

# Academics First!

## Introducing Kermit L. Hall

By Christine Hanson McKnight

Photography: Mark McCarty

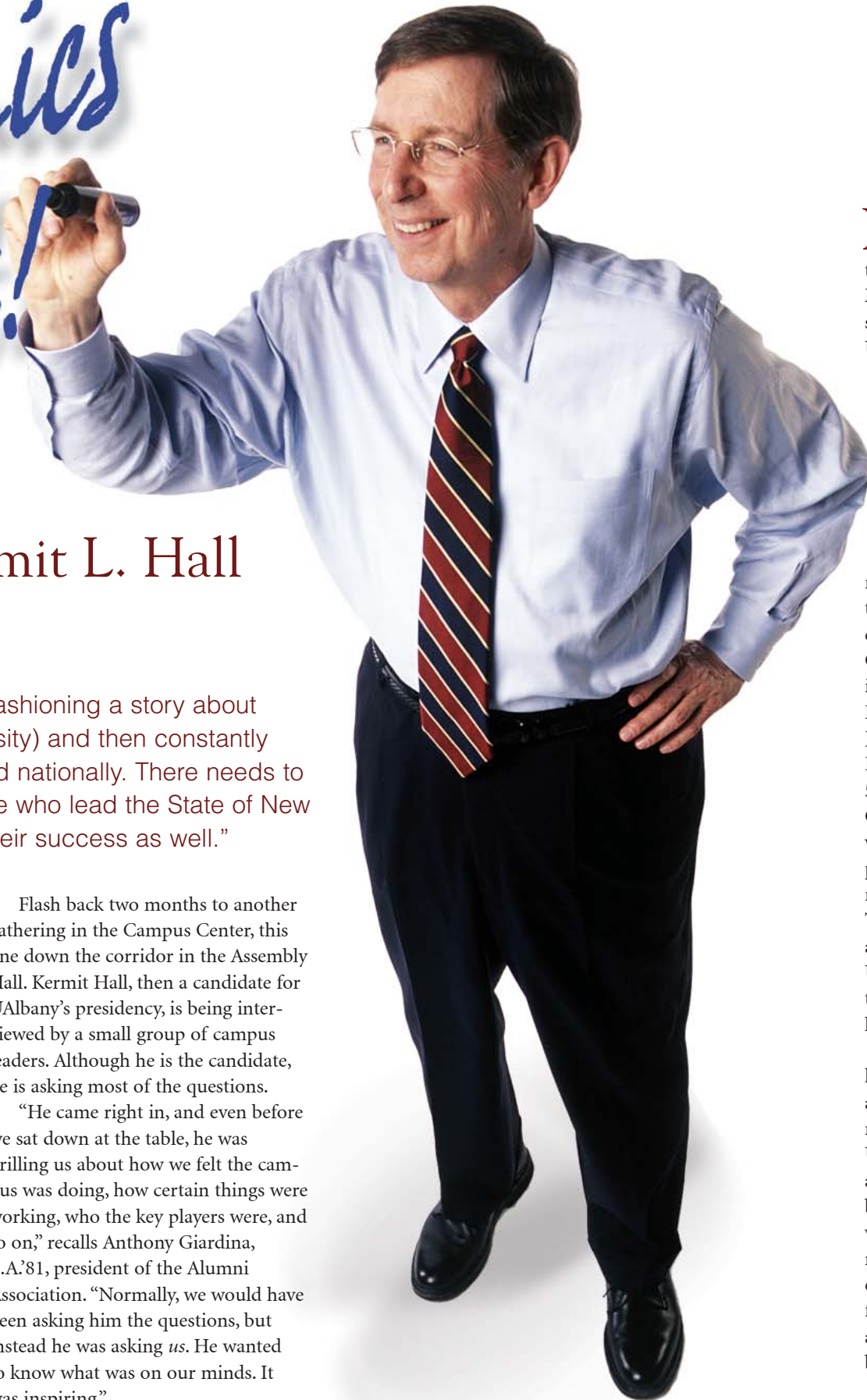
“One of our great challenges is fashioning a story about what is happening (at the University) and then constantly reiterating it locally, regionally and nationally. There needs to be no doubt in the minds of those who lead the State of New York that UAlbany’s success is their success as well.”

It is shortly after noon on a blustery mid-February day. In the Campus Center Ballroom, University at Albany President Kermit L. Hall, who has been on the job two weeks, nibbles on his chicken Caesar salad. But he is more interested in chatting with three high school seniors at his table who have been invited to join the University’s Presidential Scholars program. He asks how their day is going, encourages them to sign up for the course he will teach this fall (*Colloquium in U.S. History: The Supreme Court*), and invites them to contact him using the University’s Web site with any questions. They are impressed.

“He was a good listener, and actually interested in what we said,” says John McCarroll, a senior at Cornwall High School in Orange County.

Flash back two months to another gathering in the Campus Center, this one down the corridor in the Assembly Hall. Kermit Hall, then a candidate for UAlbany’s presidency, is being interviewed by a small group of campus leaders. Although he is the candidate, he is asking most of the questions.

“He came right in, and even before we sat down at the table, he was drilling us about how we felt the campus was doing, how certain things were working, who the key players were, and so on,” recalls Anthony Giardina, B.A.’81, president of the Alumni Association. “Normally, we would have been asking him the questions, but instead he was asking *us*. He wanted to know what was on our minds. It was inspiring.”



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 Grawl basketball game Feb. 5, Hall roamed the Recreation and Convocation Center, shaking hands with students and community supporters, and leading the crowd in a rousing 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 3,462 employees by graduation in May. Plans for walking tours, pancake breakfasts and ice cream socials were on the books for later in the spring.

The whirlwind of activity sends a big message to the campus communi-

ty: This is a team effort, and everyone counts. The campus vibrates with his energy and optimism.

“You have to listen to people. Absolutely,” Hall says. “For the impatient 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 accomplishing 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 hundreds 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 Doellefeld 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 students on their own ground, instead of their coming down to see me,” says Hall, a constitutional law scholar who was a history professor

## Hall: Keep the Focus on Students

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 \$10,000. 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 fundraising will likely include efforts to boost endowed professorships and fellowships. Former President Karen R. Hitchcock launched the Bold. Vision. Campaign in April 2003 with the goal of reaching \$500 million by 2008. About \$250 million has been raised so far.

The Inaugural Scholarship Fund had grown to \$202,672 by the end of March. A similar fund established by the Halls in 2000 at Utah State has since grown to more than \$1.1 million.



Phyllis and Kermit Hall

# Kermit L. Hall: He's Got Game!

## 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

Master of Studies in Law (M.L.S.), Yale University, 1980. Ph.D. (constitutional 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 2001 and the Harvard Institute for Educational Management in 1993.

## 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, and the *Oxford Guide to Supreme 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, president of the SUNY Maritime College, filled the UAlbany presidency on an interim basis.

## Personal

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



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

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

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

◆ 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 nearer students.

◆ One of his core beliefs is: "You win with people."

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

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

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

before he got into academic administrative work.

He won points for canceling plans for a lavish inaugural ceremony 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 similar effort 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 announced his plan in late March to refocus the goals and direction of UAlbany's Bold. Vision. campaign and to re-launch it next year with a new name and greater emphasis on scholarships, academics and other student support. Besides scholarships, future fund-raising will likely include efforts to boost endowed professorships and fellowships. Former President Karen R. Hitchcock launched the Bold. Vision. campaign in April 2003 with the goal of reaching \$500 million by 2008. About \$250 million has been raised so far.

"Philanthropy plays a critical role in determining UAlbany's success," Hall said. "Upon arriving at UAlbany, I discovered many new institutional developments that have occurred since the launch of its major fundraising campaign. It is essential that these developments, along with new priorities, be factored into our vision for institutional success and our overall fundraising equation."

Hall developed his leadership style under Gordon Gee, who was president at The Ohio State University when Hall served as dean of the institution's College of Humanities from

## Out and About



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

Photos by Mark Schmidt

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 quality and change (at Ohio State)," said Gee. He remains Hall's mentor and good friend.

"Gordon was a great person to follow around, to see how he addressed issues. He understands the basic lesson that you win with people," Hall says,



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 meetings with faculty, administrators and legislators, including Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, center.

returning the compliment.

Martha Garland, another Ohio State faculty member and administrator 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

# School Spirit



**President Hall cheers on the Great Danes during the Big Purple Growl.**

energy.” Garland credits Hall with reorganizing Ohio State foreign language programs, and then raising funds to renovate historic Hagerty Hall, which became the home of the World Media and Culture Center and nine units of the College of Humanities. The Kermit L. Hall Videoconferencing Room in Hagerty Hall was recently named in his honor.

“The University at Albany has made a wonderful choice,” says Garland, now Ohio State’s vice provost and dean of undergraduate studies.

With Gee’s encouragement, Hall realized he, too, had the skills and temperament to lead an institution. He left Ohio State to become provost, vice chancellor and history professor at North Carolina State University, serving two years in that post before moving to Utah State. He has also held academic and administrative jobs at the University of Tulsa, the University of Florida (his longest stretch in one

place, 1981-92), Wayne State University and Vanderbilt.

Hall built an impressive record at Utah State, a university with 23,500 students and a \$600 million budget. He led efforts to improve freshman retention rates, attract better-prepared undergraduates, and increase the number of doctoral students. Hall also implemented a program for students seeking nationally competitive scholarships, raised endowed dollars for scholarships, increased resources for graduate fellowships, and boosted sponsored research. He attracted \$10 million for a new recital hall, the largest single individual gift in Utah State’s history.

The first one in his family to graduate 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 you ask him about events in his life that helped prepare him for UAlbany’s presidency, he might begin by talking about “Mrs. Allen,” his fifth-grade teacher in Akron, where he grew up. She drove home the 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.

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# UAlbany

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Throughout his career in higher education, Hall’s wife, Phyllis, has been at his side. She critiques his speeches and jokes, but she says she would never dream of advising him about his neckties. (“He picks out his own ties, and he has good taste.”) Petite and soft-spoken, Phyllis taught elementary school for 25 of their 34 years together. When the Halls moved to Logan in 2000, she retired from teaching, devoting herself instead to a number of community boards and the responsibilities she embraces as the wife of a university president. “It’s a job that comes without a job description or a manual, and each person needs to shape it according to her interests and talents,” she says. She remains passionately interested in education, especially for at-risk children, and is an enthusiastic supporter of public libraries.

Her first order of business, Phyllis Hall says, is to learn about the campus and the community. She is off to a good start: The first book she picked up after moving from Utah was William Kennedy’s *O Albany! Improbable City of Political Wizards, Fearless Ethnic, Spectacular Aristocrats, Splendid Nobodies, and Underrated Scoundrels*. She and her husband have settled into the University residence near Washington Park in downtown Albany. From its comfortable window ledges, Harry and Bess, the Halls’ four-year-old cats, keep a sharp eye on the squirrels in the yard. “I love the location, especially the diversity of the neighborhood,” Phyllis says.

The Halls met on a blind date at the University of Akron. Married in 1970, they have moved ten times, including for three military assignments. They share many interests, including bird watching, hiking, and riding in his red 2000 Corvette.

Kermit Hall is still listening — and charting plans for the University’s future.

“I have been most pleased to find that this University community clearly understands that academics come first, and that the best prescription for con-

tinued growth in the stature of the institution is to become even more competitive as an academic enterprise,” he said shortly after his arrival. While the profile of the UAlbany student population has risen substantially, the SUNY system seeks even further improvement. Strengthening that profile, Hall said, will be one of his top priorities.

“I also think one of our great challenges is fashioning a story about what is happening 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.”

Hall is particularly impressed with UAlbany’s cultural, ethnic and racial diversity, and with its commitment to a Division I athletic program that stresses the academic success of its students. The University’s location in Albany, the capital of one of the nation’s greatest states, is another asset, Hall adds.

“These qualities make UAlbany and its host city and region at once attractive and challenging,” he says. “I hope that we can take this strong set of assets and use them to make the University an increasingly distinguished academic institution — for students to learn, for faculty to teach and do scholarship, and for the community to take pride in its success.”

He is the first to admit that there is work to be done. As Hall takes the helm at UAlbany, he recalls another great piece of advice from his mentor, Vanderbilt’s Gordon Gee. “He told me that these jobs are all about moving along, and not necessarily about reaching a destination and saying that you’re there. It’s one of the wonderful characteristics of universities — their work is never done.”

Kermit Hall’s UAlbany journey is under way.

*For the latest information on President Kermit Hall, please go to:*  
<http://www.albany.edu/president/>