MU News Bureau

Daily Clips Packet

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The Texas A&M University football team’s win over top-ranked Alabama in 2012 will never be forgotten by the Aggie faithful, but the game is not the only memory that a Texas A&M University System regent carries from that day.

Piloting his private jet to Tuscaloosa, Ala., for the game, the regent, Jim Schwertner, secured a prime landing slot at an airport and later persuaded security to let his limo park next to the stadium despite not having a permit — after telling officials he was traveling with the “first lady of Texas A&M.”

“I’m sure the air traffic controller had no idea who the first lady of Texas A&M really was,” Mr. Schwertner said, sitting in his Georgetown, Tex., hangar, before launching into laughter. A&M’s “first lady” is a collie named Reveille.

Mr. Schwertner recounted the story several times to Richard Box, a former Texas A&M System board chairman, who smiled with each telling. The repetition was not solely for their enjoyment. The men were filming a scene for a planned documentary about Texas A&M’s move to the Southeastern Conference in 2012.

A&M’s decision to join the SEC, which has been widely heralded as a transformational move for the university, will be the subject of print and film accounts, set to come out this fall, that detail the behind-the-scenes moves that brought about the change.

By leaving the Big 12 Conference for the SEC, the university cut ties with other Texas institutions, including its longtime rival, the University of Texas at Austin. The proposed shift drew a backlash from A&M alumni, threats of lawsuits from other institutions and lobbying from legislators. (The Texas A&M System, the university and U.T.-Austin are corporate sponsors of The Texas Tribune.)

“Village idiots, they don’t understand we’re going to get creamed,” Mr. Schwertner recalled critics saying. “We got a lot of hate mail. Then when it happened and we were successful, everyone took credit then, which is fine with me.”

“Victory has a thousand fathers,” Mr. Box agreed, “and defeat is an orphan.”

In September, Texas A&M University Press plans to release “The 100-Year Decision: Texas A&M and the SEC,” by R. Bowen Loftin, who was president of Texas A&M from 2009-13 and now serves as the chancellor of the University of Missouri. He wrote the book with Rusty Burson, a vice president of Texas A&M’s 12th Man Foundation, a fund-raising organization that supports Aggie athletics. (Texas A&M University Press is a corporate sponsor of the Tribune.)
Mr. Burson said Mr. Loftin’s leadership role in A&M’s move gave him the insight he needed to write the book. Mr. Loftin declined to be interviewed for this article.

But Mr. Burson stressed that the book sought to provide one of many perspectives, and that Mr. Loftin was not the only key decision maker.

“He certainly relied heavily on his inner circle, on the board of regents and a number of folks to get input,” Mr. Burson said. “But as the president, he was making decisions or was put in position to make some decisions that were very, very difficult. The book gives people a real insight to the thought processes that went into it.”

“Breaking Tradition,” the working title for the documentary, aims to be a more definitive account. Individuals close to the project indicated that, because of the personalities involved, wrangling the necessary participants among the key players could prove challenging. John Robison, a 1985 A&M graduate who has led multiple technology and movie production companies, is spearheading the production.

Returning to Texas last year after spending several years in Los Angeles, Mr. Robison began toying with the idea of producing a reality show on the Aggie football team’s summer training. But as he delved more into A&M’s decision to switch conferences, he said, “what I found was that the real story was better than a season of ‘Dallas.’”

Mr. Loftin was largely the public face of the decision, but Mr. Robison, after conducting his own research, came to refer to Mr. Box; Mr. Schwertner; Cliff Thomas, an A&M regent; and Jim Wilson, a former A&M regent, as the “four horsemen” who helped secure the move.

“There were people around the decision that had one foot on the dock and one foot on the boat, so to speak,” Mr. Robison said. “I noticed that a lot of people were taking credit for it, but my question was: Who actually had the resolve to get it done?”

During a break in filming last week, Mr. Schwertner singled out Mr. Box. Though some university officials had pushed for staying put or moving to a different conference, Mr. Box never wavered in his belief that the SEC was the right choice.

Mr. Box returned the compliments by noting that when administrators at Baylor University dangled the possibility of suing over the move, Mr. Schwertner sought the aid of 12th Man Foundation leaders. They came up with enough money to indemnify the conference.

Regardless of where most of the credit should go, supporters of A&M’s move to the SEC argue that the change was as much about reputation as it was about revenue. Not only did the university become a part of a conference with a higher national profile, but it managed to step out of the shadow of Texas, which had angered A&M officials in 2011 by announcing a new Longhorn Network as part of a 20-year, $300 million deal with ESPN.

Ultimately, an absence of Longhorns on the schedule did not translate to a lack of interest in Aggie football or Texas A&M University. In its first year as part of the SEC, the university
announced that it had raised more than $740 million, or more than $300 million over its previous single-year high.

“I don’t think football is the end all and be all of what a university is about, but what it does is it focuses attention on the university,” the Texas A&M System chancellor, John Sharp, who joined the system in 2011, said.

Mr. Robison, who is aiming to screen “Breaking Tradition” for investors in August and center the film’s release on the Aggies’ October showdown with Alabama, said the conference switch and his film on the topic were about more than football.

“A&M was suffering from battered-Aggie syndrome,” he said. “You can’t be great if your goal is only to be as good as the other guys. It took a major breakthrough to get out of that mind-set, and to me, this is also that story. It’s a maturing of our rivalries.”

It also may have been a story of stars aligning. In 2012, the school’s football team had a new coach, Kevin Sumlin, and a new quarterback, Johnny Manziel, who won the Heisman Trophy as a freshman and was selected in the first round of the N.F.L. draft this year.

If the last two seasons had not been so successful, Mr. Burson said, “I don’t think Aggies would be as likely to want to relive the whole transition.”

Jury's out on programs intended to reduce Medicaid costs

June 01, 2014 12:15 am • By Jim Doyle jdoyle@post-dispatch.com 314-340-8372 and Virginia Young vyoung@post-dispatch.com 573-556-6181

In 2008, Centene Corp. took on a contract to manage health care for 30,000 foster children in Texas — a tough new challenge for the Clayton-based Medicaid contractor.

Texas state caregivers had been prescribing a lot of psychotropic drugs to these children and adolescents. As these youngsters were shuttled from one house to another, Centene executives said, state authorities often lost track of which medications the children were taking.

“I think the state understood that their ability to manage this population was limited,” said Keith Williamson, Centene’s general counsel.
Within a year of winning the contract, Williamson and other Centene executives said, the Texas foster care program was being more effectively managed: The state budget for foster children had declined, and the number of psychotropic drug prescriptions was reduced significantly.

One key: Centene created a “health passport” for the children, an electronic medical record that follows them from county to county and into adulthood.

Centene executives cite their success with the foster care program as an example of how a managed care company can provide quality care while saving money.

But in Texas and other states, managed care of Medicaid continues to spark debate.

“There are some cost savings — the Texas Legislature wouldn’t do it otherwise. (But) with the rollout of any managed care in a state, there are always concerns about quality of care,” said Clayton Travis, a health coverage policy analyst at Texans Care for Children.

F. Scott McCowan, a clinical professor at University of Texas School of Law and director of the Children’s Rights Clinic, agreed that Centene has significantly reduced the number of psychotropic medications for foster kids through a “retrospective review” of children’s medications.

But McCowan says it may take years before the state realizes significant cost savings in the foster care program. And managed care has yet to solve the problem of recruiting enough physicians willing to accept Medicaid rates of pay, he adds.

While trends have favored managed care of Medicaid — about 35 states and the District of Columbia now contract with for-profit companies to manage their Medicaid population — there have been some high-profile stumbles along the way.

In Kentucky, litigation continues over Centene’s early termination of its Medicaid contract. Centene executives say that Kentucky’s contract rates were based on misleading information regarding its Medicaid population.

In Texas, state officials last month canceled a managed care contract with a Xerox subsidiary. The move came after the attorney general’s office sued to recover hundreds of millions of dollars that the company allegedly paid for Medicaid claims that were not properly reviewed. Xerox, which denies any wrongdoing, blamed unscrupulous dentists for taking advantage of the program.

In 2012, Connecticut jettisoned its Medicaid contractors, saying it preferred to use the millions that went to administrative costs and profits to instead boost pay for primary care doctors and improve care. The head of the Medicaid program said the state lost confidence in the managed care contractors. “Their measured performance is not impressive,” Mark Schaefer told Kaiser Health News.

MISSOURI HESITATES

In Missouri, where lawmakers again turned down federal money to expand Medicaid eligibility, there also was reluctance to expand managed care.
Currently, three managed care companies provide services in about 54 of the state’s 114 counties, covering less than half of the state’s 823,761 Medicaid participants.

Legislative committees this year recommended a Centene-backed bill that would have shifted more children and parents into managed care policies run by private insurance companies.

“I believe it’s a way to give the state some cost-certainty and better health outcomes,” said the sponsor of one of the bills, Rep. Todd Richardson, R-Poplar Bluff.

But the House shelved the bill, and a similar proposal stalled in the Senate.

Sen. Rob Schaaf, R-St. Joseph, a physician, led the opposition.

“It’s not been shown that managed care for sure saves money,” Schaaf said. “There’s mixed research on that. We do know that it tends to limit the care of some people, especially the ABD (aged, blind and disabled) population, who are less able to navigate their way through it.”

A study commissioned by the Missouri Medicaid program and performed by Mercer and Associates reported 2.7 percent annual savings for the current Medicaid managed care groups in Missouri.

But Schaaf said that savings was wiped out by the study’s margin of error. And critics also contended that any savings stemmed from inadequate provider networks and denial of medically necessary services.

In the end, the managed care bills died when the Missouri Legislature’s session ended May 16.

“I would rather not just do stuff to make managed care companies wealthy but rather, to take better care of the recipients or save the taxpayers money, or both,” Schaaf said.

The Missouri Medicaid Coalition, which is seeking to expand Medicaid coverage in the state, has not taken a position on whether these services are better provided by a state agency or a contractor.

Bill Scheffel, Centene’s chief financial officer, insists managed care is focused on improving health care while saving tax dollars.

“We provide quality health care, we save states money and we give them budget predictability,” Scheffel told the Post-Dispatch, adding that profit margins for the managed care industry are comparatively narrow.

To measure the quality of health care, the company uses various metrics, such as rate of receiving immunizations, prenatal checkups, dental care for children, and follow-up appointments after discharge from a hospital. They also include hospital readmission rates and polls that show “member satisfaction” among Medicaid enrollees.

One of Centene’s goals is to make certain patients receive proper care and don’t unnecessarily drive up their health care costs. For example, too many Medicaid patients use emergency rooms for routine care, rather than visit primary care physicians, said Holly Benson, chief executive of Healthcare Enterprises LLC, a Centene holding company that oversees four subsidiaries.
“If you invest in primary care and preventive care, it means they're getting the right care in the right setting,” she said.

So far, managed care companies in Missouri appear to be meeting patients’ expectations.

“I haven’t heard a lot of complaints about any of the managed care companies, and usually I do if someone is a bad actor in the health marketplace,” said Andrea Routh, executive director of the Jefferson City-based Missouri Health Advocacy Alliance, a watchdog organization for patients.

But the jury is still out regarding the industry’s track record in delivering quality health care.

“Based on the data provided by managed care companies, we’ve seen some modest increases in quality of care and some cost savings,” said Dr. Karen Edison, director of the Center for Health Policy at the University of Missouri.

But it’s not clear if expanding managed care would yield similar results, she said.

“The Medicaid managed care population is largely women and children, and they’re healthier and less costly than the older patients with multiple, chronic conditions like diabetes, heart disease and cancer,” Edison said.

“It’s hard to imagine that you can translate the cost savings seen from managed care of women and children to the sickest Medicaid patients,” she said.

Tim McBride, a health economist at Washington University, serves on a health policy advisory committee for Centene.

Yet even he thinks Centene and other managed care companies need to provide more data to determine the effectiveness of these programs.

“We as taxpayers give a check to these companies,” said McBride, “and we don’t get as much evidence or information back as I would like to see.”

MU High graduates diverse, far-flung class of 2014
Saturday, May 31, 2014 | 8:37 p.m. CDT; updated 9:41 p.m. CDT, Saturday, May 31, 2014
BY AUSTIN HUGUELET

COLUMBIA — As 13 students nervously milled outside Stotler Lounge inside Memorial Student Union Saturday afternoon, Scott Thuong couldn't help but remember his own
experience graduating from MU High School, a distance-learning service based in Columbia.

Thuong is now eight years removed from his graduation at age 14. He’s since added bachelor’s degrees in mathematics and computer science from Missouri Southern State University in 2009 and a doctorate in math from the University of Oklahoma this year. But he still couldn’t resist addressing the awkwardness he felt at graduating from an independent-study program.

"It's a very different experience than attending a brick-and-mortar high school," Thuong said. "I distinctly remember looking around and thinking to myself, 'I have no idea who these people I'm graduating with are.'"

**It's a common theme at MU High School, which had 150 students eligible for graduation this year from 16 states and six countries.**

MU High School, which began offering courses in fall 1999, hosted its 15th graduation ceremony Saturday. In its first 14 years, the school has graduated 869 students, including the likes of Olympic bronze medal figure skater Gracie Gold, according to previous Missourian reporting.

Thuong said MU High School students, despite their geographical differences, share a will to pursue their goals with grit and enthusiasm, which self-paced online courses allow them to do.

"I really just wanted to get into mathematics as soon as possible," said Thuong, who attended a traditional high school before enrolling at MU High School. "There wasn't enough math to take no matter what high school I went to, so MU High was the best option for me."

Eli Scher-Zagier, a 14-year-old 2014 graduate from St. Louis, felt the same way. In the self-paced MU High School courses, he was able to reach deeper levels of understanding in his learning even in the face of greater challenges.

"I think that the courses here aren't as much about memorization but understanding," he said. "There are more challenging exams and work."
Scher-Zagier also credited his success to the amount of access and feedback he had to instructors online. MU High School allowed Scher-Zagier, home-schooled for most of his life, to zip through high school in just two-and-a-half years. He's not sure where he'll end up in the fall, but he plans to pursue a double or triple major in political science, economics or finance.

For 17-year-old aspiring actress Desiree Kellum of Florissant, MU High School provided an opportunity to get ahead and accelerate more quickly into a performing arts education despite moving around a lot, but she said she struggled at times with motivation.

"It was challenging on a personal level because you have to get up and want to do it," she said.

Thuong touched on that type of struggle in his speech, saying that those who succeed in the virtual classroom often have great internal drive.

"The biggest thing is that the whole responsibility is on you," Thuong said. "There's no detention if you don't finish your homework."

In the end, Kellum was able to complete the rest of her high school requirements in her last three months at MU High School. The State University of New York in Geneseo, N.Y., and William Patterson University in Wayne, N.J., are among the schools she's considering attending in the fall.

Her only regret is not doing independent study sooner.

"I wish I had done this earlier," she said. "When I got to my new high school, they told me I wasn't going to be able to graduate early. So I came here."
Big crowd shows up early to get bargains at Tiger Treasures sale

By Alex Schiffer

Sunday, June 1, 2014 at 2:00 am Comments (1)

The rush of "early bird" shoppers who turned out for the eighth annual Tiger Treasures rummage sale on Saturday morning was reminiscent of Black Friday.

Approximately 450 people paid $5 to enter the sale at 6 a.m. — an hour before it opened to the public — to get first pick of the items on sale, which included clothing, electronics and other goods donated or left behind by students at the end of the University of Missouri's spring semester.

"I was surprised by the number of people who attended," said MU sophomore Michael Krebs, who was a first-time attendee to the sale. "I came to the sale looking for a phone and was unable to get one because so many were sold before I got there."

Event organizers ran out of early bird tickets, so some people had to wait until 7 a.m. to get into the Surplus Property building on Capen Park Road. The sale ran until 11 a.m.

This year's sale featured roughly 13 tons of items, including microwaves, televisions, desk lamps, futons, storage shelves and a lot of clothing, among other items. Organizers said on average they sell roughly 80 percent of the items because most of the stuff is in good shape.

"A lot of the stuff we sell only had a shelf life of one year," sale organizer Alicia Lavaute said. "It was bought brand new."

The main goal of the event is to raise money for The Y, MU's YMCA. The Y uses the money for scholarships for kids to attend its camps. In addition to raising money for a good cause, the sale also helps reduce the amount of stuff taken to the landfill.

"Every year when freshman leave the residence halls at the end of the semester there is an exorbitant amount of leftover items that students don't want to take with them on their next
adventure," Lavaute said. "So we take everything from microwaves to rugs and clothes which saves goods from going into the landfill and prevents unsafe Dumpster diving."

The unsold items go to a variety of places, but the two main groups that pick up the leftovers are Goodwill and USAgain. Because the clothes at the sale are secondhand they usually are baled and sent overseas to be turned into rags.

Columbia resident Maxine Frangenberg, who said she is a regular at the Tiger Treasures sale, said she was satisfied with her finds.

"It's great fun," she said. "Today I got a fridge. This is great because the deals are good and the money goes to charity. And giving to charity always gives you a good feeling."