

The Accidental Superintendent

Trying to figure out her future, advertising graduate Gayle Stinson took a temporary teaching job. Now she's spreading her passion for education everywhere she goes

BY CORA BULLOCK





Facing page: Charles Tate in a print ad for Satel's, and today.
 This page: Rex Tillerson as a UT student and with Vladimir Putin

REX TILLERSON

IN THE BUSINESS WORLD, THE STAKES don't get any higher than at Exxon Mobil, a Fortune 2 company (in 2006, second only to Wal-Mart in size, with \$347 billion in revenue). As the company's CEO, Rex Tillerson stays grounded, drawing strength from the same core values he developed at his university.

Born in Wichita Falls in 1952, Rex's dad was an executive with Boy Scouts of America, which took their family to Vernon, Texas, Stillwater, Okla., and Huntsville. Tillerson was the ultimate Boy Scout. "I think the highlight of my youth and adolescent years were my achievements in scouting," he says.

The Eagle Scout graduated from Huntsville High in 1970 and headed to UT. "I decided I wanted to major in engineering," he remembers. "And I kind of followed my older sisters' footsteps to the band. Because the University was so large, the band really gave me a home in terms of a circle of friends."

As a sophomore, Tillerson was invited into the Tejas Club, a diverse group that prompted him to examine his values. "Whatever you thought, whatever truths you held to be true, when you went to the Tejas club you knew they were going to be challenged," he says.

The 1975 engineering graduate was recruited to Exxon. After two years on the job, he found himself managing a group of drilling rigs near Tyler. "There was a lot of money being spent and a lot of people relying upon me to give them direction every day as to what needed to be done next," Tillerson says. "I think that's the first time I realized all of a sudden, 'Gee, I really am in charge of something here.'"

As bigger professional responsibilities came his way, Tillerson met Renda House in 1983. "We both had been previously married," says Tillerson, "and I had twins, and she had a son. And so, when we married, we had instant triplets because the boys


were all within six months of the same age." They also have a son together, Tyler, a mechanical engineering freshman at UT and member of the Longhorn Band.

Tillerson was named president of Exxon-Yemen in 1995 and took charge of Exxon's ventures in Russia in 1998. "Those assignments were some of the high points in the development of my career," Tillerson says. "Those early assignments where I worked internationally and the things I learned there have served me well ever since."

Perhaps his biggest thrill of his accomplished 30-plus-year career came in 2005 with the culmination of the \$6.5 billion Sakhalin-1 production project in far eastern Russia. "To see them turn the valve on the first barrel and see it be delivered to the market, that was a high moment for me," Tillerson says.

In 2004 Tillerson was named president of Exxon Mobil Corporation. Two years later he became chairman and CEO of the 82,000-employee company. It was the same year that Exxon Mobil became the nation's most profitable company, banking \$39.5 billion.

This Life Member of the Texas Exes has been active in the Longhorn Alumni Band, the Engineering Foundation Advisory Council, and the Tejas Club Foundation. He also serves as chairman of the American Petroleum Institute and is on the executive board of Boy Scouts of America. "Scouting has always been a part of my life," he says. "I continue to believe that it's the best thing going for young men today."

Rex Tillerson took the values he learned at UT to the very pinnacle of the business world. "When you attend UT," Tillerson says, "you really get two educations, and only one of them is in the books." 

Ted Barnhill, BJ '93, Life Member, is executive producer of Castleview Productions in Austin.

OUTSTANDING YOUNG TEXAS Ex and Lake Dallas ISD superintendent Gayle Stinson earned a degree in advertising from UT but wound up in education. How'd that happen? "People ask me that all the time, and I'm really not sure either. I didn't find education; it found me."

She went to work for a small start-up firm in East Texas after graduation, making commercials for TV stations. After about a year, she decided it wasn't for her. Some friends suggested that while she was trying to figure out her future, she could come teach for a little while to fill an opening. She moved back to Dallas and worked at Lake Dallas ISD for two years, teaching high school English and coaching basketball, volleyball, and softball. "I was having a lot of fun," she says of that time. "I was very young, and the paychecks didn't mean a lot to me." She loved coaching her younger sister in volleyball and basketball and was going to quit when Mikki graduated, but life, as always, has other plans, and she ended up staying with education.

Stinson is one of the most humble people you'll ever meet. There is not a shred of pretense about her. An example: Within a year of becoming principal at three different schools, she took them to exemplary status, but she won't take the credit. "Every district I've ever been, everywhere I've ever worked, they've all had the most fabulous teachers you've ever seen. When you ask just about anyone in the world, 'Who was your influence?' they can all name their teachers. Teachers are beautiful, wonderful, passionate people, and all they need is some love. You go into a district and say, 'I'm behind you 100 percent. I'm here as a resource for you, whatever you need,' and they do what they do, they work their magic every day, and that's what's happened in every district I've ever been in. It wasn't me; it was the teachers."

Another example: She was a Terry Scholar, which meant a full ride to The University of Texas (she never says UT; it's always "The University of Texas"). She didn't have to work, but work she still did, for three years at the Engineering Foundation raising scholarship funds for other students, "just trying to pay back what someone had done for me."

And yet she is extremely driven. She's been a teacher, coach, assistant principal, principal of elementary, middle, and high schools, assistant superintendent, and superintendent. The Texas Association of Secondary School Principals named her a "Texas Hero" — twice — and she was Texas' 2003 Principal of the Year, after only three years on the job. Her mom was just as driven. "My mother was the most brilliant, fantastic person you could have ever met," Stinson says passionately. "Her focus was education and being the best that you could be." She credits her success in career and life due to the way she was raised. (Stinson's mom passed away in 2000 of multiple myeloma, and she and her stepdad started a scholarship in her honor.)

Stinson is even prettier in person than she is in her photos, with impeccable makeup and hair, yet she wears athletic clothes and has a slender, muscular body from playing sports her entire

life. She looks you straight in the eye when answering questions, is straightforward with her responses, and speaks with a Texas accent — noticeable, but not overwhelming. She often refers to Trent, her husband whom she's known since she was 17. Sometimes the exchanges are funny. Gayle: "I'm 37." Pause. "Am I 37 or 38?" she asks him, laughing.

Stinson was born in Denton and lived in Lake Dallas through 11th grade; she then moved to East Texas. "It was very difficult because I moved from a suburban district outside of Dallas to a rural East Texas community. When I look back on it, though, it was a fantastic experience for me." She played a lot of sports, met lifelong friends, and also met Trent. He asked her out for pizza after one of her high school basketball games, "But I think I turned him down," she says. "You did," he confirms, smiling.

She and her sister, Mikki, a speech pathologist, were raised by her mom, who later married her stepfather, of whom Stinson says emphatically, "I could not have asked for a better dad, still to this day."

Though her mother worked hard, Stinson knew the only way to get into college was through an academic scholarship. She had her sights set on UT from an early age. "I had always dreamed of going to The University of Texas, from the time I was a young middle-school child. Our basketball coaches took us every year to the girls' state basketball tournament here in Austin, so I'd visited many times. And when you're in sixth, seventh, eighth grade, you're in awe of the campus, and I am still today."

She graduated valedictorian in 1987, which was the same year that Howard and Nancy Terry started a little program called the Terry Foundation Scholarship. Perhaps you've heard of it? It awards Texas recipients a full, four-year ride at six participating Texas public universities, including UT. The foundation invited Stinson to interview for the scholarship; Stinson, who had never heard of it, was skeptical but flew to Houston for the interview. Afterward, Trent picked her up at the little airport in Texarkana and asked how things went. Gayle ticked off the people who were there: Howard and Nancy Terry, the board of directors, some coach named Darrell Royal ... "Trent almost had a heart attack! I didn't know who he was. I was a 17-year-old girl and didn't follow much football," laughs Stinson.

But ask her about the Lady Longhorns, and it's a whole different story. "During my era, in 1986, when I was still in high school, the Lady Longhorns won the National Championship, so I thought that Jody Conratt and the Lady Longhorns were the best thing to ever hit the face of the earth," she says. Even though Stinson has only briefly met her, she credits Conratt with making the biggest impression on her as a child (along with her parents and Santa Claus).

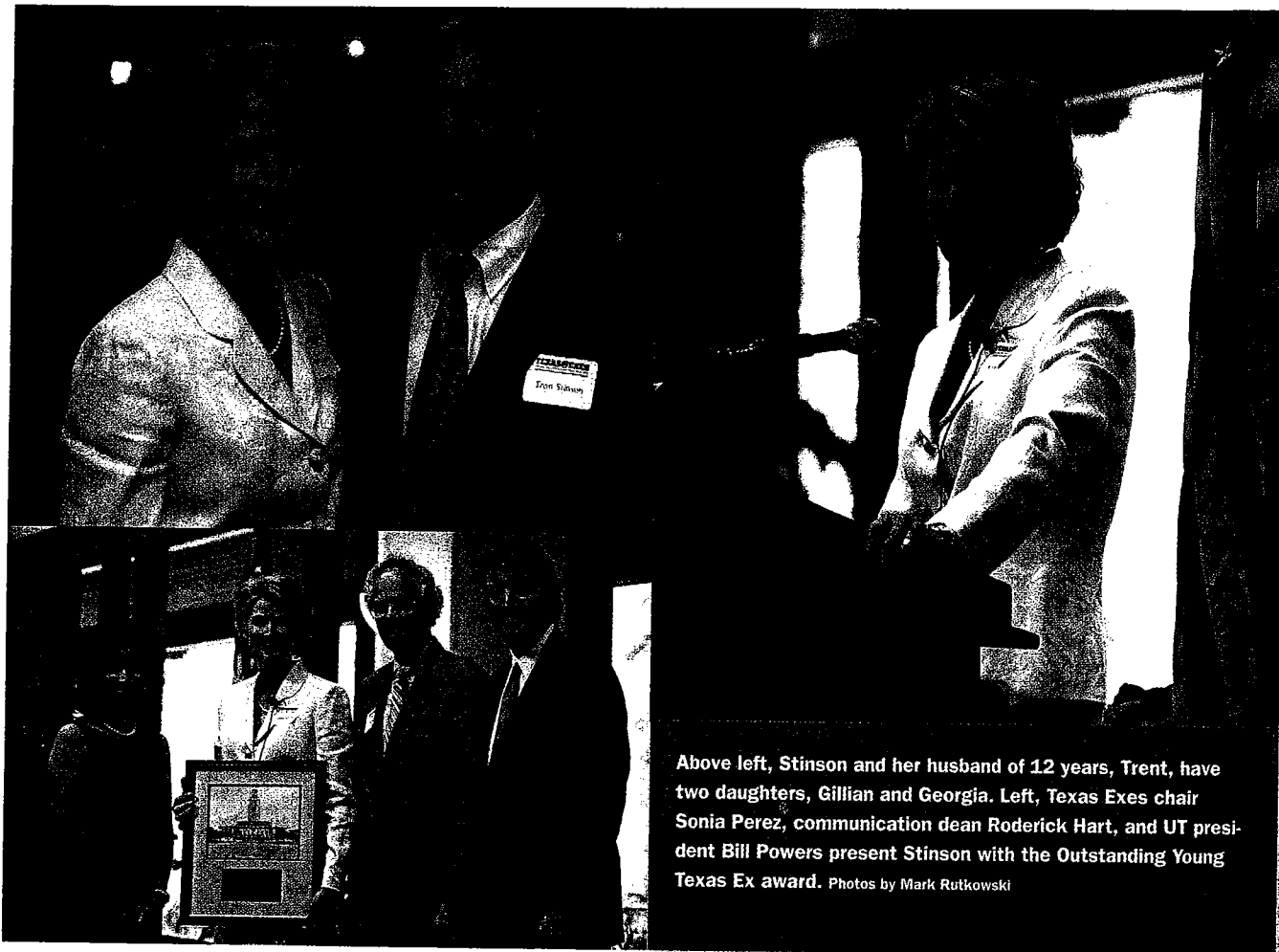
Stinson's whole life changed with a letter from the Terry Foundation: she was one of the lucky few recipients of a Terry Scholarship, the only way she could have attended UT. She was shocked, and her mother cried for weeks. Gayle tears up to this day when talking about the scholarship. "It was the most fantastic thing that ever happened to me."

Though thrilled to bits, her career at UT started rather inauspiciously. Through a Social Security number mix-up, her guar-



Gayle Stinson during the Outstanding Young Texas Ex awards ceremony in May at the Alumni Center

Photo by Mark Rutkowski



Above left, Stinson and her husband of 12 years, Trent, have two daughters, Gillian and Georgia. Left, Texas Exes chair Sonia Perez, communication dean Roderick Hart, and UT president Bill Powers present Stinson with the Outstanding Young Texas Ex award. Photos by Mark Rutkowski

anted room at Carothers went to someone else, and she was force to bunk with 12 other girls in the basement of the dorm for about three weeks until a spot opened up. On top of that, "You always feel a little bit alone when you're 17 and at The University of Texas by yourself," she says. But as always, she was driven to succeed and make the most of her time. She attended football and basketball games, was a member of Spooks (now called Spirits), saw such concerts at the Erwin Center as Chicago, Bobbi Brown, and Whitney Houston, and visited as often as possible with Trent, who was attending Stephen F. Austin. He would take her to one of her favorite places, Chuy's, which she couldn't afford on her own. (Texadelphia is also a favorite to this day.)

In 1995, she and Trent married. He says he hardly remembers how he proposed because he was so nervous. "We dated 8-1/2 years before we got married, so there were about three proposals along the way," adds Gayle, laughing, but the timing finally was right. She calls him her rock, patiently putting up with her many career moves. After they married that July, they moved back to East Texas, where he was teaching and coaching. They were going to just stay long enough for her to get her master's at A&M-Texarkana, but didn't move until 12 years later, when she accepted the superintendent position at Lake Dallas ISD.

With all of her awards and glowing recommendation letters (for Outstanding Young Texas Ex), people obviously like working for Stinson, but she deflects the praise. "I just try to be firm, fair, and consistent in all that I do and give everything I have to the staff and students of any district."

As superintendent, Stinson says she misses being around kids

on a daily basis, but she does have two of her own: 3-year-old Gillian ("my smart, gorgeous first-born") and 1-year-old Georgia ("my sweet Georgia peach"). And even though she is extremely busy, she has chaired the Terry Scholarship Committee since 1997 and spends a week every spring interviewing candidates. "The turning point for me was receiving a Terry Foundation scholarship. There's no doubt. It was the opportunity that gave me the tools needed to live an independent and successful life and to have the ability to make those decisions that would create my own path," she says.

Because of that, she takes a deeply personal interest in the students. She recalls one year, there was an extremely rare no-show during the interview process. She knew a kid in her school who she thought would be perfect. Howard Terry OK'd it, so she called the student at school, and he interviewed right then and there over the phone. He got the scholarship, was student body president for the Terry Foundation organization at Texas A&M, and became a very successful engineer. "Things like that make it all worthwhile, to see kids succeed who wouldn't have because of money."

The Stinsons are very busy people, but they manage to find time to hang out outdoors. Gayle is an avid reader, especially of mystery novels, and some of her favorite authors are Patricia Cornwell, Iris Johansen, and Tami Hoag. She also does a lot of research on how to motivate people, and her current favorite book is Mack Anderson's *212 Degrees*, a concept she uses in business and personal life. "Small things can make tremendous differences. That's how I live my life and how I handle myself at work and in business. I've been lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time, and it's been a good ride." 