

Down On the Border With Ray Keck

A man set apart. Ray Keck is on a mission to spread higher education to the underserved of South Texas.

BY ARLENE SATCHELL

The voice on the phone is relaxed, welcoming, and warm—not unlike that of an old friend catching up on old times. The voice resonates in a commanding yet gentle tone, with a laugh or two, soothing the listener.

That voice belongs to Ray Marvin Keck III, president of Texas A&M International University (TAMIU). Those who know him can easily confirm his affable and unassuming manner. “The faculty, staff and community know him well and know that he is always available,” says Minita Ramirez, TAMIU’s associate vice president of student success.

“Everyone on campus knows that getting an appointment with Dr. Keck is easy and that he sees everyone who requests a meeting. He has lunch most days on campus at the university dining hall so he can interact with the students and faculty,” Ramirez offers.

At TAMIU, Keck’s beacon shines specially for those who have worked closely with him.

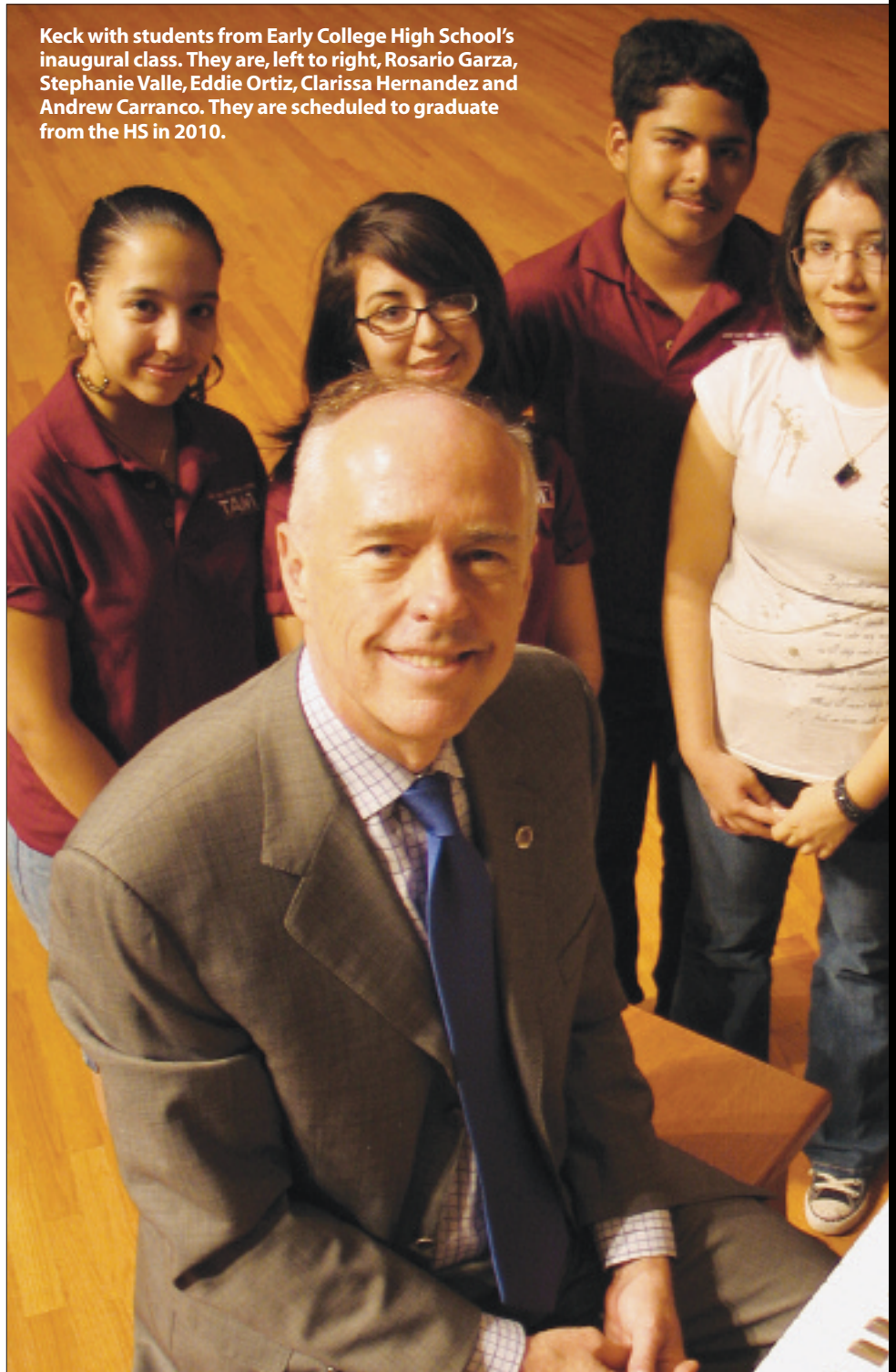
“Dr. Keck is a leader of hope for our community; a leader with vision who finds ways to turn vision into reality. His philosophy of, ‘if it is right for our students and right for the university, then it has to be done’ sets the pace for the rest of us. He leads by example and is willing to do whatever it takes to fulfill the dreams of our students,” says Ramirez.

“I firmly believe that we work together *with* him. I don’t ever feel like I work *for* him,” adds Ramirez.

No stranger to TAMIU

Keck became president of the school in 2001, but his association with TAMIU began in 1979 when he taught Spanish during its Laredo State Uni-

Keck with students from Early College High School’s inaugural class. They are, left to right, Rosario Garza, Stephanie Valle, Eddie Ortiz, Clarissa Hernandez and Andrew Carranco. They are scheduled to graduate from the HS in 2010.



versity days. In 1994 he returned to TAMIU as professor of Spanish and chair of the department of Language, Literature and Arts. Five years later, he was appointed provost and vice president for academic affairs. "I've been fortunate, says Keck, I have a career that has allowed me to enjoy my life—doing what I love to do."
Jose Garcia, TAMIU's vice president



of finance and administration has witnessed some of Keck's achievements over the years. "I see him as having a commitment, of being extremely active in the community. He is creating excitement on campus that is bringing in new students and programs. He's very communicative with Laredo's community and has been a tremendous fundraiser for the university."

Under Keck, TAMIU has received philanthropic gifts from the local community, including a \$10 million endowment supporting graduate education from the Lamar Bruni Vergara Trust.

Keck believes that a public university should forge ties with its community, and synergy has grown between TAMIU and the Laredo community. "We have a very close and deep relationship with the Laredo community—businesses, our two school districts and the community college as well," says Keck.

TAMIU's student community

Keck and his staff have willingly grappled with TAMIU's unique realities. "Most of our enrollment are first generation students. They have little understanding how a university works. The mere fact that no one in their family has ever done it is a fear factor for many of our students," says Ramirez.

Recruiters struggle with distrust of outsiders who propose ideas that can upset family traditions. Going to college is often not seen as an immediate need. "Using one-on-one recruiting, we have to get their attention with an analysis of the benefits of college and the projected earnings," says Steve Harmon, director of TAMIU's office of public relations, marketing & information services.

"Part of our challenge is to explain that it's DO-ABLE. The American dream is yours. I think our government has a responsibility to ensure that every student who wants a college degree has a chance to earn one, at least a baccalaureate," says Keck.

Educating generations of young and old about college financing options is crucial. "We have to make people understand how to borrow

money. They're hesitant or afraid of borrowing. When you're struggling to make ends meet, the thought of borrowing money is scary to many people. We need to help people understand that borrowing money to fund an education is a good thing. We also must encourage them to finish in four years, so they can get into the work place. That's a hard sell for very poor people," adds Keck.

Enrollment comes to a standstill at TAMIU when the monies are exhausted. So the major need for support from the community is scholarship money. "Most of our students are on some form of financial aid. Last year we awarded and disbursed more than \$12 million in free aid. Many are now learning how to access the B-On-Time loans and Stafford loans as well," says Ramirez. B-On-Time loans include loan forgiveness for students who maintain a B-average and graduate on time.

TAMIU and its environs

"TAMIU is a young university in a region unaccustomed to a new university. We're fresh, new, scrutinized and admired. We're over 90 percent Hispanic, and the rest come from all over the world," says Keck. Laredo is 150 miles north of Monterrey, Mexico. Its population in 2005 was 208,754, of whom 197,198 were Hispanic.

Keck grew up in the small town of Cotulla, 60 miles from Laredo, and he's a local historian of sorts, "Laredo has two exciting and diverging personalities. It's a boom town with fast-growing industry and commerce. It's also a very old city with much of the economic and political power still concentrated among founding families who can trace their roots to Spain," explains Keck.

TAMIU's proximity to the U.S.-Mexico border regularly involves the school and its leaders in immigration-related issues. Keck recalls the outcry and emotion among TAMIU's community when the Secure Fence Act was passed recently.

"We must have a secure border. We must address illegal immigrants. But the wall theory has been tested world-

FROM THE

PRESIDENT

wide to no success, and it's extremely expensive. Every wall that has gone up has gone down," Keck affirms.

Scholar and teacher

Keck was shaped by his private school experience at Texas Military Institute. Then in 1979 Princeton University was his next stop. What a transition that was. "Baptism by horror and awe," recalls Keck of the day he boarded a train to New Jersey. "I loved the school from the moment I arrived. I knew then that I had been marked for education."

As a sophomore, while studying *Don Quixote* and Bach, Keck knew then that he would become a teacher. A love of religion moved him to enroll in Harvard's Divinity School in 1969 during the Vietnam War. The following year Keck changed his course and left Harvard to teach Spanish at The Hotchkiss School in Connecticut. He stayed for eight years.

"Hotchkiss gave me the chance to fall into the clutches of a wonderful and old faculty, and in return I have become a very grateful mentor," says Keck. Today Keck is a Hotchkiss trustee. "My intellectual life I owe to Princeton and to Hotchkiss," he says.

Keck recently celebrated his 40th anniversary as a teacher.

"It is our solemn obligation to awaken each of our students to life's most precious gift: the uniquely human capacity to mold a unique life. We teachers hold before our students new identities, new realities, new ways of being," writes Keck in a speech titled "To Teach, To Learn: Thoughts on the Profession." "I want to get students fired up by a dream, a hunger. I want this university to do for them what mine did for me—to awaken a passion they did not know they had."

The man who became president

In 1977 Keck married Patricia Gonzalez Cigarroa and took a sabbatical from academia to try his hand at banking. To settle in Laredo, Keck struck a one-year deal with his father, a third generation banker. He would try it for a year, but if he didn't like it, he could move on. By year's end he had his sights set on a



Keck with Martha C. Gonzalez, a recent graduate with a Masters in Public Administration, December '05.

“ Hotchkiss gave me the chance to fall into the clutches of a wonderful and old faculty, and in return I have become a very grateful mentor

return to academia.

Daughters Teresa, Joyce and Lacey have since grown into independent, strong women—just as Keck had hoped. He credits them as having shaped and fitted him for the world today. "I could not do the job I have done as a teacher, educator or administrator if not for the experience of bringing up three girls. I went to an all-male prep school, an all-male college and I don't think I could work with teachers effectively, if I had not been weaned from that male-dominated background."

Turning the corner

TAMIU is winning accolades. The College of Business Administration was recently named an "outstanding business school" by *The Princeton Review*, 2007 edition, also drawing third place in the U.S. in the "Greatest Opportunity for Minority Students" category. "Students want majors that

will convert immediately into jobs. They don't come here to find themselves," say Keck.

Early childhood bilingual education, criminal justice, nursing and business administration are popular undergraduate majors at TAMIU. For postgraduate study, education, educational administration, school counseling and business administration are favorites.

Keck plans to finish the remaining years of his 10-year term as president and then return to teaching. "I've been given a privileged chance to enjoy and study some of the riches of the human story and the chance to share it with other people, and I've enjoyed doing it," says Keck.

"He's the right person at the right time for this university," says vice president Garcia. ■

ARLENE SATCHELL is an editor of *The Greentree Gazette*.