

Allison Bradshaw — THE BATTALION

# Muster hosts serve as student connection for families

By Jennifer Reiley

Each year, families travel from across the country to attend Aggie Muster to remember their loved ones. For those who meet and assist those families, the Muster hosts, the day becomes a unique experience.

About 120 students are selected in February to act as Muster hosts, spreading awareness about Muster and its symbolism in the days leading up to April 21. Then, on the evening of Muster they meet and speak with the families of those recognized. Their motivations and backgrounds vary, but they are united by their desire to serve the institution of Aggie Muster.

Cory Rodriguez, Muster host and agricultural economics sophomore, said she grew up in an Aggie family and was always interested in Muster. She said she first attended a Muster ceremony during her senior year of high school, when she knew she would attend Texas A&M. She described her first Muster, and each since, as the closing of another chapter of her Aggie experience.

"For the first time it felt like I wasn't an outsider looking in, but an insider looking out," Rodriguez said.

Amy Gray, one of this year's Muster host coordinators and human resource development junior, said the process of choosing hosts is not easy.

"It varies year to year on what we look for," Gray said. "For us, it was, 'Do they get it? Do

they get what Muster is about? Do they get that it's not about them, but it's about these families that they're serving?' Because these families come a long way and it's an opportunity to love on them and care for them."

Rodriguez said the coordinators aim to choose hosts that can easily interact with the families and who can maintain an appropriate and professional air, which can be difficult considering the sensitive nature of Muster.

"It's very intimidating to think that you'll be hosting a family who has just lost their loved one," Rodriguez said.

Once the 120 hosts are selected, they are taken through a training process to prepare for the experience. Gray said the training teaches the hosts the mechanics of the day, so that the hosts can better focus on the families when they arrive.

"[The hosts] don't have to worry about where they're going, what they have to do next or what's the next proper procedure," Gray said. "Hopefully by the time on Tuesday night that they get their family, all of that is just habit or second nature."

Holly Rine, two-time Muster host and communication junior, said she was surprised to know hosts do not meet families until the evening of the ceremony. The training prepares the hosts to handle their brief time with the families as best as possible.

Alexandra Gonzalez, former Muster host,

Traditions Council chairman and agricultural economics senior, said the experience requires a certain level of adaptability.

"It's a very sensitive and emotionally trying way of serving because it's kind of luck of the draw," Gonzalez said. "But regardless, you're having an impact in some way, shape or form on these families."

Keller said he witnessed firsthand the variations in families at Muster. His first year, he was in charge of two families, one that was very talkative and knowledgeable of A&M and one that was not and remained quiet at the beginning of the ceremony.

"After the whole ceremony at Reed Arena, I came back and got them to escort them out, and the first family that was very talkative didn't talk at all, they just gave me a silent hug and I showed them on their way," Keller said. "The second family was super talkative afterward and were like, 'Hey, if you ever need a place to stay where we're at, just give us a call.' Just going on and on about how that was one of the best experiences they'd ever had in terms of kind of getting over the fact that that person had passed away."

For Keller, one of the defining moments of his service as a Muster host was an experience with a family to which he was not assigned. He was part of A&M's Student Government Association, which helped dedicate the Common's piano to Caleb Tate, Class of 2015. Tate was a

university studies major and was Company P-2 sergeant in the Corps of Cadets. He died in October 2013.

Keller said he saw Tate's family at the piano dedication ceremony and again at Muster that same evening.

"They were just so thankful for that event in the morning, and I remember walking up to them after Muster, going to get my family," Keller said. "The mom and dad just grabbed me, and the dad just started sobbing uncontrollably and he just kept saying, 'Thank you.'"

All the hosts are students, which Keller said shows the level of maturity A&M students have to gain that trust from the families and the administration.

"It's a unique thing that no other school can really comprehend; I think it displays perfectly the spirit we have at Texas A&M, and the kind of family feeling that we have here, and the fact that we do it every year," Keller said.

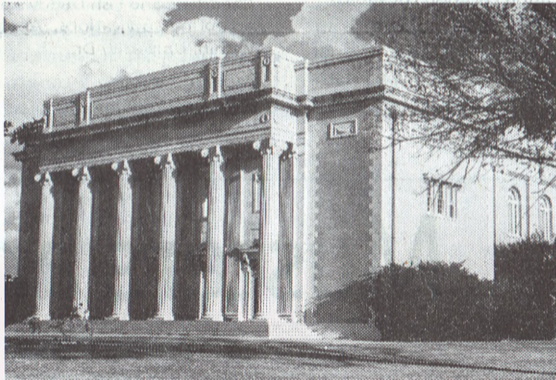
For the hosts, their time serving during Muster does not end after they graduate. Keller said he is set to read the Roll Call of the Absent at the hometown Muster he is attending this year. The other hosts, current and former, also expressed interest in remaining involved with Muster, either through attendance or active participation.

"I plan on attending every Muster for the rest of my life," Gonzalez said. "It's my duty as an Aggie."

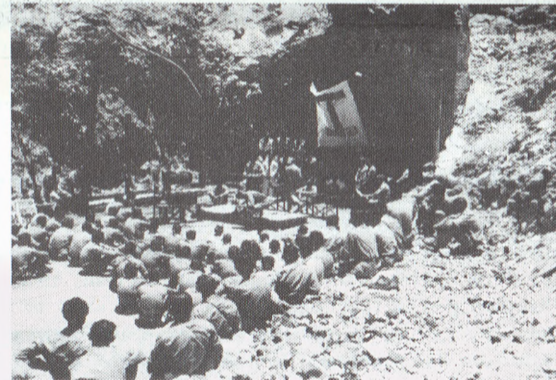
## Muster: a brief history



June 26, 1883: Aggies first gathered together to reminisce over their college days, the victories and defeats experienced on the drill field and in the classroom. Over time, this gathering came to be associated with April 21 — San Jacinto Day, the celebration of Texas's independence from Mexico.



April 21, 1924: The first campus Muster was held in Guion Hall in 1924. Today, campus Muster is held in Reed Arena and is the largest Muster worldwide, with an annual attendance of around 12,000 students.



April 21, 1942: During World War II, Major General George Moore, Class of 1908, held a Muster of 25 Aggies during the Japanese siege of Corregidor Island in the Philippines. They honored the Aggies who had died, held a yell practice and sang the Aggie War Hymn, all while under enemy fire.

Compiled by Sam Scott

### GUEST COLUMN

# Muster: This is what it means to be an Aggie

Aggie Muster is tonight. By now, hopefully you know that — you've seen the posters, or the awareness tables set up around campus, or seen a Muster-related post on Facebook. This year, I've had the privilege of serving on the Aggie Muster Committee as a Media Coordinator, along with my partner, Jamie Bennett. Our year has been dedicated to promoting this time-honored tradition so that as many students as possible will fill up Reed Arena tonight. But no video, no poster, no Facebook post can fully convey what this sacred ceremony truly means.

Growing up in an admittedly crazy Aggie family, from a young age I thought I had a grasp on what this "spirit that can ne'er be told" was all about. I'm a third generation Aggie — my grandfather was an Ag; my parents were Ags; a majority of my aunts, uncles and cousins are Ags; and currently I and my two brothers, Hunter and Heath, are enrolled here. My childhood seasons followed a maroon clock — fall was filled with road trips to College Station for football games, spring breaks followed the basketball team and summers were spent at Aggie sports camps. You get the picture — we bled maroon. Or at least I thought I did.

The biggest, most passionate and faithful Aggie I've ever known was my mother, Sandy Heidtke. She was more proud of this school than I felt was often necessary, and she loved this school with an unmatched fervor. Her greatest passions were three things: faith, family and Texas A&M University. I knew she loved A&M — she made that very clear to everyone she met, but growing up, I never fully grasped why.

In June 2012, my mother was diagnosed with stage IV melanoma, and was told by doctors she had six months to live. My mom was incredibly strong, and beat the hell outta that initial prognosis by fighting for my family, fighting to bring glory to the Lord and fighting to make it through two more Fightin' Texas Aggie Football seasons. Throughout her battle, our whole family was flooded with love and support from the Texas A&M

community all around the nation. As I saw so many people rally around her, classmates she hadn't seen in years, I began to get a clearer picture of what it meant to be a part of this university.

In January of last year, my mom passed away. My twin and I were high school seniors, but my older brother Heath was a sophomore here at the time, and for that reason her name was on the Campus Muster Roll Call last April. By that point, I had been accepted and knew I was coming to A&M that fall. I thought, from growing up in an Aggie-obsessed family, that I knew what to expect out of the night of Muster. I thought it would be a nice ceremony, a touching memorial.

But sitting in the arena with my brothers and my dad, surrounded by thousands, I for the first time felt the full depth of what it really means to be an Aggie. The fact that Reed Arena was completely packed, full of students who, chances are, did not know the individuals behind the Roll Call names, took my breath away and brought chills down my spine. But there they were, supporting my family in what was our darkest time and standing for all of the families and friends of those who had lost a loved one.

As our Muster Committee Chair, Mari Quiros, said this year, "More than anything, Muster is a celebration of a life lived, not simply a life lost." I felt the truth of those words as I sat in the darkness of Reed Arena surrounded by the soft call of "here," echoing throughout the room, sure and steady. It was incredibly powerful, and something I will never forget. Despite the fact that the reason we were there was because my wonderful mom had passed just a few months before, my heart didn't hurt as much when I looked around in the dim candlelight and saw what the Aggie family really is — and got a beautiful glimpse into why my mother was so deeply in love with this university.

Muster is truly the epitome of what it means to be an Aggie. It is not only our duty but our privilege to fill Reed Arena and be there for the families of those Aggies who have gone before. Every name on the Roll Call was someone just like you



The Heidtke family, including Sandy (center) and Hannah (right).

and me, who walked on this campus and figured out this crazy thing that is college, that is life. Every name is someone's mom, dad, sister, brother, grandparent and friend. Every name is a life that touched others, a life that was loved. And one day down the road, those names will be ours.

Aggie Muster is for everyone. It is honor, it is remembrance, it is hope and it is a celebration. I know what it meant to my family, and I know what it will mean to those who fill the floor of Reed this Tuesday. "There's a spirit that can ne'er be told..." and it can't be told — it has to be experienced. So come out and experience it. This is what it means to be an Aggie. This is what it means to answer "here."

Hannah Heidtke is an English freshman who serves on the 2015 Muster Committee