

HIDDEN GEMS



‘You are there to be a friend’

Students mentor Waco youth through Baylor Buddies

ABBY RATHBURN
Staff Writer

The Baylor bubble can feel hard to escape, but for one organization, students are stepping out into the greater Waco area to serve as mentors to local students.

Baylor Buddies is a mentorship program that connects student volunteers with at-risk elementary, middle and high school students in the Waco community. Volunteers spend at least an hour a week with their buddy during the school day, doing activities like making crafts, playing games or simply talking.

“Many of these kids need someone to believe in them, to show up consistently, and remind them that they are seen, valued, and capable of achieving great things,” the organization’s website states.

Dallas junior Livia Thomas, a Baylor Buddies ambassador, said the program is unique because it connects college students with children who are more likely to face difficult situations and emphasizes the importance of building a relationship with them.

“The ‘Baylor bubble’ is a real thing, and we have so much opportunity literally right outside of it in Waco,” Thomas said. “It’s not a super impossible task to try to step outside of your comfort zone and help someone, so I think just putting ourselves out there a little bit more and experiencing these things would make us more aware.”

To prepare volunteers, every mentor undergoes a background check and participates in an orientation. Starting this year, volunteers will also participate in an awareness program designed to help them better understand the experiences of the students they mentor.

Simpsonville, South Carolina, senior Ethan Friend, also a Baylor Buddies ambassador, said the programs help bridge gaps between Baylor students and the children they mentor while helping volunteers understand the inequalities that may shape their buddies’ lives.

“They really stress the importance that your body language matters, so you want to be on your best behavior and present Baylor in a great light.”

Although mentoring can be challenging, the students involved voluntarily chose to participate in the program.

“The reality is that these kids sign up for the program, their parents sign them up, or they really want to be a part of it,” Houston senior Jaclyn Vuong, Baylor Buddies President, said. “They want someone like a role model, and I think that’s a very important distinction between you just going in and volunteering.”

Wichita, Kansas, sophomore Paisley Ghormley said she has enjoyed mentoring her buddy because it gives them both a break from the monotony of school.

“I get to be youthful with them, but I also get to watch that experience, and I think that brings such fond memories and kind of

SELFLESS STUDENTS >> B2



Photo courtesy of Tiandra Acquaye

BEAR FAMILY McKinney sophomore Juliet Korto (left) and Wylie junior Tiandra Acquaye (right) grew up together and reconnected at Mosaic Mixer after realizing they both attended Baylor.

How 3 students found lost family on campus

GISELLE LEE
Staff Writer

In college, students strive to build friendships that are as close as family. But at Baylor, family can be closer than you think.

For Wylie junior Tiandra Acquaye, McKinney sophomore Juliet Korto and Manvel freshman Jeremiah Ocloo, their lives changed overnight when they first met on campus, only to learn they were long-lost cousins after tracing their family lineage back to the Ghanaian Ewe tribe together.

Acquaye said that despite being close with Korto during

childhood, they lost contact before attending Baylor. They recently reconnected through Instagram and met up during the Mosaic Mixer event earlier this month.

“I was surprised to see that I have been going to school with Juliet (Korto) this whole time, but we had never crossed paths,” Acquaye said. “Especially since we are both studying similar things and came to Baylor at around the same time.”

Korto said the reunion was slightly unexpected, as they found out over the summer break through her aunt, with whom she and Acquaye used to play.

“[Acquaye] went by a different name when we were little, so I wouldn’t have recognized her even now,” Korto said. “Now I think we’re going to be friends again, because she’s very nice.”

It was a slightly different affair for Ocloo, who met one cousin after another within the same week; with Acquaye, they crossed paths “out in the open” at the Student Union Building, whereas with Korto, they discovered their connection through a mutual friend.

Ocloo said meeting his cousins at Baylor was a “weird” experience, but he

FAMILY >> B2

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We’ve lost the plot of “What Would Jesus Do?”

THE EDITORIAL BOARD

In June 1891, the late Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon asked his congregation an important question: What Would Jesus Do? The question later appeared in a religious fiction novel by Charles Sheldon in 1896, and the phrase officially became mainstream after a Michigan youth leader created the famous bracelets with the phrase boldly printed out in 1989.

Somewhere since the time of Charles Spurgeon, we have forgotten the meaning of this question. Instead, it has become a familiar saying that is slapped on bracelets, T-shirts or bumper stickers and fails to make it into our daily life.

According to a 2024 Pew Research Center poll, 62% of U.S. adults and 67% of Texas adults identify with Christianity.

Belief is visible on every corner in Waco: white steeples cutting into the Texas sky, crosses reaching above highways, churches marking every street and worship nights strung with fairy lights and soft acoustics. It is seen in the iced coffee and open Bibles, the carefully underlined pages and the verses-of-the-day posted before class.

Our faith has been reduced to something we can post about, be seen wearing or performatively attend. And, often, the way we live is not more than this.

The actions and behavior of Jesus have been reserved for judging others and justifying gossip, rather than orienting one’s own decision-making toward Christ.

“What Would Jesus Do?” has been watered down to an empty and hateful phrase barked when someone does not believe another person is living in a way that is accurate to their perceptions of Christ.



Randy Clute | Cartoonist

This is not the heart behind WWJD.

Often, the way we converse about politics, social issues and each other does not reflect the character of Christ.

Christianity is not intended to be defensive or aggressive, but instead welcoming and loving.

We claim persecution when people do not agree with us; we spout hate behind the safety of a keyboard; we’ve become the moral arbiters of others’ lives with no judgment upon our own.

In the New Testament, the Pharisees are often seen debating with Christ. They hold too tightly to the law and their idea of right and

wrong and fail to see Jesus when he is right in front of them.

Modern Christians adopt the role of the Pharisees all too often, assuming that we know the answers.

Asking the question “What Would Jesus Do?” is easy. Answering it is much harder.

Around 2019, Casey Schultis expanded the rhetorical “What Would Jesus Do?” question by adding “He Would Love First” (HWLF).

Time and time again, Scripture shows Jesus loving people in place of judging them: John 4 and the conversation with the Samaritan

woman, Luke 19 and his dinner with Zacchaeus, the corrupt tax collector and, John 8 with the woman caught in adultery.

“Let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone,” Jesus commands in this story, and one by one the woman’s accusers leave, until it is just Jesus.

And he lets her go. Jesus, could have thrown the stone, lets her go free.

So, What Would Jesus Do?

Jesus would love the individuals around him — with a love that is not found in sin, but rather inviting them into life with him.

Make a goal: Watch FIFA U-20 Women’s World Cup

VANESSA ADAMS
Photographer

As the hype of the men’s world cup simmers down, we are given the opportunity to shift our attention to the FIFA Women’s World Cup, taking place 8 a.m., Sept. 5 to 27.

Regardless of these being the top female soccer players in the world, these athletes are still facing misogyny. This event gives sports fans the opportunity to rally against this prejudice and celebrate the skill of these women.

Aside from just tuning in, recognizing the ongoing battle these athletes have been facing is important. FIFA president, Gianni Infantino’s, scrapped a \$20 billion FIFA Forward Enterprise plan to sell stakes to investors. With this plan, the World Cup would sell shares to private investors by creating a whole new organization called the FIFA Forward Enterprise (FFE).

The conversation left out women’s teams entirely, ultimately stripping away a place for women to speak on an issue that would heavily impact them.

Many other women’s teams have spoken up about the challenges they face. All 28 members from the



Women’s US National Team have sued the United States Soccer Federation due to an exceedingly large pay gap between the women’s team and staff, even though the women’s team has consistently done better in matches.

The players cited numbers from the 2015 USSF financial report to argue that the women’s team generated around \$20 million more in revenue than the men’s team, however the women were still paid significantly less than the men.

A few months after the lawsuit, the US women’s team won the World Cup. The team flooded the field shouting, “Equal Pay! Equal Pay!” Following this, Co-Captain Megan Rapinoe became a symbol for gender equality in sports.

“Men are so often paid and compensated on the potential that they show, not necessarily what they’ve done,” Rapinoe says. “And women are so often paid on what they’ve actually done — which normally I would say, we outperform what our contract was.”

By tuning in and supporting the U-20 Women’s World Cup, you’ll not just show your support for women athletes, you’re also engage in a much bigger fight for equality.

These next few weeks, when you find a free hour or are trying to find out what show to binge next, make an effort to stream the games. In doing so, not only will you enjoy a fun match, you’ll be helping mend one of the largest issues in sports.



Photos courtesy of Baylor Athletics and Lariat file photos

GOING STRONG Baylor’s female athletes continue to excel in the college sports sphere

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CHILL VIBES

JD's Cafe in Woodway quiets down after serving a wide variety of tasty dishes to customers throughout the day.

Lily LeMaire | Photo Intern

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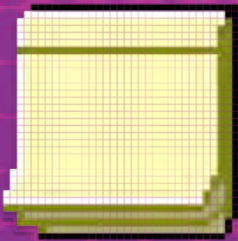


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CROISSANT TIME

Woodway's JD's offers a wide variety of food from burgers to baked goods, some of which you can grab from their ready-to-go section at the entrance.

Lily LeMaire | Photo Intern



Note



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7 off-campus spots for food adventures

ARDEN BERRY
Arts & Life Editor



CATHAY HOUSE

Cathay House has an extensive menu of primarily Chinese foods, including soups, chicken, rice and more. The restaurant is quiet and charming inside and out, with painted walls inside and an exterior based on traditional Chinese architecture.

I like their orange chicken with wonton soup and a crab puff. Their portion sizes are great for the price, so plan to bring home leftovers. You can find Cathay House with its dark green roof and beautiful white-paneled with brown accents exterior on 825 Wooded Acres Drive.

BROWN HOUSE CAFE

For breakfast and comfort-food lovers, look no further than Brown House Cafe. You can get comforting classics like steak fingers and chicken tenders, breakfast foods served all day and desserts. Plus, it's on 9110 Jordan Lane over by Sip City, so you can get a dirty soda on your way back to campus.

I have fond memories of visiting this spot with

LA FIESTA

According to the Waco History website, Sam Castillo Sr. opened La Fiesta Mexican Restaurant and Cantina in 1963. However, its history begins with his father, Antonio P. Castillo Sr., who opened El Patio, later renamed The Italian Village, in 1948. While The Italian Village closed in 1986, its family legacy lives on through La Fiesta.

I have strong opinions about Tex-Mex fajitas, and La Fiesta meets my basic criteria: good steak, good tortillas and good shredded cheese. While places like Rosa's, Ninfa's and Chuy's are also great sit-down Tex-Mex spots, if you haven't tried La Fiesta, go check out its colorful space and reasonably priced local Tex-Mex food on 3815 Franklin Ave.

JIMENEZ BAKERY

Jimenez Bakery has three walls lined with cases filled with colorful pastries, cakes, cookies and pan dulce. The establishment is cash only. You grab a tray from next to the cash register, pull out a pair of plastic gloves from the box provided and pull what you want off the

JD'S CAFE

Located at 6500 Woodway Drive, Suite 101, the JD's Cafe interior is bright and welcoming, complete with a large artificial tree. Its lunch and dinner menu features a variety of options, from steak frites to curry.

I enjoy the shaved steak sandwich, but I'm usually there for the desserts. The signature frosted sugar cookie is the perfect mix of sweet and salty, and the tiered cake slices are worth checking out as well. JD's has some great grab-and-go options near the front, so you can take certain meals and treats to go. The meals are a bit pricey, but it's a nice place to go for a special occasion.

According to an Instagram post from Joshua Davis himself, the business began with JD's Art Cafe downtown, transitioned to a catering company for almost 20 years and opened JD's Cafe in its current state in 2023.

HEALTH CAMP

From the moment I first sipped a chocolate milkshake from Health Camp following my first Baylor tour, I knew Waco, and Baylor by extension, was the place for me. Located at 2601 Circle Road,

SCHMALTZ'S SANDWICH SHOPPE

No list of Waco restaurants that I make would be complete without one of my mom's favorites: Schmaltz's Sandwich Shoppe. Schmaltz's has two locations, with one at 105 S. Fifth St. and another farther out at 1412 N. Valley Mills Drive.

I have spent many a day at Schmaltz's during the lunch rush with my family, sometimes in doubt of there being an open table. My willingness to do so is a testament to how much I love this sandwich shop. When I had a friend tour Baylor back in high school, I insisted that she try it out.

I like to get a sandwich that's just cheese with garlic butter, but the menu has a variety of classic sandwich options alongside soups, salads and chips. The standard option I would recommend would be the Blue Plate Special, which comes with "The Schmaltz Sandwich," chips or potato salad and a small drink.

IF I MISSED ONE OF YOUR FAVORITES...

If I missed a spot, and you have suggestions for other Waco food spots, keep an eye on The Baylor Lariat Instagram stories, where we'll be asking for your recommendations on the subject later this semester.

COMFORT FOOD Brown House Cafe in Woodway prepares for their Lunch rush where customers can order anything from a sandwich to a cinnamon roll.

COLORFUL CREATIONS Pastries fill the trays along the walls at Jimenez Bakery. The bakery has cake slices, breads, cookies and more.

Hilltop Tavern offers eats, atmosphere to sports fans

ARDEN BERRY
Arts & Life Editor

Each piece of sports memorabilia covering the walls at Hilltop Tavern was picked out and hung on the wall by Matt Fatheree, co-owner of the restaurant with his wife, Tiffany Fatheree. Before Hilltop Tavern opened at 13701 Woodway Drive in late 2025, the Fatherees opened The Butcher's Cellar in the same area. After creating The Butcher's Cellar, Matt said the concept for Hilltop Tavern stemmed from a desire to start a sports bar.

"I think after having a really more, not formal, but a nicer restaurant, we wanted something that was a little more relaxed, more family-friendly, kid-friendly," Tiffany said. "We don't really have anything on this side of town. We have George's, but going this way just to watch sports or watch something."

Hilltop's initial menu had about 200 different items.

"So it's constantly being evolved," Matt

said. "We got some stuff on here now that will probably stay permanently. But we are fixing to make another change to the menu and add another five or six things to it."

Their two restaurants and their Scratch House Catering business, located right next door to Hilltop, use the same chefs.

"Our chefs are creative, and they don't like sticking with the same thing," Tiffany said. "I know it makes some people mad, but it's also kind of cool to come in and see what's different. And eventually it will come back around, but it's fun to have something constantly changing. Because I'm one of those people that like to order the same thing over and over. And here if they take it off, then it kind of pushes you to try something new."

For students trying Hilltop out, Matt said he would recommend the "House Made Mozz Stick" as an appetizer.

"It's about 12 inches long," Matt said. "It's huge. And it's absolutely amazing. If they come out here, they have to try that."

For the entree, Matt's favorite is the "Tavern



Layla Bazan | Photographer

SPORTS VIBES Hilltop Tavern has many large televisions for sports viewing and walls filled with sports memorabilia.

Smash Burger," but the menu also includes chicken fried steak, a chicken sandwich that can be made a "Dirty Bird," which adds tavern buffalo sauce, coleslaw and pickles, and the "Tavern Dog."

"I had someone stop me yesterday," Tiffany said. "They were having their 'Tavern Dog.' And he was like, 'I just love this thing so much ... they take the actual dog and they cut it in half and then they put all the stuffings inside.'"

Aside from its sports bar atmosphere and eats, Hilltop Tavern is also home to the official watch party for Baylor's away football games.

"Usually the cheerleaders are here," Tiffany said. "It's loud and fun."

But Hilltop's connections to Baylor do not end there. Among the items on the walls, Tiffany said they currently have two Baylor Line jerseys hung up.

"I like the Baylor Line jerseys," Tiffany said. "My husband has his Baylor Line jersey up there from 1997 ... And then our son's, Cason's, hanging up there ... And then Addison, we haven't gotten hers yet. But we have three Baylor line jerseys that will eventually be up there. So I

like that. A little personal."

As for the other decor, the couple knew where to find decorations from about 14 years of owning The Findery, a furniture and decor shop that has since closed. Matt said he ordered memorabilia off eBay and Etsy.

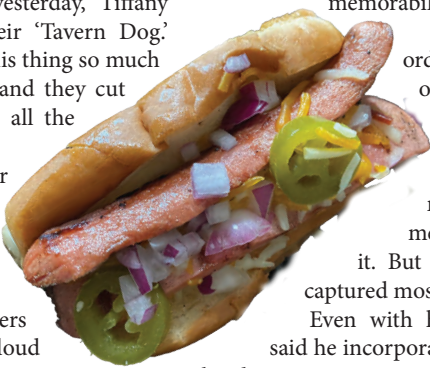
"[I] just started ordering stuff ... I kind of like all this, so I just put it up," Matt said. "We missed a couple of sports, I think. My mother and father give me a hard time about it. But for the most part, we captured most everything in here."

Even with his Baylor roots, Matt said he incorporated multiple schools in his decorating.

"People say we don't have enough Aggie stuff," Tiffany said. "... We have a Baylor alum and then alum by choice. We kind of prefer Baylor."

Hilltop Tavern is open 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday through Wednesday and 11 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. Thursday through Saturday. According to the Baylor website, Hilltop offers 10% off foods and fountain drinks to those with a valid Baylor ID.

Photos by Arden Berry | Arts & Life Editor



Layla Bazan | Photographer

ON THE HILLTOP Hilltop Tavern located at 13701 Woodway Drive in the same area as Scratch House Kitchen and The Butcher's Cellar.

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Escaping cult classics: Students spill hidden gem movies

REIGHA WEAVER
Arts & Life Writer

There are certain “cult classic” movies everyone watches. Yet there are movies that hardly get the same spotlight, despite being just as good. These movies stand out and make an impression despite not having a huge fanbase. Three students shared their “hidden gem” recommendations.

When considering the factors that make a movie a hidden gem, San Antonio freshman Sophie Stevenson believes it’s the ratio of quality to hype.

“It depends on how underappreciated or how under-talked about a movie is even though the movie has incredible quality, story or creativity,” Stevenson said.

Stevenson thinks “It Takes Two,” directed by Andy Tennant, should get more praise.

“I think all around it’s a fun film,” Stevenson said. “It’s a similar concept to ‘The Parent Trap,’ but different enough from it so that it has its own interesting originality. I would also say it’s just very funny and quotable.”

“It Takes Two” tells the story of two girls who look identical who meet one day. It uses the same story elements of “The Parent Trap,” but focuses more on the romantic subplot of the parents.

Sanger freshman Wilson believes that a movie is a hidden gem when it’s unpopular, but a film can also be a hidden gem because it’s misunderstood.

“I think a hidden gem movie is obviously a movie that is lesser known and deserves more recognition, but can also be a movie that



Photo courtesy of IMDb

UNFAMILIAR FAVORITE “It Takes Two” is a comedy about two girls who switch lives.

might be popular but isn’t popular for the true meaning of the movie,” Wilson said.

For Wilson, that movie is “The Darjeeling Limited,” directed by Wes Anderson.

“The Darjeeling Limited’ approaches a family relationship in such a different way,” Wilson said.

“The Darjeeling Limited” tells the story of three brothers who travel across India



Photo courtesy of IMDb

LIMITED EDITION “The Darjeeling Limited” is a Wes Anderson film about three brothers.

after their father dies in attempt to bond with each other.

“The three brothers in it are clearly disconnected, stubborn, and not well-acquainted with one another, but Wes Anderson still strongly shows the deep connection of brotherhood amongst the three,” Wilson said. “I also love this movie because of the unexpected humor within it”



Photo courtesy of IMDb

MAKING MUSIC “Jersey Boys” tells the story of The Four Seasons, a pop band from the ‘60s.

For some, a hidden gem movie is defined by its aesthetics. Boerne freshman Kenlee Runyan thinks “Jersey Boys,” directed by Clint Eastwood, captures the vibes of the ‘60s very well.

“I love the soundtrack, and I love the overall vibe of the ‘60s time setting,” Runyan said.

“Jersey Boys” tells the origin story of the band The Four Seasons, focusing on how the four members came together.

A&L

SONG RECS

• “MY HEART IS BURIED IN VENICE” BY RICKY MONTGOMERY

• “FALLING UP” BY WILL WOOD

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News

Things you’d never know about the man who leads your chapel service

JOSH SIATKOWSKI
Lead Writer

Carlos Colón has been featured in almost every news outlet in Waco, and for good reason. He’s a whole lot more than just the leader of Baylor’s chapel programming.

In his life, Colón has been many things: a refugee, a musician, a Catholic, a Baptist and a Catholic again, to name a few. He has seen more hurt than most, but he’s passionately faithful. When he recounts some of his experiences, he’s drawn back to something his pastor showed him as a boy while growing up in El Salvador.

“One of the deep lessons I learned from him is that the kingdom of God moves through relationships,” he said.

Colón, the Assistant Director for Worship and Chapel at Baylor, was born in Chalchuapa, El Salvador. But he did not stay there long. When he was 14, a civil war in his home country made him a refugee. He spent five years in Guatemala with some friends and family, while others in his family went to the U.S.

While it displaced him from his home country, the turmoil also sparked a religious shift among those in the country. El Salvador had traditionally been a Catholic country, but the war saw many convert to Protestantism with a sense of urgency.

“A lot of people were asking questions about life and death and turning to God,” Colón said.

Colón, raised Catholic, became part of that conversion at age 12 when he stepped into a Baptist church to ask the pastor about the piano and organ inside. The inquiry marked the start of relationships with the pastor and church, relationships in which

he visited remote farming villages, grew closer to his congregation and evolved in his faith.

Two years later, Colón was no longer in the same country as the church that led him to the Baptist faith, as his family escaped to Guatemala just hours before a paramilitary group broke into their home. But for Colón, who has edited, translated, composed and performed many of his own hymns, the memory that so closely connected God and music remains.

“I don’t know exactly if I decided or if it was decided for me,” Colón said of his career as a musician and liturgist. “Even in that moment, the first time I set foot in a Protestant church, a place where my life was transformed, God was showing me my vocation.”

In Guatemala, another relationship — one with his music teacher — shaped his life again. She helped him become the pianist he is today and helped him reunite with his parents in America by helping him secure a scholarship to Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee. Naturally, he studied music.

Colón appreciated the historic country singers who visited the Grand Ole Opry, but over time it became clear that, with his love of piano and his reverent faith, Christian music was his calling. Graduating Belmont in 1990, he arrived in Waco, where he earned a Master of Music in Piano Pedagogy.

Since then, Colón has made a

hymnal music career of his own. He’s

one of the editors of “Santo, Santo, Santo,” a multicultural hymnal whose purple cover students might recognize from chapel services.

In that hymnal, he’s also one of the most credited composers, with numerous translations and compositions attached to his name.

His music has been performed around the world, but he’s continued to live and work in Waco since joining the Baylor chapel team in 2012. In the last 14 years, he’s helped diversify the chapel curriculum alongside Baylor’s former Chaplain, Burt Burleson.

“He asked me to help him start smaller chapels in the dorms that resemble prayer services and the Liturgy of the Hours tradition,” Colón said. “The decision was to multiply not just prayer chapels and worship services, but into things that look more like a class, like a place where people reflect about their vocation. That’s why you have a business chapel, faith and healing, faith and the arts.”

In his time with the chapel team, Colón has worked with a number of professionals and an even larger number of students. One of those students is Isaac Wrobel, who is now a Truett Seminary student after graduating in 2025.

Wrobel called Colón “reverent” and “someone who takes his faith seriously.” As a passionate Christian interested in ministry, Wrobel said he appreciated Colón’s constant mission to keep Jesus at the center.

“The centrality of knowing who truly Jesus is, even through song and through worship, is something that

Carlos always emphasizes,” Wrobel said. “And honestly, it’s taught me a lot too, to really think through some of these songs in church. Do they help me to really know who God is?”

For Colón, this emphasis on centrality also shows in how he shares — or doesn’t share — about himself. The goal of his team, he said, is not self-expression but evangelism.

“I mentor students here at Baylor sometimes as a songwriter, and I try to change their minds,” he said. “I say, ‘Our role as Christian songwriters is to be messengers of the gospel.’ So, in the chapel, I will tell stories about my life, as long as they help people.”

Around the time he began working at Baylor, Colón lost his wife, Dr. Susan Colón of the Honors College. Even then, he never strayed from his faith.

“I probably could count with one hand a Sunday when I didn’t go to church,” he said.

Colón has since remarried, and he’s also returned to the Catholic faith. Part of it has to do with his wife’s Orthodox denomination and reverence for the old Church, but another part comes from his desire to balance two virtues.

“One of the turmoils of North American Christianity is that separation of love and truth,” Colón said. “People want to emphasize truth without love, and that can become brutality. Or people who want to emphasize love, but detach from truth, that becomes wishy-washiness.”

“In the U.S. there really is a crisis of love and truth,” he continued. “But love and truth are not separated. And Jesus Christ — he actually keeps them in perfect balance.”

Caleb Garcia | Photo Editor

Students are talking; BU Athletics is listening

JOANA KAROSHI
Staff Writer

Baylor students may see changes to the game-day experience this year as a new student council works with Baylor Athletics to address barriers keeping students from attending athletic events.

The Athletic Student Advisory Council, a new initiative under External Vice President Lucy Dennis, held its first meeting Friday. The 11-member council and a Baylor Athletics representative will meet monthly to discuss ways to improve game days and increase student engagement.

The first meeting focused on how to get students’ attention for game days. Aaron Fordyce, associate athletic director of marketing and fan experience and the council’s Baylor Athletics representative, asked members for feedback on a weekly email from Baylor Athletics. Members discussed its formatting, colors, graphics and content, as well as other ways to engage students, including athlete meet-and-greets and social media reels.

Fordyce said student feedback is important to Baylor Athletics because the department relies on students’ energy and passion at games.

“Hearing from students on what the obstacles are [that do not allow] them to come to events, or what things we could do better, is extremely important for us,” Fordyce said.

Some barriers to attending games, such as classes and busy schedules, are unavoidable, Fordyce said. Others, including communication from Baylor Athletics, can be addressed.

“We talked a lot today about whether there are opportunities for us to

email the students regularly and get the student-athletes out on campus to communicate with their students about upcoming games or matches,” he said.

Dennis, a junior from Parker, said the council has been in the works since last spring. To find members, she reached out to campus partners, including the Office of Multicultural Affairs, New Student Programs and organizations connected to athletics, to ask for recommendations.

“Yes, there are students in there who care a lot about athletics, and this is something they put thought into,” Dennis said. “But also the student who has not really gone to games or encounters barriers to entry — we want to make sure their voice is accounted for as well.”

Dennis said she is already thankful for her relationship with Baylor Athletics and hopes the council will create a two-way exchange between students and the department.

“Our relationship already is what we hope for it to be,” she said. “[It’s] definitely a two-way street, where it is not simply just students giving input to athletics but also bringing news back to their communities as well.”

Changes resulting from the council will not happen immediately, Dennis said. The timeline will depend on the type of request.

“Requests like ‘We need more water’ or notifications for game days, I see those requests as things we could improve within the semester quickly,” she said. “But when you are thinking of changes that are more structural and require a lot of funding or donor support, institutional approval, such as Baylor Line improvements, those are things that might take nine months, a year.”

Dennis said some success may not be seen immediately and that the council will

help future generations. She also believes initiatives like the council hold both the athletic and student sides accountable.

“Success in a council doesn’t come from how many items on our list we see change immediately,” she said. “But rather, do students feel like they’re able to voice things, and if they’re being received well, that’s one measure of success.”

Waco senior Benjamin Jacob joined the council because of his involvement in Baylor athletics. A self-described “die-hard avid Baylor fan,” Jacob joined the Bear Pit as a freshman and worked his way up to president his junior year.

“I want to showcase the fun aspects of the atmosphere on game days,” he said. “My goal is to get as many students to show up at the games as possible.”

Jacob said the Bear Pit meets with Baylor Athletics every two weeks, but he believes additional opportunities for student input can help strengthen communication between students and the department.

“I think it will be really good to have more student voices heard by athletics,” Jacob said.

Looking ahead, Fordyce hopes students will notice the changes the council helps create.

“Overall, what I want that change to feel like is ... students who have nothing to do with this council feel the same way because they’re like, ‘Wow, they really thought of everything,’” Fordyce said. “That all starts by listening to the students in an environment like this first to make sure that we can achieve that goal.”



Photo courtesy of Sarah Kathryn Ricci
SOPH-AI Faith and Sophia serve as the two Virtual Engagement Officers helping strengthen relationships with Baylor donors.

Say ‘hello’ to Faith & Sophia: Virtual robots help fund Baylor’s future

TRIPP HENDERSON
Staff Writer

Baylor is using artificial intelligence engagement officers to have curated interactions with under-reached donors, keeping them involved in university happenings.

On May 2, 2025, Version2.ai announced in a LinkedIn post that it had partnered with Baylor to develop and implement a Virtual Engagement Officer (VEO) called Faith. The artificial intelligence agent curates donor interactions and engages them with the university.

“Baylor is accelerating its efforts to increase donor engagement, leveraging Autonomous Fundraising to spark more connection and reflection with supporters in a personal, scalable way,” the post reads. “Faith will play a key role in strengthening relationships across the donor community, making it easier for the advancement team to listen, learn, and lead with insight.”

In addition to Faith, there is a second VEO called Sophia. Together, they help to maximize university outreach to a database of over 170,000 alumni and 300,000 friends of the university.

Sarah Kathryn Ricci, Associate Vice President of Alumni and Volunteer Engagement at Baylor, oversees donor and alumni engagement. She played a pivotal role in overseeing the Virtual Engagement Officers.

“[Faith and Sophia] are working to work with a group of people who we haven’t historically been able to get in touch with,” Ricci said. “As they engage with them and they start to interact, that’s really a place where we can say, this person would be wonderful to reach out to. How can we get them more involved in the life of the university?”

The implementation of Faith and Sophia comes amid a university-wide push to use new technology to drive efficiency.

“We’re working on how do we integrate [AI] into just the operations of the institution to make us more efficient and



Caleb Garcia | Photo Editor



Walter Guerrero | Photo Intern

READING TIME The quiet reading room of the Texas Collection, featuring spacious wooden tables and warm lighting.



Walter Guerrero | Photo Intern

OLDEST LIBRARY A close up of one of Carroll Library's exterior name signs on the southeastern side of the building.



Walter Guerrero | Photo Intern

ARCHIVES A row of elegant, dark wood chairs sitting in front of one of Carroll Library's grand sections of Texas history.

Texas Collection is making ‘history accessible’

STEPHANIE STARKS
Staff Writer

Tucked inside of Carroll Library, Baylor's first library building, is a collection of Texas history that stretches far beyond the walls of the university.

The Texas Collection houses historical documents, books and other materials that tell the story of Texas and its people. In 1923, Dr. Kenneth Hazen Aynesword and other Baylor graduates donated volumes on Texas history to the university. Now, The Texas Collection is one of the largest institutions in the world dedicated to historical documents related to Texas history.

For students, The Texas Collection, its exhibits and primary documents provide opportunities to encounter history firsthand and consider how the events of the past continue to shape the present.

Sylvia Hernandez, outreach and instructional librarian at The Texas Collection, said understanding history can help students recognize

how people before them responded to challenges.

“We are The Texas Collection,” Hernandez said. “Our main focus is from the viewpoint of Texas, and I think that learning both American and Texas history is important for students to be able to look back on how people solved problems in the past.”

The collection is currently highlighting that connection by displaying documents in an exhibit commemorating 250 years since America's founding. The exhibit, which will remain on display through October, features documents from the Revolutionary period, including journals from the Second Continental Congress, where the Declaration of Independence was signed, and documents detailing colonists' grievances over taxation.

The documents are organized into three periods: the events leading up to the American Revolution, the Revolution itself and the period immediately following it.

Hernandez said the collection's exhibits also allow students to see how larger moments in American history connect to Texas.

Nothing can go wrong when students engage with challenging topics from the past, or just things people may not be familiar with.

ERIC AMES
ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR
IN TEXAS COLLECTION

“If you look at some of the other documents that are on display, you can kind of see how immigration has affected Texas itself,” Hernandez said.

Eric Ames, associate director for advancement, exhibits and community engagement for The Texas Collection, said making history accessible is central to the collection's purpose.

“There's always relevance when we look into the past,” Ames said. “Part of our job is to put out as many of these stories as we can, so that we can make history accessible.”

That accessibility is particularly important for students, Ames said, because engaging with historical topics can challenge their existing perspectives and broaden their understanding.

“Nothing can go wrong when students engage with challenging topics from the past, or just things people may not be familiar with,” Ames said. “This makes students grow, broaden their understanding and that is what The Texas Collection is aiming for with the exhibits that we

put on display.”

Houston junior Emma Savoy works in The Texas Collection as an archival assistant. She said working with historical materials has changed the way she thinks about the importance of preserving and understanding the past.

“If we can't learn about our own history, we're bound to make mistakes,” Savoy said. “This old adage that everyone says has a lot of merit. Learning about history can be really fun if students engage in it properly.”

For Savoy, one of the most valuable aspects of the collection is the opportunity to interact with primary documents rather than simply reading about historical events.

“Looking at primary documents here is one way to do that because it is free to the public to access these documents,” Savoy said. “It is important to see and understand what people before us were thinking and how that thinking has evolved over time.”

VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENT OFFICERS from B1

to support students in better ways, and frankly, potentially to reduce our operating costs over time,” President Linda Livingstone told the Lariat in May.

The University's Vice President of University Advancement, Jason Diffenderfer, said roughly 60 staff members interact with donors regularly, and Faith and Sophia are meant to expand that work.

“Any one of those 60 individuals will work with roughly anywhere from 100 to maybe 200, which would be a lot of individual people at a time — Faith and Sophia, they work with 1,200 people at a time, and they're able to interact with them on a unique basis,” Diffenderfer said.

The VEOs and donors interact via text or email. Diffenderfer gave the example of Faith or Sophia sending a question to a donor and, based on the response, curating a conversation that sources information on university happenings to

get donors involved.

Naturally, ethical questions arise with the use of AI in fundraising, especially around privacy and data. Ricci said the university “takes privacy seriously,” and individuals can opt out of interacting with Faith or Sophia if they wish.

Baylor alumnus and donor Annette Boorman said she has not had any contact with Faith or Sophia, but if she did, she would opt out of the interaction in favor of the human connection she currently has with the university. Boorman said that “personal touch really reminds [me] of the real reason why [I] love Baylor so much.”

“It's worth it for me to take the time with my in-person donor contact because I get the chance to encourage him as well, so there's a much more reciprocal relationship,” Boorman said.

Ricci emphasizes that Faith and Sophia are not meant to replace human interaction with machines.

“We see [VEOs] as a way to actually create more relationships because we want to see more people raising their hand to do something with Baylor,” Ricci said.

Diffenderfer also echoed the importance of preserving human connection and its crucial role in success.

“Baylor is such a community-based university that builds community, that wants to foster community,” Diffenderfer said. “We look at this as an opportunity to continue to do that, but we never want it to lose that human connection. That's very, very critical to our success in fundraising and engaging individuals.”

AI use in fundraising has yet to be widely implemented across colleges and universities. As Baylor pioneers new territory, Diffenderfer said he finds it “kind of exciting too, that we can be a leader in this space and demonstrate how to do it well.”

FAMILY from A1

appreciated having people close to him.

“It means I can't act a fool, but it's cool to have a home away from home,” Ocloo said. “I was worried that Waco was going to be unfamiliar territory, but now I have a family here already. I'm excited for my freshman year, and now I have my seniors, my elders, my ancestors here to give me advice and tips and tricks.”

Ocloo said he hopes to use his experience to encourage students to “go out” and talk to people to form unique connections.

“You shouldn't be afraid to go out and talk,” Ocloo said. “Everyone wants to make connections. If you like them, you stay friends with them. If you don't, you move on. Maybe you'll find your cousin, or your twin sister.”

Go out and place yourself in an environment with people that share similar interests. I'm glad to still be here at Baylor and connecting with people I enjoy having in my community.

TIANDRA ACQUAYE
WYLIE JUNIOR

SELFLESS STUDENTS from A1

the child part of my life still in the mix,” Ghormley said.

For Vuong, Thomas, Friend and Ghormley, their desire to join Baylor Buddies stemmed from a shared interest in working with children. While their reasons differ, they have each found a way to turn that interest into service.

“In high school, I was in an education class, and I went into classrooms to go shadow,” Ghormley said. “Then, this one second-grade

teacher took me under her wing, so I was able to come back anytime I wanted and would help with lesson planning, and it was my favorite time of the day.”

Looking ahead to this year, Vuong said she is excited to continue building relationships between buddies and mentors while fostering a stronger community among the mentors themselves.

“One of our biggest goals is community, not just within the Waco community, but within

our organization itself,” Vuong said. “We are planning a lot more meetups and events with just the mentors.”

Baylor Buddies also saw interest from prospective volunteers at Late Night, with approximately 100 students signing up to become mentors, Vuong said.

“No matter where you're from or what your background is, you do not need to have any special skills,” Vuong said. “You are there to be a friend.”



Photo courtesy of Jaclyn Vuong

BEST BUDDIES Baylor Buddies mentors engage in a group craft activity with each of their buddies at the fall semester CIS Carnival event.



Photo courtesy of Jaclyn Vuong

CHRISTMAS FUN Baylor Buddy mentor and kid smile at the fall semester Christmas social after engaging in fun activities and crafts.

Korto said that she looks forward to bringing her cousins around Waco and “having a good time” bonding together. She also highlighted the importance of using friends as connections.

“Our mutual has a lot of friends, so if I see her with somebody, I'm going to talk to her, then I'm going to talk to everybody else,” Korto said. “It's a very easy way to find friends. I'm excited to bring them to tour around downtown Waco; the library, the coffee shops, the very cute, very nice, pretty area we live in, I want them to see it.”

For Acquaye, time and space were crucial in forming special connections, which she hoped students could learn from her cousins' stories.

“I spent my first year to myself, just focusing on school, which affected how I felt about going out and even if Baylor was the right place for me apart from the academics,” Acquaye said. “Go out and place yourself in an environment with people that share similar interests. I'm glad to still be here at Baylor and connecting with people I enjoy having in my community.”

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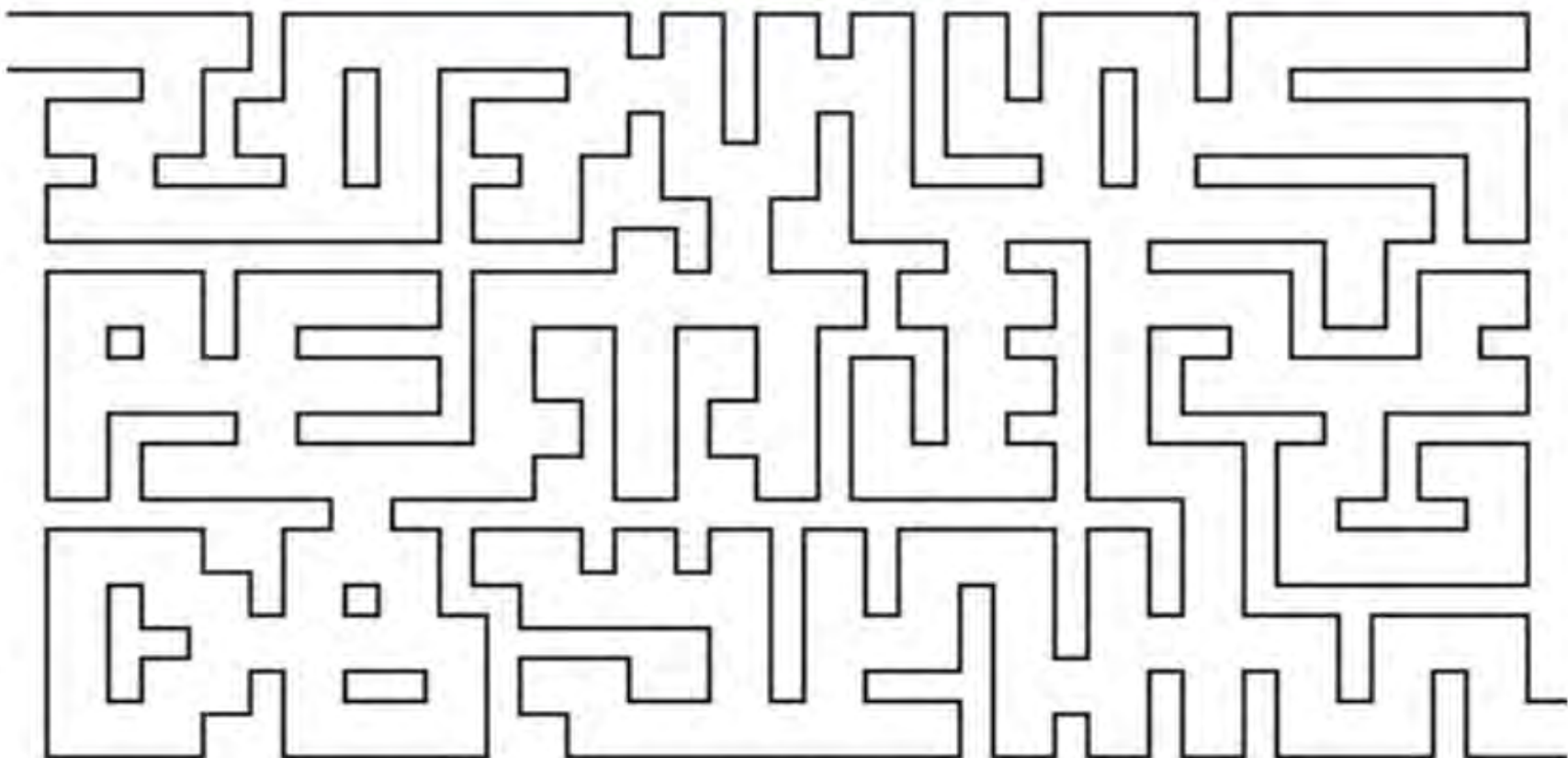
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Studied at Pinewood	Visited Magnolia	Stayed in Moody Library until close	Went to a Baylor football game	Ordered a Cowboy Coffee at Common Grounds
Pulled an all-nighter	Pet a cat at Draper		Went to Taco 2 after a football game	Walked in Cameron Park
Started a Sic 'em	Made a stuffed bear during Welcome Week	Ate at each dining hall	Sat on a swing bench	Coordinated decor with your roommate
Drank a milkshake at Health Camp	Bowled in the SUB	Ordered an OMG from Rising Roll	Lost your ID card	Ran the Bearathon

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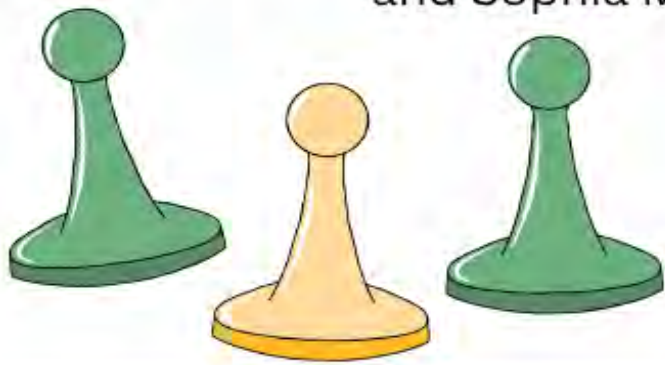




Photo courtesy of Baylor Crew

EARLY MORNING WAKE UP CALL Members of Baylor Crew row under the sunrise reflecting off the Brazos River. Baylor Crew's practices begin at 5 a.m. and go to 7 a.m. Monday through Friday.

Baylor Crew bonds through commitment

JEFFREY COHEN
Sports Editor

A small black tent with an air rowing machine and a couple of students sitting behind a table is a common sight for Baylor students walking through Fountain Mall.

Some choose to look down at their phone, while some put in an AirPods to avoid an extra interaction while walking between classes.

"It's hard to recruit people, and it's even harder to get them to keep showing up," Stewart said.

For those that choose to walk up to that tent, the interaction could lead to a defining aspect of their college experience.

"It played a very important role in deciding where I attended grad school," said Denton graduate student and head coach Max Stewart. "It was one of the big reasons I wanted to stay at Baylor and continue helping with the team."

Stewart initially considered Baylor to run on the track and field team. While realizing he did not quite stack up to the times of Baylor's nationally-recognized runners, Stewart found rowing as a good substitute for his running cardio.

He was hooked immediately. He competed with Baylor Crew throughout undergrad and eventually worked his way to being the club's head coach while working toward his master's degree.

Despite the rowers that return each semester praise rowing, it is a grind. One of the primary reasons that people are reluctant to join is the early wake up call for practice.

"Practices are 5 to 7 a.m., five days a week," Stewart said. "We're in our distance season, our 5K season. So, [it's] getting your lungs used to being uncomfortable and really stretching our legs for longer races and getting comfortable for long durations of rowing."

That grind is what creates the strong connections between Baylor Crew's members. Their commitment also elevates the competitive spirit.

"You generally form bonds with the people there because you are up so early and because

of the work you put in," Bryden said. "We will suffer together, but we will win together. And that's what we really want as a competitive team."

Those relationships do not only hold weight on the water. They leave notable impacts on the rowers' lives.

"I was going through a rough time," Newport Beach, California, senior Colin Bryden said. "I just moved out to Texas ... I had family stuff going on and everybody was so supportive. They were all kind. It wasn't fake."

Baylor Crew also competes with a chip on its shoulder. The club vies to compete at a high level despite working with fewer resources than some of the teams it faces off against.

"We're competing against teams with paid coaches, million dollars a year in funding, paid boatman to come fix their boat house and maintain it," Bryden said. "We have to do all that ourselves. So when we put our boats on

the trailer ourselves, we drive it out to the race ourselves, we unload everything ourselves."

The success of the club depends on the dedication of its returning rowers. As some of them move into leadership or coaching positions, they are tasked with leading a team filled with new members.

"90, 95% of people on our team had never rowed before," Stewart said. "We're constantly teaching them and it's all like, 'Hey, we're all figuring this out together ... You just stick it out for a few weeks, you know, you're going to learn a ton.'"

The club also struggles to keep a consistent number between seasons. Some are not able to keep up with Baylor Crew's rigorous practice schedule with their classes, and it sometimes boils down to their desire to compete.

"It varies so much semester to semester,"

Stewart said. "The fall of my junior year, we had 73 people on our roster ... We're now sitting at around 25 to 30."

The club is still accepting to both those that want to compete and those who are still on the fence about whether they want to commit. It does not cut anyone who is interested in rowing.

"The people who want to be competitive and the people who want to row, we will absolutely have a boat for you," Bryden said. "If you don't know if you want to be competitive, if you don't know if you want to row and you're figuring it out, we have a boat for you, too."

Baylor Crew is set to compete in three or four events in the fall, but the spring is its primary semester. Its most important competition is the Southern Intercollegiate Rowing Association (SIRA) National Regatta in April.



Photo courtesy of Baylor Crew

COMING IN HOT Four members of Baylor Crew row together in the 2026 Heart of Texas Regatta in Austin.



Lariat file photo

PUMP THEM UP Senior Connor Van Schalkwyk pumps his fist toward the crowd in Baylor's 4-1 win over Texas A&M.

Baylor men's tennis connects with students through charity

AIDAN O'CONNOR
Play-By-Play

There is an inherent separation between student athletes and students, but Baylor men's tennis has found a way to connect the two worlds.

"It's just really cool to bridge that relational gap between athletics and the Baylor student body because sometimes there's not a lot of opportunity for us to interact with Baylor athletes," said Terra Bella, California, senior Brenna Galloway, who is VP of Philanthropy and Service for Zeta Tau Alpha. "It was just really cool to help them and get more attendance at their games and boost the morale of the guys and the people there."

For the past five years, Baylor men's tennis has connected to students through an idea that was initially created by former volunteer assistant coach Nich Ochran. This idea was to engage with organizations across campus through philanthropic challenges.

"You'll have a designated match that you'll go to as a sorority,

fraternity or campus organization, and then whoever gets the most attendance at those games gets the money donated towards philanthropy," Galloway said. "Last year, we were fortunate enough to win that participation credit. They donated \$1,500 back towards our philanthropy, which is Breast Cancer Awareness, Education and Research. It was just really cool to see Baylor Athletics want to invest in something that's not just Baylor Athletics."

Before these challenges begin, the Bears also visit several of the organizations and plays with the winner before a match. This way, the team is not only giving to a charitable cause but enriching interpersonal connections between players and students. "My guys being predominantly international with how much the demands are on these student-athletes, they are very focused on what they're doing, and they're somewhat in their own bubble world relative to a general student," head coach Michael Woodson said.

Sports

Baylor Spikeball builds community around the net

CARSON VERCOE
Sports Writer

You don't need a packed football stadium or a sold-out basketball arena to be competitive at Baylor. Sometimes all you need is a circular net, a yellow ball and three friends ready to compete.

For Baylor's club Spikeball team, or roundnet team, a casual beach and backyard game has turned into a competitive one filled with dives and rallies. Whether they are battling it out or just playing for fun, this team has built a community within a simple game.

Baylor club Spikeball is just one of the 36 club sports options at Baylor. It was created in 2015 but grew in popularity during COVID-19.

"It really grew and exploded during COVID because it was one of the only clubs still active during the pandemic," said Temecula, California, senior and Baylor club Spikeball President Jawaan Rasmussen. "Every Wednesday on Fountain Mall there were tons and tons of nets because that was one element of community that people got during COVID."

The surge in participation helped the team become the 2022 College Roundnet national champions.

Now the club has around 116 players with 16 competitive players and around 100 casual players. The club offers two teams for people with differing interests.

"There are two clubs," Rasmussen said. "You have the casual club and the competitive club. The casual club meets from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. on Fountain Mall, which is tons of fun. The competitive stuff also happens from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. but on Tuesdays and Thursdays

at Edgefield." But aside from the actual sport, the club offers more than just a game. It offers a sense of community for students who might be missing out on the sports they used to play.

"When I came here, I was missing the sports and team aspect, and I didn't have a team anymore, so I didn't know what to do," Chicago senior Haleigh Manske said. "The team brought back a piece of my life that I was really missing."

The club also gives students a chance to build meaningful friendships through competition.

"It's definitely a close-knit community because the competitive club is smaller," Santa Barbara, California, senior Micah Allin said. "You really get to know people super well and just form good relationships with them."

On the competitive side, the team participates in several tournaments and has found success showcasing its skills against other colleges on a national stage.

"People love competing," Rasmussen said. "We have lots of tournaments, and this past summer we won nationals, so we're definitely among the more competitive club sports."

While winning tournaments and competing at the highest level remain at the heart of this club, the club's success is not measured solely based on what goes on around the net.

Whether students come to Fountain Mall for competition or to have fun, Baylor club Spikeball has created a place where both can coexist.

"There's no skill level required," Rasmussen said. "We're here to have fun, and just build community, and share God with one another through playing."



Photo courtesy of Baylor Roundnet

ON THE NATIONAL STAGE Santa Barbara, California, senior Micah Allin spikes a ball in front of the net in a national roundnet tournament.



Lariat file photo

FOR THE HOME CROWD Senior Devin Badenhurst swings into his forehand in front of Baylor supporters in the Bears' 4-0 win over UCF.

MEN'S TENNIS from Page B6

"I think any opportunity that we can have to get them integrated in with the main student population I think is wonderful."

The effects also extend to match days with attendance providing a boost of morale to players and giving them a competitive advantage over their opponents.

"It's a massive advantage, and it just makes it that much more fun," Woodson said. "It's why the guys love playing at home, getting their crowd, their people. They're competitors, but they're also entertainers and love the opportunity to show off their skills and their tools to new people."

Through and through, these philanthropic challenges have deepened the relationship

between the Bears and the student body. Now looking to the future, Baylor men's tennis hopes to expand and grow the challenges as well as continue other avenues of connection such as Baylor Giving Day and the Pro Bear Bash.

"We're going to try to, this year, expand to other organizations, club, intramural teams, you know, different, all student organizations, and try to incentivize them to get more involved with us and find ways that we can benefit like causes," Woodson said.

The Bears begin their fall campaign with the ITA All-American Championships on Sept. 19 in Tulsa, Oklahoma, at the Michael D. Case Tennis Center.

SAN JOSE JEWELERS
THE UNIVERSITY COLLECTION

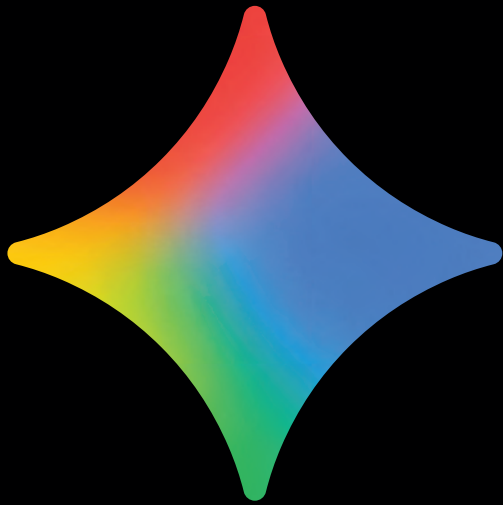
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