

People Builder

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Within 48 hours of arriving at BYU, transfer student Duane D. Oakes (BS '89, MA '90) found himself parked on the steps of the BYU administration building, staring at the skies from a sleeping bag and waiting to get a ticket to apply for a job. He wondered what on earth he was doing in Provo.

His uncertainty grew as the semester progressed. The former student body vice president at Mesa Community College was accustomed to being in the center of activities and felt isolated and disconnected at BYU.

"I really wondered whether I had made the right decision," he says. "I came because I received a leadership scholarship, making BYU affordable as long as I worked. As the only person in my family to attend college, I was responsible for all my own expenses."

Oakes got a job in the cafeteria of the Missionary Training Center and still wondered what he was doing in Provo as he peeled thousands of eggs and chopped thousands of mushrooms.

"I struggled to find a place at BYU. I did not know many people and had no family nearby for support," he explains. "One day, as I stood on the second floor of the Cougarreat I pondered my future and decided go home."

He could not have foreseen that his life was about to change. Tamara Quick (BA '69), a student government advisor, greeted him, and within a few moments the teary-eyed student told her he was returning to Arizona. Her quick response was "You are not going anywhere! You are staying here and we are going to mentor you."

That moment changed Oakes' life forever.

"I remembered him from Student Orientation earlier that semester, because unlike most of the new and transfer students, he had been eager to volunteer and had passed out lunches to the other students," Quick says. Both Quick and Maren Mouritsen ('78), the dean of Student Life, had been impressed with him and thought he might do well in student government.

Under their guidance, Oakes realized he could fit in and succeed. He made friends, got involved in student life, and thrived academically. "I found my passion for working with students," he says, "and realized this is what I wanted to do professionally."

The word "involvement" is probably mild to explain the rest of Oakes' academic and post-collegiate experiences. He says he took the motto "Enter to Learn, Go Forth to Serve," seriously and immersed himself in BYU life. He was an ASBYU Ombudsman, BYUSA vice president, and even Cosmo the school's mascot. He helped plan Homecoming, and danced at BYU Spectacular and Christmas Around the World concerts. In 1989, Oakes received the Outstanding Undergraduate Student Award.

More important, Oakes found his life's work. He earned two degrees in recreation management and youth leadership while working as a graduate assistant in the high school relations office and giving tours to thousands of future BYU students.

"One of my fondest memories," he says, "was giving tours on the top of the Kimball Tower, especially at night. I remember giving basketball player Shawn Bradley a tour and getting into an elevator with him. He needed to bend over just to enter it."

Upon graduation, Oakes continued working with students and relied on knowledge and experience he gained from BYU. His first job, at the University of Wyoming, involved coordinating student activities. In 1991 he returned to Arizona as the founding director of student life at Chandler-Gilbert Community. BY 2000 he was back at Mesa Community College as a member of the faculty and the director for the Center for Community and Civic Engagement.

Along the way, Oakes has received many honors, among them the Paragon Award, Giles Distinguished Advisor Award, the Continued Excellence Awards, and Mesa Community College Hall of Fame. His greatest joy, however, is in changing the lives of students just as his life was changed by caring BYU advisors.

"I have had the opportunity to help mentor thousands of students who are successful citizens all over the country," he says. "Just this year, two of my students were named to the All-USA Community College First Team. This recognition goes to only 20 students from all community colleges nationwide."

Service is another Oakes' hallmark. In 1992 he helped start the Service-Learning Program at Chandler-Gilbert Community College and helped build a national model. At Mesa he enhanced that model and strengthened it as a service-learning and civic responsibility training for the Community College National Center for Community Engagement and the American Association of Community Colleges. He has presented at local, national, and international conferences on service-training, including BYU, where he helped dedicate the new Wilkinson Center and provide a workshop for faculty and staff on service-learning in 1995. At Mesa, he has documented more than 1.6 million hours of service from students he and his team have mentored. A plaque he had as a BYU student leader still hangs on his office wall and reads "People before Programs."

"I hope I can always remember that I am building people first," he says.

Oakes is again serving BYU in a direct way. He and his wife Geniel Seaman Oakes ('89) have agreed to chair the Arizona BYU Chapter in Phoenix of which he says, "It is a privilege to help promote the Spirit of the Y and help others see and feel that spirit. I look forward to my service with BYU." At BYU's Homecoming this year he created a popular contest for Phoenix students where he gave clues on Facebook and they then found shirts that had been placed throughout campus. It culminated with a reunion that drew 200 participants.


And he showed his wife the steps where he had once slept on a sleeping bag.


"This time I knew why in the world I had come to Provo," he says.


Duane D. Oakes

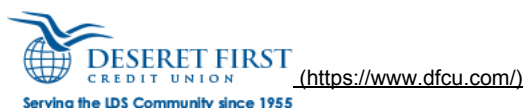
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