

Phonathon “Telebirds” make life better for many

It’s a cool Tuesday evening in March, and with the exception of the Sharwan Smith Center (where you’re likely to find students at any hour) and a few scattered classrooms, most of the lights in and around campus buildings have long since been dimmed. However, you’re likely to find one bank of office lights just coming on in the J. Rueben Clark Alumni House. Because while most of the university’s dedicated employees have already punched out for the night, the work day is really just beginning for **VaLynne Nicholes**, Associate Director of Alumni Relations and her crew of dedicated student callers, self designated, the “Telebirds.”

Officially known as the Annual Giving Campaign, the flurry of activity in the basement of the Alumni House is more commonly referred to as the phonathon. But regardless of its title, the effort, which has been a part of the university’s overall fundraising plan for decades, continues to succeed.

“It’s a program that really benefits everyone involved,” said Nicholes, “I like the personal contact between our alumni and the students who are attending now. It gives our alumni an opportunity to know what is currently happening on campus and to share specific news about athletics, new buildings on campus, new majors etc., and it also gives them a chance to share stories about professors they might have had while they were attending. And just as importantly, as the current students go through the phonathon process, they get to know the history and the sacrifices those who founded our institution better than any other students on campus.”

“Even better,” Nicholes added, “the Telebirds also gain an understanding of the importance of private giving and giving back to their alma mater. I look for someone who is caring and loves the university, and who will be able to connect with our alumni.”

Yes, it’s six o’clock on a Tuesday evening in March, darkness is already settling on the street as the Telebirds move down the spiral staircase for another night on the phones. The students move quietly and efficiently to their respective spots to begin calling. Later, they’ll mention that after so many evenings spent in that spartan basement room, they’ve each claimed a cubicle as their own. Small pictures and an occasional jotted reminder tacked up on the walls help to personalize their work areas.



According to Nicholes, the Telebirds are quick to point out that their calls have two distinct purposes; to update alumni records, and to invite former attendees to join in the effort to raise much needed funds for the university.

Most call recipients are positive about the experience. “Generally we receive very favorable comments,” Nicholes said. Because scholarships are so badly needed, our focus this year has been to encourage those who have given in the past to double their pledges and most have been very generous in doing so,” she added.

“I enjoy working with the students,” Nicholes says “Because scholarship opportunities are so limited, I like to think of the students’ employment here as Telebirds as a great way to give students some financial support while they’re attending school.”

And a great way, as well, to spend a cool evening in March for everyone involved in the annual giving process. “It’s hard to put into words how grateful we are for the positive response we receive from our alumni,” Nicholes concluded. “This university is as much theirs as it is the students who are currently attending.” A favorite quote by Winston Churchill sums it all up, “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.”