



The ALUMNUS 100 Years of Golden Eagles

Celebrating 100 Years of the Golden Eagles: The Birth of a Legacy



BY MEGAN TROTTER

In 1925, Tennessee Tech made a decision that would shape its identity for the next century: the naming of its student body. At a meeting of the Athletic Association, options like Tech Warriors, Mountaineers, Mountain Eagles and Lions went through three rounds of voting before Golden Eagles was ultimately chosen with a resounding vote of 139 to 18.

The name was suggested due to four eagles who were said to have soared over campus on clear afternoons for many years.

In his 1957 history book of Tennessee Tech, Austin Wheeler Smith wrote, "From some cranny in the cliffs of the Cumberlands they sailed forth each day to gather food and flaunt defiance at the wiles of man in the azure above his busy streets."

In 1988, the university newspaper, The Oracle, while recounting the naming process from 1925, said that, "...it was rumored one of those Cumberland Mountain Eagles ventured close enough to land on the library tower, leaving no doubt about the choice of a name."

This pivotal moment not only gave our students a new identity but also inspired the renaming of the yearbook from "Tech Dynamo" to "The Eagle."

While the Golden Eagles name has remained constant for a century, our mascot has undergone quite a transformation.

Our first "mascots" weren't costumed characters, but spirited individuals who embodied the Golden Eagle spirit. Frank Hudgens, our first recorded mascot, was described as "keeping up the 'pep' and spirit of the team." As a freshman, he set the standard for enthusiasm. The torch would later be carried by students Guy Boyd and Maxie L. Alderson.

The 1960s saw the introduction of our first costumed mascot. It featured an all-gold outfit with a gold football shirt sporting a black TT logo. The costume included feathered pants, a beak and raptor feet, bringing our team name to life. In 1972, a major update gave the Golden Eagle a head with short feathers and a feather-laden oversized shirt. During this time, the mascot was often referred to as the "Tech Eagle."

In 1975, our mascot took on a daring new persona. Known for motorcycle stunts and basketball court antics like the American stunt performer Evel Knievel, the "Evil Eagle" (sometimes "Evel Eagle") became a campus sensation. During the 1975 Homecoming game, he jumped over 14 mini school buses with a motorbike in a scaled-down recreation of a stunt by his professional namesake. In 1982, Elayne Hayes became the first woman to wear the mascot costume, earning the title "Evil Eaglette."

In 1984, we welcomed Awesome Eagle, designed by student Olan Kemp, a chemistry major who entered a contest by the Associated Student Body (now the Student Government Association). The new costume featured hands, allowing for more interactive performances.

The modern version of Awesome was unveiled in fall of 1990 when a truck delivered a box onto the football field during a game and the newly designed Awesome Eagle stepped out to meet the adoring crowd. In the following years, Awesome won multiple Cheerleaders Association Mascot National Championships, cementing his status as one of the nation's top collegiate mascots. This beloved character continues to rally our crowds today.

As we celebrate 100 years of the Golden Eagles, we honor the legacy of the Tech students who have come and gone, the community that has supported them and the spirit of pride and enthusiasm that continues to thrive at Tennessee Tech University.

Here's to another century of Golden Eagle spirit.

Wings up!

Special thanks to Megan Atkinson, university archivist, and University Archives & Special Collections for their assistance in researching 100 years of the golden eagle.



From Mascot to Mentor: College of Engineering Student Success Director reflects on time as Awesome Eagle



BY KELLY CHAMBERS

When Ted McWilliams ('95 business management and '97 MBA) first arrived at Tennessee Tech in 1990, he never imagined he'd soon be crowd surfing, dodging detonators and bursting from giant safes in front of packed football stadiums. But as Tech's iconic mascot, Awesome Eagle, McWilliams became not just a symbol of school spirit, but a legend among the Golden Eagle faithful.

After graduating from high school in 1986, McWilliams earned an associate's degree in electronic engineering from ITT Tech and spent a few years working in the field. But something was missing.

"I was looking for something more," McWilliams recalled. "I had always wanted to go to Tennessee Tech."

He enrolled at Tech in the fall of 1990, initially majoring in computer science engineering.

"Calculus II really showed me I'm not meant for engineering," he laughed. "So, I switched to business."

It wasn't long after arriving on campus that McWilliams noticed something strange during the third football game of the season: There was no mascot. The previous mascot had graduated, and a replacement had not yet been selected.

"My friends said, 'You should try out!'" McWilliams recalled. "At first I thought no, but then I thought that sounded like so much fun."

McWilliams debuted in dramatic fashion on Parents' Day. With a little help from the cheerleading squad, police and even the fire department, he staged a moment that would become part of campus lore.

He built a giant "safe" out of a refrigerator box, painted it black and gold, and staged a rescue operation. The storyline was that Awesome Eagle

had been locked away in a safe, and no one knew the combination. That's why there hadn't been a mascot at the first three games.

On game day, McWilliams – sweating profusely inside the safe – was led out onto the field on a pallet as the crowd buzzed in anticipation.

Then came the explosion.

McWilliams had cut the corners of the box in segments, just enough to where he could bust out of it when the time was right. The cheerleading team set off a fake stick of dynamite, McWilliams jumped out of the box, and the crowd went wild!

"It was one of the best moments," McWilliams recalled. "The crowd was cheering because they hadn't seen the mascot for several games. I took off into the stands and was crowd surfing and high fiving and hugging everybody. I had THE best time that day."

McWilliams' passion for the role knew no bounds. Unlike today where there are typically two mascots who swap out at games, he was Tech's one and only during the 1990-91 season. He never missed a game – home or away – and often paid the price in sweat and sore muscles.

McWilliams said he started out at 161 pounds and dropped to 148 pounds. At one game, he put a thermometer inside the mascot head and it measured 112 degrees. Sometimes he would hide under a pup tent so he could remove the head and cool off.

But the physical nature of being Tech's mascot didn't slow him down. Whether it was being "rescued" by the Golden Eagle Battalion from the evil Austin Peay State University team or conducting basketball halftime

pranks like shining people's shoes (and often running off with one of them!), McWilliams brought creativity, energy and humor to every performance.

McWilliams credits the legacy of Tech's mascots before and after him – names like Mike Sliger, Drake Fenlon, Brad Dozier, Jay Banasiak, Zarrin Clark, Bryce Fox, Eric Farmer and Pete Majors – for building the culture that shaped Awesome Eagle into a symbol of strength, excellence and connection.

Serving as Awesome Eagle didn't just impact McWilliams' college experience – it helped shape his future. With two business degrees in hand, he launched a career that eventually brought him back to his alma mater. In June, he was named director of Student Success for Tennessee Tech's College of Engineering.

"I've never really been shy in front of a crowd, but being Awesome took away any awkwardness," he said. "Now, in any situation – even going in cold – I'm comfortable, and I know I can adapt."

For McWilliams, the value of a mascot extends far beyond gameday hype.

"The golden eagle is a strong symbol – of strength and vision – and it brings people together to rally around the best parts of a university," he said.

Even now, decades later, McWilliams lights up when talking about his time as Awesome Eagle. He still remembers the roar of the crowd, the joy of spontaneous antics and the friendships that made it all meaningful.

"It was all fantastic," he said. "I loved it."



Tech grads paint campus mural to celebrate 100 years of Golden Eagles



BY TRACEY HACKETT

As Tennessee Tech celebrates 100 years as the Golden Eagles, a new campus mural honors that milestone.

Abby Ramaker ('23 fine arts) and her partner Millie Hall ('24 fine arts), both Tech alumnae, worked for several months on the piece outside the ground floor of the Roaden University Center – and it's not Ramaker's first mural in town or even on campus.

"The first mural I painted, I was still a student, and it was behind Pennebaker Hall in the native plant garden. Since then, I've done about 10 around Cookeville and Monterey," she said.

Ramaker was commissioned for this mural by the Tech President's Office, which expressed interest in adding more of her work to campus.

It took about a year of planning and designing, with strategic input from university administration to achieve the perfect image, before Ramaker was ready to paint. The mural is located by the west entrance to the Roaden University Center, sandwiched between the university's Centennial Plaza and new pedestrian walkway.

Dan Warren, associate vice president of facilities and business services at the university, expressed his gratitude for the campus beautification project.

"This was an exciting addition to campus, and I'm sure it's going to be the backdrop of many, many pictures for years to come. It makes it even more special because the artists who painted it are Tech alumnae," he said.

Ramaker said the piece reflects both the essence of Tennessee Tech and the broader Upper Cumberland community and how both interact with and influence each other.

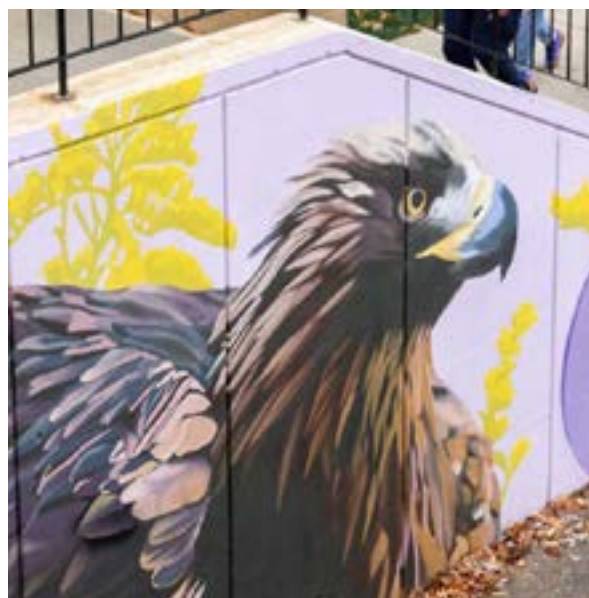
One of the mural's most meaningful details is its depiction of four golden eagles, a nod to

Tech's centennial anniversary of selecting the bird as the symbol for its student body.

The significance of the bird dates back to 1925, when the university's Athletic Association chose the Golden Eagles as the student body's official name after a spirited vote. According to campus history, the name prevailed – with a student vote of 139 to 18 – over other options like Warriors, Mountain Eagles and Lions.

Tech legend and lore say the name was inspired by four golden eagles that soared over the campus on clear afternoons at the time, with one allegedly perching on the library tower, inspiring the student body to solidify that choice. That story has even been recounted in a 1988 column of The Oracle campus newspaper, which also marked its centennial in 2024.

Other prominent features of the mural include Burgess Falls, silhouetted figures of rock climbers, and goldenrod and ironweed – the flowers that inspired Tech's purple and gold colors.



All these elements blend to celebrate both the university and the natural beauty surrounding campus, with the tri-star emblem of the Tennessee state flag featured notably in the mural, as well as the state outline and musical instruments subtly included within that design.

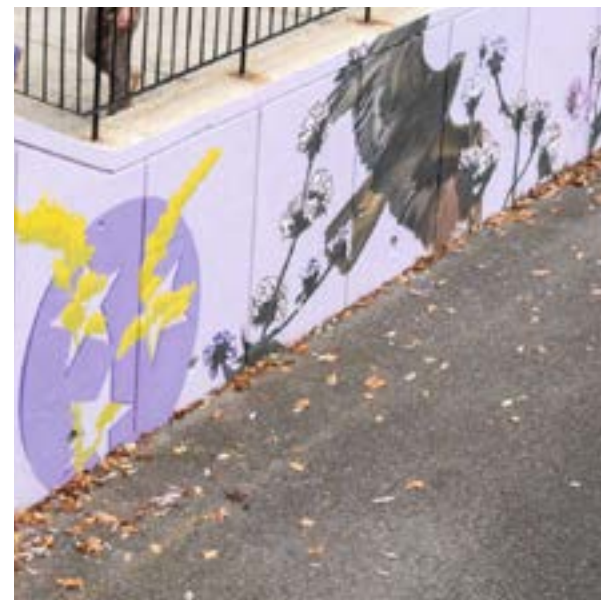
Ramaker credits her time at Tech as pivotal in her development as an artist, so she sees it as an honor to be commissioned to produce such a prominent work on campus.

"The programs here on campus and at the Appalachian Center for Craft are really special to me. I wouldn't be able to do any of these murals without the programs, teachers and everyone who taught me so much when I was a student," she said.

While Ramaker's senior thesis focused on oil painting and figurative work, her murals use exterior acrylic latex and spray paints – materials that hold up against the elements.

She and her partner's process for this latest mural involved bringing the idea from the page to full scale by sketching it onto the wall, blocking in large sections of color and refining details.

"Murals are a great responsibility. They're



shared spaces, so it's important for me to feel like I've made that space better for everyone who uses it," she said.

Public art, for Ramaker, is about transforming the blank "canvas" of a wall into sources of inspiration and community pride – even if not everyone sees the creation from the same perspective.

"Public art affects people in positive ways. It's about taking blank walls and making them more beautiful," she said.

As Ramaker and Hall brought this special mural to life, they naturally looked back on their own experiences, but they also look forward to seeing how it resonates with the Tech community, hoping it serves as a lasting reminder of the many things that make the university special.

Still “Awesome” after 30 years: Tech alumnus reprises role as mascot



BY KELLY CHAMBERS

It's not often that you get to relive one of the best experiences of your life, but one Tennessee Tech alumnus got to do just that at last year's homecoming.

Brad Dozier ('95 business management) served as the Awesome Eagle mascot at Tech from 1991 to 1995. At Tech's 2024 homecoming on Nov. 2, he was “awesome” once again.

“You really can't describe what it's like to be a mascot,” said Dozier. “It takes a special human being to get in a costume and sweat your guts out just to entertain people. But once you experience that feeling, it's better than anything out there. It's so cool when a kid – especially one who was previously scared of you – gives you a hug or a high five.”

When Sara Ramey, director of development for Tech's College of Business, spoke with Dozier a few months prior to Homecoming, he shared how much he loved inhabiting the role of Awesome Eagle. Ramey knew the homecoming theme was “100 Years of Golden Eagles” to celebrate the upcoming centennial anniversary of Tech's mascot, and she wanted to find a way to include Dozier in the festivities. After speaking with Tech's Crawford Alumni Center, Ramey learned that Spirit Squad Coordinator Sydney Hickerson had a costume for “Grandpappy Eagle” - the senior version of Awesome Eagle - but no one to wear it.

“I thought, what if we could invite Brad back to Tech to be Grandpappy at homecoming?” Ramey said. “I felt that, based on my previous conversations with Brad, he might be willing to

jump back into the role. He had indicated that he wanted to be more involved and was willing to help in any way that he could. I'm not sure that suiting up as the mascot again was what he had in mind, but I have to admit, this off-the-wall-idea could not have been more perfect for Brad. It felt like he was made for this moment.”

Dozier remembers Ramey's phone call well.

“After Sara called me and asked me to be Grandpappy at homecoming, I hung up the phone and started crying,” he said. “Being Awesome Eagle was such a huge part of my life and my college career. It was literally awesome to have the opportunity to do that again.”

Dozier admits that being Awesome Eagle three decades later was challenging. After interacting with the crowd at the Crawford Alumni Center's parade watch party, running around the field at the football game and supporting alumni award winners at the Evening of Excellence, he was exhausted.

“You thought you were 20 years old again,” he said to himself, laughing.

But Dozier says he loved every minute of it, just as he loved his time at Tech. Dozier was a third generation Tech student. His grandfather earned a degree from Tech - then known as Tennessee Polytechnic Institute - and both of his parents graduated from Tech as well. Dozier's daughter graduated from Tech in 2023, becoming a fourth generation Golden Eagle.

Dozier was a member of Tech's Student Government Association, ROTC and Phi Gamma Delta Fraternity but says he never set out to become Tech's mascot.

“My parents did not send me to school to be a seven-foot yellow bird,” he laughed. “But that's what I became known for. Tech really made me who I am today. I would not have the personality I have now had I not had those experiences.”

Alumni who attended Tech in the early '90s may not have known Dozier was the mascot – the identity of Awesome Eagle is typically a secret – but they certainly remember his impact on school spirit. Dozier started the trend of the backwards half-court shot at basketball games.

“It became my trademark,” he said. “Normally, the fans leave to get popcorn at halftime, but everyone would stay in their seats to see if I could make it. I think I actually caused concession sales to drop a bit. What's funny is that people would say, ‘Oh my gosh, he's throwing it backwards!’ But what they didn't realize is that I had to throw it backwards because of the big beak!” Dozier was the first mascot to compete at the University Cheer Association Championship in 1992, where he won second place. Since then, Tech's mascot has won the championship three times.

“I'm not sure people realize how physically exhausting it is,” Dozier said. “And one of the hardest parts is you can't talk, and I like to talk.”

Dozier said it was especially challenging not being able to speak at homecoming when he ran into old friends and mentors, such as President Emeritus Bob Bell and First Lady Emeritus Gloria Bell.

“I walked up to them as Grandpappy Eagle, and I gave both of them a huge hug,” Dozier recalled. “I kept hugging them and trying to convey who I was. It wasn’t until later that Dr. Bell came up to me and said, ‘Brad! I didn’t know it was you in that costume!’”

Dozier said he also enjoyed reprising some of Awesome’s antics. In the ‘90s, Dozier would make a comedic showing of pushing the marching band conductor aside and conducting the band erratically. The band would then start playing erratically, too.

“I did that again at homecoming, and it was amazing how fast the band knew what I was trying to do,” Dozier said. “I didn’t know the band members – we hadn’t planned this ahead of time – but they picked right up on it.”

Today, Dozier is an attorney focused on estate and financial planning. He jokes that people are surprised a school mascot would become an attorney but says his business degree from Tech has served him well.

“I encourage any student who doesn’t know what to major in to try business,” he said. “Even if you change your major, you will still have the business background everyone needs to function in the real world. I’ve always been self-employed, and my business degree helps a lot with that. No matter what discipline you choose, you will always need to know how to prepare a budget and buy a car or house.”

Dozier says he has often asked himself why people love a mascot so much.

“I think it’s because the mascot brings spirit to everyone,” he said. “Even alumni who never played a sport love the mascot. You always need a focal point – a reason why you’re there. The mascot gives people something to rally around, whether it’s football, basketball, volleyball or track. The mascot is the same for every sport. The mascot is there for everyone. I remember walking into a football stadium or basketball arena and the crowd would be screaming, ‘Eagle! Eagle! Eagle!’ There’s no feeling like it.”



Cheering from the inside: Drake Fenlon's journey from Awesome Eagle to pro mascot



BY KELLY CHAMBERS

When Drake Fenlon (15 communication) shares his journey as a mascot, he's not merely recounting tales of wearing a costume. He's telling the story of a life built around spirit, performance, community and, above all, connection. From his earliest days growing up in Cookeville to performing on the biggest professional sports stages, Fenlon's path has been a blend of deep-rooted fandom and fearless creativity. And it all started with Awesome Eagle.

Fenlon's family has deep roots in the Upper Cumberland. Born and raised in Cookeville, his childhood was filled with Tennessee Tech sports.

"When I was growing up, going to Tech football and basketball games with my family was one of my favorite activities," Fenlon said. "But instead of watching the game, my parents say I was always focused on Awesome Eagle. I thought Awesome was the coolest guy on campus and being a mascot was the best job on the planet."

Fenlon knew he wanted to be part of the sports world – just not as a player.

"I struck out at T-ball, and I would either pick grass or chew on the leather strings of my glove in the outfield," Fenlon laughed. "It quickly became apparent that I was never going to be a sports star. What my lack of sports talent taught me, though, was the appreciation for athletics and fandom in general. I had a passion for rooting for a team, being there for wins and losses, embracing the history and keeping the tradition – just being in the arena for sports moments that become legendary. These are all

priceless things that I learned at a young age cheering for the Golden Eagles."

That love for fandom set the stage for Fenlon's journey into mascotting – starting as Mr. Cavalier for Cookeville High School. Later, during a campus tour at Tech, Fenlon met with Jim Gray in Admissions and mentioned his interest in being Tech's mascot.

"I remember Mr. Gray looked up from my paperwork and said, 'So you want to be Awesome Eagle? You really want to be a mascot?' With a big smile on his face, he instantly reached for his desk phone and called Tech Cheer Coach Robin Burroughs."

That meeting set everything in motion. From 2011 to 2015, Fenlon embraced the role of Awesome Eagle and says the job was about more than just putting on yellow tights – it was about embodying a character.

"When you perform as a mascot, it's not like Halloween," Fenlon explained. "Anyone can just put on a costume, but it's how you bring the character to life. If you're doing the job right, no one should be thinking, 'Who is that in there?' or 'That's just Drake from science class in a costume.' You have to wow them and make them forget that there's even a person in a costume at all."

And Fenlon and his team did more than wow people. At the UCA College Mascot National Championships at Walt Disney World, Awesome Eagle placed third, second and then won back-to-back championships in 2014 and 2015. Awesome and the mascot team also won the championship in 2018.

"Planning the championship skits and building the sets were some of the most challenging projects I worked on in my career," Fenlon said. "For Awesome to even go to the competition in Orlando is commendable and takes a great deal of hard work. In the open division, only the top five college mascots in the country get to attend. Winning that first championship was a major accomplishment – not just for the cheer and dance program but for Tech as a whole."

Mascotting at Tech also meant getting creative with limited resources. When Fenlon joined, the team had four performers – but only one costume. That summer, they repurposed an old mascot head to create an elderly version of Awesome Eagle: Grandpappy Eagle.

Fenlon says Grandpappy was inspired by his grandfather Jim "Papa" Drake and great uncle Walter Drake – both fiercely proud Golden Eagles who always called the university by its original name of Tennessee Polytechnic Institute.

"Papa and Walter were steadfast in their love for the university," Fenlon said. "And both proudly wore custom-made TPI hats around town and to Tech football games."

Grandpappy was intended to be used in a singular cheer camp skit in 2011, but Fenlon and his team began using Grandpappy on game days, and he quickly became a fan favorite. Today, Grandpappy is still hobbling around with cane in hand at Tech sporting events.

"In a way, the spirits of Papa and Uncle Walter are still cheering on the Golden Eagles," Fenlon said.

After graduation, Fenlon planned to go into broadcast journalism, but then a conversation



with the Nashville Predators' mascot changed everything.

"He asked if I'd ever considered doing this as a fulltime job," Fenlon recalled. "Pro mascots come from all walks of life, but a vast majority were mascots at FBS Division 1-A schools. I had an uphill challenge ahead of me, but I also knew that had never stopped us in our mascot championship runs."

Fenlon landed a part-time, back-up role with the Kansas City Royals. He served as the "lion tamer," the point person for the in-park entertainment control room and as the Royals' mascot Sluggerrr.

"I applied for eight different mascot jobs all across the country, and the Royals were the first to give me an opportunity," Fenlon said. "That first year was extra-special, as the Royals would go on to win the World Series that fall. Being on the field and in the stadium during that excitement was like nothing I had ever experienced."

Fenlon also worked with the Kansas City Chiefs and the Missouri Mavericks hockey team.

"Getting to work alongside some of the performers that the Awesome team and I had studied was surreal, and I'm incredibly thankful for this time in my life," he said.

After working four part-time jobs, Fenlon received a full-time job running the Thunder the Big Green Dog mascot program for the Lake Elsinore Storm, a Single A Padres affiliate minor league team.

"A majority of mascot jobs at the professional level are full-time jobs that require a good amount of office work on top of the performance requirements," Fenlon explained. "Teams require the mascot to oversee kids' clubs, along with appearance scheduling and invoicing, script writing, social media and the upkeep of props, costumes and mascot vehicles. While players on the field might aspire to be major league players one day, a lot of the front office staff have their own ambitions to move up to the next level. I was no different and focused on honing my entertainment, script writing and event planning skills as I waited for my call to the bigs."



Fenlon got his call at the end of the 2018 season. The Oakland A's were hiring their first full-time performer, and Fenlon says he jumped in headfirst to oversee the Stomper the Elephant program.

"When I worked with the A's, I became enthralled by the passion of the Oakland fan community," Fenlon said. "What I found is that to do my job well, I had to become the team's biggest fan and fully embrace the culture. Oakland is far from a perfect place, but the fans I met and interacted with every day taught me to love The Town for its rough edges and gritty culture. The passion of the A's fans was different than anywhere else in baseball."

Fenlon also joined hype teams for the Golden State Warriors and San Francisco 49ers, performing for some of the most electric fan bases in professional sports.

After 10 straight years of working all summer, every summer, 2020 and COVID-19 brought an abrupt end. Fenlon was laid off – along with a significant portion of the front office.

"Of course, the layoff wasn't personal," Fenlon said. "But the pain sticks because my coworkers and I were hired to do a job we loved, and the fans made it all worth it for us. To have that ripped away so unceremoniously is difficult to process, even now. This was the biggest stage I had performed on, and these years were a major part of my personal growth."

But Fenlon focuses on remembering the good times in Oakland, including meeting his wife, Lilly. In 2021, the couple moved to Nashville for their next adventure with Nashville Soccer Club. Fenlon was tasked with helping launch the mascot program for Tempo the Coyote.

"Opportunities to start a new character from scratch are rare in the professional mascot world," he said. "You get to define everything – how the character moves, interacts and makes that first impression with fans. My goal with Tempo was to make him the living embodiment of the 'rock on' emoji. We wanted Tempo to bring the energy of a rock show to every event. Anytime a seven-foot-tall coyote wearing a high-lighter-yellow soccer kit appeared, we wanted people to be mesmerized."

Fenlon says being back in Tennessee to serve his home state was special. It also gave him perspective. After more than a decade mascotting, Fenlon decided to step away. He moved to Connecticut to be close to his wife's family. Today, Fenlon has found new ways to channel his creativity – helping Lilly's family with their Airbnb rentals, restoring old furniture and working in leadership at Trader Joe's.

"I never thought I'd walk away from sports, but I'm grateful to do so on my own terms," he

said. "After my final game in costume, I made a point to take five minutes alone in the middle of the field to reflect and meditate on this life change and the memories I've made in my career. This career has molded me into who I am today, and I'm thankful for those I've met along the way."

Looking back, Fenlon credits Tech for shaping his approach to life and work.

"The creativity Tech allowed my team to have is what I'm most thankful for," Fenlon said. "We were allowed to try new things and push the envelope. Coach Burroughs would often lead with the wisdom of Ms. Frizzle in the Magic School Bus story: 'Take chances, make mistakes, get messy.' I've taken this mentality from our scrappy Awesome Eagle program with me."

From Tucker Stadium and the Hooper Eblen Center to fields and stadiums across the country, Fenlon's journey proves that spirit, once found, never really leaves.

"A mascot is the heart of a team's brand," he said. "Players may come and go, but the mascot stays – and becomes a living, breathing piece of the team's spirit."



Tennessee Tech graduate reflects on passing the Awesome Eagle torch



BY JONATHAN FRANK

Tennessee Tech graduate Zarria Clark delighted packed crowds of Golden Eagle fans for two and a half years – but audiences had no idea it was her.

The Knoxville area native, who graduated on Dec. 13, 2024, with a degree in studio art from the university's School of Art, Craft & Design, was selected to inhabit the role of Tech's beloved mascot, Awesome Eagle, during her sophomore year.

Clark recalls that tryouts for the position took place while she was on a family vacation, so she resorted to emailing a video audition filmed in her front yard.

"There I was recording a video of me acting out the role of Awesome Eagle and neighbors were watching, cars were passing by ... it was a sight to see," Clark said with a laugh.

Awesome Eagle's identity is always a closely guarded secret, but as graduation day approached, Clark was ready to share her journey playing the iconic character.

"I could express myself in ways on campus that I would normally be shy to do, in front of big groups of people," Clark explained. "I think just being able to make a group of people happy, entertained and engaged was something I was called to do."

Clark, who previously played the mascot at Carter High School in Strawberry Plains, Tenn., initially enrolled at Tech because she liked the university's welcoming campus feel and ideal enrollment size.

"It was easy to get more involved at Tech because it's not too overwhelmingly huge," she explained. "I could walk around campus and see people I know."

During her sophomore year, Clark saw Awesome Eagle on campus and whispered her intentions of one day playing the role herself. But true to their mascot duties, Awesome Eagle did not audibly reply, instead acting out an exaggerated silent chuckle.

Over her years in the costume, Clark not only took part in nearly every major campus event, she also was a presence at off-campus happenings – including an alumni wedding.

"Seeing how the Golden Eagle spirit lasts, even after students have graduated, really made an impression on me," she recalled.

As Clark prepared to retire her Awesome Eagle duties upon graduation, she also trained her successor, who happens to be one of her best friends on campus.

"That was really fun, getting to train him and teach him the role," said Clark. "It's bittersweet, for sure, but it was heartwarming to see him take that over."

Clark dreams of creating a communal space for artists of all disciplines to collaborate and share their work – a WeWork of sorts, specifically for artists.

But would Clark ever return to mascotting? She says, "100 percent."

"If I can make a fool of myself in front of a crowd of people to make them happy, that would be really cool," she added.

As Clark hung up her costume, she said she felt gratitude for all that Tech gave her.

"Tech definitely gave me a better understanding of what I wanted to do with art. The professors were really great about helping me narrow things down and understand my creative freedoms," she said. "But it also gave me such a great collection of friends."

"It's always hard to leave behind childhood friends and start over in college, but everyone at Tech was so friendly," Clark added. "Tech gave me a feeling of being seen and known."



Behind the feathers: Heartfelt and hilarious stories from Awesome Eagles past



BY KELLY CHAMBERS

For 100 years, the golden eagle has been more than just a mascot – it's been a symbol of Tennessee Tech spirit and tradition. And behind every high five, hug and halftime stunt are students who stepped into the suit and into something bigger than themselves.

Several former Awesome Eagles shared the laughs, mishaps and meaningful moments that shaped their time as the mascot – and beyond. Their stories serve as a reminder that being Awesome isn't just something you do. It's something you become – and you carry it with you for life.

David Rhea Bailey ('80 civil engineering)
Years as Awesome Eagle: 1977-1978

As told through David's wife, Dana: David was the Evil Knievel Eagle or "Evel Eagle." He has always had a vivacious personality and always loved being around kids. He often volunteered with the youth ministry at his local church, and he loved impacting kids in a positive way. I think that's why he wanted to be the mascot at Tennessee Tech. David was an engineering student – a super smart guy – and I know being the mascot was a lot of work, being on the road all the time on top of difficult engineering classes. But David absolutely loved it. The suit was really heavy, and he would have to drink lots of

water because it was so hot. He would lose five pounds every time he put the suit on because he would get so dehydrated. This was during the time of Evel Knievel [American stunt performer and entertainer known for ramp-to-ramp motorcycle jumps], and so David became the Evel Knievel Eagle or "Evil Eagle." He got some matchbox buses and a yellow mini bike and jumped over the buses during a football game. That was a lot of fun. He also set up a tent in the endzone and – because his name was David – named it Camp David. During basketball season, he would wear roller skates and did tricks at games in Memorial Gym. Wheeler Skating Rink even gave him some golden skates to wear. Of course, he always wore the yellow converse tennis shoes and the yellow leggings that are part of the mascot costume. We actually have David's old costume. It was in an antique store in Algood, and the owner heard David's story and was willing to sell it. We live near the campus, and over the years the Homecoming parade would come right down our street. We'd put the suit on and be "Alumni Eagle" and the current eagle would jump off the fire truck or whatever he was riding on and come over and interact with us. I know David loved representing Tennessee Tech.

Lisa G. Chambers ('90 special education)
Years as Awesome Eagle: 1987

My favorite memory of being Awesome Eagle was the night Tech played UT in a basketball game with a

packed arena. When the first point was scored for Tech, every hand in the crowd threw the toilet paper into the air. The "snow" that fell took forever to clean up and of course the Eagles were penalized, but it was so worth it!

Brad Dozier ('95 business management)
Years as Awesome Eagle: 1991-1995

So many amazing memories...and I am sure all of my fellow Awesome Eagles could reminisce for hours on the times we have spent in the various costumes over the years. I was actually volunteered into the auditions by my fraternity. We were all at lunch my freshman year and the signs in the University Center talked about mascot auditions. The guys felt like it would be a "great adventure," and the next thing I knew, I was on the stage at Derryberry Hall in a seven-foot bird costume. And to make it even more of an adventure... I got the part!! I will honestly say my times in the eagle costume were some of my best memories at Tech. Whether it was harassing refs, cheering on the team or making kids smile, I had a blast. In 1992, I won the opportunity to take the Eagle to the UCA national competition in California. Unfortunately, we went home in second place, but as the first to go to Nationals, I know I paved the way for future eagles that did go on to win. It's hard to pick just one, but one of my most "memorable" was actually my first appearance as the eagle. It was at an alumni event over the summer after I had my auditions, and it was at the Sounds baseball game in Nashville. I



had never worn the suit in public before, much less at an event this big, and I was alone (a big no-no I found out later). The alumni event went great. Hanging out with loving former students, pictures with their families, smiles all around and I was feeling great... Then we went out into the main concourse and towards the seating... Unbeknownst to me it was “mini bat night” at the Sounds stadium. Also unbeknownst to me, the MTSU baseball team was sponsoring summer camp for high school players, and they were also there for an event night. At some point in the evening, I was separated from our alumni group and found myself in the midst of several hundred high school kids with a couple of MTSU ball players yelling, “Get him!!!” Long story short, I made it out with some minor bruises, an increased irritation with our then-MTSU rivals and a valuable life lesson on situational awareness. I could go on, but I will end by saying I really enjoyed being the mascot at Tech. As a third-generation student (and now my daughter has also attended and was a cheerleader), I felt a sense of pride at being able to represent the school in that capacity... Call it “Tech Pride.”

**Sam Mauck (`99 psychology)
Years as Awesome Eagle: 1996-1999**

The experience of being Awesome Eagle was the highlight of my college experience! To this day, I cannot smell the classic scent of Lysol Disinfectant Spray without being transported back in time. My favorite experience was hitting a backwards half-court shot at the OVC tournament game in Martin with my family in the stands, the crowd going crazy – even our opponents – and making ESPN’s Top Plays that night. I was the first person to try on the new Jim Henson Company-designed costume when it was first delivered. I believe it’s the same design we have now – an honor I still hold dear. I can remember winning a mascot dance contest at TSU – a very tough crowd – and kicking field goals at halftime after the band played when the costume still had rubber feet. I got away with cheating on my pushups after touchdowns because my beak was already practically touching the ground anyway! I was cursed out at an away basketball game at SEMO by nine-year-olds for simply existing. My fellow cheerleaders had to escort me straight to the bus after the final buzzer because of the hostility we experienced. My squad mates banished me to the back of the bus to mitigate my unique aroma on the ride home. I loved every second of it! The best part was the little interactions with fans. We had

our regulars – mostly young kids and seniors – in every section who could not wait to say hello and make jokes. I had secret handshakes with people with whom I never spoke a word. I had little dance routines in the stands with friends. The band would chant “KFC” when I tried to spell out TTU. They called me the Cookeville Chicken. I never rode a unicycle or dunked with a trampoline, but in my own way I was able to entertain and inspire a great fanbase. I will forever cherish the bond I shared with perfect strangers over the love we had for the school that means so much to me.

**Dr. Jason Wilton (`07 biology)
Years as Awesome Eagle: 2005-2008**

What I enjoyed most about being Awesome Eagle was seeing the kids’ faces light up at the games. The biggest challenge was the SMELL! It was hard to clean that old suit! My mom was always my biggest cheerleader. My favorite memory of being Awesome Eagle was hearing my mom tell everyone she knows that I was in the bird suit. I worked at the Fitness Center while I was a student (best job I ever had!), met lifelong friends and overall had a great experience. Another favorite memory would have to be meeting my future wife there. Tech prepared me for veterinary school and to become a doctor of veterinary medicine. I met all of my prerequisites. Before going to vet school, I worked as an environmental consultant, so I actually got to use my degree! A life lesson learned from being Awesome Eagle is to never take yourself too seriously. We’re all wearing our own stinky eagle head.

**Jacky King, Jr. (`08 economics and `09 MBA)
Years as Awesome Eagle: 2007-2008**

My favorite part of being Awesome Eagle was the sheer amount of fun it was to be Awesome. The most challenging part was not knowing when a random event might pop up where Awesome was needed. My audition was not the standard audition. It started from a conversation I was having with a fellow coworker at the Fitness Center one night, and somehow, we started talking about Awesome Eagle. I said “I bet it would be fun to be Awesome Eagle,” and he replied, “Well, I’m retiring next year.” I had no clue that he was Awesome and was quite shocked. He offered to let me try being Awesome during one of the basketball games over winter

break. Despite me tumbling down the stairs at one point, the cheerleading coach said I did well and offered me the opportunity to be Awesome Eagle the next year. So many memories... At one of the football games, the big inflatable football helmet that the players ran out of was deflating on the track so I decided to run and dive on top of it. I soon found out it was not as full of air as I thought and I hit the hard ground. The only air to be found was what I just knocked out of myself. Knowing the crowd was watching, I played it off by giving a thumbs up to them and continued in stride. Another time I was standing above the band at a basketball game, and they began to shout “Fly, Awesome, fly.” I was flapping my wings (arms) and took a leap down to where they were. Those big feet of Awesome’s weren’t so great for a landing. I slipped, landed on my back, and again, despite the pain, I gave a thumbs up to the crowd. One time I (as Awesome) was helping ring the bell for the Cookeville Rescue Mission at Wal-Mart. My friend had borrowed my truck, and when it was time for me to leave, I tried calling him to no avail. Thus, I decided to just start walking back. Many people honked and waved as I made my way down Jefferson Avenue. Little did they know, Awesome was just trying to get back home. I made it a little over a mile, and my friend finally showed up. Another engrained memory is the time we played Auburn in football. To my surprise, their war eagle was an actual golden eagle. Its talons were as big as my hands! They had us two eagles pose for a picture; however, their eagle was not too fond of Awesome Eagle at first and attacked my beak. The handler was able to calm the bird, and we finally got our snapshot. If there’s anything I take from my time as Awesome Eagle, it would be to embrace the moment, have fun where you can, and sometimes you just have to take the leap even when not knowing the outcome.

**Dr. Derrick Edwards (`08 psychology and `11 M.A.)
Years as Awesome Eagle: 2003-2004**

Being Awesome Eagle was...well... Awesome! I struggled with the transition to college, so being able to be a part of Tech’s campus was a true blessing. I remember learning to ride the unicycle in Browning - Evans to the cheers and laughter of my dorm-mates, and being able to debut my newfound skill (which was terrible) at Haunted Homecoming 2003. Of course, that was after dressing like a pumpkin and riding an ATV in the parade. That same day I danced on the 50-yard line with the Golden Girls. I was also able to be a part of a Blizzard event in the Hoop (though I took an unfortunate face plant at half court while sweeping up the “snow.”) It didn’t matter... The crowd loved any antics that Awesome Eagle was a part of! My most memorable Awesome moment was the unveiling of the Tennessee





Tech Flag in Memorial Gym. Now, as Tech faculty, I see that flag every day and am reminded of all that this great university (and the people who call it home) have meant to my life.

Audition Story: My audition was in Mem Gym and consisted of a single question... "Can you walk goofy?" After a brief demonstration I was Awesome.

Life Lessons: Putting yourself out there is hard, but life is worth the risk of being rejected.

Ben White
Years as Awesome Eagle: 2010-2012

During my time as Awesome Eagle From 2010 to 2012, I had the incredible honor of being part of the mascot team at Tennessee Tech University. Those years remain some of the most memorable and unique experiences of my life. Together with my teammate and friend, Drake Fenlon, we brought new energy and creativity to the Awesome Eagle program. We were constantly brainstorming skits, building props and finding ways to push the mascot game to the next level. One of our proudest contributions was introducing Grandpappy Eagle – what we affectionately called the old Awesome Eagle suit. We created a whole dynamic where I would suit up as Awesome, and Drake would play Grandpappy, often playing off each other at games to get the crowd going. Jordan Allen was also an important part of our team during that time. She had a real talent for dancing and crowd engagement, and she helped Drake and me step up our performance game. Whether it was choreographing moves or reading the energy of the fans, Jordan knew how to get a stadium fired up. We also added a fresh look by bringing in two morph suits – one gold and one purple. These quickly became part of our mascot identity, and we proudly wore our "This Is What Awesome Looks Like" shirts to complete the vibe. It was all about school spirit, connection and fun. During my time on the team, we took Awesome Eagle and our mascot crew to the UCA/UVA national competition for the first time. We didn't bring home a medal that year, but we helped set the stage. I truly believe that what we started – the character work, the showmanship, the passion – laid the foundation for Awesome Eagle's future success, including the national title win in 2014. Being Awesome Eagle wasn't just about putting on a costume. It was about tradition, teamwork, creativity and pride. It's still one of my favorite stories to share with friends and family – and always will be.

Karly Page ('21 special education)
Years as Awesome Eagle: 2017-2019

Being Tech's mascot brought me so many friends, most of which turned to family. Between my teammates, my coaches (Jordan Benedict and Kelsea Giantonio), I couldn't have asked for a better experience. Being the mascot brought me friends from other sports like basketball (men's and women's), baseball and football. Speaking of baseball, I actually got zipped up in a camping tent once with kids in it who thought it was a good idea to beat up the big, yellow bird AKA me. I'm not sure what lesson they were trying to teach me, but I learned it real quick. Oh, and then one time a men's basketball player thought Awesome's name was Austin, so that's still a running joke. Or the time when we were doing a Christmas parade, and I slipped down a hill, and the entire bird head went tumbling down the hill... without me in it. OR the time when I went to a pageant for students with special needs, and I got a picture with a kiddo that just so happened to be one of the kids in the class I student-taught in two years later. I could go on and on. My favorite part about being the mascot was all the memories I get to look back on. My all-time favorite memory was winning the national championship in Orlando my freshman year. I still have the ring to prove it! One thing that ole bird taught me is to never give up. Even when life isn't fair and people are just, well, people, keep pushing forward. At the end of the day, you'll always have yourself and your people. And I was lucky enough to have myself, my people and the best birdie there ever was! Wings up, Austin!

From Evel Knievel stunts in the '70s to national titles in 2014, 2015 and 2018, the students who suited up as Awesome Eagle brought something uniquely their own to the 100-year legacy of golden eagles. But one thing remains constant, and that's the spirit and purpose that comes from being part of something bigger – something Awesome.



The Alumnus: 100 Years of Golden Eagles

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