "They raised money with it, they gave it to women in need, all sorts of things. So that's what keeps us motivated for this year."

Encouraged by last year's results, La and Yoon are stepping it up with increased marketing, a larger team and improved infrastructure. They brought on Houston senior Ethan Wiley and Katy freshman Allegra Alaniz to help keep the operation running after the founders graduate, and they also have help from Baylor's Sustainability Office and Campus Living and Learning, which Yoon said will continue the program under the leadership of Sustainability Specialist for Operations and Engagement Dr.

Sarah VerPloeg and Senior Director of Sustainability Gary Cocke "We're supported by a great team, which is Sarah and Gary," La said of the Office of Sustainability department. "They give us a lot of support and flexibility on the work that we're able to do and use our creativity."

While Yoon and La elected to limit operations to Baylor's 16 residence halls again this year, they hope to scale up in the coming years.

"How do we make this bigger so that we can collect as many items as possible and eventually hit the majority of everyone here at Baylor?" Yoon said. "That's the end goal."

For now, though, they're focused on ironing out any kinks, like recruiting volunteers, which can be difficult because of finals. Yoon said to make the workload lighter for students, they've divided the shifts into one-hour increments and are also bringing their central sorting — previously at the Baylor Research and Innovation Collaborator — closer to campus.

"If people can see [volunteering] as a study break, that'd be incredible," Yoon said.

Students interested in volunteering can visit the Bear-ly Used website for more information. For students interested in donating their lightly used items, boxes will be available in the lobbies of each residence hall, with signage indicating which items can be donated.

## FIRST-GEN GRADS from A1

really meaningful," Griffin said. "It was also really special to do that alongside other first-generation students."

Programs like FILSA began to connect students early with resources from a specialized adviser to mentorship from upperclassmen, helping smooth the transition into college life, something Griffin said she needed when she first arrived on campus.

"I was terrified coming to Baylor because I was the only person I knew from my hometown," Griffin said. "But Baylor does a really great job making sure anyone who wants community can find it. All you really have to do is look left and right."

For Liberty Ferguson, a Frisco senior in elementary education with a minor in religion, those tools provided her with structure and confidence. After graduation, she plans to teach second grade here in Waco.

"The First in Line program helps set up students with every resource under the sun," Ferguson said. "Whether that be peer

mentorship programs, academic checkups or scholarships, first-generation students are set up to beat the glass ceiling put before them."

Ferguson explained that programs like FILSA and the broader First in Line community were especially significant in helping her understand the more challenging aspects of college, from registration to long-term career planning.

"As a first-generation student, you don't always know the answers or even the questions to ask," Ferguson said. "The First in Line community opens up so many doors, conversations and opportunities to succeed."

While first-generation students make up an estimated 16% of Baylor's student body, Ferguson said significantly fewer take advantage of the available scholarships and programming, making student engagement a key success factor.

"What you get out of Baylor is what you put in, and pouring into that community was one of the greatest joys of my collegiate career,"

Ferguson said.

Mentorship is still one of the most impactful aspects of Baylor's selling point and approach. Ferguson said her mentor helped guide her through times where she felt uncertain and remained a resource long after her first year.

"I remember being so overwhelmed and feeling like I didn't even know the questions to ask," Ferguson said. "However, no matter who I went to, they didn't view me as less than because of that."

In Ferguson's experience, being a first-generation student has meant more to her than academic and personal success.

"Being a first-generation college student means that you are working towards something so much greater than yourself," Ferguson said. "I worked so hard growing up to be able to do something no one in my family has had the opportunity to do. So being here at Baylor isn't just for me and my own goals. It's for my family and future family."

She explained how her college experience here has been transformative to her personal

and spiritual growth.

"I have been able to have an incredible experience at one of the greatest schools in the nation, pursue a degree that I love and that I am passionate about, meet the best people on Earth, be stretched in every way possible and fall deeper in love with Christ," Ferguson said.

Ferguson also accounted for the financial support being an important part of her journey, giving her the chance to attend Baylor without the burden that many first-generation students face.

"I have been able to go to Baylor on a full ride, and that is simply because the Lord is good, kind and sovereign," Ferguson said. "He put me right where I needed to be and right where he wanted me. I believed he would provide, and he did."

When looking back, Ferguson described her college experience as one she will carry with her long after graduating in a couple of weeks.

"Baylor has been one of the greatest joys of my life," she said. "I am so thankful to be a Baylor Bear."

## Baylor cadet earns ROTC honor

**RHEA CHOUDHARY**  
Staff Writer

When Air Force Cadet and Spring senior Alissa Zenero crosses the stage at graduation in a couple of weeks, she will do so as Baylor's only Distinguished Graduate this year and one of a select few cadets nationwide chosen for a premier pilot track.

As a cadet in Baylor's Air Force ROTC program, Zenero earned the Distinguished Graduate designation, awarded to the top 10% of ROTC cadets across the country, while also securing a reserve pilot slot to fly the C-5M Super Galaxy out of Dover, Del.

"When I think of distinguished graduates, I think of my mentors who are like rock stars," Zenero said. "So it felt kind of crazy that I was joining that lineage."

Baylor ROTC Captain and Assistant Professor of Aerospace Studies Bernard Sheppard attested to Zenero's recognition, reflecting on her years of consistent excellence within the program. Sheppard said she's always been a standout since joining the program.

"If I could copy her like a bazillion times, I absolutely would," Sheppard said. "Everything that she touches turns to gold. It's really, really cool to see somebody care that much and constantly want to make things better, not just for herself, but for other people as well."

In addition to this accolade, Zenero's selection as a pilot propels her forward. While most ROTC graduates enter active duty without knowing their aircraft or long-term assignment, her reserve track guarantees both, making it an uncommon opportunity offered to only a handful of cadets nationwide.

"I get the opportunity to know exactly which plane and which base I go to," Zenero said. "That's something that not a lot of people get to do."

During her time at Baylor, Zenero's impact extends beyond her selection and honors earned. She previously served as vice wing commander, one of the highest leadership roles in the cadet corps, and as a drill and ceremonies officer, where she trained and mentored other cadets. She also co-lead the planning of a national Arnold Air Society Conference that brought together approximately 1,000 cadets nationwide with high-ranking military leaders.

Beyond ROTC, Zenero explained the importance of organizations like Silver Wings, a civilian counterpart to Arnold Air Society that gives non-military students the chance to engage in service and professional development alongside cadets. She said the organization offers opportunities for students interested in military or civil service careers to connect with professionals, attend national conferences and participate in community service.



Photo courtesy of Alissa Zenero

**TOP GUN** Baylor ROTC senior cadet Alissa Zenero was selected as the university's only Distinguished Graduate, an accolade given to the nation's top 10% ROTC cadets.

"Students in Silver Wings can go to different events, do community service or go to a national conference where they can talk with contractors and meet with generals," Zenero said. "It's an accessible way for the overall student body to get involved in similar experiences."

Throughout four years in the ROTC program, Zenero managed her leadership roles alongside the rigorous duties of ROTC training and academics as a business management major. Cadets condition in early morning physical training multiple times a week, along with leadership laboratories, aerospace studies courses and extra meetings based on their positions, adding hours of commitment to a full academic schedule.

"There's a lot to do if you put your heart in the right place," Zenero said.

Aside from the time commitment, Zenero emphasized that ROTC provides students with a unique experience compared to other commissioning paths, giving cadets the chance to engage in campus life while preparing for military service.

"We're just students, just with a little bit of military training on the side," Zenero said.

Gradually, Zenero's motivation to stay in the program grew as a result of the mentorship she received.

"My 'why' now is to invest in others the same way people invested in me," Zenero said. "I want to be someone people can rely on."

That mindset, Sheppard said, is what sets her apart.

"The way that she got this opportunity was based on everything she's done by always standing out and doing the right thing at the right time," Sheppard said.

As Zenero prepares to start pilot training and eventually report to Dover, she holds both the national scale of her selection and the accolade of being Baylor's sole Distinguished Graduate this year, depicting a simple mindset she has learned throughout her ROTC career.

"The worst thing someone can say is no," Zenero said. "There's no harm in trying."

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Sam Gassaway | Photo Editor

**WHEN THE YANKEES CAME TO TOWN** The Magnolia Market complex features commemorative statues of Lou Gehrig (left) and Babe Ruth (right), who played in Waco's Katy Park on April 4, 1929.

# Babe Ruth in Waco

*The Great Bambino's visit marked a vibrant chapter in Katy Park's storied past*

**JACKSON POSEY**  
Sports Editor

Ninety-seven years ago, Babe Ruth arrived in Waco.

Pandemonium ensued.

The 1929 New York Yankees were perhaps America's biggest draw. Wacoans showed up in droves to watch the local Waco Cubs host a preseason exhibition match against the back-to-back World Series champions.

Katy Park typically held about 4,000 fans, but on April 4, 1929, the venue packed in 11,000 spectators, roughly a sixth of the town's population. Fans jostled for a glimpse of the Babe with such fervor that a New York Times story from the following morning called the event "one of the weirdest spectacles probably ever seen on a baseball field."

Waco had "never had occasion in all its history to handle a crowd of such proportions," wrote the Times' John Drebinger, leaving event organizers scrambling to make room for the crowds. Makeshift outfield benches were immediately packed to the brim, and pretty soon "most of the inhabitants of Waco were swarming all over the outfield."

Comic hilarity ensued. Officials, overwhelmed by the size of the crowd and apparently unable to fully evacuate the field, gruffly declared that order had been restored. That declaration may have been premature — fans were still overflowing from the stands, "backed against the fence from foul line to foul line," and the children were getting antsy.

Things came to a head when Ruth jogged out of the dugout to take his place in the outfield.

"As a final demonstration some 300 youngsters, most of them barefooted and in overalls, charged out on right field and surrounded Ruth," Drebinger wrote. "This caused another ten-minute delay ... while the great man shook hands, autographed scorecards and beamed upon his youthful Texan admirers."

Satisfied, the crowd backed up to a respectful distance for a few innings. But by the third, they were back on his heels; by the fifth, Drebinger noted, "the Yanks were forced to play with their distinguished right fielder completely engulfed in humanity." Ruth apparently enjoyed the diversion, allowing the kids to climb all over him as he frolicked and rolled in the grass.

During a rare respite from the crowds, Ruth shot a ground-rule double back into right field, where it drilled a kid in the head. The Babe rushed to the outfield to check on the child,

who was not seriously hurt, and gave him an autographed baseball as an apology.

It wasn't needed. The child, by all accounts, was having the time of his life.

"Tonight the proudest youngster in all Texas is a kid with the lump on his head the size of an apple," Drebinger wrote. "He received this intimate contact with the great man of the Yankees when the Babe smashed a two-bagger into the crowd in right field in the third inning."

Eventually, the chaos reached a fever pitch, and Ruth was removed from the game. That was too much for the already-frenzied crowd to handle. They charged the outfield and actively harassed the Cubs' outfielders, attempting to pull the ball out of the players' gloves after Yankees hits. It was a madhouse only the roaring '20s could produce.

home runs in one inning.

The Waco Dons featured one-legged pitcher Monty Stratton, who lost his leg in a hunting accident but continued his baseball career anyway. The one-legged pitcher tossed a shutout for the Dons in 1947, and — a year after his promotion to Waco — served as an adviser for a Hollywood movie about his life entitled "The Stratton Story."

In 1952, the renamed Waco Pirates finished 29-118, good for a .197 winning percentage and a solid 56 games out of first place, one of the worst seasons in minor league history. The following year, the devastating 1953 Waco Tornado destroyed the ballpark, along with much of the city, prompting the team to relocate to Longview.

The park was soon rebuilt, with minimal

baseball teams, including the Waco Black Navigators and Waco Black Cardinals. The latter team made history in a May 1930 game against the famed Kansas City Monarchs.

"It's 1930 that the first night baseball game [in Texas] is played in Katy Park," Sloan said. "The Kansas City Monarchs, which was a Negro League team, comes to town with their light sets and they put up lights, and it's wildly popular. And so a few weeks later, the white owners of the white team install lights because it was obvious how much more money they could make if they would stage night games."

Katy Park also hosted football games for Paul Quinn College, the oldest historically Black college in Texas. In 1949, onlookers watched the Tigers make history, as they defeated the Camp Hood 41st Infantry team 19-6. It was, according to the Philadelphia Tribune, the first game in Texas football history in which an all-Black team played an all-white team.

In 1951, the Waco Tribune-Herald proclaimed that "the greatest Negro baseball attraction of all time will be offered to Waco and Central Texas fans" on Halloween eve, when the "Major League All Stars" — featuring Don Newcombe, Willie Mays and Roy Campanella — would play the "Colored American League All Stars" at Katy Park during a barnstorming trip.

Aside from football and baseball, famous athletes occasionally came to Waco for one-off events, with Katy Park as their venue of choice. Most famously, track and field legend Jesse Owens — three years removed from his historic showing at the 1936 Berlin Olympics — hosted a training clinic in Waco in August 1939, free to attend for any boy under the age of 15.

Joe Louis, one of the greatest American boxers of all time, spent enough time in Waco in 1950 to win a four-round exhibition fight against a soldier from Fort Hood and announce his retirement from the sport. He, too, spent much of his time in that ballpark off Jackson Avenue.

Katy Park no longer exists in its former glory. It was torn down by the forces of nature, then by force of pragmatism. It is physically survived by a Texas Historical Commission marker outside the Silos at Magnolia and a small wiffle ball field on the premises.

Katy Park's story is riddled with imperfections. Seating was racially segregated, and in many ways, the park fell victim to

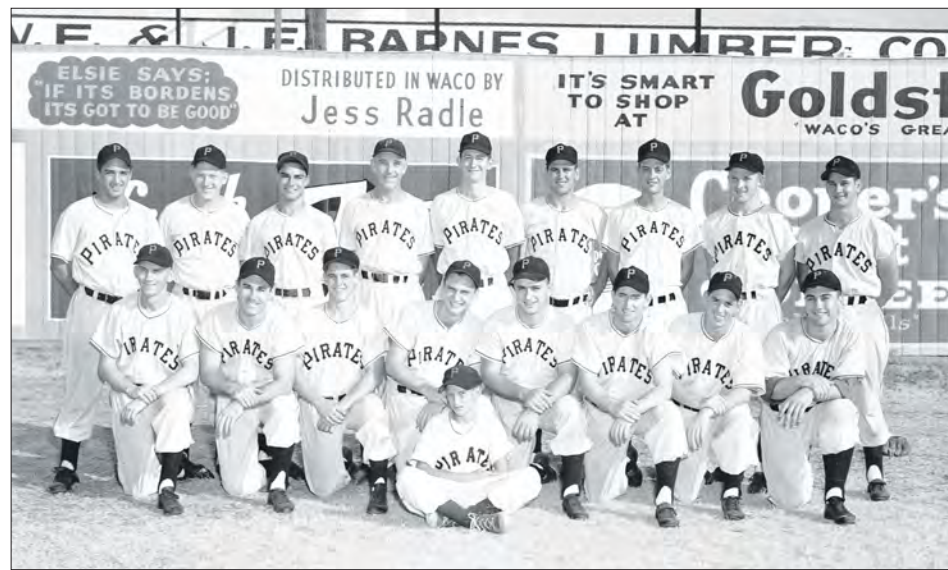


Photo courtesy of the Texas Collection

**AHOY, MATEYS** The Waco Pirates played at Katy Park in the 1940s and '50s.

"It was a joyful picnic that terminated without the Waco Cubs taking their last turn at bat," Drebinger wrote. "No one cared what the Waco players did on this day."

Ruth's appearance may well represent Katy Park's enduring legacy, but that game was only one chapter in a storied history. Teddy Roosevelt stopped in April 1905, marking the first presidential visit to Waco. Several baseball teams played there over the years, including the Waco Navigators, who won the Texas League in 1914, and the Cubs, whose diminutive outfielder Gene "Half-Pint" Rye made history in 1930 by becoming the only player in history to hit three

financial success, and was eventually razed to make room for a parking lot.

"Baseball just holds kind of a special place in the culture," said Dr. Stephen Sloan, professor of history and director for the Institute for Oral History. "I think all these things happening around baseball seem real central to who we are as a people."

The park also played an incidental role in the civil rights movement throughout its history as the site of various Black sports teams and some high-profile integrated sporting events.

The old Katy Park hosted Texas' Black Little League Championship and multiple Black

**KATY PARK >> B3**



Photo courtesy of the Texas Collection

**BASEBALL ON THE BRAZOS** Throughout the 20th century, Waco's Katy Park hosted countless games, including for local minor league teams like the Waco Cubs and Waco Pirates.



Sam Gassaway | Photo Editor

**RESTORATION** The former site of Katy Park has been turned into a wiffle ball field at the Magnolia Market complex. Youngsters often perch atop the statues of Ruth and Gehrig.

# Kuykendall ‘grateful’ for Baylor as he re-enters portal

**DYLAN FINK**  
Sports Writer

After riding the pine for three years at Arizona and Baylor, Will Kuykendall came to a decision: he didn't want any regrets. It was time to shoot for the moon.

"I want to bet on myself now," said Kuykendall, a rising redshirt junior with two years of eligibility remaining. "I could've stayed at Baylor if I wanted to but I talked with [head coach Scott Drew] and the staff and they agreed that I'd regret it if I didn't see what all I could do."

Kuykendall entered the transfer portal this April following an "unbelievable" season at Baylor. The Big 12 veteran is now looking to downsize in schools with hopes of making his last two years of college basketball memorable.

Before playing for two prominent Power Five programs in Arizona and Baylor, Kuykendall didn't see college basketball as something that was on the table for him — until it fell right in his lap.

The Californian guard spent his high school years at St. Joseph's High School in Santa Maria, Calif., where he averaged 5.8 points and 2.7 assists per game. Entering his senior season lacking the eye-popping number most recruiters look for, Kuykendall assumed that his basketball career would end with his high school graduation.

"I had made a lot of good memories playing basketball my whole life," Kuykendall said. "We saw a lot of winning, including going to the state championship, but at the end of junior year I had no offers and wasn't playing AAU ball either."

Kuykendall was spending his senior year applying for colleges, working for his uncle and enjoying his final season of basketball, with little mind of playing college ball.

College coaches regularly attended his practices to watch his teammate (and fellow Baylor Bear) Tounde Yessoufou. Kuykendall tried to showcase himself in practice but assumed no team was focused on him. That is, until a standout 15-point performance against Sierra Canyon brought Kuykendall into Arizona's sights.

"They were in practice after my



Alyssa Meyers | Photographer

**THE NEXT STEP** Redshirt sophomore guard Will Kuykendall drives the ball to the basket during the Bears' win against Colorado in February at Foster Pavilion. He is now entering the transfer portal after spending only one season with the Bears.

game against Sierra Canyon and I figured I had nothing to lose so I went at it," Kuykendall said. "It was actually crazy. The coaches told me that if I ever wanted to walk on at Arizona that they'd have a spot for me."

Up until that winter afternoon, Kuykendall had no expectations of playing college basketball.

"I got in the car and drove to the gas station and my mom met me there ... I remembered just hugging her and telling her that Arizona wanted me," Kuykendall said. "I just started crying and couldn't stop. I can look back at it all now and easily say that was definitely the Holy Spirit moving right there."

Kuykendall redshirted his first year at Arizona and spent the second on the end of the bench. While getting minimal playing time, the guard took advantage of his time in Tucson to learn from the talented rosters around him.

Kuykendall played alongside five current NBA players during his time at Arizona, including Portland Trailblazers guard Caleb Love and Miami Heat wing Pelle Larsson.

"That was an absolutely stacked roster and I learned so much from

them," Kuykendall said. "I hadn't seen any college teams before so I thought that everybody was as dialed as much as some of those dudes were. Caleb [Love] became one of my best friends while I was there and man, he had us living in the gym."

At the end of his second year, Kuykendall was itching for meaningful minutes and knew it was time to hit the portal.

"I knew I was hitting the portal and I was ready to downgrade and get some actual playing time," Kuykendall said. "Tounde had told me that he'd see if there was a walk-on spot for me at Baylor, merely to use to possibly negotiate a scholarship for me if I were to return to Arizona."

Yessoufou soon called his former teammate back to tell Kuykendall that Baylor had a scholarship spot for him. Not long after, the Arizona transfer took a visit to Waco and knew before it was over that he wanted to be a Bear.

"I knew I needed to be here almost immediately," Kuykendall said. "Coach Drew kept having to remind me that there were still parts of the visit I hadn't seen yet because I was already telling him I wanted in."

Throughout the season, Yessoufou echoed his excitement to have his former teammate on the court with him again, as Kuykendall was reunited with the NBA Draft prospect.

"That's my brother man," Yessoufou told The Lariat in October. "I'm always happy to see him succeed, and man, when we get on the court together ... you don't even want to know what we can do."

Kuykendall's Baylor experience wasn't much different to his experience at the end of the bench in Arizona. Instead, the guard found new value off the court.

Living alone for the first time, Kuykendall knew that he was going to have to go out of his way to get plugged in Waco. A cousin that was an alum connected the transfer with some fraternity guys she knew, allowing Kuykendall to thrive in a world outside of basketball.

"I met a bunch of dudes that were all so kind and cool," Kuykendall said. "Outside of all the basketball stuff, it helped me so much mentally to be able to have friends that I could unplug and just be away from all the pressure stuff that comes with basketball."

Pressure was high for the Bears this season, as a culmination of injuries and roster replacement led to a tumultuous 17-17 season, the program's worst finish since 2007. While the ball didn't always fall the way of the green and gold, Kuykendall thinks the team found something more valuable in each other throughout the season.

"We sat down and had to ask ourselves, 'Is this our purpose, and are we really going to let this affect who we are as people?'" Kuykendall said. "We had to learn what we could do and who we are together. Through that we found our faith and our identity as a team through Jesus Christ. I see it all as a blessing as well as the opportunity to look at things through a different lens."

In his one year with the program, Kuykendall credits his experience as leading him to grow not just as a basketball player but also in his faith and in his relationships with the people around him. On a team that was criticized for struggling with on-court chemistry, Kuykendall says he found some of his best friends in the locker room.

"Isaac Williams, for starters, is one of those dudes that's going to be in my wedding someday," Kuykendall said. "Mikey Rataj also is probably one of the best teammates I've ever had. He was like a big brother to me and I learned so much from him ... He was never afraid to call me out on something, and that meant a lot."

Now with two years of collegiate eligibility remaining, Kuykendall is looking for a new school with the intent of downgrading to a smaller program. The 6-foot-3 guard has talked to a handful of smaller Division I programs including Cal Baptist, Cal Poly and Concordia as he hopes to return home to California.

"After learning from so many great people the past three years, I know it's time to bet on myself and see what I can do," Kuykendall said. "My priority is returning home to family but I'm not closing any doors yet. That's not supposed to be on me. It's the Lord's job to open and close doors, and I'll follow."

# Resilience, growth defined Baylor softball's regular season

**CARSON VERCOE**  
Sports Intern

With the regular season over, Baylor softball has clinched a spot in the Big 12 Tournament, with eyes on a possible NCAA Tournament berth. In a year filled with ups and downs, the young squad has shown resilience and growth all season long.

"We went from one of the oldest teams last year to one of the youngest, with 18 freshmen and sophomores," head coach Glenn Moore said. "A lot of free spirits in that group had to be corralled in a little bit."

The Bears finished the regular season with a 28-25 record and a 10-14 Big 12 mark, placing eighth in the stacked conference. The Bears faced a daunting conference schedule featuring multiple ranked opponents, forcing the young team to adjust quickly to the level of play. Although they have at times shown their youth, this team has remained competitive.

The early portion of the season offered glimpses of what was to come. Despite a 10-0 loss to No. 16 Mississippi State and two losses to No. 22 Clemson, the Bears finished non-conference play with a 14-6 record. The Bears picked up big wins and gained valuable experience as a team made up mostly of underclassmen.

The Bears dominated the start of Big 12 play, sweeping Iowa State and picking up a ranked series win in Orlando against No. 23 UCF, but then things started to get rocky.

A gauntlet of ranked opponents and an injury to star sophomore Karynton Dawson proved to be too tall a task for the

Bears. The Bears would drop five of their last six Big 12 series, as well as a few midweek games.

"We show our youth a little bit," Moore said. "I know I got to quit saying that 'youth' word, but you know, when they act young, they throw and play like they're young, then they get that reward of being young."

Through the downward slide, though, stars emerged, as the senior duo of Brooklyn Carter and Amber Toven stepped up as leaders for the young team.

"Amber and Brooklyn have shown great leadership with this team, and it will pay off," Moore said.

Carter batted .329 along with 16 RBIs. Her blazing speed allowed her to steal 22 bases and play sound defense in center field. Toven batted .350 with a team-leading 47 RBIs and five home runs. The duo helped generate a ton of offense at the top of the lineup and provided great defense.

Sophomore pitcher Peyton Tanner used the opportunity to become the Bears' go-to pitcher. Tanner posted a 4.20 ERA with seven complete games as a sophomore.

"I couldn't be happier with what Peyton is doing," Moore said. "I think we're seeing her get more and more confident."

The emergence of a freshman star in Kaygen Marshall also helped the Bears get through the grind of Big 12 play. Marshall currently leads the team in home runs (10) and slugging percentage (.556).

"I've surprised myself coming in and just being more comfortable than I thought I was going to be," Marshall said.

A defining moment for the team was a comeback win against No. 2 Texas Tech on Friday.

The Red Raiders were up 6-1 heading into the top of the fifth, but the Bears battled all the way back, scoring three runs in the fifth and three in the seventh on their way to defeating a top-ranked team. The performance reflected the team's fight and resilience, which it had shown all season.

"This team has some valleys they go through, and we have created a lot of those valleys, but we've never quit, we've never thrown the towel in," Moore said. "That's a characteristic you see in upperclassman teams, so I'm thinking that's going to pay off down the stretch."

At the same time, however, the Bears struggled against the nation's best. Missed opportunities and games that were just out of reach kept the Bears back from becoming a top Big 12 team. These experiences, though, will serve as lessons for a young, talented team in the future.

"It's difficult, and it's hard to lose, but we know we're growing as a team," Marshall said.

With the regular season over, the Bears shift their focus towards the Big 12 Tournament and a potential NCAA Tournament appearance. A Bears team built on youth, resilience and growth will look to keep that momentum going into the tournament.

The Bears begin their postseason push against Texas Tech at 1:30 p.m. Thursday at Devon Park in Oklahoma City. The game will be streamed on ESPN+.



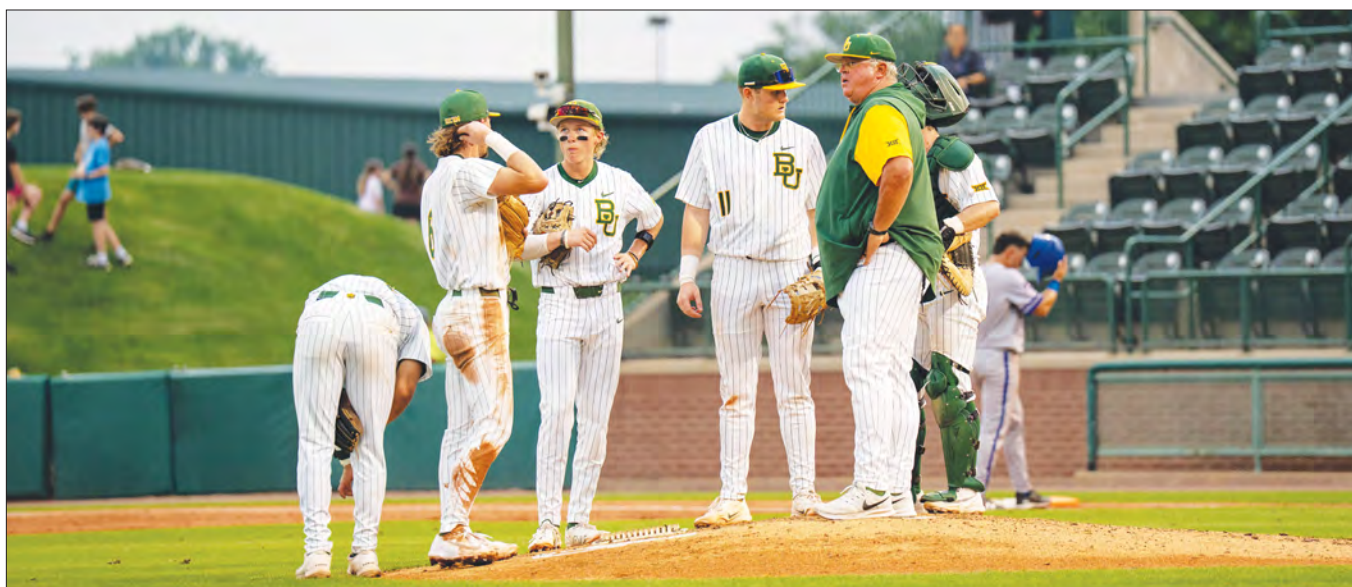
Jake Schroeder | Photographer

**POSTSEASON BOUND** Baylor softball has clinched a spot in the Big 12 Tournament, placing eighth in a conference full of NCAA Tournament hopefuls.



Jake Schroeder | Photographer

**STIFF COMPETITION** The Bears faced a tough conference schedule, finishing with a 28-25 overall record and a 10-14 mark in the Big 12.



Sam Gassaway | Photo Editor

**BUBBLING OVER** With seven games left, Baylor ranks 66th in the RPI, a major metric for determining NCAA Tournament at-large berths.

## Bears fight for position on NCAA bubble

**JEFFREY COHEN**  
Sports Writer

Baylor searched for a Big 12 series win for a month as the 2026 season continued to roll on.

Cincinnati took care of the Bears in the first two games in mid-April before a series against TCU fell out of the Bears' grasp, with a collapse in Game 2 and blowout loss in Game 3. Then-No. 25 Arizona State handed the Bears their third straight series loss in April.

Once the calendar turned to May, Baylor (25-22, 11-13 Big 12) showed up against Texas Tech, taking the first two contests to secure its first conference series win since beating BYU on April 2 and 4.

The successful weekend served as a boost for the Bears, who are currently sitting on the bubble and fighting for their first appearance in the NCAA Tournament since 2019.

"This was a really good weekend for us," redshirt senior first baseman Tyce Armstrong said. "It showed that we have the fight that it takes to be an NCAA Tournament team."

Baylor entered the series against the Red Raiders ranked 59th in the Ratings Percentage Index (RPI), which is generally considered to be the metric that determines which teams make the NCAA Tournament.

Being in the top 55 in RPI has become a goal number for teams trying to find themselves in the mix for an at-large bid in the 64-team tournament. With the Bears straddling that line, every outcome can be make or break.

"You could say we're a fingernail from sweeping the series, but we're also a fingernail from losing the two out of three," Thompson said. "The margins are so thin."

RPI ratings use three main categories to be calculated, and a team's opponents' winning percentage accounts for 50%. While Texas Tech (23-24 overall) did not provide much support for Baylor, the series win goes beyond the numbers.

"You got to feel good about getting a series win," Thompson said. "We played our hearts out yesterday and had to fight for the second win there."

The Bears dominated the first game 8-1. They won 10-9 in Game 2, despite giving up seven runs in the last two innings, but could not secure the sweep after allowing another seven runs across the final two frames.

The Bears were happy to secure their first series victory in a month, but the ending to the weekend forced them to learn a valuable lesson.

"Yesterday for sure showed that the game's never over," Armstrong said. "You can't ease off the pedal. You just got to stay on the gas until the last out."

Baylor plans to attack the remainder of the season with that all-gas mentality.

The Bears stare down seven games left in the regular season. They first will try to take care of Texas State, whom they defeated 14-4 in February.

Then Baylor will close out its home schedule with a three-game series against UCF. This series could serve as a catalyst or a major obstacle for the Bears as the Knights ranked 25th in RPI coming into this past weekend.

Baylor will close out the regular season with a series against Utah. The two teams stand tied at ninth in the Big 12 with an 11-13 conference record.

"It's just keep playing one game at a time, take care of the one game that's up in front of you," Thompson said. "It didn't work out today, but these guys came and competed really hard."

The race for the finish line does not come without its speed bumps. Baylor dealt with multiple injuries in the starting rotation early in the season and now deals with the absence of multiple bullpen arms, including junior left-hander Mason Green and senior left-hander Stefan Stahl.

"We're in the grind of the baseball season," Armstrong said. "Everybody's trying to just stay healthy, stay committed and stay energized in these games."

The Bears enter the final seven-game stretch of the regular season as they take on Texas State at 6 p.m. Tuesday at Irvine-Rasmussen Ballpark in San Marcos. The game will be streamed on ESPN+.

## KATY PARK from B1

many of the same issues that plagued the rest of Central Texas over the years. But as a public space shared by Black and white patrons, its role in local racial dynamics is worthy of further study.

After the Pirates left town for good in 1955, business at Katy Park began to wind down. The end looked inevitable. Perhaps fittingly, the historical marker notes that the field's "last baseball games [were] part of a statewide tournament of African American teams." Even in its final form, the old Katy Park showcased overlooked icons.

Today, the wiffle ball field on Katy Park's gravesite stands as a monument to its former glory. Statues of Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig look on, occasionally still mobbed by children, as home plate remains in the same place it always has.

Katy Park has a complicated legacy. Razed to a parking lot and raised to a wiffle ball field by Waco's biggest economic attraction, its story shows how far the town has come — and how much further it still has to go.

The field welcomed Babe Ruth and 300 field-rushing children, an undersized slugger, a one-legged pitcher, an Olympic gold medalist, integrated football and Negro League royalty. Heroes, all of them, for as long as they stayed on that field. Through a tornado, a demolition and a century of social and economic change, baseball remained.

From presidential visits and boxing matches to racial integration and all the innings in between, Katy Park stood silently, watching generations of patrons pass by and grow old. Watching, sometimes squinting, but always there. In some ways, the old structure lived multiple lives, shifting with the seasons until falling to the winds of calamity.

Life is like that. So is baseball. Babe Ruth left the Yankees for the Boston Braves in 1935 but never got his old magic back. He hit .181 with six home runs in 92 plate appearances for a team that finished last in the National League. The writing was on the wall. It was time to hang 'em up.

The same fate befell Katy Park. With the rise of television and other alternative entertainment, minor league teams didn't seem so interested in moving to Waco anymore. The money dried up. The heart and soul of a community collapsed with scarcely a goodbye.

But perhaps it isn't all gone. The river still winds through Waco, and the desire for change hasn't run dry. Maybe there's still hope for a better tomorrow, for a day when greater harmony and equality reign free. Perhaps the heart of Waco, like America, endures on the dusty corners of local baseball diamonds, patiently waiting for a new generation to approach their hallowed grounds and play ball.

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## The voice of graduation

STACIE BOYLS  
Arts & Life Writer

Meet Sam Henderson, assistant professor of theater and film, who serves as the reader that announces names during graduation. His voice has swept graduates across the commencement stage using his skills as an accomplished actor and professor since 2021.

While his contributions to Baylor span multiple departments, his role in the commencement ceremonies is fundamental to the success of every graduation.

### HOW DID YOU FIND YOURSELF AT BAYLOR?

Henderson: "This could be a twofold answer since I was an undergraduate at Baylor as well. But as a professor, it was a mix of serendipity and the Lord meeting me when I needed it the most."

### HOW DID YOU LAND YOUR ROLE AS THE GRADUATION ANNOUNCER?

Henderson: "The previous announcer, I believe his name is Louis, retired from the position right before the COVID pandemic in 2020. Of course, that was also the year we did not have a traditional 'walking ceremony'."

The following year, the university wanted to combine ceremonies so that both the previous year's graduates and the class of 2021 could walk. It was three days' worth of ceremonies outside in McLane Stadium.

As one can imagine, this was going to be a tall order for a reader. So, one of two things must be true: they thought my performance background made me a good replacement, or I'm a sucker — probably both."

### HOW DOES THE ROLE COMPARE TO ACTING?

Henderson: "There are quite a few similarities. I have a 'script,' and even with a mic, I still need to project. It also requires a certain amount of stamina that I associate with performing long speeches on stage. However, the greatest similarity is that I have to pretend that what I'm saying is right."



Photo courtesy of Sam Henderson

**GRAD GREATNESS** Sam Henderson, assistant professor of theater and film, also serves as the announcer for Baylor's commencement ceremonies.

### WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE MEMORY FROM BEING THE GRADUATE ANNOUNCER?

Henderson: "Every year, two things get me pretty emotional, and I've had to learn how to work through them. One I can say is truly a favorite — when I announce a student I've had. It's such an incredible full circle moment."

The second I wouldn't necessarily call a 'favorite,' but it's deeply meaningful: announcing a posthumous degree and watching a family walk the stage. It gets me every time. Not every university does this, and it's one of the many things that make Baylor special."

### WHAT'S AN UNEXPECTED COMPLICATION OF THE JOB?

Henderson: "Probably pacing. I really try to maintain a quick but deferential

pace for every name. Absolutely no one is at graduation for the 'reader,' but I believe every name deserves its moment — just not a long one."

This is occasionally disrupted by dancing, cheering or other unexpected interruptions, or when I get a bit emotional during the moments I mentioned."

### WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE MOVIE?

Henderson: "Midnight Cowboy."

### WHAT ACTOR INSPIRES YOU MOST AS BOTH AN ACTOR AND GRADUATION ANNOUNCER?

Henderson: "I have so many inspirations. If I reach way back, the reason I wanted to study acting was because of Laurence Olivier and Sidney Poitier."

Yes, I'm old. I certainly have a long way to go before I reach their heights, but hopefully I'm getting a little closer to being a slightly more than serviceable 'reader.'"



Sam Gassaway | Photo Editor  
**SWEET TOOTH** The Apple Gal serves a variety of artisan caramel apples, including this Fruity Pebbles creation.

## Apple Gal opens Waco storefront

ALEXANDRA BREWER  
Arts & Life Writer

What started as an at-home hobby for owner Morgan Francis has now grown into a second storefront for Apple Gal in Waco, expanding from its original location in Tyler. Apple Gal now serves the community with unique candy apple flavors like circus animal and cookie butter.

The idea for the shop first started as a creative outlet for Francis.

"I was a stay-at-home mom, and I just needed a hobby," Francis said. "I did not think it would turn into this, but here we are."

Now, instead of her home kitchen, Francis has two storefronts and about 35 flavors rotating through her cases. The newest store, located at 407 S. Eighth St., is just a short walk from Magnolia and other local downtown spots.

"It was very, very scary to start my first location, because I was [working] out of my home for three and a half years," Francis said. "The jump from home cottage laws and just being comfortable in my house to a storefront was very scary, but a lot like having children. The second one's not so bad."

Francis was ultimately swayed to open a Waco location after another business owner reached out to her through Instagram direct messages.

"The person who owned this building or rented out and had their business here reached out to me randomly on social media and said, 'Hey, we're moving. Do you want this spot?'" Francis said.

When Francis walked into the location, it immediately felt weirdly familiar. The glass shelves, spacious counters and room to show off rows of apples were the perfect additions to the space.

Francis said the Waco community has been heartwarming and supportive. Since the store's opening, many small business owners have stopped by to introduce themselves or enjoy an apple on their break.

"Waco has been such a delight," Francis said. "The community is super supportive... It's been a really good place to land."

Behind the business, Apple Gal is a family effort. Shop manager Jessi Wright, Francis' sister, said her connection to the business goes back to its earliest days, when Francis was still making apples at home.

Wright also emphasized pride in watching the business develop over time, especially seeing her sister's vision take shape into multiple locations.

"I'm very proud of her, and I love just seeing her creativity," Wright said. "She does an amazing job, and it's been so fun getting to spend more time with her."

Wright said she hopes every customer can see the amount of work that goes into perfecting the product itself.

"Morgan worked so hard to perfect this recipe and tinker with it for over a year," Wright said. "It's more than just a plain caramel apple."

Francis wants the shop to feel like an immersive experience for her customers.

"I try to get all five senses," Francis said. "I'm really big into an experience. I want the music on, I want the smells to smell, the sees to see, I want the taste to taste. So I just want it to be a full-on five-senses experience."

Apple Gal doesn't stick to just classic caramel apples. The shop has about 35 flavors in rotation, with a "flavor of the week" and sometimes even two specials.

"We have so many, and I've had so many ideas throughout the years that we have a flavor of the week, sometimes two flavors," Francis said.

Flavors range from a classic red hard candy apple and a simple caramel to some crazier flavors such as Muddy Buddy, topped with cereal, peanut butter and chocolate, or Cookie Butter, built around a Biscoff cookie.

In addition to the Tyler and Waco locations, Apple Gal has an online store for customers. Before deciding to open the Waco storefront, Francis thought she'd focus on shipping and keep things smaller.

"I thought, 'Oh, I'm not gonna have multiple locations,'" Francis said. "I'm just gonna have one, and I'm gonna focus on my shipping. And that's okay." And then this opportunity popped up. I would say what the plan is, but I don't even think I know what the plan is. The plan just happens to me."



Sam Gassaway | Photo Editor  
**AMAZING APPLES** The Apple Gal, located on Eighth Street across from Magnolia, serves delicious caramel apples.

## First-gen student blends identities at Baylor

ISABEL VORST  
Intern

Centerton, Ark., senior Gracie Lawhon is graduating with her bachelor's in biology; however, unlike the majority of students, she is the first in her family to graduate. She currently serves as the student outreach specialist for the student organization First in Line and is a Trailblazer Scholar.

She first became involved with the student organization as a First in Line Success Academy (FILSA) Scholar her freshman year, where she quickly found a lifelong community.

"I wanted to pour back into the system that poured into me," Lawhon said. "I served as a peer leader to first-year FILSA scholars for two years. In my final year, I am the First in Line student worker, where I support programming efforts for our student leaders and scholars."

After graduation, she will pursue a master's in clinical rehabilitation counseling at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, with the hope of becoming a vocational rehabilitation counselor for blind and visually impaired youth.

Lawhon said she would not be where she is today without her faith and family.

"My mom has been a single mother to my younger brother and I for half of our lives," Lawhon said. "She worked any chance she could for us, supporting every dream we voiced. Her mentality was 'How can we make this happen' instead of saying no.

Despite any financial obstacles or distance, she has always encouraged me to explore new places and step outside of my comfort zone."

For Lawhon, stepping out of her comfort zone has led her to Baylor and helped implement future plans for grad school.

"Gracie's family has been her anchor over the past four years," Neches senior Cara Greve, Lawhon's best friend, said. "I've seen them uplift her, encourage her and bring her a sense of peace and reassurance. From their daily sweet phone calls to their surprise visits, their support has motivated her to keep going even when things felt impossible."

Lawhon's brother, Nash, is also incredibly proud of his sister for working so hard to get into her dream grad school. Nash said that being in college at the same time as his sister has allowed them to become incredibly close.

"As we both navigate college life while being seven hours apart, I am super glad to have such a loving and amazing sister like Gracie," Nash said.

First-generation students are generally subject to many assumptions and stereotypes. One that Lawhon has proven wrong is the assumption that first-generation students fall under one demographic and are "at-risk" in academic settings.

"When coming to college, I struggled with my identity as a first-generation student," Lawhon said. "My life did not look like the life of my peers. I was adopted from China when I was 11 months old into a white family from southern



Photo Courtesy of Valerie Castiblanco

**STUDENT SUCCESS** Senior Gracie Lawhon currently serves as the student outreach specialist for the student organization First in Line, guiding other first-generation students throughout

Arkansas. Few people had similar experiences with me, especially any related to racial or ethnic identity."

Lawhon said there were times she didn't believe she earned the "first-generation" title, her struggle with identity reaching beyond imposter syndrome.

"I learned that the experience of first-generation students is just one experience of many," Lawhon said. "Each should be respected and valued, and my story is a testament to that truth. I've met a lot of first-generation students during my time at Baylor, and one thing is for sure: first-generation students are anything but 'at-risk.' We are resilient, driven and compassionate."

Finding community at Baylor was fundamental to helping Lawhon form her identity in Christ.

"Before coming to Baylor, I knew a lot about God,"

Lawhon said. "My dad was a Baptist pastor, so I did all the things that came with that. However, it became a religious routine rather than a loving relationship with the Lord. It wasn't until I got plugged into community with Highland Baptist Church that I really understood what it meant to be a child of God."

Lawhon elaborated that all incoming first-generation students at Baylor should focus on finding their own identity and confidence.

"Give yourself grace and flexibility in your plans," Lawhon said. "The goals you have going in may not be the goals you have going out, and that is perfectly okay. Your path is unique to you. Yes, the people in the room around you are qualified, but don't forget that you are also in that room for a reason. Your story deserves to be heard like anyone else's."

# From track team to big screen

*How a life-altering accident sparked a pathway to reality TV for alum Keviah Ealy*

**KALENA REYNOLDS**  
Arts & Life Editor

From being on the track and field team to building a social media brand, alum Keviah Ealy had no shortage of accomplishments during her time at Baylor. After graduation, Ealy made the decision to take a gap year — a choice that has now led her to starring in the third season of “Vanderpump Villa” on Hulu.

While Ealy has begun to make a path for herself in the media industry, her plans weren't always straightforward. After a career-ending all-terrain vehicle injury in 2023 that resulted in a loss of memories, Ealy was forced to medically retire from the track team, leading her to both a loss of identity and life plan.

“To have my accident, lose my memories and lose that part of myself, I found my passion for social media through that,” Ealy said. “I feel like if my accident never happened, I would still be going to med school, I would still be on track, kind of having this corporate life, which there is no problem with, but it's not what my heart really wanted.”

Ealy said the months after the accident were both emotionally and physically grueling.

“I woke up, and I didn't even really know who I was,” Ealy said. “I was in my childhood room, everyone surrounding me and I'm like,

‘What happened?’”

Following her accident, Ealy underwent a year and a half of vestibular rehabilitation.

“I had these blackout headaches where I was like, ‘I cannot move, I cannot do school, I have to go to sleep,’” Ealy said.

Ealy elaborated that the strenuous moments of recovery were really where she was able to reflect on her priorities.

“It helped me realize that my accident did position me to explore myself because you don't really know what you have until you lose it all,” she said.

Ealy spent the rest of college building a digital platform, quickly realizing that she wanted to pursue social media as a career. After graduation, she received a direct message from a casting director asking if she wanted to be on a reality show.

“I got an Instagram DM, and I was like, ‘Um, sure, like this is gonna be a scam,’” Ealy said. “So I took a leap of faith and went through all of it.”

After going through an extensive screening process, Ealy was flown out to Los Angeles a few months later to meet the crew and Lisa Vanderpump.

Vanderpump is an English TV personality who has appeared on “The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills” and has spearheaded her own shows, including “Vanderpump



Photo courtesy of Keviah Ealy

**SOCIAL MEDIA SUCCESS** From the track team to building a social media brand, alum Keviah Ealy found her life transformed after a tragic ATV injury.

Rules,” “Vanderpumped” and, her latest, “Vanderpump Villa.”

“Vanderpump Villa” revolves around a cast of staff who work and live at exclusive French and English estates. The cast has to navigate working at the Villa while also managing love interests and high-stakes drama.

“You wake up, you get ready ‘cause there are cameras in your room, and you go grab your microphone,” Ealy said. “If you were the morning shift, you'd go and do brunch service ... If you were dinner service, it would be the opposite.”

During filming, the cast was not allowed to have their phones and was only allowed 10 minutes of phone calls once a week.

“It was hard, but I think more than anything, you missed your daily routine,” Ealy said. “Anxiety is so high ... You're performing as an elevated version of yourself, so you just feel this anxiety of not being yourself, and you're like, ‘Am I being myself or am I performing because there's a camera right here?’”

Ealy said that the thing she wants people to take away from her experience is the importance of “taking the risk and jumping off that ledge.”

“The only way you fully submerge yourself into being truly happy is to chase

after your true desires, regardless of what people think about it,” Ealy said.

Ealy's aunt, Tangela Seals, said some of her family were confused about her being on a reality show; however, they ultimately understood the opportunity that was being presented.

“She's always been a high achiever and had a lot of career aspirations in the medical field, and so I think some of our family might have been a little confused because this is way the opposite direction,” Seals said.

Seals explained that Ealy's drive has propelled her to where she is known.

“Once K finds something, she's committed to it,” Seals said. “Even if she changes her mind, she's going to fully commit to that. She's really self-motivated. She's certainly a self-starter.”

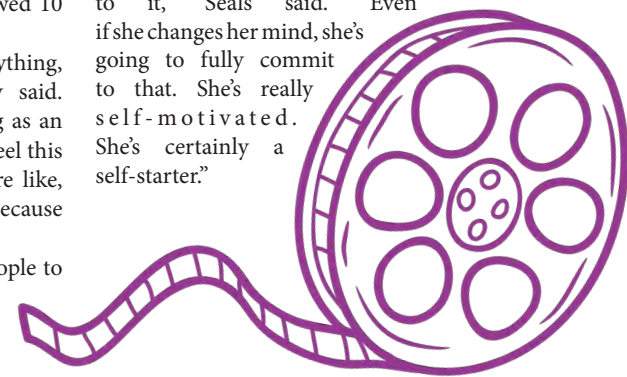


Photo courtesy of Keviah Ealy

**LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION** Baylor alum Keviah Ealy poses next to her “Vanderpump Villa,” castmates. The show is streaming now on Hulu.

## Why you should be more excited for ‘Backrooms’

**SAM GASSAWAY**  
Photo Editor

This year marks the first time internet creatives are getting a chance in Hollywood. With the release of “Shelby Oaks” late last year, written and directed by YouTuber Chris Stuckmann, and the release of “Iron Lung,” written, directed, edited, distributed and starred in by popular gaming YouTuber Markiplier, content creators are now at the heart of their own feature-length passion projects.

The “Backrooms” film is no different.

With the major motion picture adaptation of “Backrooms” being less than a month away, it's surprising how little hype it's amassed on mainstream channels. On social media, aside from the week the initial teaser came out, the reception has been very sparse.

In-person talks have been no better. Even people in the film and digital media department, who are tapped into niche and independent movie releases, have no idea what this film really is. This release truly deserves more hype, from both horror film and cinema fans alike.

The film is being produced and distributed by independent cinema powerhouse A24, home to some of the most critically and commercially successful films of the past decade.

From “Moonlight” and “Lady Bird” to “Everything Everywhere All at Once” and “The Brutalist,” the company has been on a roll since its establishment in 2012, securing over 90 Oscar nominations and 21 wins.

The only thing crazier than the studio producing this project is the mastermind behind it all: a visual effects YouTuber named Kane Parsons.

Parsons, who was 19 at the time of

production, is the youngest director in A24's history, and the studio gave him complete creative control.

It's a level of trust in creative figures that Hollywood has yet to see since the closure of creative-focused studios like United Artists in 1981, and definitely not since Orson Welles and “Citizen Kane” in 1941.

In January 2022, Parsons, known online as Kane Pixels, released the first episode of the “Backrooms,” a found footage-style series on his YouTube channel, which has since amassed over 76 million views.

This unconventional online hit soon caught the eye of A24, and the idea of the feature adaptation was born.

The film serves as a culmination of a viral internet sensation and one of the most successful examples of modern folklore.

Originating from a single source image, the story quickly grew through online forms such as 4chan and Reddit. Now the lore of “Backrooms” is too deep to condense into a column, but a dimension of infinitely repeating hallways, fluorescent lights and liminal spaces can lead to infinite story potential.

Parsons' viral online series and now major motion picture are a direct adaptation of this, not of an established, marketable IP, but of a shared idea.

If this concept doesn't get you excited, this might not be the movie for you.

If this wasn't enough info to encapsulate you, there's also the mysterious underground marketing campaign, requiring fans to search through hidden codes and blow the dust off of their local library's fax machine.

I know I'll be seated in Cinemark when the film releases on May 29.



Photo courtesy of IMDb

**FILM FANATIC** The new A24 film “Backrooms” is set to be released on May 29. The director, Kane Parsons, was only 19 during the film's production.

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**BAYLOR LARIAT**  
News for the students by the students

**Arts & Life**



Photo courtesy of Samantha Stubblefield

**EMERALD** Montgomery PhD student Samantha Stubblefield chose both emeralds and diamonds for her graduation ring.



Photo courtesy of Kristen McPherson

**RING IT IN** Alum Kristen McPherson customized her ring to feature Pat Neff Hall in the center.



Photo courtesy of Sophia Malouf

**WEAR IT PROUD** Cedar Hill master's student Jasmine Fontenot decided on a timeless look for her graduation ring.

# Gold, green, rings

## *A look at the most unique Baylor rings*

**CAMILLE KELLY**  
Reporter

Graduation season is here, and students are faced with the option to invest in their own, custom Baylor rings to treasure their university experience.

The Baylor ring tradition honors the university's legacy as one of its meaningful traditions that has stood the test of time.

According to the Baylor alumni website, eligibility requirements for purchasing a Baylor ring include being a Baylor alumni and undergraduate student who has achieved 75 or more credit hours, a graduate student who has completed 18 credit hours toward their degree or a PhD student who has completed 30 credit hours toward their degree.

According to Cedar Hill master's student Jasmine Fontenot, getting her ring from San Jose Jewelers right before she graduated with her

bachelor's gave her a way to always be reminded of her hard work at Baylor.

"I knew that it was something I wanted to do because it is a great tradition," Fontenot said. "Once we graduate, we are told to flip the ring to showcase outward to the world that we went to Baylor, and while we are in school, we are told to have it flipped to face us to remind ourselves that we are a part of Baylor and the Christian mission."

Fontenot's ring is circular with a ring of diamonds around the center BU emblem. She chose a style with her parents that was similar to the ring her dad had gifted her mom.

"We wanted something that tied in all three of us together," Fontenot said. "We got it to match hers in a way, and I also have my initials and the year I graduated engraved on the inside."

Alum Kristen McPherson customized her ring to feature Pat Neff Hall in the center, surrounded by

emerald stones and diamonds, with a twisted band of four pieces that meet at the center seal.

**“**  
It is a constant reminder of all the hard work you've done and all the support from friends and family.

**JASMINE FONTENOT  
CEDAR HILL  
MASTER'S STUDENT**

"I wanted something really unique and special, and I'm kind of an extra girl, so I wanted something that nobody else really has," McPherson said. "It's a lot bigger than the majority of the Baylor rings."

For Montgomery PhD student Samatha Stubblefield, she was hesitant to invest in a ring at first, but after ring shopping with her old roommate her senior year of undergraduate, she decided on a ring that was "very much her style."

"It has the dual band on it with two prongs on each side of a circular seal with the BU emblem and the top layer is emerald stones," Stubblefield said. "One of my professors actually was looking at it, and she had gone to Baylor for undergraduate and her PhD and she was like 'Oh, I might go get that and change out my Baylor ring' ten years later, just because she really liked it."

Fontenot said her ring will

always remind her of Baylor and the rich tradition that pulses through its campus.

"It definitely is an investment, and I would say it is definitely something that you should strongly consider," Fontenot said. "It is a constant reminder of all the hard work you've done and all the support from friends and family."

According to McPherson, the university ring tradition is one of the things she believes are special about Texas schools.

"You should be proud of where you've graduated from," McPherson said. "Why not have a piece of jewelry that you can wear and show off your time there and just hold on to. You can show your grandkids one day, and it just means more than something that you wear every day ... It's recognizing how incredible it is to go to such a special school."

Have a great Baylor summer.

# LARIAT

## *Break Time*

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