Penn State’s New Lion King
Football Tickets Going, Going...
Hollywood Hitmaker
You Can Call
Graham Spanier is late. It’s a beautiful spring day and ten students and I are waiting in Old Main’s lobby to meet the new president and take his picture for the cover of The Penn Stater; fingers are starting to tap. The photographer is ready, the art director is ready. Some students sit on Old Main’s steps soaking in Happy Valley’s rare sunshine—I’m pacing. The photographer’s year-old daughter trips on the cobblestone floor, and her walls echo through the chambers of Old Main.

I knew the president was coming from another photo shoot at the new presidential residence on campus. I imagined he was being inundated with questions, shuffled about by men in dark suits who were keeping the throngs at bay. I knew his tardiness wasn’t his fault; some professor probably wanted to catch his ear, or an administrator had found something “more important” for him to attend to.

Suddenly, a back door flies open at the end of a dark hallway; the bright light beams in and makes it impossible to recognize the figure. No doubt someone coming to tell me that plans have been changed.

The man stops halfway down the hall to shake the hand of the guard and thank him for opening all the doors, adding that he wasn’t sure which one to use. As I approach, my eyebrows press deeper into my nose in disbelief that the future president may have just come in a back door all by himself and thought to stop and thank the guard. I reach my hand to him.

“Mr. Spanier?” I ask, not sure of the answer I’ll get. “My name’s Debbie Ream, I edit the Penn Stater magazine.”

“Sure,” he says, looking me square in the eye. “I recognize your name from the masthead.” I’m rather taken aback, I must admit. The man finished his sentence and was still focused on me, as if he were actually waiting for a response. Already, this was the most personal attention I’d ever received from a university president: The man had actually read the masthead. He knew my name. He acknowledged that I’d spoken.

I lead him into the rotunda, and he promptly takes the hand of the closest student, introducing himself, asking questions, and chatting: “You say you’re from Quito, Ecuador? I’ve been there.”

Then, “Doesn’t your mother work in the president’s office?” And, “Where exactly is Aarsburg?”

Conversations sprout all over the place, and Spanier, relaxed and smiling, seems genuinely interested and engaged. With a raised eyebrow, I cast a side glance to April Scimio ’84 A&A, the magazine’s art director, who shrugs her shoulders, then gently reminds everyone that the future president probably has a very tight schedule to keep. The photo shoot goes off without a hitch, and Spanier is off again.

I stand in the corridor for a few moments, letting my first impression of this new president sink in. “Who was that masked man?” I muse to myself. I certainly didn’t feel as if I’d just met a president. He came off much more like a person.

Taking Nebraska’s chancellor during a year when they took Penn State’s national football championship begs for jokes, but I’ll just say this: we may have bagged the better trophy. Every Nebraska newspaper I’ve read is dotted with tearsheets at the thought of losing Graham Spanier; I have visions of people blowing their noses into their handkerchiefs and wiping their eyes between sobs as headlines mean: “University Loses a Winner” and “Good-bye Graham.” More than one paper refers to him as an “upcoming star,” an “imaginative and effective leader,” and a “chancellor with ideas and convictions.” Will Norton Jr., dean of Nebraska’s College of Journalism and Mass Communications, told the Omaha World Herald, “You’re getting a terrific new leader. I just hope we get one here who’s halfway as good.” (Kinda makes you want to put an arm around a Cornhusker, doesn’t it?)

Pity aside, all indications are that Penn State’s Board of Trustees made a gutsy decision to choose one of a new breed of leader to steer the University into the twenty-first century. At age forty-seven, Spanier is Penn State’s first baby boomer president, the first information-age user—presumably the first to own a gorilla suit.
Spanier's first day of work at Nebraska happened to fall on Halloween in 1991. Vice chancellors and department directors gathered in the chancellor's office to conduct the serious business of academic affairs, when they were interrupted by a candy-tooting gorilla. After the initial shock and a few chuckles, the gorilla was asked to leave. The gorilla, aka Graham Spanier, promptly unmasked himself, revealing his true identity as their incoming leader—business as usual now had a new face.

Admittedly, the atmosphere at Nebraska was tense when Spanier arrived: months of hearings had produced little in the way of solving a $6 million budget cut; faculty and staff morale was abysmal; several key administrative positions were filled on an interim basis; the climate for women and minorities was strained; admission standards were low. Spanier, of course, knew the wires were taut to the breaking point and needed to be eased. A gorilla suit for a few laughs was just the beginning.

Spanier spent the next four years surprising his constituents, and not just with simian imitations and magic tricks (Spanier is an amateur magician). In six weeks’ time, he solved Nebraska’s budget dilemma in a manner that was lauded as fair and impartial. He revitalized the affirmative action office, modified administrative reporting relationships, and raised admission standards.

His slate of accomplishments at the University of Nebraska is dictionary-thick and makes one wonder how, exactly, the university survived before his arrival. The Daily Nebraskan called him, “the man who brought the University of Nebraska-Lincoln into the next generation.” One devotee points to his commitment to undergraduate education, while another raves about his accomplishment of making UN-L a Carnegie I Research University. Faculty members raved about his commitment to accessibility, while administrators appreciated being able to make decisions without red tape.

Frank Tryon, Naval ROTC commander at UN-L and loyal racquetball partner (“I think we’re pretty evenly matched”), told Nebraska magazine: “[Graham] inspires performance. He inspires loyalty. You know where you stand with him.... In life you run into very few people that you respect so much that you want to give your all to those people. Graham Spanier is one of those kind of people.”

Graham Spanier

EDUCATION
Northwestern University, Ph.D. in sociology, 1973
Iowa State University, M.S. in sociology, 1971
Iowa State University, B.S. in sociology (psychology and mathematics minor), 1969

ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT HISTORY
Oregon State University
Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, 1986–91
Professor of Human Development and Family Studies and Professor of Sociology

State University of New York at Stony Brook
Vice Provost for Undergraduate Studies, 1982–86
Professor of Sociology and Professor of Psychiatry

The Pennsylvania State University
Associate Dean for Resident Instruction, College of Human Development, 1979–82
Professor of Human Development and Sociology, 1981–82
Associate Professor of Human Development and Sociology, 1977–81
Assistant Professor of Human Development and Sociology, 1973–77

Divisional Professor-in-Charge, Division of Individual and Family Studies, 1977–79
Professor-in-Charge of the Undergraduate Program, Division of Individual and Family Studies, 1977–79

BOARD AND COMMISSION MEMBERSHIPS AND CIVIC POSITIONS
Christian Children’s Fund, Chairman of the Board of Directors, 1992–94
Member of the Board of Directors, 1985–92
Lincoln Chamber of Commerce, Board of Directors, 1993–1995

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS
American Sociological Association
National Council on Family Relations
American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy
Population Association of America
International Sociological Association
American Association of Family and Consumer Scientists
American Association for Higher Education
professor in replacing Gearhart and Williams, but his plans for reorganizing the division. And he opened the floor to questions. “I’ve never seen anything like it,” says one staff assistant. “I’ve never been at a meeting with a president.”

“You can’t help but believe the guy,” says another division employee. “He just tells it the way it is—no bureaucratic babble, no sense that we weren’t being told exactly what’s going on. He didn’t have to do that. In fact, I can’t believe he did do that.”

Much like Clark Kent, Abe Lincoln, and a few other superheroes, Spanier came from the tough beginnings that turn a boy into a man before his time and sometimes instill in him honesty, integrity, the ability to leap tall buildings in a single bound (or at least pull a rabbit from a hat). Spanier was born in South Africa, the first son of Rosadele and Fritz Otto “Fred” Spanier. Fred Spanier had fled Nazi Germany as a fifteen-year-old, never to see most of his family again. The year after Graham was born, apartheid became the official policy of South Africa and the Spaniers fled again, this time to Chicago.

Working for many years loading and unloading trucks in a warehouse and struggling to feed his children, Fred Spanier never found the prosperity he sought in America. Graham describes his father as “a brilliant man who never realized his dreams,” and speaks openly of his impoverished upbringing, which perhaps led him to the field of sociology, and led him there quickly.

For economic reasons and as an escape from home, Spanier became what some might refer to today as a child laborer. He mowed lawns at the age of nine. As a young teen, he had a regular circuit to mow, he baby-sat, did secretarial work in a lawyer’s office, worked as assistant to the manager of a children’s clothing store, and at the age of fifteen became one of the youngest radio announcers in the U.S. By the time he was twenty, he had a morning talk show on the ABC affiliate in central Iowa. He got through school solely on his own financing. He received his doctorate from Northwestern at twenty-four, the same year he published his first book, and the same year he came to Penn State as an assistant professor of human development and sociology. At thirty-two, he became one of the youngest full professors in Penn State history.

“I was the kind of faculty member who always worried that maybe I was causing trouble. I was on a lot of committees, I questioned things, I wrote up proposals—I had a lot of ideas,” Spanier says. “I was professor-in-charge of the undergraduate program and divisional professor-in-charge, then took the position of associate dean of resident instruction of the college for three years. During my entire nine years here at Penn State, I considered myself a faculty member, a teacher, and a researcher. Administration was just something I was doing on the side as part of my contribution to the University. I didn’t see myself as having a career in administration.”

His staff did. “We were sorry to see him leave,” says former secretary Kim Smith, referring to Spanier’s departure in 1982 to become vice provost for undergraduate studies at SUNY Stony Brook. “We wanted him to come back, but couldn’t see him as dean. We had higher ambitions for him and teased him that he would come back here someday as president.”

Gerald E. McCleary, Evan Pugh Professor and director of the Center for Developmental and Health Genetics, was an associate dean with Spanier. “It was very clear that Graham had enormous skills and talents as an administrator, and it has been no surprise to me that he rocketed to the top.” McCleary

When English Department Head Bob Secor received a phone call this spring from Liberal Arts Dean Susan Welch informing him that the new president’s wife was an English professor at Nebraska and asking him if he wanted to look at her records for possible employment at Penn State, he said no. He didn’t need to—he had been following the work of Sandra Spanier ’76 MA, ’81 PhD Lib for quite some time. Secor had been Sandra Spanier’s first professor at Penn State in 1973 when she began taking classes toward her master’s degree. “She knocked me out with her prose,” he remembers. “She’s very conscientious, a hard worker.”

The decision to add her to the faculty of the English department, then, was an easy one, and the department’s faculty unanimously voted her a new member. In fact, when Secor wrote Spanier a recommendation in 1982, he had said: “[Sandy Spanier] is exactly the colleague I would choose if I were in a position to hire one.” Others have joked that they’re relieved to hire an outstanding faculty member for whose spouse they don’t have to find a job.

Even before her children were born, Sandy Spanier had a career as a junior high and high school English teacher in State College, during which time she began work on her master’s degree by taking evening and summer classes at Penn State. “I enjoyed my master’s work so much, I kept going,” she says. An Edwin Earle Sparks Fellowship gave her enough time off from secondary school teaching to complete the course work toward her doctorate, then for the next three years, she taught high school full-time, worked on her dissertation, and got her Ph.D. in English five weeks before her first child Brian was born. She then taught in Penn State’s English department during the 1981–82 year.

Spanier has taught at Nebraska as an associate professor and before that at Oregon State University and the State University of New York at Stony Brook. She’s considered an expert in twentieth-century American literature, specializing in expatriate authors such as Ernest Hemingway, Kay Boyle, F Scott Fitzgerald, and Martha Gellhorn. At Penn State, she will continue work on her latest book, an authorized edition of the collected letters of Kay Boyle, for which she received a prestigious National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship. She’ll begin teaching American literature in the spring.
Personal Thoughts

Five most memorable spots in the world and why?

- The Old Town Square, Prague, Czech Republic: fascinating architecture, European history, and the ability to witness a people moving rapidly toward Westernization.
- Outside the bull ring in Pamplona, Spain: Hemingway, the running of the bulls, and the disturbing frenzy of the local culture.
- Floating down the undisturbed wild section of the Rogue River in southern Oregon: the thrill of white water rafting in one of the most scenic spots in the world.
- In the remote village in the middle of the undisturbed jungle several hours outside of Quito, Ecuador: here the children supported through the Christian Children’s Fund have discovered that people far away care about them.
- On the edge of the ravine at Babiy Yar, on the outskirts of Kiev, where as many as 200,000 were murdered by the Nazis: a sobering, frightening reminder of inhumanity.

The book on your nightstand right now? Love Goes to Press, by Martha Gellhorn and Virginia Cowles, edited and with an afterword by Sandra Spanier. My wife’s latest scholarly work, just published, which I am eager to read (and which I had better read before she notices I haven’t).

Who is your favorite Brady?
I’ve never sat through a full episode. But my favorite Little Rascal is Spanky, my favorite I Love Lucy character is Fred Mertz, and my favorite horse is Mr. Ed.

People who have made a profound impact on your life?

- Howard S. Becker, the distinguished sociologist, who taught me to observe everything, ignore nothing, and see every side of people, issues, and behaviors.
- Paul Glick, the former senior demographer of the United States Census Bureau and elder statesman of my field, who taught me commitment to precision, accuracy, and the power of good data.
- Adolph Hitler, who was responsible for the murder of my relatives and demonstrated the possibility of unqualified hate.
- My paternal grandmother, who showed me the possibility of unqualified love.

Do you have a philosophy that you live by?
Above all, people come first.

He described Spanier as “very energetic,” “forward-looking,” “extremely fair,” and “levelheaded about the realities and aspirations, plans and hopes for the future of academic affairs.” McClernand and Spanier share another interest: they’re both licensed pilots.

Spanier’s generosity to Penn State colleagues went beyond his tenure here—as in the case of Nan Croter, professor of human development, whom Spanier recommended as a board member of the Christian Children’s Fund—an organization Spanier was involved with for ten years and headed from 1992 to 1994. “He had a keen sense that it was something I would enjoy doing,” Croter says of her appointment. She’s still involved after eight years. “His recommending me says that he was still concerned with my development even after he left here.”

Spanier had been sought for presidential positions at least a dozen times during his tenure at Nebraska; the University of Washington was hot on his heels when Penn State invited him for an interview. But as he told the Daily Nebraskan: “The presidency at Penn State is probably the only thing I would have left this university for.”

Spanier hesitated to make too many early campaign promises, opting instead to take time to “get [his] arms around the University”: “The vision for Penn State should not be solely Graham Spanier’s vision,” he said during a press conference in May. “It should be a collective vision.” He will, however, present his initial agenda in his September 15 inaugural state of the University address.

Already on his calendar are visits to the Commonwealth Campuses, cooperative extension offices, and community leaders across the state. “Penn State is a complex, comprehensive institution with multiple goals,” he said when his appointment was announced, adding that while research and community service are important, “we are here first and foremost to serve those 70,000 students.”

The morning after my interview with Spanier, I walked to work, mulling over how this article would be structured. When I arrived at my office a little late, Graham Spanier was standing in the doorway. Stirred, I quickly searched my brain for a forgotten appointment. “I had a free half hour in my schedule and thought I’d see if you needed any more information for your story,” he said. My eyes were still wide and face flushed.

“You’re giving me your extra half hour!” I said as it dawned on me that this new president, surely with plenty more important things on his mind, would take the time to make sure I was squared away.

Since our initial meeting on that sunny day in the lobby of Old Main, energy and excitement about Penn State’s new president has risen, and, admittedly, I’m among the cheerleaders. It’s hard not to like a guy who offers to be tripped in the hallway if I need his attention. We’ve already been in touch by mail, by fax, by e-mail—he even gave me his home phone number in Nebraska. A writer appreciates a cooperative subject.

It’ll take some getting used to having a president as friendly, open, and accessible as this one. I still had one problem though: what to call him. Having successfully avoided using his name during several meetings (Dr. Spanier? Mr. Spanier? Chancellor? President Spanier?), I finally got up the nerve to ask him how he’d like me to refer to him.

He responded instantly, “You can call me Graham.”