

SPIRIT



Formidable Mission

*How Texas A&M University's
Veteran Resource and Support
Center assists student veterans
as they mobilize from military
to academic life.*

Eyes on

Bob Jordan '85, executive vice president of corporate services at **Southwest Airlines**, and his wife, Kelly '86, talk low fares, high standards and preserving what matters most in the midst of growth.



Kelly '86 and Bob Jordan '85 see it like this: From the outside looking in, you can't understand it; and from the inside looking out, you can't explain it. It's a place where camaraderie exceeds expectations and loyalty runs pure.

The Jordans are, of course, describing the environment at Southwest Airlines, where Bob serves as executive vice president of corporate services. However, the couple does notice more than a few parallels between the airline and their alma mater, Texas A&M University.

Just as Texas A&M has a spirit that can never be told, Bob attests to Southwest having an inexpressible something that sets its working environment apart. "We refuse to define the culture," he said. "If you're here, you know what it feels like, but it's very hard to describe."

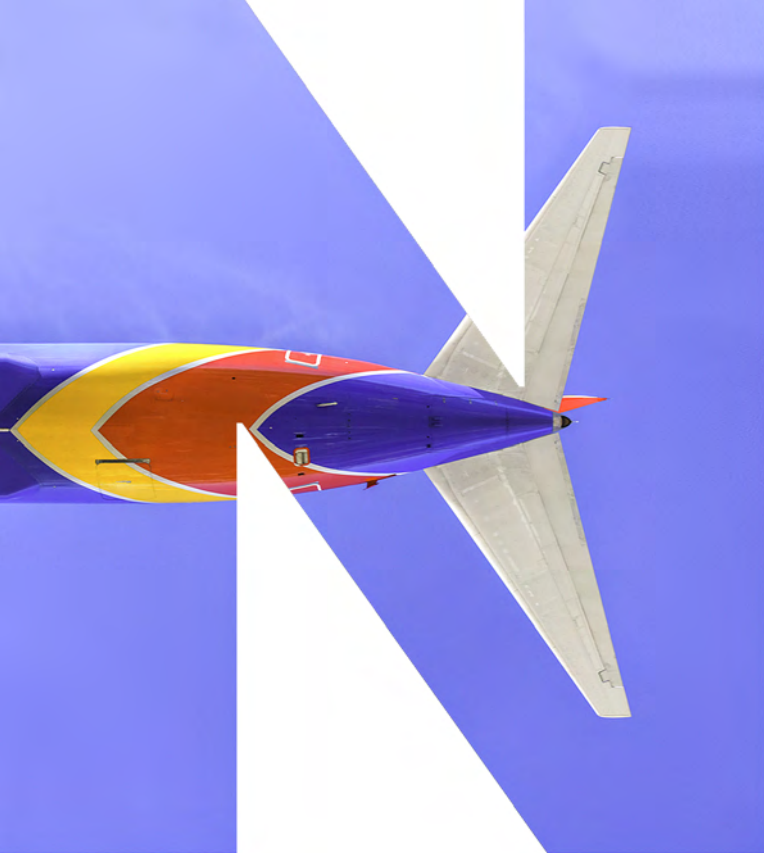
Bob refers to a culture in which every employee, whether they work in a boardroom in Dallas or on a tarmac in California, has a personal stake in Southwest's success. In his position, Bob holds responsibility for preserving that culture as the airline ventures further into new territories and fearlessly takes on the challenges ahead.





Home Skies

By Bailey Payne '19



either Bob nor Kelly grew up in an Aggie household. Bob was reared in Indiana, while Kelly's family moved sporadically during her father's service as a fighter pilot in the U.S. Air Force. Leading up to college, both Bob and Kelly moved with their families to Texas and enrolled at Texas A&M to study computer science and history, respectively.

The two met each other through a college ministry group, became inseparable and married a year later. After taking a few extra semesters to finish their degrees (Kelly coined herself "the queen of victory laps"), the newlyweds graduated a year apart, had their first child while still in College Station and moved to California. Within 18 months, however, they resettled in Texas for Bob's new job as an entry-level programmer for Southwest Airlines.

When Bob joined the company in 1988, it was a scrappy underdog of an airline made resilient by its brushes with extinction. Upon its founding in 1967, Southwest faced immediate opposition from existing airlines, which spent three years trying to extinguish the company in court before it could get a plane off the ground. But through its low costs, tenacious marketing tactics and no-frills approach, which cut out amenities like first-class seating and in-flight meals to reduce costs, Southwest found its footing in Texas and slowly but surely expanded outward.

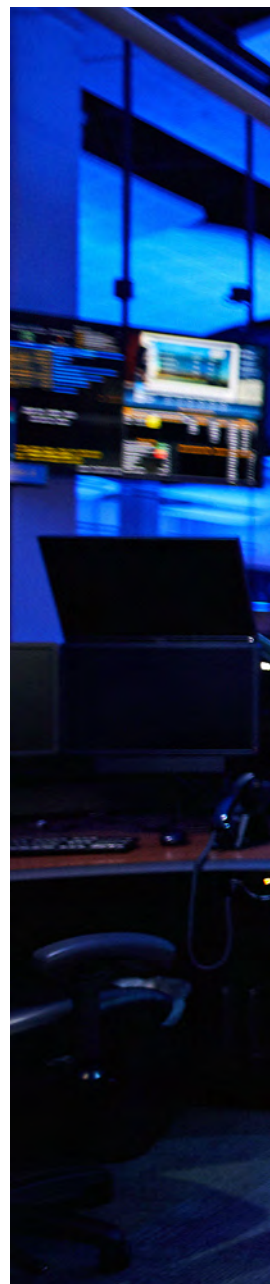
Bob started as one of about 7,000 employees. That number has since grown to more than 58,000. Southwest is now the largest U.S. domestic carrier and the world's largest low-cost carrier. "We do

almost as much business in a week now as we did in a year back then," Bob said. Though it has been years since Southwest was considered an underdog, the philosophy and values that arose from its challenging beginnings still inform the company today. "We talk a lot about living and working the 'Southwest Way,'" Bob explained, "which involves three things: having a servant's heart, a fun-loving attitude and a warrior spirit."

Making a Connection

It's one thing for a company's leadership to know the kind of culture they want to create and another thing to get employees on board. So how does Southwest, a massive company, get everyone to care so much about the organization's goals? Having watched the airline grow alongside Bob from the outside, Kelly answered simply and emphatically. "It's the way they treat their employees," she said. "There's a genuine respect and appreciation for employees as well as acknowledgement when they do something well."

At numerous Southwest events, employees have approached Kelly to praise Bob's personal attention to their well-being. "Bob writes a lot of handwritten notes telling people they did a great





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job in a meeting or that their presentation was spot-on," she said. "There was one employee who was attending night school to get his master's degree, and not many people knew that. But Bob knew when he graduated and personally congratulated him." Bob chalks this up to simply practicing what has been modeled for him. "Every company has a set of values," he said. "It comes down to whether you actually live them every day."

Since he took his first administrative role at Southwest, Bob has overseen a number of high-profile projects within the company. He managed Southwest's shift to e-ticketing that allowed passengers to use virtual boarding passes, its "Transfarency" marketing campaign that highlighted the airline's straightforward pricing, and its \$1.4 billion acquisition of Air Tran Airways (during which he temporarily served as Air Tran's president). While working on these big projects, Bob has sought to instill in his team values of family, trust, vulnerability and maintaining a sustainable work-life balance.

"I absolutely love Southwest, but it doesn't define my life," he said. "Whether you know it or not, as a leader, people are always watching the way you behave. If the example you set for others is working from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. every day, they start doing that to their own teams. They may miss being with their families, but they'll do it anyway because they think it's required to be successful. You need to work hard and get your job done, but I truly believe you're a better person, leader and example to those around you if you can practice balance."

Up in the Air

A few years ago, the Jordans faced a small crisis during a visit to Kelly's mother. Kelly was washing her hands in the kitchen sink when, in one sudden motion, her Aggie ring slipped off her finger and disappeared down the drain. For a few seconds, she stood motionless, paralyzed by shock. "I just stared at the drain thinking, 'That did not just happen,'" she said. Bob assured her that she could order a new ring, but it wasn't the same. The ring she had worn for 30 years, the one on her hand when she walked across the old G. Rollie White stage to receive her Texas A&M diploma, was gone. After some grieving, she purchased a replacement.

While in line at the ring clerk office at The Association of Former Students, Kelly overheard a student veteran asking about when to make payments on an Aggie ring. After he left, she spoke

with the clerk and quietly inquired if the student needed help paying for his ring. "Oh no, he already has a ring," the clerk said. Somebody had paid for his, she explained, and he was paying it forward by funding a ring for someone else. "That's the kind of stuff you regularly see at Texas A&M," Bob said.

Energized by their fellow Aggies' selfless spirit, the Jordans pay it forward in a number of ways. In addition to funding a number of Aggie ring scholarships for student veterans, they've also established endowed scholarships for business honors students and outstanding members of the Corps of Cadets, a President's Endowed Scholarship in honor of Kelly's late father and an endowed professorship at Mays Business School. Bob is currently serving on The Association of Former Students' Board of Directors, and he and Kelly recently supplied a lead gift toward future renovations to Aggie Park (formerly known as Spence Park). The project will renovate the area in front of Kyle Field for all Aggies and transform what the world sees of Texas A&M on a national stage.



The Jordans don't profess any strategy behind their giving beyond keeping their eyes and ears open for opportunities to meet students' needs. They give what they can when asked, because they've seen so many other Aggies do the same. "All you have to do is say, 'There's a need,' and there's an overwhelming willingness in Aggies to fill it," Kelly said.

For all the talk of spirits can never be told and cultures that can't be defined, what binds Texas A&M and Southwest together in the Jordans' mind is simply the effort that people from both places put into helping each other. When it comes down to it, it's easy to pinpoint what makes both communities so unique: They are places where people always come first and where, in all things, the sky's the limit. ©