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## OU staff ensure successful presidential visit

By **Jeff Samoray**, *OU Web Writer*

Through teamwork and a lot of elbow grease, Oakland University staff, faculty, students and volunteers from many different departments pitched in to make the recent visit of U.S. President George W. Bush and Poland President Aleksander Kwasniewski a success.

When OU officials first learned that the Recreation and Athletics Center had been selected as the site for one of two Michigan stops on the official state visit, OU President Gary Russi quickly assembled a **core team** to assist the White House, State Department and Secret Service advance teams in preparing for the event.

"I doubt the core team had any real sense of how much work this visit would ultimately entail," Russi said. "But the group by necessity quickly fanned out to include many, many others. And the results we all saw were a testament to our employees' tenacity, their pride in the university and their work, their dedication to showing the world that Oakland is a university of distinction, and their commitment to teamwork in the real sense of the word."

### Readying the Rec Center

One of the key individuals who helped ensure that the venue would meet the expectations of the advance teams was Denise McGee, athletics facilities coordinator and an OU alumna.

"It was my job to get the arena ready – everything from pulling the bleachers out and covering the basketball court to finding vendors to bring various equipment in," McGee said. "We had less than 10 days to take care of all this and coordinate all the entities involved. And we worked very late the night before to get things ready. It was a challenge, but the good thing was that everyone at the university was involved and helped to make it happen and make it right. Without teamwork, it couldn't have happened."

McGee said perhaps the most interesting organizational piece was working with the Secret Service.

"The Secret Service certainly knew what they needed from our facility in terms of security," McGee said. "We were able to meet all of their requests. They were very efficient and cooperative."

OU Director of Athletics Jack Mehl also worked closely with the White House and Secret Service to meet their needs.

"The security issues weren't difficult, there was just a little more pressure," Mehl said. "We had to be able to commit the venue to their requirements and get certain things done. The Secret Service performed a two-hour sweep of the building and only four of us were allowed to be in the building to participate. We went through it room-by-room and space-by-space with the Secret Service, military techs and bomb-sniffing dogs. It was about as intense and extensive as you can imagine."

Mehl said OU's Athletics Department is accustomed to handling big events, and aside from some extra pressure to make things perfect, the presidential visit was no different. Mehl even stepped forward to be an impromptu emcee of the pre-program when local anchorman Rich Fisher was unexpectedly unable to attend the event.

"I think the ability of the Athletics Department to respond on an ad hoc basis is something we have the poise and experience to handle," Mehl said. "There was a large flurry of activity within the last 48 hours to ensure that everything was just right. But it wasn't just our department. There was a sincere and genuine effort to showcase the university from Building and Grounds Maintenance, OU Police, the administration and many others. It was all very unselfish."

### All systems secure

OU Police had a large role to play both inside and outside the Recreation and Athletics Center by assisting with security and directing traffic in and out of campus.

"You'd characterize the OU officers who were within the Rec Center as those in the position to enforce state laws," said Interim Chief of Police Dallas Schneider. "Beyond that, we worked with Secret Service in the command center to coordinate resource

deployment, handled various road closures, provided backup officers at the metal detectors, and assisted in controlling access to the [helicopter] landing zone. The OU officers working outside the arena provided continued service to the remainder of the campus and responded to concerns that arose which were directly related to the visit."

Schneider said other area police departments cooperated by assigning officers to the campus for the day.

"The Auburn Hills Police Department and Sheriff's Department donated personnel, and state police and county sheriff's deputies were involved in the motorcade," Schneider said. "The Lake Angelus Police Department also had a reserve officer who volunteered to work all day long with us because he wanted to be involved. There was a lot of cooperation from everybody – it all worked very nicely."

### **Spit and polish**

Rusty Postlewait, associate vice president for facilities management, worked with OU Police to coordinate vehicle and pedestrian traffic and was charged with ensuring the venue was in perfect order.

"My staff handled a lot of tasks in and around the Rec Center that folks needed on short notice," Postlewait said. "There were the typical pre-event things such as repainting the handrails at the front of the building, repainting curbing, laying down hydro seed on the lawn, hanging banners and posting signs. We wanted to make things look nice for all visitors. We also met the needs of the White House staff and provided an electrical technician dedicated to the White House Press Corps. We also had a dedicated air-conditioning technician and structural engineer on hand in the building during the event, just in case."

Anticipating that many visitors would not be familiar with OU's campus, there was still work to be done on directing traffic and guiding visitors from the various parking lots to the Recreation and Athletics Center.

"Our mission on the day of the event was to manage the parking and pedestrian flow," Postlewait said. "We had to identify lots to be reserved for event attendees and coordinate that with OU Police. We had a lot of grounds maintenance personnel stationed at various lots and intersections for people coming into the campus. We also had a shuttle bus and golf carts available for handicapped visitors.

"The event was of high intensity but of a short duration. Everybody was excited about being able to participate, and the privilege of having prominent visitors like this kept everyone charged up. Everything went very smoothly. Sometimes you look back on an event and wish you could've done things better. But I look back at this event and can't think of anything I'd do differently."

### **Lending a hand**

Volunteers made a major contribution, with the recruiting task fell to Rochelle Black, OU's director of Government Relations. Rochelle worked with a variety of people on campus and off, including coordinating with the Governor's Office, to make sure all needs were covered.

"This was probably not a job Rochelle would go looking for, but like so many others on campus, she took it on without a second thought, and really made it work," said Geoff Upward, director of University Communications and Marketing. "Rochelle also served in a variety of liaison roles with the White House and Governor's Office and, with Jo Hairston from the President's Office, managed OU ticket requests for the by-invitation event."

### **Pressed into service**

Executive Events Consultant to the President Joy Williams is an expert at coordinating special events of all kinds, large and small. This one, however, represents one of the proudest moments of her career. "It was an event that I definitely wanted to be a part of because it's not every day that a sitting president of the United States, let alone two world leaders, visit your campus," Williams said.

"It was really quite emotional to see the whole event come together. When President Bush was about to arrive and the presidential seal was put on the podium, that's when it really hit me."

Williams was put in charge of arranging catering for the White House Press Corps, which included about 80 journalists. Williams' first-class attention to detail brought a touch of excellence to the event and was noted by the visiting journalists.

"I wanted the press to have a really good time with us and leave them with a good, solid impression of Oakland University," Williams said. "But I only had two days to really get things together. I contacted Epoch Caterers in Novi, a vendor that I've used before, and I knew they'd do an excellent job. The comments I received were quite complimentary and everyone seemed to be in a happy frame of mind. We really put our best foot forward."

OU Media Relations Assistant Ann Ruppenthal also received positive feedback from the visiting media on their treatment from the university.

"We had no doubt Joy would provide the best food and service for the Press Corps, but she outdid herself. I think it brought her back to her time in the foreign diplomatic service. We heard from the Press Corps that they had never been treated so well."

### **Communications central**

Ruppenthal was added to the core team to coordinate contact with the White House press advance team – a major task.

"We worked with the White House to pull together a press office for the Press Secretary's staff and the White House Press Corps," Ruppenthal said. "We also had to coordinate setting up a transmission room for CNN, which had the live feed for all the television networks. The White House press advance team chose the main floor of the Recreation Center as the site for all national press activity. One of our best organizational moves was asking Joel Nieuwsma, Rec Center facilities manager, to help. He basically took charge of coordinating the set up and was on hand all week and through the event to make sure things were handled professionally and smoothly. Joel did an outstanding job.

"Our department also helped organize volunteers to assist the press on the day of the event with credentialing and seating and such. Everybody just pitched in to help. We really had a great staff. This kind of event consumes you from the moment it's brought in, and we couldn't have done it without the help of everyone on campus."

Upward said Communications and Marketing acted as a central communications point for a variety of areas and when a need was determined, tasks were distributed to the appropriate team.

"With the White House's approval, we were able to find appropriate opportunities to promote the university, although the university's charge and our core team's primary concern was doing the very best job we could as event hosts," Upward said. "We were very appreciative of the White House's willingness in this regard. We were able to prepare and distribute OU press kits, including a version in Polish. The White House invited President Russi and recent OU graduate Ania Matuszewska to greet the presidents and speak to the assembled crowd on behalf of OU. And they gave us the latitude to create a variety of welcome banners and signs inside the arena and around the campus, which Ania translated into Polish for us.

"Our design staff was a big part of this effort in creating the signs and banners, T-shirts for attendees and polo shirts for the White House advance team. They put in many extra hours on this effort on an incredibly short schedule – from White House requests to design approval to manufactured production."

### **Post-event coverage**

Upward emphasized that the event work continues. One avenue for post-event news and information is the university Web site.

"We began working on a communications plan prior to the event and continue to execute the tactics and add to that plan," Upward said. "We've been working to leverage the opportunity to let people know – worldwide – that the university was the event host. Within hours of the presidents' appearance, our Web team had an extensive page on the OU site devoted to event coverage, and we continue to add to it with additional stories from many angles.

"Many of us have been involved in a lot of events, but I can say without question that I have never seen anything like this as far as teamwork goes – not even close. Everyone's efforts made a difference. No one on campus said 'no' to requests, no matter how tough they may have seemed. OU looked great to the president's staff, the Polish dignitaries, the press and a watching world because university staff and volunteers cared so much. It was an honor to be part of the effort and to work with so many great people."

Mehl also recognized the efforts of all who contributed to ensuring the event was a success.

"From my perspective there were a lot of heroes for the university. That's a testimony to how good university staff are at their jobs," Mehl said. "This was a real opportunity to showcase OU on an international stage, and the biggest day in the university's history came off without a hitch."

#### **SUMMARY**

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