Introducing Kermit L. Hall

By Christine Hanson McKnight
Photography: Mark McCarty

“One of our great challenges is fashioning a story about what is happening (at the University) and then constantly reiterating it locally, regionally and nationally. There needs to be no doubt in the minds of those who lead the State of New York that UAlbany’s success is their success as well.”

Kermit L. Hall, the University’s 17th president, has hit the ground listening. A pragmatic, self-deprecating Midwesterner with an understated sense of humor, Hall was named UAlbany’s president by the State University of New York Board of Trustees on Dec. 29, 2004. Since then, he has redefined the meaning of the phrase “getting to know you.”

Within days, Hall was on campus, meeting and talking with faculty, staff and students and reaching out to UAlbany friends and the community off campus. One of his earliest trips took him to the state Capitol in downtown Albany, where he introduced himself to Gov. George Pataki and other state leaders at the Jan. 5 State of the State address. At the Big Purple Gridol basketball game Feb. 5, Hall roamed the Recreation and Convocation Center, shaking hands with students and community supporters, and leading the crowd in a roaring cheer of “Go Danes!”

Throughout January, he shuttled back and forth between Albany and Logan, Utah, home of Utah State University, the land-grant school he had previously served as president. By Feb. 1, his official start date, Hall had already met scores of student and alumni leaders, launched a series of meetings with the faculties of the University’s nine colleges and schools, and introduced himself to countless business executives and politicians. He was also working away at his goal of meeting each of the University’s 3,462 employers by graduation in May. Plans for walking tours, pancake breakfasts and ice cream socials were on the books for later in the spring.

“Blithely,Hall says, “for the impa-tient part of the population — like me — that’s hard to do, but it is critical. If you stay in your office too much, your office will capture you. It’s very, very important to let people bring their issues to you.”

One of the ways he is accomplish-ing that is through the University’s Web site. Launched in February, the “Ask the President” page (http://www.albany.edu/president/questions.html) has generated hun-dreds of questions about everything from class accessibility to parking.

Hall also moved his office from the University Administration Building on Western Avenue to the third floor of the Science Library on the Academic Podium. Vice President for Student Affairs James Doegefield joined him. (The University’s new administration building, going up on the podium’s north flank, is expected to be ready for occupancy in October 2005.) “I want to see stu-dents on their own ground, instead of their coming down to see me,” says Hall, a constitu-tional law scholar who was a history professor.

Since his arrival at UAlbany, President Kermit L. Hall’s mantra has been “academics first.”

On his first week on the job, he announced that he was skipping the usual inauguration ceremony and using the money saved — $100,000 — to establish the Inaugural Scholarship Fund. To help launch the initiative, he and his wife, Phyllis, donated $50,000. Hall is challenging others to pledge their support, with the goal of raising at least $1 million. The fund is designed to provide need-based undergraduate student scholarships.

Hall also announced plans in late March to evaluate the goals of UAlbany’s $500 million Bold. Vision. capital campaign and to re-launch it next year with a new name and greater emphasis on scholarships, academics and other student support.

“We need to get ourselves focused on our students,” Hall said.

Besides scholarships, future fundrais-ing will likely include efforts to boost endowed professor-ships and fellowships. Former President Karen R. Hitchcock launched the Bold. Vision. Campaign in April 2003 with the goal of reach-ing $500 million by 2008. About $250 mil-lion has been raised so far. The Inaugural Scholarship Fund had grown to $202,672 by the end of March. A similar fund estab-lished by the Halls in 2000 at Utah State has since grown to more than $1.1 million.
before he got into academic adminis-
trative work.

He won points for
canceling plans for a
lavish inaugural cere-
mony and asking that
the $100,000 saved be
used to establish an
Inaugural Scholarship
Fund. His goal is to raise
at least $1 million. To jump-
start the initiative, he and his wife,
Phyllis, donated $10,000. A similareffort at Utah State had generated $1.1
million by the time he left.

“My mantra is academics,” Hall
said. “Students are central to that.”

With that philosophy in mind, Hall
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refocus the goals and direction of
UAlbany’s Bold. Vision. campaign and
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of reaching $500 million by 2008.

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“Philanthropy plays a critical role
in determining UAlbany’s success,” Hall
said. “Upon arriving at UAlbany, I dis-
covered many new institutional ... along with new priorities, be
factored into our vision for institu-
tional success and our overall fundraising
 equation. ”

He invites
his wife of 34
years, Phyllis,
to critique his
jokes and
speeches.

All developed his leadership style
under Gordon Gee, who was
president at The Ohio State University
when Hall served as dean of the insti-
tution’s College of Humanities from
1994 to 1999 and executive
dean of the Colleges of the Arts
and Sciences from 1996 to 1999. Gee, now chancellor of
Vanderbilt University, said that
Hall stood out immediately as
an exceptional administrator
who “brings a great sense of balance and perspective to
understanding the nature of
American higher education
today.” As dean of the College
of Humanities, Hall reached
out to the rest of the campus
and showed how his college
could contribute to the larger
university and “became one of
the leading advocates for quali-
ty and change (at Ohio State),”
said Gee. He remains Hall’s mentor
and good friend.

“Gordon was a great person to fol-
low around, to see how he addressed
issues. He understands the basic lesson
that you win with people,” Hall says,
returning the compliment.

Martha Garland, another Ohio
State faculty member and administra-
tor who worked closely with Hall,
describes him as “one of the brightest
people I’ve ever known, and someone
with an extraordinarily high level of

Kermit L. Hall:
He’s Got
Game!

He was named after his
father, whose namesake
was Kermit Roosevelt, a son
of Theodore Roosevelt.

He's a constitutional law scholar
who was a history professor before
he became an administrator. He still
finds time to teach.

One of the most
important people in
his life was his
fifth-grade teacher,
who urged him to
go to college.

He is the author of two books
that were main selections of the
History Book Club.

He moved his office to the
center of campus to be
nearier students.

He is the first one in
his family to
graduate from college.

One of his core beliefs is:
“You win with people.”

His personal
 car is a red
2000 Corvette.
He enjoys deep-
sea fishing, bird
watching and
hiking.

He has a passion for
nerd culture and
went on a Star Wars
vacation in 2006.

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Photos by Mark Schmidt

President Hall is surrounded
by student leaders in the
Campus Center.

Senior Catherine “Cat” Provost, left, shadowed
President Hall for a day as part of the president’s
plan to provide greater access and understanding of
his office. Their schedule on March 23 featured meet-
ings with faculty, administrators and legislators,
including Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, center.

The Road to UAlbany
- President, Utah State University, 2000-2005
- Provost and Vice Chancellor for
Academic Affairs, North Carolina
State University, 1999-2000
- Executive Dean, College of the
Arts and Sciences, The Ohio
State University, 1996-99. Dean,
College of Humanities, The Ohio
State University, 1994-1999.
- First Lieutenant, Military
Intelligence, U.S. Army, 1967-69

Education
and legal history), University of
Minnesota, 1972. M.A. (history),
Syracuse University, 1967. B.A.
(history), University of Akron.

Hall is a graduate of two Harvard
University professional education
programs: the Harvard Seminar for
New Presidents in 2000 and the
Harvard Institute for Educational
Management in 1999.

Academic Publications
- Author of five books on the
American legal system, including
The Magic Mirror: Law in American
History (Oxford University Press,
1989), and editor-in-chief of The
Oxford Companion to the Supreme
Court of the United States (Oxford
University Press, 2nd ed. revised,
2005). winner of the Gavel Award
from the American Bar Association,
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Court Decisions (Oxford University
Press, 1999). Both books were
main selections of the History
Book Club.

UAlbany’s 17th President
Succeeds Karen Hitchcock, who left
UAlbany to lead Queens University
in Kingston, Ont. John Ryan, presi-
dent of the State Maritime College,
filled the UAlbany presidency on an
interim basis.

Political
- Sixty years old. Born in Akron,
Ohio. Married to Phyllis Hall. They
own two cats, Harry and Bess.

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The first one in his family to gradu-ate from college, Hall’s initial goal was to be a history professor — an ambitious aspiration, he admits, for the son of a rubber worker and a bookkeeper. But if he was not yet the first in his family to graduate from college, his point that college was important and confirmed for him that history was worthwhile. It was, says Hall, a powerful demonstration of how a teacher can influence her students. When his father died during his senior year in high school, Hall enrolled at the University of Akron and lived at home. At Akron, he encountered dedicated teachers who “really made a difference and cared about their students.” To help pay his way through school, Hall joined the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program, eventually rising to command all of the ROTC units at the university. He went on to serve two years in the U.S. Army, primarily in intelligence; his assignments included Vietnam, Korea and Germany. His military experience was a central event in his life, he says, shaping his thinking about leadership.

In 1979, as a young scholar at Wayne State, Hall published his first book, *The Politics of Justice, Lower Federal Judicial Selection and the Second American Party System, 1829-1861* (University of Nebraska Press). Writing it, he says, was one of the most rewarding events of his career. He has since written or edited 20 other books on the American legal and constitutional system, including his most recent, *The Law of the Land: A History of the Supreme Court* (2003, Recorded Books), fourteen 35-minute lectures on the history of the U.S. Supreme Court.

In the mid-1990s, President Bill Clinton nominated Hall to serve on the John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Review Board. Confirmed by the U.S. Senate, he and four other board members eventually released 6 million documents relating to the assassination — despite opposition from the CIA, FBI and National Security Agency. The experience “taught me the value of openness in dealing with issues of governance, and as a way of building trust and confidence in any institution,” Hall says.

Finally, as one of five Division I university presidents charged in 2003 with reforming the Bowl Championship Series in football, Hall gained insight into the tensions that exist between college academics and what he describes as “the money machine that has become big-time football.” He has also been named to the NCAA’s new Presidential Task Force on the Future of Intercollegiate Athletics.

Kermit Hall, please go to: http://www.albany.edu/president/

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