

THE SAM HOUSTON SANDERS CORPS OF CADETS CENTER

— A VISION BECOMES REALITY, CREATING A JEWEL IN THE CROWN —

By Dennis Davenport '01

When the Memorial Student Center (MSC) opened in 1950, the student body consisted primarily of the Corps of Cadets. World War II Veterans, most former Cadets, made up the next proportion. The MSC, in its functionality and beaming depiction of A&M History, was indeed the show-place for the Corps of Cadets. As the university grew and the Corps proportion decreased, its presence and ownership of the MSC progressively declined.

Upon returning as Commandant in the fall of 1987, Major General (Maj Gen) Tom Darling '54, U.S. Air Force (Ret.), realized this void. The Corps no longer had a gateway or something of its own in which to market itself, show its proud history, host visitors and functions, and provide convenient areas for Cadets to meet. Throughout his distinguished military career, he had visited other military schools and installations that featured highly visible facilities of this functionality. The closest correlation was the Visitor Center at the Air Force Academy.

In February 1988, Maj Gen Darling made his first report to the Corps Development Council (CDC) Board of Directors, developed in the mid '80s to provide financial and political support for the Corps. Sensing things were going well and the board was open to new ideas, he spontaneously closed with "I have a dream" seed-planting comments of having such a facility within 10 years.



Corps Center Ground Breaking Ceremony. Left to Right: Robert Magee '90, Vice President of Student Affairs; Dr. John Koldus, Commandant Maj Gen Thomas Darling '54, Dr. Sam Sanders '22, TAMU President William Mobley, Jonathan Whitties '91, Bob Walker '58.

Photo provided by Buck Henderson '62.

That evening, the entire CDC and their spouses assembled for a social event. That was the opportunity for the Darlings' initial interactions with many. Within minutes, the new Commandant was called aside by a '33 Aggie who stated, "We need to get started on that project NOW," and pledged \$100,000 to get it rolling; soon an additional \$150,000 was committed. The unprecedented enthusiasm continued through the evening and into the general meeting the next day. In addition to the inherent duties of a new Commandant, Maj Gen Darling was about to become the project officer for an incredible vision: a major structure with the unique mission to showcase the past, present, and future of the Corps of Cadets.

Commandant's staff member Lieutenant Colonel Donald R. "Buck" Henderson '62, U.S. Army (Ret.), was designated as primary assistant. He became the first Director. With 12th Man gusto, they charged headlong into the "Corps Center Project." Included within the grueling process was the planning and

execution of a major construction project and doing it in accordance with the arduous university protocol, embodying it with the unique mission, funding, and staffing it.

From the first discussion with Major General Ed Peel '47, U.S. Army (Ret.), Vice Chancellor for Planning and Facilities for the A&M System, the idea progressively gained the support of University and System officials.

That allowed the initial stages to proceed quickly from that incredible moment of conception.

With construction scheduled to begin by late 1990, funding issues became imminent. State money was not available as Texas was suffering from the "oil bust." The mission became to raise 3-4 million private Aggie dollars. Thus began collaboration with Robert Smith '62, Vice President for Finance and Administration; Randy Matson '67 and Jim Jeter '70 of the Association of Former Students; Bob Walker '58, Vice President for Development; Dr. Malon Southerland '65 of Student Affairs; and the CDC. The plan became to secure a \$1.5 million lead gift and others of at least \$100,000 before campaigning for smaller gifts. An attractive program was developed for donor naming opportunities. The project was expected to operate in the red from early on until long after completion. A line of credit was established with the Foundation to ensure bills were paid on time. Colonel Richard Biondi '60, U.S.

Army (Ret.) and former Professor of Military Science, came to the Foundation and became an integral part of fundraising for this and other Corps needs.

In 1989, Maj Gen Darling was introduced to Dr. Sam Houston Sanders '22 by Bob Walker. In addition to lettering in basketball and track, he was an all-Southwest Conference halfback and was injured in the Dixie Classic that spawned the 12th Man Tradition. After leaving A&M, he played more football at the University of Tennessee while pursuing his doctorate. Highly successful, he became head of the Department of Otolaryngology and Maxillofacial Surgery within the University of Tennessee College Of Medicine. With his Corps Spirit burning, a major contribution was possible. "Texas A&M made me what I am today," said Sanders. Maj Gen Darling provided an overview and Walker asked him to consider becoming lead donor. The building could be named in his honor and the Metzger-Sanders Gun Collection, in which he was principal, could be displayed there. Dr. Sanders later agreed to donate some Memphis real estate, of which proceeds of the sale would go to the project.

Fortuitously, Corps Center gifts became a part of the University's Capturing the Spirit Campaign. Donors could direct their gifts to the Corps Center. Maj Gen Darling recalls fond memories of generous Aggies contributing; many of their names are forever enshrined on or in the building. Long term funding was also necessary. Planning called for a brick plaza on the north end, which would provide an area for multiple usages. A paver brick sales program was developed, which continues to generate operational funding.

Dr. Sanders made his last visit to Aggieland in March 1990. Construction would begin soon. Seizing the opportunity to include the aging lead donor, a fulfilling groundbreaking ceremony was conducted. Early in construction, the cornerstone leveling ceremony was conducted by the Masons. Many of the crowd contributed items to time capsules that were implanted.

As construction stayed generally on schedule, plans for interior design, adornment, and specific theme, the heart and soul of the building took a life of its own. Several vitally important people joined the team. Bill Leftwich '45, artist, lecturer, and writer from Fort Davis came aboard as display and exhibit

consultant. He had the passion for Aggie culture and Corps History, and the ability to express it; one of his incredible works is the sculptured bronze of the original Reveille. Joe '58 and wife Pat Fenton, former rice farmers from Louisiana, were running the MSC Forsyth Gallery. Joe, a folksy outgoing Aggie, with a penchant for the arts, writing and everything Ol' Army, came aboard as Curator. Pat brought security system and administrative expertise. Aggies contributed artisan craftsmanship and donated artifacts and books.

Thanks to the Corps support base, the donations kept rolling in. The line of credit never came into play. "[It was] a remarkable accomplishment," said Maj Gen Tom Darling.

The Corps Center was dedicated on September 12, 1992. That was a day of great joy for all, and indeed a day of great relief for a few. Included in the ceremony were System and University dignitaries, BFW Construction officials, and the general public. A large crowd packed the Great Hall to hear stirring words from Regents, the late Bill McKenzie '44, Raul Fernandez '59, President Bill Mobley, and others. Fittingly, the Aggie Band, assembled on the Corps Plaza, concluded by playing "The Aggie War Hymn" and "The Spirit of Aggieland."

*As was established over 25 years ago, the Corps Center continues to run by means of the private endowment, the Brick Program, and donations. All contributions are tax deductible. For more information visit: <https://corps.tamu.edu/corpscenterbrick/#order> or call 979-862-2862.



*You are cordially invited
to attend the Grand Opening
of the Sam Houston Sanders
Corps of Cadets Center
at Texas A&M University*

*9:30 a.m. Saturday, September 12, 1992
Corps Center Plaza*



*“Now, over
25 years after
establishment,
The Corps Center
stands as landmark
action that gave
new life to the
Corps and allowed
Texas A&M
University to build
on its rightful claim
of being a truly
unique American
university.”*

~Maj Gen Tom Darling '54