

Class acts

Teach for America recruits recent grads to teach at low-income schools

By Heather Campbell
THE BATTALION

Eric Dickens, a Class of 2001 English major, had planned to take the corporate route after graduation, but found his true passion in the classroom.

"I had interviews with Dell and IBM and wanted to do something computer-oriented and go to grad school," Dickens said. "But, after I heard about Teach for America, I knew that's what I wanted to do. I realized I needed to do something with the fortunate experiences I had and I wanted to open doors for others."

Dickens, who is in his second year of teaching ESL (English as a Second Language) at Cullen Middle School, said he wants to make a difference through his teaching position.

"I teach in the third ward, which is a low-income area. It's a challenging experience, but someone once said, 'We got our excellent education, now it's our turn to give it back.' That's the reason I joined," Dickens said. "The kids I see everyday were born in a certain part of town and just because of that have limited opportunities."

According to teachforamerica.org, the program targets "outstanding recent college graduates, of all academic majors, who commit two years to teach in public schools in low-income communities." Teach for America allows graduates to defer many college loans during the two years of teaching. In addition, the organization does not require teaching certification from its applicants. Instead, those admitted to the Teach for America corp can obtain certification during their two-year teaching tenure.

Teach for America originated in 1989 when Wendy Kopp, then a student at Princeton University, established the idea for Teach for America in her senior thesis and received a seed grant from Mobil Corp. to get the program started. Since then, Teach

for America has recruited more than 8,000 people to assist in providing a higher quality of education in public schools.

Jeremy Jones, a junior political science and English major, knew he wanted to be involved in education. What he didn't expect, however, was to become involved while in college.

"I was sitting in class last fall and saw (a sign that read) 'Teach For America, MSC 230, 7:30pm,'" Jones said. "(I) knew that I was going to be in the MSC, so I decided to stop by for some info on the way to my other meeting."

Jones never made it to his original destination, but he did leave the Teach for America meeting wanting to make a difference in public education.

"There were only nine people at the presen-

tation, which frustrated me," Jones said. "With the state of education in public schools today and the high concentration of leaders at A&M, I felt like the room should be saturated with movers and shakers anxious to apply."

Jones said he expressed his frustrations to Molly Stauffer, central recruitment director, who hired him as the Texas A&M campaign coordinator two weeks later.

Stauffer said she sees Teach for America as a way for Aggies to give back to the community.

"I know that Texas A&M has a deep commitment to leadership and service, and Teach For America will give Aggies a chance to make an immediate impact in the classroom. (The program) also sets students up for future success, in whatever career path they choose," Stauffer said.

The popularity of the program is rising. Last year, Teach for America had a 300 percent increase in applicants, and a 500 percent increase for the first deadline this semester.

Jones said his favorite aspect revolves around the kids and helping them.

"The program works, and after fourteen years of service we have seen the social changes it has created," he said.

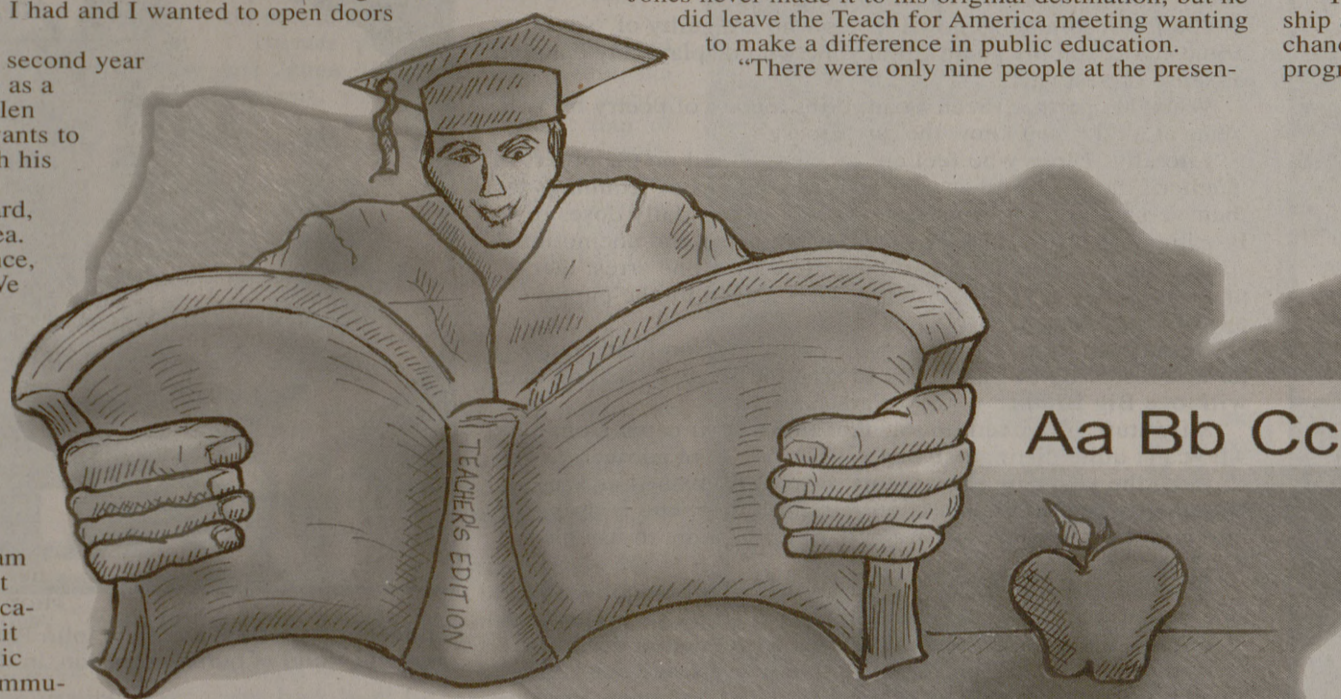
"There are Teach For America alum working in Washington D.C. and in the top graduate schools around the nation, not only fulfilling their personal aspirations, but working for social equality as well."

Yet the giving back is not without challenges. "It makes everything I've done at A&M seem easy," Dickens said. "Classes were nothing compared to this. The challenge I fall upon most often is finding a way to motivate kids who haven't been reached out to. A lot of times, their past teachers have been there for the wrong reasons and haven't truly wanted to help them learn."

For Dickens, however, teaching has been a rewarding experience.

"It's worked really well for me. I have a lot of good relationships with kids and get letters from the ones I had last year," Dickens said. "I had a kid who had a detention today and walked out on me. I have to keep pushing them and reminding them that I'm not doing this to be mean but so that they'll do better."

Teach for America is open to all majors and anyone can apply online at www.teachforamerica.org.



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