



# When NORTHEAST MISSOURI STATE UNIVERSITY

*Became* **Truman**

## Anniversary of name change nears

Truman's name turns 10 years old and the liberal arts mission statement turns 20 this year

Loretta Palmer  
Staff Reporter

The words "Truman State University" lit up in bright and bold letters atop a large water tower in southwest Kirksville the evening of July 1, 1996.

Now, almost 10 years later, former University president Jack Magruder remembers the night fondly.

"We turned on the lights, and it was just beautiful," he said. "That was the celebration in Kirksville that was really to end all celebrations."

Magruder and about 700 others attended the ceremony, which marked the official University name change from Northeast Missouri State University to Truman State University. Former Gov. Mel Carnahan also attended and spoke at the ceremony.

"[Carnahan] at that time was talking about how this University had made itself so well known throughout the country and had sort of lifted itself up by its own bootstraps and indicated that it had achieved more than anyone had expected of it," Magruder said.

Prior to 1986, Missouri state statutes referred to Northeast as serving 22 counties. In the mid-1980s, Missouri's commissioner of the Coordinating Board for Higher Education wrote a study arguing that the various schools in the state should have differentiated missions, said Candy Young, professor of political science.

"[The commissioner] recommended that Truman take on a mission to be the state's public liberal arts and sciences institution, focusing on undergraduate education and providing a quality liberal arts experience for all students enrolled in the institution," Young said.

Young said it was appropriate for Northeast to become that university because there was evidence that it had pulled away from the rest of the regional institution in terms of students' ability and the University's intense focus on quality education.

"We used to say student learning was our first, second and third priority," Young said.

On June 20, 1985, Gov. John Ashcroft signed the bill, which changed the mission of the University. The new mission took effect Jan. 1, 1986.

"It was really the big decision, but it was not as politically volatile as the name change decision," Young said.

After the change, the University focused on fulfilling the new mission. To do this, the University went from offering 140 different programs to 39 during a period of five to eight years, Magruder said.

"[We were] cutting programs right and left to focus on those programs that would be most appropriate for a liberal arts and science institution that's going to be highly selective," Magruder said. "No university in this country



Photo courtesy of Jack Magruder

Former Gov. Mel Carnahan signs the paperwork to change Northeast to Truman State University 10 years ago.

**Top 10 Name Choices Other Than Truman**

- Baldwin University
- Baldwin State University
- Joseph Baldwin University
- Truman University
- Missouri State University
- Missouri University of Arts & Sciences
- Northeast Missouri State University
- (some wanted to keep it the same)
- Jefferson University
- Hawthorne University

Source: Associate Professor of Linguistics Sally Cook

has been able to do what we did in that piece of history."

A state inspection group and a group of national experts on liberal arts and sciences education reviewed the University and declared that it had met the mission change, Young said.

"At that point we started to look at the possibilities of different names and what name could we choose that would signify a statewide institution," she said.

A commission created a Northeast name development poll. The most popular vote was to leave the name the same. However, two names in the top five were associated with President Harry Truman, Magruder said.

"There was ... Truman State University and Truman University," he said. "Faculty generally preferred Truman University, but the board truly said, 'Since it's a state institution, we're going to call it Truman State University.'"

Some people did not understand the link to Truman, but Young said Harry Truman was a lifelong learner, and the University believes in that as well.

"Our various groups that talked about this felt like Truman was somebody who would have directly benefited from having had an inexpensive, quality liberal arts

institution in the state," Young said. "He could not afford to go to school, [which] is why he didn't go to college."

After the board decided on Truman State University, Magruder said it scared him because it meant the decision would have to go through the Missouri General Assembly.

"It gave me the opportunity to go down there to visit with about every senator and every representative of the state on something [other than] asking them for money," he said.

The bill passed the House with ease, but it was filibustered on the floor of the Senate, especially by Sen. Harold Caskey. Sen. Joe Maxwell took the bill off the floor, Magruder said. Magruder said he remembers Caskey's wife, Kay, a Northeast graduate, expressed concerns with the name change.

"Her idea was that the University had become something very special, and it belonged to the people of Northeast Missouri, [and] don't give it away to the state," Magruder said.

Other alumni shared this feeling. However, Magruder reassured alumni the University was proud of its history.

"We were not running from the name Northeast," he said. "We are trying to make the University even better [and] more easily recognized anywhere in the world, so when you say the name Truman, they think Missouri."

In honor of its history, the weather vane on top of Kirk Memorial is welded permanently to the northeast direction, Magruder said.

Three days after the removal of the bill off the floor, some house representatives added the name change bill to a bill Caskey had in the House, he said.

"They sent it back to the Senate," Magruder said. "... Of course [Caskey] did not vote against his own bill even though our bill was attached to it."

The bill passed in July 1995, but the name did not be-

come official until one year later.

David Clithero, Magruder's assistant for governmental relations during the time, said there were days he was uncertain if the bill would pass, and it was very much a rollercoaster at times. Clithero, a 1983 University graduate, said he understood why people had concerns, but the institution needed to change with the times.

"We [thought] this is the appropriate thing to do to keep Northeast, now Truman, moving forward," he said. "[Magruder] empathized with them as I did. It was a necessary thing to do, and it was the right thing to do."

One of the promises the University made and kept was that the name change would not cost the state additional money, Clithero said.

"We would use up all the material before anything was spent on a new name," he said. "Anything that was developed would be paid for by private donation, [at] no cost to the state of Missouri or to the student body."

The University often had been confused with other institutions. One example is when Money Magazine listed Northwest Missouri State University instead of Northeast in its national college rankings, Clithero said.

"How [could] we continue to garner national recognition when we are confused with other institutions?" he asked.

Clithero said Truman continues to be ranked nationally in a number of publications, and he thinks the name helps the University with recognition.

"[But] it's not just the name - it's the quality of faculty, students and staff," he said.

Magruder said the history is what makes the University what it is today, and we ought to honor and respect that history.

"Altogether the mission change and the name change and the marvelous people that went before us make it what it is," he said.