

## Heroes & Friends

## By Jack Sweeny

was born and raised in Pineland, Texas, a deep Least Texas sawmill town located in Sabine County, about 60 miles east of Lufkin. Pineland is also the birthplace of TJC trustee Dr. Joe Prud'Homme—Joe's father, E.G. Prud'Homme, even served as mayor! I attended West Sabine High School and played basketball all four years. That's where I met Coach Floyd Wagstaff for the very first time.

Coach Wag drove to Pineland to recruit me to play basketball at Tyler Junior College. I had offers from Stephen F. Austin State University, Lamar University and a few others, but my mother insisted that I needed to attend a Southwest Conference, Division I school. Coach Wag convinced us that playing for TJC would allow me to develop as a player, and upon graduation, I could matriculate to one of those elite, Texas universities. Every year, during my high school basketball career, I played in tournaments on the Texas A&M campus, but little did I know that I would eventually attend there.

My parents divorced while I was in high school, so Coach Wag spent extra time recruiting my mother, Lucille, as much as he did me. In fact, my mother moved to Tyler during my freshman year. Coach Wag and his wife Nell helped her make a very difficult transition in her life much more bearable, and I will always be grateful to them.

My basketball career at TJC was a learning experience. Our team was known as the iron-man eight—we persevered and made it to the NJCAA national tournament! I knew I wasn't the strongest player on the team, but I could handle the ball. I remember Coach Wag occasionally bragging about my basketball abilities to fellow teammates and coaches. He would say, "Let me tell you about old Sweeny, he's got deceptive speed." You know those words really made me feel good until he finished his thought, "Yeah, he's running slower than he looks!" That's why it surprised me a few years ago when Dr. Tim Drain, TJC athletic director, called to tell me I had been nominated for the TJC athletic hall of fame, the Circle of Honor. I was really reluctant to accept the honor until I received another phone call – from Peggy Wagstaff Smith, Coach Wag's daughter and a TJC trustee. She said, "I still try to do things that I know he would want to be done. He wanted you to be part of the Circle of Honor. Now, what size jacket do you wear?" I clearly had no choice!

All of us from the iron-man eight would agree that the worst thing about TJC is that we had to leave after only two years. It just wasn't long enough, but when I finished at TJC, I knew a lot more about what I needed to do with the rest of my life. I completed my bachelor's degree at Texas A&M University and after graduation joined Jones and Laughlin Steel Company. However, East Texas was my home; and in 1970, I

returned to my roots and began my career at Temple-Inland in Diboll.

I had the opportunity to be a part of a small, family-owned company and help it grow into a publicly traded, Fortune 500 corporation. Over the span of 40 years, I have served in sales,



marketing, manufacturing and forest management. One of my favorite positions with Temple-Inland was when I ran our forest. At the time, the company owned two million acres of timberland, the fifthlargest privately owned forest in the country. Only four individuals have had that opportunity, and I feel very blessed to have been entrusted with the stewardship of that land. During my tenure at Temple-Inland, I developed a lifelong friendship with fellow TJC alumnus and Temple-Inland Director, Admiral Bobby R. Inman. Both of us still enjoy reminiscing about our days in Tyler.

I met my wife, An, while still in Pineland. She claims that I was 12 and she was 10! An lived in Alvin, Texas, and her grandparents resided in Pineland. An would visit her grandmother during summer breaks and that's how we first connected. An grew up with Nolan Ryan's wife, Ruth, and often they would commiserate that their high school boyfriends were always absent— Nolan playing major league baseball and me attending Tyler Junior College! Coach Wag thought that An was pretty keen, too. When Coach Wag was in his late 70s but still very involved at TJC, I had planned to attend an athletic dinner. An had other plans and could not come with me, so I brought my oldest daughter Jennifer in her place. We were standing in line to check in to the event, and I saw Coach Wag. I teasingly introduced Jennifer to him as my "new" wife. He grabbed my arm and jerked me out of line and began scolding me for at least several minutes before I could explain that I was only joking. Coach Wag had such a wonderful way with people that he was able to connect with all of us as players, and over time, with our extended families.

There are many roads that you can take throughout life, and the decision to go left or right doesn't really matter. But, on rare occasions, you happen upon a major crossroads, and the road you choose determines a lot about how big things occur in your life. Tyler Junior College was one of those major crossroads for me. I think I would have done OK at another college or university, but I'm glad I didn't take that chance!

TJC Hero and Friend Jack C. Sweeny and his wife An live in Diboll. They have two daughters: Sarah and Jennifer; and five grandchildren. Jack and An recently established the Lucille C. Sweeny Endowed Scholarship in honor of Jack's mother. Jack serves as a member of the board of directors for the TLL Temple Foundation and has held numerous executive positions with Temple-Inland, most recently serving as group vice president for building products. Jack currently serves on the boards of the Diboll Housing Foundation, First Bank and Trust, and Memorial Health System of East Texas. He recently served on the board of trustees of Angelina College and the Forest Resources Institutes at SFA, and he is past president of the Angelina & Neches River Authority.