

IMPACT | 2025



A Publication by Tennessee Tech's Crawford Alumni Center

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Dear Golden Eagle Family,

It is an honor to introduce this edition of Impact, a magazine that celebrates the remarkable difference your generosity makes at Tennessee Tech. Just as every championship season is built on the collective effort of many, Impact reminds us that the achievements of this university are shared victories – made possible by alumni, donors and friends who believe in Tech's mission.

This past year, our women's basketball team experienced a season we will never forget – capturing both the OVC regular-season and tournament championships for the first time in 25 years, earning our 12th NCAA Tournament appearance, putting together a 17-game



winning streak and finishing a perfect 14-0 at home. Just as meaningful, our student-athletes achieved a 3.699 cumulative GPA – ranking 13th nationally and proving that excellence is not confined to the court but lived out daily in the classroom and in life.

In our program, we live by this principle: How you do one thing is how you do everything. It is not about chasing perfection – it is about the relentless pursuit of excellence. That mindset has shaped not only champions in competition but leaders who will make an impact well beyond their playing days.

In the same way, your support creates an impact that cannot be measured on a scoreboard. It appears in scholarships that lift financial burdens, in opportunities that open doors and in the confidence students gain from knowing someone believes in them. Some of you give through your time and mentorship, others through gifts and resources and many through simply showing up – cheering loudly, encouraging often and standing alongside our students. Every act of support matters, and every act leaves its mark.

As you turn the pages of this issue, I hope you see what I see every day: When Golden Eagles unite, extraordinary things happen. Together, we've achieved so much – and the best is still ahead.

Wings Up!

Handwritten signature of Kim Rosamond in black ink.

Kim Rosamond
Head Coach, Women's Basketball

Tennessee Tech breaks ground on new Advanced Construction and Manufacturing Engineering Building



Tennessee Tech University officials and the campus community broke ground on its Advanced Construction and Manufacturing Engineering (ACME) Building on Oct. 3, celebrating the second building in the College of Engineering's recent expansion of facilities designed to support interdisciplinary collaboration and hands-on learning.

The \$89.6 million ACME Building will be devoted to "making" on a grand scale, featuring industry-grade instructional labs to provide students with experience in real-world practices in advanced manufacturing and construction, fabrication, machine learning and cyber-physical systems, industrial robotics, mechatronics and concrete and steel manufacturing and testing.

Held on the future construction site at the corner of Stadium Drive and Wings Up Way, adjacent to the college's recently opened Ashraf Islam Engineering Building, the event brought together university leaders, donors, industry partners, faculty, students and

community members to mark a milestone in hands-on education.

"Groundbreakings are a significant moment in a university's history, and we've been fortunate in the last few years to celebrate these quite often. They recognize growth, renewal, energy, vision, relevance – it's all focused on the future," said Tech President Phil Oldham during remarks at the event. "We're investing in the students we currently have and the students yet to come. These groundbreakings remind us of our commitment to tomorrow and our commitment to our purpose: developing top quality graduates to lead our communities, our state and our country."

Oldham went on to thank state and federal leaders, including Gov. Bill Lee, for their strong support of the building's construction. ACME was approved for funding in the State of Tennessee's fiscal year 2022-23 state budget with additional funding provided in the fiscal

year 2025-26 budget for a total of \$89.6 million from the state.

The building will be cross-disciplinary within the College of Engineering and will provide Tech students with practical, applied engineering skills that manufacturing and construction employers need.

“The Advanced Construction and Manufacturing Engineering Building will fill a critical gap for the state’s growing manufacturing and construction sectors by providing students with direct hands-on experience with the kind of industry-grade equipment, tools and technology they will encounter in the workplace,” said Joseph C. Slater, dean of the College of Engineering. “This building—combined with our ABET-accredited programs, strong industry partnerships, robust co-op and internship programs and reputation for producing career-ready graduates—will ensure our students are ready to hit the ground running in manufacturing and construction careers.”

With over 3,200 total students in fall 2025, the College of Engineering is ranked in the top 150 best undergraduate engineering programs in the country by U.S. News and World Report. Tech engineering graduates earn an average starting salary of \$86,320, and the university ranks in the Top 50 institutions nationwide for the lowest median debt among graduates, according to the publication’s latest rankings.

Highlights of ACME labs and facilities include:

The Gary Durham Foundry, a smart foundry, metallurgical lab and casting lab for advanced metal casting and materials research, nearly doubling the size of the current foundry. Tech is one of only 19 institutions in the U.S. to have an educational foundry certified by the Foundry Educational Foundation.

An advanced manufacturing lab for instruction and research in advanced manufacturing processes and techniques.

A state-of-the-art PLC lab and robotics lab.

A 10,000-square-foot machine shop and 4,300-square-foot fabrication lab to consolidate Tech’s current machine and prototyping shops into one open space.

A computer lab to support CAD/CAM 3D modeling for manufacturing.

Material formulation and characterization labs and exterior demonstration yard.

A structural testing lab for the testing of large structures over 50 feet long.

A fabrication lab and plating and coating labs.

The building will also house new locations for the Center for Manufacturing Research, a Tennessee Tech Center of Excellence conducting research in smart manufacturing and sustainable materials and manufacturing, and the Department of Manufacturing and Engineering Technology.

At the ceremonial groundbreaking, students, including Emma Waller, a Tech senior majoring in engineering technology with a concentration in mechatronics, also shared how the new building will impact future Golden Eagles.

“The engineering technology program at Tech has given me experience in ways I never expected,” said Waller, who also serves as president of Tech’s student chapter of the American Foundry Society.

“Everything we are taught in the classroom is accompanied with hands-on labs where we can apply our knowledge... and I truly believe without these experiences I wouldn’t be as successful as I am today.”

The ACME building construction is anticipated to be completed in Fall 2028. To learn more, visit www.tntech.edu/WatchUsGrow.

Carrying love forward: Two-time Tennessee Tech alum honors mother and brother through scholarships

For Tennessee Tech alumna Dr. Erin Mekkaoui, giving back to her alma mater is deeply personal. A third-generation Golden Eagle, Mekkaoui recently established two memorial scholarships at Tech – one in honor of her mother, a dedicated nurse, and one in honor of her brother, a creative soul with a heart for others. Each scholarship supports future students and honors the legacy of two individuals whose lives were defined by compassion, resilience and a desire to uplift those around them.

“Losing my mother and brother has been one of the greatest challenges of my life,” Mekkaoui said. “But creating these scholarships in their memory allows me to carry forward the values they lived by, and in some small way, it eases the grief to know that their legacies continue to live on through the lives of others. It’s a way to keep their light in the world.”

Mekkaoui’s time at Tech was filled with formative experiences and joyful memories – fall days on campus, long conversations with friends and a life-changing internship at Mustard Seed Ranch. Her part-time job in Alumni Relations was especially significant: Her grandparents met in the very same building (Jere Whitson) decades earlier. Mekkaoui earned her bachelor’s degree in human ecology in 2013 and master’s in curriculum and instruction in 2015.

“Human ecology was the perfect blend of my passion for education and my desire to support children and families on a deeper level,” she said. “The faculty in that department were phenomenal – deeply knowledgeable, supportive and genuinely invested in who we were

becoming as people – not just who we were as students.”

Mekkaoui fondly recalls classes with Dr. Lee Ann Shipley, Dr. Amber Spears, Dr. Jane Baker and Dr. Martha Howard.



"I often think about how fortunate I was to learn from such strong, inspiring professors," she said. "While my path to the classroom took a bit longer, I'm so thankful for my background in human ecology. I still use what I learned every single day, especially when it comes to understanding the whole child and working closely with families."

Today, Mekkaoui is the co-founder of Anniston Academy, a therapeutic private school in Cookeville that serves both neurodivergent and typically developing students. The inspiration behind the school – and much of her work – stems from the lives and legacies of her mother and brother.

"My mom had such a gift for finding joy in the little things," Mekkaoui said. "She could see the good in any situation and never took the simple moments for granted. I try hard to channel that mindset daily, but it came so naturally to her. She had the best sense of humor and was never afraid to laugh at herself. She showed up for everything – every school event, every game – and I always knew I could count on her to be there."

The Melisa Corn McCollough Memorial Scholarship, named for Mekkaoui's mother, will be awarded to nursing students from Livingston Academy, Monterey High School and Cumberland County.

"My mom spent her entire career as a nurse," Mekkaoui said. "She modeled compassion and resilience and had such a quiet strength about her. Supporting nurses in the communities that were closest to her heart felt like a direct way to honor her life's work and the people that she cared so deeply about."

McCollough recently passed away from Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS or Lou Gehrig's Disease), and Mekkaoui says the care she received was extraordinary.

"Watching other nurses care for her with the same grace and dignity she had shown to so many made it feel right

to give back to the field that shaped her life," Mekkaoui said.

Dr. Kim Hanna, dean of Tech's Whitson-Hester School of Nursing, says the Melisa Corn McCollough Memorial Scholarship honors a life spent in service to others.

"Melisa's legacy of quiet strength, compassion and unwavering dedication to her patients reflects the very heart of nursing," Hanna said. "By supporting future nurses from the communities she loved most, this scholarship will help shape caregivers who lead with empathy and grace, just as she did. Even after three decades have passed since she was a student at Tech, she is still remembered by our faculty as being precious and amazing in her demeanor as a student nurse."

Darlene Franklin, nursing faculty emerita, described McCollough as a student who was kind and always had a smile on her face.

"She was a competent student nurse and a credit to Tennessee Tech's School of Nursing in her practice," Franklin said. "Melisa's legacy being memorialized by her daughter speaks volumes to the legacy and love exhibited to her children and family."

The Tyler "Ducky" Crouch Memorial Scholarship, named in honor of Mekkaoui's brother, will be awarded to special education majors.

"My brother was constantly cracking us up with his impressions of celebrities and proudly showing off his latest painting or piece of art," Mekkaoui recalled. "He had an intense love for NASCAR and would talk your ear off about it, whether you liked racing or not. He had such a goofy, fun-loving side but was also incredibly thoughtful and curious. He brought so much energy to everything he did, and he had a way of making people feel seen and understood."

Mekkaoui adds that her brother was diagnosed with autism as a young child.

"Toward the end of his life, he started opening up more to others about what it meant to him to navigate that diagnosis," she said. "His journey inspired me to advocate for children like him – children who deserve to be understood, supported and celebrated. I've seen firsthand how much of a difference one passionate educator can make in the life of a child with special needs. Through this scholarship, I want to empower more teachers to be that difference – for their students and their communities."

Dr. Lisa Zagumny, dean of Tech's College of Education and Human Sciences, says the Tyler "Ducky" Crouch Memorial Scholarship is a powerful tribute to the importance of special education.

"Dr. Erin Mekkaoui's vision for this scholarship reflects a deep understanding of what it means to truly see and support every child – especially those with unique learning needs," Zagumny said. "We are honored to help carry forward Tyler's legacy by preparing special education teachers who will meet their students with the same warmth, understanding and belief in their potential that Dr. Mekkaoui and her family embody so fully."

Mekkaoui hopes the two scholarships offer more than just financial aid. They're meant to inspire, too.

"I want the scholarship recipients to know that their work matters and that their story is just beginning," Mekkaoui said. "I also want them to know that these scholarships were created out of deep love and loss. The names behind these scholarships belonged to real people – with hopes and dreams, strengths and struggles, good days and hard ones. Their legacies live on not because they were perfect, but because they cared deeply and made a difference. My mom and brother were both ordinary people who made an extraordinary impact. I hope the recipients carry that same spirit into whatever field they pursue – because who you are matters just as much as what you do."



Movies on the Quad brings Tennessee Tech community together for a night under the stars



Golden Eagles past and present gathered on Sept. 12 for a night of nostalgia, laughter and connection as Tennessee Tech's Crawford Alumni Center hosted Movies on the Quad. Alumni, students and members of the community enjoyed an outdoor screening of *The Princess Bride*, complete with live music, games, free t-shirts and food trucks, all on Tech's Historic Main Quad.

The festivities began at 6 p.m. with a lively pre-party. Student band The Customs set the tone with music that carried across the Quad as guests played lawn games,

crafted friendship bracelets and sampled local eats. Families and friends spread out on blankets and lawn chairs, creating a relaxed, festival-like atmosphere. At 7:15 p.m., the movie began, and the Quad transformed into an open-air theater where the audience laughed, cheered and celebrated the joy of watching a classic film together under the stars.

Among those in attendance was alumna Chloe Callis Wade ('09 psychology and '12 M.A.) who brought her daughter – a future Golden Eagle in the making.



"I had the most wonderful time with my daughter seeing The Princess Bride on the Quad at Tech!" Wade said. "To get to share my favorite movie with her where I went to college and graduate school, with friends, under twinkly lights and starlight, was just so special and emotional. Getting to see her laugh and play in the same spots on the Quad where I made so many memories as a student was really a gift! I'm so thankful for opportunities like this."

Raela Gore, events specialist for the Crawford Alumni Center, noted that hosting the event on the Historic Main Quad was intentional.

"For alumni from across the decades, the Quad holds some of their fondest memories," Gore said. "It's where they spent time with friends, where their residence halls once stood and where so many of their classes were held. Hosting this event at such a special place gave alumni and students the chance to connect across

generations and relive a little of what makes Tennessee Tech so memorable."

The event was made possible thanks to generous support from Wilson Bank & Trust, Select Designs and the Tennessee Tech Alumni Association.

"We are deeply grateful to our sponsors for making this event possible," said Susan Luna-Hazlewood, director of the Crawford Alumni Center. "Their support allowed us to host Movies on the Quad at no cost to our guests, creating a special opportunity to bring students, alumni and the community together. Our alumni often share how much they love returning to campus – to see what has changed, what has remained the same and to engage with today's students. This event provided all of that, while celebrating Tech's traditions in a meaningful way."



A lasting legacy: Buzz Heidtke honored with posthumous award and endowment to support professional readiness and leadership



At the annual Evening of Excellence in September, the Tennessee Tech Alumni Association posthumously presented its Outstanding Philanthropy Award to Lyman O. "Buzz" Heidtke, a visionary businessman, investor and dedicated supporter whose generosity transformed Tech's College of Business and continues to open doors for students.

A 1965 graduate in business management, Heidtke credited Tech with preparing him for his career in the investment industry. An entrepreneur from an early age, he went on to found Heidtke & Co., a Nashville-based

investment firm, and established himself as a leader in investment brokerage and hedge fund management.

Heidtke's daughter, Annsley McAleer, accepted the award on his behalf.

"My dad loved his time at Tennessee Tech and treasured the education he received as well as the lifelong friendships he made," McAleer said. "He always said he was fortunate to find his passion at Tech."

Mike Medley ('65 business management) says he and Heidtke became good friends during their time at Tech,

and their friendship lasted more than 50 years – until Heidtke’s passing.

“From the very beginning, Buzz had a way of keeping life lighthearted,” Medley said. “He was born to be a practical joker – always ready with a story that could make you laugh, no matter the situation. Buzz started out studying engineering, but he quickly realized it wasn’t the right path for him. When he shifted to the College of Business, everything clicked. That decision shaped his life and career. What I’ll always admire about Buzz was his generosity. He never forgot the place that gave him his start. His impact will live on in the lives of students for generations to come – just as his friendship lives on in me.”

Through his philanthropy, Heidtke left an indelible mark on Tech’s College of Business. The Heidtke Trading Room in Johnson Hall has become one of the most distinctive facilities on campus and a centerpiece for experiential learning. This state-of-the art lab simulates the fast-paced environment of an investment firm, allowing students to manage real funds and make critical buy-and-sell decisions. A wall of high-definition screens streams global financial markets, commodities and currencies, preparing students for the realities of the profession. Heidtke also established the Heidtke Fund, a student-managed investment portfolio, and the Heidtke Scholarship Endowment for College of Business students.

Determined to carry forward her father’s vision, McAleer created the Buzz Heidtke Professional Readiness and Leadership Endowment to honor his memory and equip future generations of students with the tools, resources and guidance they need to launch successful careers.

The Professional Readiness and Leadership (PRL) Program helps students transition from the classroom to the professional world. Its services include resume and interview preparations, networking workshops, leadership retreats, access to professional attire and

experiential learning opportunities – ensuring graduates are prepared to stand out in competitive job markets.

“My dad often talked about how difficult it was for him – not being from an established family with connections in the investment business – to find a job in Nashville,” McAleer said. “Students need every advantage they can get. You’re always going to be competing with those who have connections or opportunities you might not have. The Professional Readiness and Leadership Program levels the playing field.”

Sherrie Cannon, associate director for professional development in Tech’s College of Business, says McAleer’s gift reflects her father’s enduring belief in the transformative power of preparation.



"That heart for leveling the playing field is exactly what the PRL Program is about – helping students strengthen their confidence, professionalism and readiness so they can step into opportunities they might not otherwise access," Cannon said. "Buzz understood that education changes lives, but he also knew that hands-on preparation and mentoring can open doors. Just as the Heidtke Trading Room gives students a real-world edge in finance, the Buzz Heidtke PRL Endowment will give students across the College of Business the personal and professional tools they need to compete and thrive. We are deeply honored to carry forward his vision and legacy through this program."

Alaina Richards, a junior marketing major from Burns, Tenn., says the PRL Program has been one of the most valuable parts of her time at Tech.

"From heading up events to increasing my knowledge on professionalism to providing weekly 'internship insights' based directly on my major, I know that PRL has my best interest at heart," Richards said. "The students and staff involved are highly passionate about what they

do. Their commitment to aiding students in all areas of career readiness is as contagious as it is kind. They offer a wide range of services including one-on-one resume workshops and professional headshots, which help set every student up for success. My college experience simply would not be the same without their support."

Heidtke passed away in December 2024, never knowing he had been selected for the Outstanding Philanthropy Award. To date, he is the only recipient to be honored posthumously. He lived a life defined by curiosity, generosity and perseverance – leaving behind not only a record of professional achievement, but also a powerful example of the impact of giving back.

"I know my dad would be beaming with pride to be recognized by Tech – the educational institution he loved the most," McAleer said. "Thank you, Tennessee Tech, for the education that allowed my dad to be a successful person in business and in life. And thank you for allowing his legacy to continue."



Milwaukee Tool Donates Hundreds of Power Tools to Tennessee Tech Engineering, Agriculture and Nursing Programs



Hands-on learning at Tennessee Tech got an upgrade this semester as Milwaukee Tool presented the university with hundreds of brand-new power and hand tools benefiting the College of Engineering, the School of Agriculture and the Whitson-Hester School of Nursing.

The College of Engineering designated its dedicated tool storage in the recently opened Ashraf Islam

Engineering Building (AIEB) as the “Milwaukee Tool’s Tool Crib” in recognition of the company’s support.

Tech students, faculty and staff joined representatives from Milwaukee Tool on July 11 at the AIEB vehicle engineering lab to unload the tool haul, ranging from Milwaukee’s M12 FUEL™, M18 FUEL™ and M18 REDLITHIUM™ cordless tools and systems to

PACKOUT™ storage systems, socket sets, multimeters and more.

For the College of Engineering, which continues to equip laboratories in the AIEB, the tools will directly support lab courses, senior capstone projects and competitive design teams.

"Tools are foundational elements in the engineering design-build-test process and this generous gift will directly support hands-on learning," said Joseph C. Slater, dean of the College of Engineering. "This partnership with Milwaukee Tool is a great example of the kind of collaboration between universities and industry that is critical for ensuring the nation has a career-ready and competitive workforce."

In the case of the Whitson-Hester School of Nursing (WHSON), the tools will support clinical courses in both undergraduate and graduate nursing, and will "assist in maintaining nursing simulators and lab equipment," according to Jason Hurley, director of the school's Simulation Lab.

"We are grateful for the assistance and the support of our nursing programs," said Kimberly Hanna, dean of the WHSON. "Milwaukee Tool should be proud to know that they are contributing to the education of our future nurses who will be caring for the health of our communities."

Milwaukee's considerable donation of cutting-edge tools for use in the Randall and Marjorie Warden Agricultural Technology Innovation Center "is a significant boost to experiential agricultural education," said James Baier, assistant dean for the College of Agriculture and Human Ecology and assistant professor for agricultural engineering technology.

"This contribution will empower students with practical experience and foster innovation in sustainable agricultural practices to explore new farming solutions," Baier said.

Milwaukee Tool's partnership with Tennessee Tech reflects its broader mission to collaborate with educational institutions and share its technical expertise.

"At Milwaukee Tool, we believe in equipping the next generation with the tools and hands-on experiences they need to turn ideas into real-world solutions. Partnering with Tennessee Tech allows us to support these future innovators as they develop the skills that will power our industries and communities for years to come," said Jeffrey Adams, director of Operations at Milwaukee Tool's Cookeville facility.



Woodsmoor Craft Fellowship empowers next generation of artists



A new chapter of creativity and craftsmanship is unfolding at Tennessee Tech, thanks to the Woodsmoor Craft Fellowship. This prestigious fellowship will recognize exceptional students in Tech's School of Art, Craft & Design and was made possible through the generosity of longtime arts advocates Steven Westfield and Mark Magnuson.

"The Woodsmoor Craft Fellowship will have a profound impact on our students," said Kim Winkle, director of Tech's School of Art, Craft & Design and Appalachian Center for Craft. "A fellowship is more than financial support – it is a recognition of talent, dedication and potential. For our fine art and craft students, that acknowledgment can be transformative, giving them both the confidence to take creative risks and the

resources to further their practice. This fellowship affirms that what they are doing matters – that their work enriches lives and environments, and that they are part of a larger community of makers committed to the highest levels of creativity and craftsmanship. Long after graduation, being named a Woodsmoor Craft Fellow will serve as a source of pride, connection and inspiration."

Westfield and Magnuson created Woodsmoor, a 25-acre retreat for artists near Cumberland Furnace, Tenn. Woodsmoor was designed to encourage the creation of furniture, functional items, decorative elements and fine art grounded in pure design and natural order – art that, when integrated into living spaces, presents a cohesive and meaningful statement.

Westfield and Magnuson's dedication to craft extends far beyond Woodsmoor. Having witnessed the Appalachian Center for Craft grow from its early days under the Tennessee Arts Commission into the thriving cornerstone of Tech that it is today, they were inspired to invest in the next generation of art students.

"We wanted a way to extend the life and philosophy of what we have created at Woodsmoor past its physical existence as a place where we are surrounded by architecture, art, gardens and craft items that enrich our lives," Westfield and Magnuson said. "It's important that students studying craft understand the important role they play in the creation of such environments. If there weren't crafts people, the world would be devoid of the unique and deeply personal expressions of not just works of art, but unique everyday items as well."

Westfield attended Tech from 1967 to 1970. He enrolled as a physics major and set up physics labs for professors Frederick Culp and Marvin Tidwell. He later changed his major to English and became active with the Tech Players. Eventually, he transferred to the University of Tennessee where he graduated with a degree in theatre. After a series of teaching and theatre production jobs, including managing the prop shop for the Juilliard School of Drama, Westfield returned to Nashville and worked alongside Magnuson, creating large scale corporate events.

Magnuson earned his bachelor's degree from Adrian College in 1975 and a degree in graphic design from the Art Institute of Pittsburgh. In 1980, he was recruited to Washington, D.C., where he became one of the first computer graphic design artists in the country. In 1983, he moved to Nashville to help set up the first computer graphic design studio in Tennessee. Magnuson eventually owned his own interactive design studio known as Anode, Inc.

The Woodsmoor Craft Fellowship will be awarded annually to one junior student in each of Tech's five craft concentrations – wood, glass, metals, fibers and ceramics

– and the fellowship may be renewed for the student's senior year. Fellows receive a monetary award to support materials, seminars, symposiums and other creative opportunities, along with the honor of being recognized for their talent and achievements.

Through this fellowship, Westfield and Magnuson aim to elevate the Appalachian Center for Craft's reputation as a premier learning destination while empowering students to pursue careers in craft at the highest level. The fellowship also forges a lasting bond with Woodsmoor, ensuring that fellows carry forward its legacy of creativity, craftsmanship and appreciation for beautiful environments throughout their personal and professional lives.

"We hope students continue their journey of producing crafts at a high level of creativity and execution," they said. "Knowing there are others out in the craft world who have been awarded this same recognition unites them and provides a lifelong way to keep encouraging and inspiring one another. Life takes many twists and turns, but they will always be a Woodsmoor Craft Fellow."



Clay Buttrey honors Tennessee Tech with presidential gift and Columbia, Tenn. alumni event



"I wouldn't have anything if it weren't for Tech."

Tennessee Tech alumnus Clay Buttrey, an accomplished investor and former engineer, recently made a significant unrestricted contribution to the President's Discretionary Fund. Buttrey's gift is both a personal gesture of gratitude and a powerful endorsement of Tech's continuing momentum.

"Tech opened doors for me that I never could have imagined growing up in White Bluff, Tenn.," Buttrey said. "I would have never had the opportunities I've had if it weren't for my engineering degree."

A proud 1973 mechanical engineering graduate, Buttrey credits Tech for launching a professional journey that changed the course of his life. But his journey didn't start easily. Guided to Tech by his uncle, Buttrey arrived on campus with a strong work ethic and an analytical mind – but, by his own admission, without the academic foundation many of his peers had.

"I wasn't prepared when I started at Tech," Buttrey said. "I had a rudimentary high school education, and I hadn't taken a lot of the pre-college courses that my classmates had. But after a year or two, I found my footing and became a good student. I had really good professors,

and they knew me. I worked hard, and no matter what, I was not going to give up.”

Buttrey credits Tech professors Cemil Bagci, Leighton Sissom and many others with instilling the technical skills and confidence that propelled him to early career success. By age 30, Buttrey had risen to the role of plant manager, then later transitioned into the investment world. Today, he says he enjoys giving back – not only to Tech but to many other charitable causes as well.

While Buttrey has given to Tech for nearly 40 years, his recent gift to the President’s Discretionary Fund is his largest to date.

“Tech gave me an opportunity, and I seized it,” Buttrey said. “Now, I’m glad I can help open doors for someone else.”

Tiff Rector, executive director for planned giving at Tech, says Buttrey is providing the same opportunity to others through his generosity.

“Clay Buttrey embodies the very spirit of Tennessee Tech,” Rector said. “For nearly 40 years, he has generously supported the university that gave him his start. Clay came to Tech with determination and grit, faced challenges head on and turned opportunity into an extraordinary career. His story is a powerful reminder of what’s possible with a Tech education, and we’re

honored to count him among our most loyal and inspiring alumni.”

To celebrate his enduring relationship with the university and help share its bold vision, Buttrey hosted an alumni event in May at Graymere Country Club in Columbia, Tenn. Ninety alumni and friends gathered to reconnect, share stories and hear updates from President Phil Oldham and leaders from the Crawford Alumni Center and University Advancement.

The Columbia alumni luncheon was filled with purple and gold spirit, complete with formal invitations, floral arrangements and a menu selected by Buttrey himself. The event also highlighted Tech’s All-Steinway Initiative, featuring a piano performance by senior music major Tannen Trees, and shared how alumni can be part of shaping the university’s next chapter.

Buttrey says he designated his latest gift for the President’s Discretionary Fund because of his great respect for Tech President Phil Oldham.

“President Oldham has taken something really good and made it even better,” Buttrey said. “He continues to build Tennessee Tech up, and I want to help him as much as I can. I’m happy to give, and I encourage others to give back as well. It’s never hurt me to give, and in fact, it’s always come back to me in a positive way. As long as I live, I’m going to give to Tech.”



Student design project showcases power of hands-on learning in Tennessee Tech's design studies program

A bold reimagining of one of Tennessee Tech's most familiar buildings highlights the real-world experience, professional preparation and creativity that define the university's design studies program.

Hannah Cowan, a senior majoring in design studies with a concentration in architecture and interior design, recently completed a redesign of the Varsity Building, home to the Crawford Alumni Center and University Advancement. The project, created as part of her HEC 4450 commercial design course, exemplifies the immersive, hands-on approach that has made the design studies program one of Tech's fastest-growing academic offerings.

When Cowan received the assignment to redesign a commercial space, she immediately knew she wanted to redesign the Varsity Building and make it more accessible, more functional and more inviting – not just for staff but for alumni and donors as well. Cowan has visited the Varsity Building numerous times throughout the years, both through her part-time job with Chartwells catering many alumni and donor events and because Cowan's mother works in University Advancement.

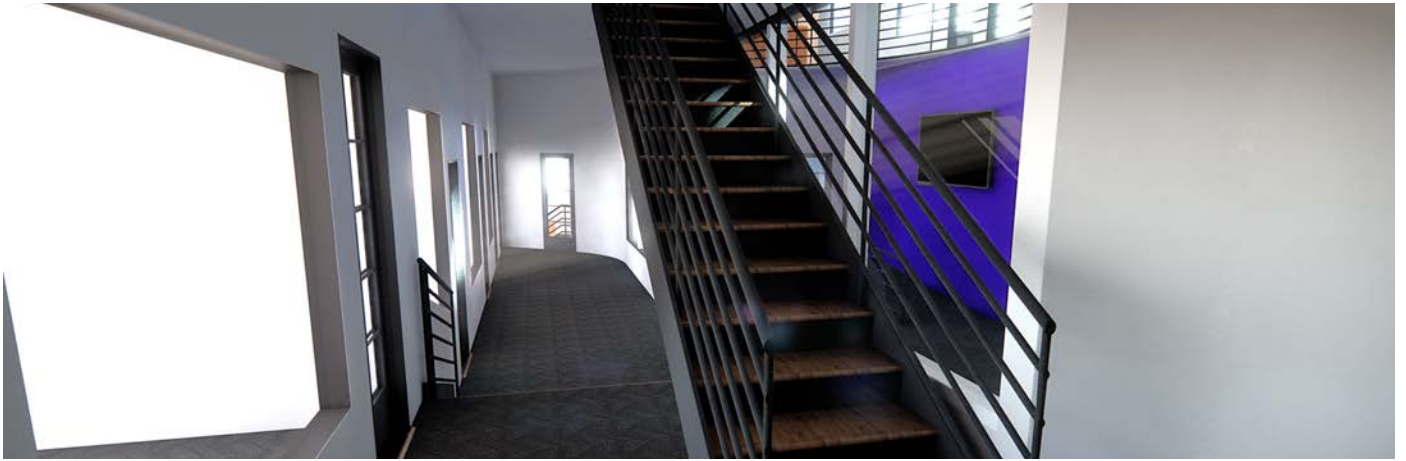
"I'm in the Varsity Building a lot," Cowan said. "And every time, I see things I wish I could change."

Using advanced industry-standard tools like AutoCAD, Revit and Enscape, Cowan developed a comprehensive 2D and 3D redesign of the space. Her vision transformed outdated cubicles into open, collaborative office areas with improved lighting, accessibility and flow, all while



tackling real architectural challenges like sloped flooring from the building's original life as a movie theater.

The commercial design course, taught by Lecturer Aeris Gunnels, is representative of the program's unique, practice-based teaching model. And Gunnels brought a unique personal perspective to Cowan's project. As a former Tech student intern and student worker in the university's facilities department, Gunnels was directly involved in measuring and mapping the Varsity Building.



"To this day, I could probably sketch out most of the buildings' floorplans from memory," he said. "I have been involved directly or indirectly with almost every building that was on campus at that time."

Cowan added, "His knowledge of commercial buildings and architecture – especially the Varsity Building, since it's quite unique – was so beneficial for me."

Cowan says she's drawn to commercial design more than residential because it's about creating shared spaces that impact everyone. Too many commercial buildings aren't comfortable or welcoming, and that matters – because many people spend more time in their offices than they do in their homes.

Cowan's classroom work was reinforced by real-world experience through job shadowing and internships – another core element of the design studies curriculum. Cowan shadowed the capital projects and planning team at Tech and returned for an internship where she worked on design projects, evaluated materials and visited construction sites. That experience steered her career goals and inspired Cowan to minor in project management and business management.

"I used everything I learned in my classes at my internship," Cowan said. "I enjoyed going to

construction sites and looking at fabrics and pulling paint samples to help design small spaces, and I also got to look at furniture for large spaces."

Cowan admits that her journey to interior design started unexpectedly.

"I never saw myself as a creative person until I got to Tech," she admitted. "I didn't draw or sketch, and I worried I would be behind my classmates. But as soon I started taking classes, that all changed. The professors teach you everything and build your ability to design. The program really helped my confidence and helped me figure out what I want to do in my career."

Gunnels notes that a common concern among architecture students at many universities is the disconnect between academic theory and real-world practice – a gap he is determined to close at Tech. His goal is to ensure that Tech's program equips students with practical, hands-on experience that mirrors the demands of the industry from day one.

"I want to make the transition for the students as easy as possible," he said. "I want to give them projects that they feel they could build tomorrow. Our design philosophy has always been a practical one rather than a theoretical one. We are creating design professionals



who will impact the future of middle Tennessee and beyond. I hope that through this program we can change the future of this area through informative, functional and aesthetically-pleasing design. Our students are already enriching their towns and cities through this design philosophy."

Dr. Melinda Anderson, director of Tech's School of Human Ecology, credits Gunnels as the driving force behind the design studies program.

"Mr. Gunnels' vision of hands-on learning and teaching real-world skills prepares the architecture and interior design students for a wide variety of career opportunities," Anderson said. "His students value his expertise and knowledge of the architecture profession and consistently rate his courses as their favorite of all courses they take at Tech."

As the design studies program continues to grow, Gunnels and Anderson hope alumni and community partners will step forward to ensure students like Cowan can continue to shape the spaces that shape others. Anderson says that while donor support has helped the program grow through donations for software maintenance fees, software subscriptions costs, new

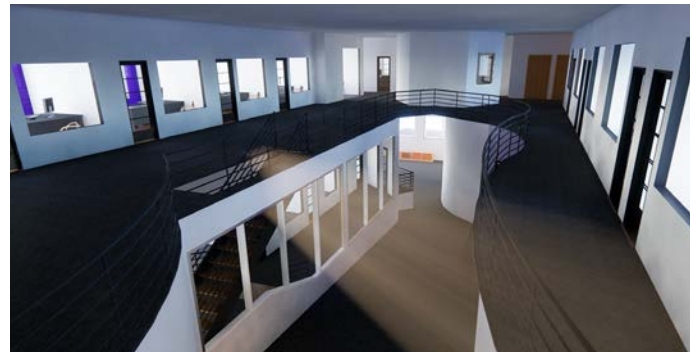
equipment such as laser printers and 3D printers and materials for the resource room, more is needed.

"Some of the software we use can be quite expensive to maintain on 40 computers," Gunnels explained. "All of the software we use is industry standard in most applications and cutting edge in others. There are a lot of different pieces of software and technology that we are trying to incorporate into our program. We have also been experimenting with new pieces of software that we are hopeful to roll out and begin teaching soon."

Anderson adds that there are no scholarships currently designated for design studies – providing an opportunity for a donor to make a meaningful impact.

At the close of the spring 2025 semester, Cowan presented her Varsity Building redesign to the staff of the Crawford Alumni Center and University Advancement – the very individuals who work in the space every day. Her thoughtful, functional design was met with enthusiastic praise and one eager question: "When can we bring this to life?"

"I would never have found my passion for commercial design and project management without the design studies program," Cowan said. "My professors taught me everything I know. I went from someone who really didn't feel very creative to someone who constantly wants to be creative and improve different projects. Now, I walk into a space, and my mind immediately starts thinking about how I can improve it."



From the library to the light booth: Scott Muir provides brighter future for Tennessee Tech students



A lifelong champion of education, Tennessee Tech alumnus Scott Muir recently made a significant gift that will directly empower students in two places that helped shape his own journey: the Volpe Library and the Backdoor Playhouse. With the establishment of the Scott Muir Library Learning Center Endowment and a gift to enhance theatre performance and student travel, Muir's generosity ensures that both academic and artistic support systems at Tech remain vibrant, student-focused and deeply impactful for generations to come.

Muir, a 1977 speech and theatre graduate, spent more than 40 years building a distinguished career in

academic libraries, retiring as associate provost for Rowan University Libraries in New Jersey. His professional life focused on leadership, mentorship and enhancing student access to knowledge and opportunity. Now, through this new gift, he brings those same values back to the campus where his journey began. While Muir previously included Tech in his estate plans, he recognizes the importance of doing something now.

"When I inherited money from my aunt, I saw it as a chance to do something now and actually get to see the impact," Muir said. "With a planned gift, you don't always get to see what happens. This way, I can see the





change I'm helping to make and enjoy knowing I made a difference."

The Scott Muir Library Learning Center Endowment will directly support the hiring and training of tutors within the Volpe Library, reinforcing the essential academic assistance available to Tech students.

"Tutors are so important to student success," Muir said. "I took physics as a freshman at Tech. Big mistake. I barely passed, and I relied on help from a tutor. Sometimes students just get stuck, and that extra help makes all the difference. A lot of students cannot afford to pay for a tutor. The Library Learning Center gives them the chance to get unstuck – for free – and keep moving forward in their education."

Kelly McCallister, dean of the Volpe Library, shared, "As a fellow librarian and former dean, Scott Muir understands the transformative nature of tutoring – the impact that students helping other students has on retention, student success and experience. His gift to

establish the Library Learning Center Endowment ensures that our students will continue to have access to the guidance and support they need to succeed. It's a profound investment not only in academic achievement, but in student confidence, persistence and lifelong learning as well. We are incredibly grateful for his vision and his commitment to making a lasting difference at Tech."

Muir's connection to tutoring and academic support is deeply personal and professional. Over his career, he saw how flexible funding helped libraries meet evolving needs and keep students at the center of decision-making.

"Libraries and theatre departments don't often get large donations," Muir said. "Every gift is appreciated, but with a larger gift, they can do something impactful – not over time, but right now."

Theatre, too, remains close to Muir's heart. His time at the Backdoor Playhouse during his student years shaped his undergraduate experience and helped him find a sense of belonging.

"I was never the best actor, and I was very much an average student," Muir said. "But average students do exceptional things and one day, they can give back, too. Even small gifts can have a real impact."

In April, the Backdoor Playhouse announced that its light booth would be named in Muir's honor, recognizing both his financial support and personal role in the design of the space during his student days. Muir and his 95-year-old mother visited campus to see the light booth and to attend a performance at the Playhouse. Jennifer Shank, dean of the College of Fine Arts, introduced Muir to the audience, and Muir spoke about his love of theatre. Muir was also invited backstage after the performance to speak with the student actors and director.

"Having the light booth named after me is really lovely," Muir said. "I was at Tech when the original one was built,

and I had a role in helping configure it. It was a very touching day, and my mom got to be there, too. It was hard not to cry. Parents like to see their children be successful and do something that is meaningful.”

In addition to improvements to the Playhouse’s infrastructure, part of Muir’s gift will fund student travel, expanding the exposure of theatre students to new performances, ideas and opportunities beyond Cookeville.

“Scott Muir’s generosity goes far beyond the financial impact,” Shank said. “His gift is deeply personal and transformational for the Backdoor Playhouse and for our students. To stand with him in the light booth he helped bring to life, and to witness his connection to the space and the students, was truly moving. Scott’s belief in the power of theatre, and his desire to make a difference while he can still see the results, speaks to the heart of what we do here – creating meaningful experiences that

shape lives. We are honored by his support and inspired by his legacy.”

Muir says he was inspired by philanthropist Henry “Hank” Rowan, an American engineer and philanthropist who, in the early ‘90s, made a \$100 million gift to Glassboro State University, a tiny school in South Jersey. Rowan’s story has been featured in numerous articles including Malcolm Gladwell’s Revisionist History podcast titled “My Little Hundred Million.” Glassboro State was renamed Rowan University in his honor.

Like Rowan, Muir says it’s about making an impact. Muir’s generosity and heartfelt approach to giving exemplify the spirit of Tech alumni who never forget where they came from – and always look for ways to pay it forward.

“One hundred years from now, students may not know who I was,” Muir said. “But they’ll see what I did – that I made something better.”



Tennessee Tech breaks ground on J.J. Oakley Innovation Center & Residence Hall



Tennessee Tech University celebrated the ceremonial kickoff to construction on the J.J. Oakley Innovation Center & Residence Hall on Oct. 7.

The 102,000-square-foot state-of-the-art residence hall will provide stylish and comfortable accommodations for 400 students, featuring a mix of double occupancy rooms and pod-style semi-suites. Amenities will include

an activity room, community kitchen and lounge, study areas, quiet rooms and laundry facilities.

"It speaks to the fact that we do put students first here on campus," said Tech President Phil Oldham at the groundbreaking event. "This is going to be an attractive place for students to live and enjoy for generations to come."

Mike Reagle, executive director of University Housing & Residential Life, added that the new residence hall represents “a promise to students that their experience here matters.”

“By investing in this space, we’re investing in student success,” added Reagle. “Research shows that students who live on campus are more engaged, more likely to persist and more likely to graduate. This hall will be a catalyst for that success.”

A nearly 12,000-square-foot innovation center attached to the residence hall will include fabrication spaces, multipurpose event and presentation facilities, a podcast studio, meeting rooms and other functionalities – all designed to spark creativity and collaboration among students. A dining space will also offer convenience items such as coffee, snacks and prepared foods.

Michael Aikens, acting vice president for research and economic development at Tech, said the center’s functionality “marks a new era for Tennessee Tech in innovation and entrepreneurship.”

“As a flagship facility, it will empower students to explore real-world problems and craft solutions using cutting-edge maker equipment, creative studios and performance spaces,” said Aikens. “This will be a space where students from all backgrounds collaborate, create and grow – where something truly profound begins.”

Additional speakers included Marc Burnett, interim vice president for student affairs, and Braxton Westbrook, student trustee.

The building is named in memory of Joyce Annette “J.J.” Oakley, a beloved local philanthropist who, with

her late husband, Millard Vaughn Oakley, contributed millions of dollars to the university over the years. Oakley passed away in December 2023, following her husband’s passing in April 2022.

Oakley learned of Tech’s plans to honor her with the building’s naming prior to her passing, saying at the time, “I cannot express how much gratitude I feel for this honor,” and sharing that she and her husband “both believe in the power of higher education and everything that Tennessee Tech symbolizes.”

Oakley’s granddaughter, Tech alumna Kendall Vaughn Phillips, attended the groundbreaking ceremony as an honored guest, along with her husband, Bailey.

The \$61.6 million project is built by American Constructors and was designed by WBA Architecture in conjunction with Mackey Mitchell Architects.

“This project brought a wonderful challenge and opportunity to accommodate two distinct purposes, in one building, uniquely stitched into the fabric of the campus,” said Eric Whitfield, principal at WBA Architecture. “It is a building that is both a residence hall, focused on providing the best student living experience, as well as an innovation center, offering space for all students to create, experiment and learn. These ideas are folded into the design, respecting the Georgian colonial aesthetic of the campus and pointing to the future. It has been an absolute pleasure working with the university to bring this vision forward and we are very grateful for the opportunity.”

Likewise, American Constructors shared in a prepared statement that the company is “proud to partner with Tennessee Tech on this exciting project.”

Groundbreaking on the J.J. Oakley Innovation Center & Residence Hall follows last week's groundbreaking on the university's Advanced Construction & Manufacturing Engineering (ACME) building, part of an ambitious slate of construction projects that also includes ongoing renovations to Johnson Hall, home of Tech's College of Business, and an all-new westside football stadium, slated to deliver next year, among other projects.

University leaders aim to have the J.J. Oakley Innovation Center & Residence Hall ready for student occupancy by the start of the fall 2027 semester.







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