

HSU makes impression across generations

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ABILENE—With four generations of Hardin-Simmons University graduates in her family, Mandy Cunningham has many tales to tell about the school—from dorm shenanigans to love stories.

Cunningham's great-grandmother, grandparents and parents attended HSU, but that was not the reason she made her way to the Texas Baptist university in Abilene.

"I didn't want to be that kid," she said. "But I came to campus and fell in love with it."

Cunningham earned her undergraduate degree in 1998. Today, she coordinates merchandise and booking and manages social media for Super Summer, a Christian discipleship camp directed by the Baptist General Convention of Texas, HSU's denominational partner since 1941.

"Hardin-Simmons prepared me really well," she said. "Even though I took classes to become a teacher, I learned to communicate with people no matter what the age.

"I've used things that I've learned in class in my job as a coordinator of an event. My professors did a good job of teaching us things we would use throughout our life, not just creating busywork."

A place 'where people cared about me'

During her time at HSU, Cunningham attended and worked at University Baptist Church, located across the street from campus. She was the

children's minister and worked with the youth for two years.

At HSU, Cunningham was involved in Freshman SING and worked in the Spanish lab. She remembers the tradition where freshmen students stood in the reflection pond to sing the freshman song.

"I loved being at Hardin-Simmons and connecting with people," she said. "I made friends the first day that I'm still friends with today. It was almost like going to church camp for four and a half years."

Cunningham fondly remembers one cafeteria worker named Linda.

"She would always say 'hello' and ask how we are," Cunningham said. "The staff knew who you were and took the time to learn your name. Even though my parents lived far away, I felt like I was somewhere where people cared about me."

Because HSU hosts Super Summer camps, Cunningham has the opportunity to return to campus often.

"I love seeing the new changes on campus and how it's growing," she said. "Regardless of how much time has passed, there is always someone welcoming you back to campus. It's a sweet feeling that makes me want to keep coming back."

Silly pranks and serious conversations



Jeanne and Jack Meeker (right) pose with daughter Mandy Cunningham and her family.

Cunningham's mother, Teresa Jeanne (Vinson) Meeker, graduated from HSU in 1974. She met her husband, Jack Meeker during her sophomore year. The two were one of the first married couples to serve as residence directors for a dorm.

Meeker remembers pranks the boys would pull on her and her husband. Once they heated a bowling ball on a hot plate and rolled it down the stairs. Another time they brought a car into the dorm lobby. They even bricked in the couple's doorway. The pranks were all in good fun, however, she said.

Residents often came to the Meekers' door when they were feeling homesick.

"We would counsel and encourage them and pray for them," Meeker said. "We would ask: 'What does God have for you here? Why did you come in the first place?'"

The couple also invited international students to their home to share in

holiday festivities.

‘It was all meant to be’

The Meekers both worked on campus—she in the business office and he as the night manager for the student center. They were involved with the rodeo team, the Six White Horses, the drama department, intramural sports and choir.

When Meeker was considering her options for college, a hurricane damaged her hometown of Harlingen. Students from HSU came to help with clean-up and restoration during spring break.

“I got close to the students,” she said. “That tipped the scales for me in choosing HSU. It was all meant to be.”

Meeker also went on mission trips with HSU. She traveled to El Paso to do mission work across the border and traveled with a revival team to Indiana.

“It was great to go somewhere out of your comfort zone,” she said. “We continued that in our lives serving in ministries in children’s homes and boys’ ranches.”

Meeker’s parents attended HSU, as well. Peggy Vinson was going on a date with someone else when she saw Lester Vinson walking. She asked her date to pick up Lester, and the two sat together in the back of the car and at the movies. The two later married.

Cunningham’s great-grandmother, Dorothy Thomas Warren, attended HSU when it was still called Simmons College. When she turned 100, she received a signed certificate from then-President Lanny Hall.