

## Commentary

Tom Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

# Nike's message negates the spirit of UT's motto

**W**hat Starts Here Changes the World." This motto, or brand message, has appeared on the University of Texas' main Web page since August 2004. It is a message all faculty, staff, administrators, students, alumni, alumnae and people of this state can get behind 100 percent.

The University's Office of Public Affairs and the Center for Brand Research worked with advertising firm GSD&M and advertising professors Neal Burns and Deborah Morrison to develop UT's motto. It appears prominently in the television ad spots UT is allotted during broadcasts of its NCAA sporting events. The motto tells the world what we stand for.

In this brand message, the words "for the better" are implicit. The university, through its research and teaching and through the values its graduates take out into the world, aspires to make the world a better place.

We all know from a very young age that a motto like this is a hard challenge. If most of us connected with UT live up to these words, even in small ways, the impact will be big.

One of the great things about being around UT is meeting the people connected with it who do make a difference. In recent years, I have been blessed to get to know Bill Wright of Abilene.

Wright is old-school modest. So don't blame him for my tooting his horn. He stands for the many Bill Wrights in every graduating class at UT.

Wright graduated from the Business School in 1956 and worked in the gasoline industry in West Texas. He said, "If I had been more of a success, I would have the money to endow a chair." Instead, Wright has offered himself, his intelligence and his values. He has served on the boards of the Harry Ransom Center and the UT Press. On the Commission of 125, he helped shape the blueprint for improvement of UT's undergraduate mission. He helps select the distinguished Harrington fellows who add to the quality of research and teaching across campus.

Outside of the University, Wright has put hard work behind his values. He served 12 years on the school board in Abilene. He is a big UT sports fan and lifelong tennis player. He helped introduce soccer into the Abilene Independent School District, and strengthen the tennis program. He simultaneously pushed for higher teacher pay and for all teachers to have a degree in the subject they

teach. Wright understands that deep knowledge and passion offer deep inspiration.

Wright has also become a world-renowned photographer. His "People's Lives" (UT Press) displays the fruits of his world-wide travels to celebrate the human spirit. In late July, Wright took his own cameras and many donated digital cameras to Afghanistan. There he worked with volunteers of an organization known as ASCHIANA. He worked with young children whose parents were unable to work, many disabled with gunshot wounds. As car bombs were detonated in Kabul, he taught them the art of photography. When his time was over, the children begged him not to leave.

Wright aggravated a back injury in Afghanistan. He underwent surgery last week in Houston. Imagine then my surprise when he e-mailed me Saturday via his Blackberry from his hospital.

That Nike ad, he wrote, was on again during the UT-Rice game. The same Nike whose logo appears on UT's uniforms, souvenir jerseys and caps. The ad, he wrote, goes like this: "Scene of a classroom. Teacher at front asks question about Napoleon. White

guy who has been laughing and talking doesn't know. Scene changes to football game where guy runs for a touchdown. Everyone cheering and celebrating him. Scene changes to message: FOOTBALL IS EVERYTHING."

During the UT-Ohio State University game, a variation appeared. "Black guy in the classroom. Same question: Who stopped Napoleon? Kids laughing, not caring. Next scene: black student walking in hall with good-looking blonde hanging on him and everyone saying hello. Next scene's the same: he runs for touchdown, same message: FOOTBALL IS EVERYTHING."

Wright is understandably upset. He believes these ads make a mockery of the educational values he has dedicated his life to promoting on the high school and college level. They denigrate his, and my, lifelong belief that sports are an important part of education.

As UT Athletics Director DeLoss Dodds has said, and Sports Illustrated has confirmed, UT athletics programs are the Joneses (with whom everyone wants to keep up). Let's try to use our influence as the No. 1 program in the country to change this small bit of our world.

Let's tell the NCAA and Nike that those ads are not consistent with what we stand for.

What starts here changes the world. Let's put our mouths and principles where our brand message is.

Palaima is Dickson Centennial Professor of Classics at the University of Texas at Austin.



*'FOOTBALL IS EVERYTHING'*

*ads make a mockery of educational values.*