

A COUGAR WITH TEETH

UH, Houston: Tier One track

Community supports the university's goal because it will be good for the city as well

By RENU KHATOR

IN my first two years as president of the University of Houston and chancellor of the UH System, I've learned many things about the city whose well-known name we share. Which freeways get crowded, where to buy good rodeo clothes, how to pronounce "San Felipe," who has the best barbecue and why it's not the heat, it's the humidity.

I've also learned that the city of Houston truly appreciates the importance of higher education.

Even in the economically challenging times we all face, Houstonians have demonstrated a generous and, I believe, enlightened support of their premier public university. While many institutions across the country and in our state have struggled with notable declines in the charitable donations made to their schools, the University of Houston has run counter to that trend. And notably so. Annual giving to UH increased 27 percent in 2008 and 19 percent in 2009, rising from \$48 million to \$73 million during that period. In fact, UH has had both the greatest total dollar increase and largest percentage increase in private support during the past three years among all major public universities in Texas. In other words, while other Texas institutions were remaining flat or declining in their recent fundraising, UH was experiencing significant increases.

This unprecedented level of support is not just good luck. It is enlightened self-interest. We are doing a good job of explaining our ambitious plans — and considerable progress

— to transform UH into a Tier One university. And Houston gets it, genuinely understanding that this crucial transformation simply won't happen without the community's support.

New economic realities have directed us to look to private support to help us take the bold steps that must be taken on the pathway to Tier One. Fortunately, our optimistic expectations are being realized. The voters of Texas recently approved a critical constitutional amendment (Proposition 4) that establishes potential funding for UH and six other "emerging research universities" as we meet certain criteria in our respective pursuits of Tier One status. However, this funding remains a few years away. In the meantime, we must continue

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TIER ONE: Of 27,000 donations a year, many are small, and all help

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to press forward. Private giving is helping us stay on track to do just that.

Take, for example, Paul and Angela Lott, two 1984 graduates of our College of Pharmacy who own a successful pharmacy consulting business. Over the years, they have supported a variety of College of Pharmacy-related efforts, giving back to the college that gave so much to them. Last summer, their son enrolled at UH and became a member of the Cougar Marching Band. So, this year, the Lotts stepped up and also gave a gift to help defray the band's travel expenses to the Armed Forces Bowl. Or consider Kaye Stripling, whom you may recognize as the former superintendent of HISD. After learning about UH's Tier One Scholarship program offering to match any donor's gift dollar for dollar, she contributed \$50,000 from the Kaye Stripling Scholarship Fund to the College of Education. With the matching funds, she has

created a powerful \$100,000 endowment.

These are just two of 27,000 annual donations that have come, for the most part, from your friends and neighbors, from area corporations and local businesses and from foundations. The range of gifts may vary from the modest to the extremely magnanimous, but they share a common motivation — to help improve this school and, by extension, the community.

This community benevolence is taking place, I believe, because we share a simple but inevitable realization: Making UH a better university makes Houston a better city.

At UH, we are focusing on creating an Energy University for the Energy Capital of the world, on developing a health initiative that builds on and beyond our membership in the Texas Medical Center, on expanding our already exceptional arts programs, on fielding consistently competitive athletic teams and, crowning this all, on a commitment to

student success that never loses sight of academic excellence and diversity. Of particular note in that regard is our emphasis on fundraising for scholarship support. During the past two years, we have raised \$18.4 million — more than double the amount of the previous two-year period. The push for Tier One Scholarships has been a significant factor in that success.

Essentially, we have told Houston that these are the things that are important to us. I believe that Houston has answered back, "Yes, these things are important to us, too." The gratifying level of private support to our university proves that this is no idle statement.

And so, in one sense, this is a thank-you note for the many gifts that the people and institutions of Houston have seen fit to give us.

But this is also an IOU, if you will, a promissory note that acknowledges our obligation to pay it back as UH becomes an even more power-



COOG COALITION: University of Houston President Renu Khator, center, speaks out for a health awareness cause with children from the UH Charter School and other UH students at a rally in 2008. Community support is speeding the university's goal of achieving Tier One status among universities.

ful engine of economic development for Houston and the state, when we are providing even more globally prepared graduates who are productive leaders in the work force,

and when we are increasingly relied on as a hub of innovation for testing new ideas and creating solutions to problems society wrestles with every day. This is a debt we will

gladly repay — and with considerable interest.

Khator is the president of the University of Houston and chancellor of the UH System.