Recently, when John Ragsdale contemplated his relationship with his alma mater, he thought not only of sharing his success with the university, but doing it in a way that might make a difference in the world.

Ragsdale has given Sam Houston State University $1,252,500, to be distributed among three different areas of the university.

“Sam Houston State University has given me so much, that I wanted to give back to the university and the students,” he said.

“Also, I’m hoping that my contribution somehow, at some point in time, will provide an education for someone who may go on to make a significant contribution to society,” he said. “They might be a famous chemist, or minister, or entrepreneur. And who knows? Because the endowment will provide scholarships in perpetuity, the money might enable several individuals in the future to make a difference,” Ragsdale said.

One million dollars will be used to establish the John R. Ragsdale Alumni Enrichment Endowment Fund to benefit the work of the Office of Alumni Relations and for a Joint Alumni Endowed Life Membership in honor of Mr. and Mrs. Ragsdale.

The John R. Ragsdale Enrollment Management Enrichment Endowment Fund, to provide financial assistance to the university’s Division of Enrollment Management, will be created with an additional $150,000.

Also, the Winnie Laurene Ragsdale Scholarship Endowment Fund, in honor of Ragsdale’s mother, will be established with $102,500 for the education of a Sam Houston State student from Humble.

Ragsdale grew up in Humble, a happy youth with a loving and supportive family and many friends. He entered Sam Houston State Teachers College in the fall of 1954, and the following year he became a member of the Caballeros. The group went on to be known as Sigma Chi fraternity, and Ragsdale
Ragsdale from page 1

returned to Sam Houston State following his graduation and tour of duty in the U.S. Army, to be formally initiated into the fraternity.

He graduated with a Bachelor of Business Administration degree in general business and a commission in the army in 1959.

After serving active duty in the military, he and his wife, Mary Ellen, returned to Houston where he began a seven-year career with Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company, and he and Mary Ellen brought up their two daughters, Georgia and Laura.

But if I had to do it all over again, I think I would find time. And from this point forward, I do believe I'll spend more time there.”

In recognition of his generous contribution to the university, during Homecoming Weekend on Oct. 20 at 10 a.m., the new gateway building for Sam Houston State will be dedicated as the John R. Ragsdale Visitor and Alumni Center.

Ragsdale is humbled by the gesture.

“It’s a tremendous honor,” he said. “It’s something I never anticipated when I was a kid walking the sidewalks of Sam Houston State. I came from a modest-income family, and never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that I would be able to give a gift such as I have to the university and have a building named after me. I’m very honored and feel very fortunate and blessed to be able to do this.

“When I first decided to give money to the university, I didn’t know a thing about naming opportunities. That came up later on,” he said. “This is icing on the cake!”

In 1968, Ragsdale and his partner opened their first Burger King Restaurant. The business was successful, and at the time of Ragsdale’s retirement in 2000, they owned 23 restaurants in and around the Houston area.

In addition to being an entrepreneur, he also served on the board of directors of Klein Bank, and was a major stockholder during this time.

Although Ragsdale was making tremendous strides in his professional life, he was facing a difficult time in his personal life. In 2003, following a lengthy illness, his beloved wife, Mary Ellen, died.

However, he was not to endure loneliness for very long. His high school sweetheart, Judy, and her husband had been close friends with John and Mary Ellen Ragsdale.

Around the same time that Mary Ellen died, Judy lost her husband as well. They turned to each other in friendship for comfort.

Later Ragsdale and Judy began going places together, first as friends, then as a “couple,” when their newly found interest turned into love for each other. They were married, and now have a home together on Lake Conroe where they enjoy spending time with their children, grandchildren and friends.

Ragsdale is also happy to be only about 45 minutes from Sam Houston State.

“In many years, I was busy making a living, running my business, and raising my family,” he said. “I didn’t think I had time to spend coming back to the campus.

“For many years, I was busy making a living, running my business, and raising my family,” he said. “I didn’t think I had time to spend coming back to the campus.
With the Byrds, Giving to SHSU Truly is a Family Affair

Rod Byrd didn’t hesitate when asked what prompted him to establish a scholarship endowment at Sam Houston State University. “The love of rodeo,” he said.

Rod and his brother, Rex, have set up the Byrd Family and Friends of SHSU Rodeo Fund to provide scholarships for deserving students on the rodeo team, no matter what their majors are.

“It’s better for them if they get a college degree, because at some time, their career is going to end in the rodeo circuit, and if they have something to fall back on, it’s always better for them,” he said.

Rod was a member of the SHSU rodeo team in the 1970s while he was working toward his degree in agricultural business.

“For years, Sam Houston had the premier rodeo team in Texas, and probably in America,” he said. “When I was in college, we were rivals with one of the college rodeo programs in California, but we were certainly the best.”

Rod said he had become concerned that members of the Sam Houston rodeo team didn’t have the kind of scholarships that other students who play sports such as football or baseball.

“Their families have to support them, or they have to find a way to support themselves on their own,” he said. “We just figured that since the rodeo kids have done so well, and with some help could do even better, they should have some recognition and support for their efforts.”

Byrd is proud that the endowment his family has set up doesn’t just benefit one department at Sam Houston State University.

“It goes to the rodeo kids, and one of them might be a business major, one might be an agriculture major, one of them might be a biology major,” he said. “It crosses the university in many areas.”

The endowment is structured so that others outside the Byrd family can contribute and be recognized. Rod’s long time friend, Rusty Davis, has made a pledge of $5,000.

Davis said there had been much discussion among rodeo team alumni about what they could do to help at SHSU.

“After all the talk, Rod was the one who actually did something about it,” said Davis.

All donors to the endowed scholarship will be perpetually recognized on a plaque to be prominently displayed in the Department of Agricultural and Industrial Sciences. The donor levels include: less than $5,000 – Maverick Member; $5,000 to $24,999 – Champion Member; $25,000 and above – All-Around Member.

The endowment is not the first contribution to the university by a member of the Byrd family.

Rex has supported the SHSU Athletics Department for approximately 20 years through the Gifts-In-Kind program.

“When recruits and new athletes from all sports come to town, we have an arrangement for them to eat at El Chico,” said Rex.

In addition, the restaurant has sponsored the “Tuesday Night Fundraising Event” for almost 15 years. Although the program is available to the entire community, about 25 percent of the fundraisers are Sam Houston State University related, benefiting any organization.

Rod and Rex’s mother, Frances – who earned her Master of Education degree at Sam Houston State, set an example of giving to the university years ago. She has been a consistent supporter of the Friends of Theatre and Dance and has supported a number of scholarship and program endowments.
The Samuel Houston Society commemorates Texas’ greatest hero and the university’s namesake. Members of this society, our major donors, receive invitations to a special event held annually. One hundred and sixteen members attended this year’s program on September 7. Mickey Herskowitz, holder of the Phillip G. Warner Endowed Chair in Journalism was the featured speaker.
Joe and Winnie Sandel

M.B. Etheredge meets ELC member Carol Weller as Advancement staff member Rhonda Ellisor looks on.

Wilburn and Geraldine Dickerson

Pianist Yanira Soria provides entertainment during the reception in Austin Hall

Following the reception in Austin Hall, guests were served dinner in the Peabody Memorial Library.

Joe and Winnie Sandel
Young Texans who are looking for ways to help them get started on their path toward a college education now have access to an innovative mobile education resource center provided by Sam Houston State University.

The university’s Enrollment Management Division has purchased a 42-foot trailer with a gooseneck-style hitch to create SHSU’s version of the Mobile GO Center. The purchase was made possible by a one-time $126,700 grant from the Texas Pioneer Foundation.

The trailer is called the “Go Kats Go” Center, based on the name that was selected following a faculty/staff contest.

“The alumni who saw it told us they were proud to be associated with a university that had taken this step to reach out to underserved students,” she added.

For approximately 30 weeks, the unit will travel across the state to county fairs, high school football games, music festivals, livestock shows and other community activities where a young audience can be reached to recruit in areas with low college attendance.

While GO Centers are not unusual for colleges and universities in Texas, the one at Sam Houston is unique in that Enrollment Management staff will be able to collect data through Sam Houston State’s university computer system so that they can track and stay in contact with each person who uses the Center.

Because many of the prospects in the areas Sam Houston State is targeting will be first generation college students, university officials are hoping to take some of the “intimidation” factor out of applying for college and financial aid.

“We will have representatives on hand to answer questions from families and help guide them through the process,” said Houston.

The trailer, which was built by Magnum Trailers in Austin, has over 20 computer terminals and is equipped with a generator and a satellite receiver to give the computers Internet access. Enrollment Management officials hope to add to it every year.

“We’ve been very pleased by the response,” said Houston. “We wish we had enough time to go to every place that has been suggested to us.”
The Master of Science in Forensic Science program has received a $100,000 gift from two Sam Houston State University graduates, who wish to remain anonymous, toward the purchase of a chemical ionization gas chromatograph/mass spectrometer.

“We have traditionally supported Sam Houston State University through scholarships for students,” said the donors in a statement.

“However, once we heard about the university’s need for new equipment in the Chemistry and Forensic Science Building, we decided to provide financial assistance for infrastructure to support work in the labs,” they said. “It’s our understanding that knowing how to use this new equipment will give students in the forensic science program at Sam Houston an advantage when it comes to getting jobs.”

The highly sophisticated instrument is used to detect illicit and prescription drugs (toxicology and controlled substances), accelerants (arson), paints, polymers and adhesives (trace evidence).

“This helps us equip the program with instrumentation that is used in crime laboratories nationwide,” said Sarah Kerrigan, coordinator of the program.

“We want our students to know more than theoretical concepts,” she said. “Equipment like this gives them hands-on experience that better prepares them for the workplace.”

Gas chromatography/mass spectrometry has also been used in airport security to detect substances in luggage or on human beings, as well as trace elements in materials that were previously thought to have disintegrated beyond identification. It is considered the “gold standard” for forensic substance identification.

The equipment at Sam Houston State will be used in a variety of graduate teaching laboratories and to support faculty research.
From the ELC

I became involved with Sam Houston State University’s Capital Campaign because the campaign allows each of us to make a difference for the future.

Generations of previous Sam Houston alumni paved the way for me. The faculty, staff and students allowed me to achieve an education that enriched my life then and now. Our work today will help future generations receive an educational experience that will positively change their lives.

The endowment that I established in the College of Business Administration will be a permanent bond with future generations of Bearkats. I hope that they will give back to SHSU to help strengthen future generations as well.

When thinking about what Sam Houston State means to me, I can honestly say that the impact cannot be measured. The opportunities given to me because of my education can never be repaid. The support and lessons I learned at Sam Houston continue to make a difference in all areas of my life, even 25 years after graduation.

Charles W. Jones III is the senior vice president and East Coast production manager for Wachovia Dealer Services. He received a Bachelor of Business Administration degree in finance in 1981. He is a member of Lambda Chi Alpha and a Life Member of the Alumni Association. Charles also serves on the College of Business Administration Advisory Council.

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Jones