

Your Alumni Association

NEWS & NOTES FROM THE UI ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

The Kids Are All Right

UIAA's Student Alumni Ambassadors group creates connections to Illinois

By pairs and groups they came running from the shadows along the Quad into the full sun of an October afternoon, dozens and dozens of them, brilliant in orange T-shirts and dance moves, a school-spirit “flash mob” of coordinated jumps and waves set to a pop mash-up playing on a portable sound system, startling and delighting passers-by with a celebration as exuberant as it was unexpected. Time: Homecoming Week 2010. Place: The University of Illinois. Persons responsible: The Student Alumni Ambassadors.

With a motto that says it all – *Students Today, Illini Forever* – the club’s raison d’être is to celebrate the past, present and future of being Illini. And – all the show and fun of the flash mob notwithstanding – these are kids pretty serious about what they do, which is giving tours, engaging in campus and community service activities, organizing events, celebrating academic achievement and creating connections to the inner and outer worlds of Illinois alumni.

“The students have worked very hard to define themselves in alignment with the visions, goals and priorities of the Alumni Association and the campus – to enhance communication to and among alumni, to develop future leaders, to benefit the University and to really maximize opportunities for all to engage with campus and each other,” explains **Lynn Marie Chaney** ’84 AHS, MS ’87 AHS, associate director for alumni relations at the UI Alumni Association (which is the SAA mother ship, providing guidance, financial support and office space, located in the Alice Campbell Alumni Center on campus).

For the group’s president, junior agricultural and consumer economics major J. Landon Frye, it’s important “to connect ... to really try to engage as many students as we can, now, on campus, so that they’ll stay in contact with the Alumni Association



Photo courtesy of SAA

Members of Student Alumni Ambassadors move and groove in “flash mob” mode. Held on the Quad during Homecoming Week 2010, the performance involved 70 students doing dance moves to a mix of pop tunes. Reflecting on his generally serious attitude toward SAA, which promotes student/alumni ties to Illinois, Matt Abtahi, one of the organization’s leaders, recalls how “[our adviser] came up to me, and she was, like, “Never would I have thought that Matt Abtahi would be dancing on the Quad.”

and the University of Illinois so that we can grow and develop relationships.”

Junior Matt Abtahi, an integrative biology major and SAA vice president of student engagement, notes that after being involved with SAA for a couple of years, he began “to really take to heart the message of the Alumni Association and what we’re actually trying to do. And that’s instill some sort of Illinois loyalty to help foster some kind of Illinois experience for students to have.

“And while that may be painting everything orange and blue,” he observes, “it doesn’t necessarily mean that.”

At the group’s soul are tours for campus visitors – the purpose for which SAA was first formed in 1976. While shepherding prospective students and their parents around the greater Quad is a duty that has long since passed to the UI ad-

missions office (which also enlists student guides), “Anyone on campus can say, ‘Hey, we’ve got a couple of alumni coming in. Can we have Student Alumni Ambassadors there from this time to this time to give a tour?’” explains Frye. Many members start their SAA “career” by helping out with tours and assisting at campus gatherings, such as the Homecoming pregame reception at the UI President’s House and the Alumni Awards Dinner.

That core mission has long since expanded into vibrant events and the leadership that makes such events possible. The SAA monogram is writ huge on Homecoming, which the group is credited with revitalizing in 1979. On Wednesday of Homecoming Week, SAA hosts Spirit Day on the Quad, a showcase for fun in the name of the orange and blue, as illustrated by last fall’s flash mob.

The Friday night Homecoming Pep Rally, also on the Quad, is an SAA classic, featuring appearances by cheerleaders and the football team, as well as the presentation of the UIAA's Lou Liay Spirit Award to a UI alumna or alumnus.

The group's ever-renewed vigor and freshness – its collective will to move on to the next event and the next challenge – have helped members add weight to their portfolio of activities. Five years ago, SAA deployed a very special kind of Illini spirit by introducing iHelp, a community day of service on the Saturday before Homecoming. Last year the initiative sent more than 1,500 UI students to more than 40 agencies throughout Champaign-Urbana to rake leaves, arrange resale clothing, organize public school classrooms and otherwise help out; Illinois alumni around the country and the globe also took on work in their own communities under the iHelp banner. On campus, SAA follows the event with a Homecoming Kickoff celebration on the Quad.

"I did iHelp my freshman year, and I guess that one event really convinced me that SAA was worth my time," says Stephanie Diamond. Now a senior, Diamond went on to become involved in the Illini Comeback program, another signature SAA Homecoming endeavor, through which accomplished alumni are invited to campus to share time with students. In the course of the program's 30 years, participants have ranged from astronauts **Lee Archambault '82 ENG, MS '84 ENG**, and **Scott Altman '81 ENG** to fashion designer **Eileen Fisher '72 ACES**, Harlem Globetrotters owner **Mannie Jackson '60 AHS, HON '08**, historian **Betty Lee Sung '48 LAS** and animal researcher **Temple Grandin, PHD '89 ACES, HON '04**.



Photo courtesy of SAA

SAA members gather in October before the Homecoming Parade. "[It's] the most exciting time of the year for SAA, as we get to watch our senior leaders be members of the Homecoming Court and are able to celebrate Illini spirit at the pep rally," says Landon Frye, the group's president. "It is the pinnacle moment of all that we work for - connecting alumni and students in celebrating Illini spirit."

"My junior year I was a host to **Rob Kennedy '78 ENG** [president of television cable network C-SPAN]," says Diamond. "And it was one of the best experiences of my life." In 2010, she took over as Comeback co-director.

"I've gained a lot of confidence from being involved in the Illini Comeback Program, and it instilled a lot of motivation in me," she observes. "I was really inspired by it."

Spring programs bookend the SAA year. As well as celebrating top achievers among the graduating class, Senior 100 Honorary recognizes their future commitment to the University, while GradFest gives a fun send-off for all of the U of I's newly minted degree holders and their families and friends. Coming full circle to the cusp of fall semester classes, Illinois Sights & Sounds gathers incoming freshmen and transfer students in Memorial Stadium to introduce them to University traditions during an afternoon of food, performances and appearances by Illini sports teams. (SAA co-sponsors the event with the UI intercollegiate athletics and student affairs units.) And this winter, SAA partnered with peers at Michigan State University to organize a

student advancement conference for CASE (Council for the Advancement and Support of Education), hosting the two-day meeting at the Alice Campbell Alumni Center.

Now an emerging new SAA identity promises to strengthen the places where "student" and "alumnus" intersect. As the group's president, Frye is working to connect with the student affiliates of alumni groups throughout the University's colleges and departments, to share information about how each organization is run and how members are

recruited and retained.

Frye says the goal is collaboration on a career-focused event, such as an alumni panel discussion, "that can really be beneficial to all college students."

Abtahi adds: "I see my role as trying to get students involved on campus so that they can have *their* Illinois experience. Because, ideally, that's what's going to happen... and they will forever be connected to Illinois."

– Mary Timmins

Editor's note: Did you belong to the Student Alumni Ambassadors or the Student Alumni Association while at Illinois? SAA is reaching out to former members and would love to hear from you! Please e-mail studentalumniambassadors@illinois.edu. We also encourage you to visit the University of Illinois Student Alumni Ambassadors Alumni fan page on Facebook.



Web Extra:

To see the 2010 SAA Homecoming flash mob, visit: www.uiaa.org/illinois/homecoming and click on "Spirit Day."