

**Oral History Interview**  
**with**  
**Jennifer Cunningham**

Interview Conducted by  
Jerry Gill  
August 24, 2010

O-STATE Stories  
Oral History Project

**Special Collections & University Archives**  
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# O-State Stories

An Oral History Project of the OSU Library

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## Interview History

Interviewer: Jerry Gill

Transcriber: Ashley Sarchet

Editors: Miranda Mackey, Latasha Wilson, Micki White

The recording and transcript of this interview were processed at the Oklahoma State University Library in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

## Project Detail

The purpose of O-State Stories Oral History Project is to gather and preserve memories revolving around Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College (OAMC) and Oklahoma State University (OSU).

This project was approved by the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board on October 5, 2006.

## Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recordings and transcripts of the interview with Jennifer Cunningham is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on August 24, 2010.

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## About Jennifer Cunningham...

Jennifer Cunningham grew up near Tulsa, playing basketball, softball, and running track in school. Rodeo, however, was her strength and passion. Riding was second nature for Jennifer, growing up with horses on the family ranch. She was on her high school rodeo team and participated in the High School National Finals Rodeo. She graduated from Sand Springs High School in 1997 and came to Oklahoma State University, majoring in fire protection and safety engineering. She became the OSU rodeo team treasurer and president, and she competed regularly. Also in 1997 in the rodeo circuit, she met Ty, her husband-to-be. In the spring of 2000, she tried out for and became OSU's Spirit Rider. Also in 2000, amid school work, rodeo activities, and Spirit Rider events, she and Ty married during spring break, their only free time. She graduated in 2001, moving to Sand Springs with Ty, but they wouldn't stay away from OSU for long.

Having done a fair share of lobbying as a student for rodeo facilities, Jennifer had become a familiar and trusted name with the OSU Board of Regents and administration. As a result, in 2005, she and Ty were offered the opportunity to head and coordinate the Spirit Rider program, which they happily accepted. Upon taking the job, Jennifer created a safety plan and worked diligently to strengthen and unify the program. Jennifer and Ty were the Spirit Riders for the first few years after taking over, but later turned their focus to coordinating the program, letting the students ride. Each year, tryouts are held for the Spirit Rider and the ground crew, while Jennifer and Ty oversee the process and the events. Jennifer lives in Creek County with Ty and their two daughters, and the whole family takes a great deal of pride in being part of the beloved OSU Spirit Rider tradition. In her interview, Jennifer shares the history of the program, the work involved with the numerous events, and her continuing love and appreciation for Bullet and the riders, past and present.

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## Jennifer Cunningham



Oral History Interview

Interviewed by Jerry Gill  
August 24, 2010  
Tulsa, Oklahoma

**Gill** *My name is Jerry Gill. Today is August 24, 2010. I'm visiting with Jennifer Cunningham at her ranch southwest of Tulsa. Jennifer, thank you for making time to visit with us today.*

**Cunningham** Well, thanks for having us. Thanks for coming.

**Gill** *You and your husband Ty have a special relationship with Oklahoma State University. You're currently training for Bullet, our Spirit Rider, and you're both former Spirit Riders yourself. Is that right?*

**Cunningham** That's correct.

**Gill** *But first, could we just back up and find out a little bit about your earlier life, a little bit about your parents, where you grew up?*

**Cunningham** Well, I didn't always grow up right here on the ranch. I grew up about two miles from here, and then when I was fourteen my parents built this place, and we moved over here with the horses. The horses had been here before we were here, so I'd come over every day and feed them. I grew up right here, went to school a half a mile down the road, and then I graduated from Charles Page High School in Sand Springs.

**Gill** *Did you go to a small rural school, eighth-grade school?*

**Cunningham** I did, yes. I went to eighth grade.

**Gill** *What school was that?*

**Cunningham** It was Allen-Bowden, right here on Frankoma Road.

**Gill** *Wonderful.*

**Cunningham** I went to eighth grade there, and then I went on to Sand Springs.

**Gill** *Jennifer, could you talk a little bit about some of your school activities, community activities, growing up?*

**Cunningham** I played basketball. I ran track. I played softball, rodeoed. Started to high-school rodeo and went on to qualify for the High School National Finals Rodeo in cutting, then went my senior year to Pueblo, Colorado, and competed. That year, Oklahoma won the High School National Finals Rodeo, so that was kind of a neat memory. I have a lot of friends that I made in high school rodeo that I still keep in touch with today.

**Gill** *Have you grown up around horses all your life?*

**Cunningham** We had horses when I was a young child, and then my parents started their business, and so they sold them and there was a little gap there for about ten years that we didn't have horses. When I was, I believe I was thirteen, we acquired horses again, and that's when I started competing.

**Gill** *What business were your parents in?*

**Cunningham** They own Western Fire Protection. It is an automatic fire sprinkler system business that they put in commercial buildings across the United States. They've had that business for twenty-seven years.

**Gill** *Growing up, were there some values and principles that you learned that contributed to your success later in life?*

**Cunningham** Well, I've always grown up in church, and so I would say that our faith and my parents always taught us to be givers. Anything we had, everyone else was welcome to. Our house was always open. Our ranch was always open to youth groups or anybody that needed anything, and my parents taught us to be hard workers. We watched them get up every day and go to work, so I think my brother and I learned that we've got to get up every day and go to work and that would lead to something.

**Gill** *What influenced you to go to Oklahoma State University? Was it family ties or friends or other things?*

**Cunningham** Well, my dad was an OU fan. I hate to admit that. He hates to admit that. (Laughter)

**Gill** *That's okay.*

**Cunningham** So, I always leaned more toward OSU, I guess, because the cowboy culture that was associated with it, and I always loved OSU. But it wasn't until two weeks before I graduated high school that I decided I was going to OSU, so the fact that I even got accepted and had a dorm room and had a roommate and all that worked out two weeks before I graduated. I never looked at another college. I just went to OSU immediately and went four years.

**Gill** *What kind of tripped your decision? Two weeks is when you finally decided, "I'm going." Do you remember? Was there something that you...*

**Cunningham** I think I had been basing some of my future decisions on other people's wants and needs in my life, and it just clicked a couple weeks before I graduated that I just thought that's where I needed to be. So, I decided to go, and that's where I went. I didn't even know there was a Spirit Rider program when I got there. I didn't know there was a rodeo team when I got there. I had probably been in school a week or so, and I saw on the sidewalk in sidewalk chalk, "OSU rodeo team meeting tonight." I thought, "Well, maybe I could bring my horse to school with me, and maybe I could continue to rodeo." That led to a whole other part of my college career. I went on to be the OSU rodeo team president, and I was the treasurer, and I competed for four years.

**Gill** *Were you still in cutting? What events were you competing in?*

**Cunningham** I was still cutting on the weekends, but I was running barrels for the rodeo team at OSU. I would still cut on the weekends, and that's how Ty and I met was cutting. (Laughs)

**Gill** *I was going to ask you that. I kind of got a sneak preview there. Did you have a pretty competitive team in the years you were there?*

**Cunningham** Yes.

**Gill** *When you look back it, you started in the fall of...*

**Cunningham** Fall of '97. Terry Hyman was the advisor at that time. It was kind of going through a little bit of reorganization, and it was really beginning to build back up. He was doing a good job with the students, and I just immediately became very involved in it. Of course, he encouraged me to come with him, and we lobbied the Board of Regents and the athletic department to build a facility. Now if you drive in Stillwater, because of

those few years of work that we did, there is a rodeo facility now. The Board of Regents unanimously approved funding for that. So, now there's an arena, and there are barns, and there are stalls. Now students can go, and they have a place to keep their horses, whereas whenever I went to college, you had to find an outside place to keep your horse.

**Gill** *Was there an equestrian team at that time that you remember?*

**Cunningham** The equestrian team had just started. I don't know exactly what year it started, but I know it was just starting up when I came to OSU.

**Gill** *Any real interest in equestrian?*

**Cunningham** No, because I had never done horse show events, per se. I wasn't into any of those disciplines. The equestrian team coach asked me to come and be a part, and I said, "Well, no, I'm so involved in rodeo, I'm going to stick with that."

**Gill** *Jennifer, other than a Spirit Rider, horses, rodeo, is there anything else you were involved in, any student experiences, activities, clubs, organizations you were a part of?*

**Cunningham** Well, I was a part of a Kappa Alpha Theta sorority, but I was only part of it for a year. After that, I decided that I was so busy with animals and horses and things, that I wanted to just move to the country. So, my sophomore year, my family and I bought a piece of land, and we—well, it was between my freshman and sophomore year, and between classes I'd go build fence, and we built a place there. So, I had an arena, and I had a barn, and then I went on to lease stalls to people, and had some roommates, and we just had a whole little horse facility there. (Laughs)

**Gill** *Sounds like it could've been work, too.*

**Cunningham** It was work, but it was sure fun. (Laughs)

**Gill** *That's great. What were some of your favorite non-Spirit Rider undergraduate memories?*

**Cunningham** Non-Spirit Rider. Well, I also—my freshman year, my major was fire protection and safety engineering because of the family history. I thought maybe I'd get a fire protection degree, so I had a lot of good memories of getting to be with those guys. And of course I had to go—oh, I don't know what they called it, but anyway, there are several, I don't want to call them initiation kinds of deals, but it was just a lot of fun that we got to go do a lot of activities at the firehouse there. That was fun. That was something different. Also, I was an AGR [Alpha

Gamma Rho] Little Sis, and so got to do some events with the AGRs and Homecoming, but most of my memories probably revolve around OSU Rodeo. I think that college was more about the people I met and the maturity that I gained as a person, rather than the material I was probably studying.

**Gill** *So, you mentioned Ty. Can you expand on your story about how you met Ty? You met him here at OSU, obviously.*

**Cunningham** Well, I did. It's kind of funny. I had high-school rodeoed with one of his younger brothers, and his dad would always turn back for me in the cutting. So, his brother and I both qualified for the high school nationals the summer before I went to college. I had been whitewater rafting with his brother and his dad and spent eleven days in Pueblo, Colorado, with them. Toward the end of the trip, his brother asked me, "Where are you going to go to school?" I said, "I'm going to go to OSU," and he said, "Well, I have an older brother up there, and you should look him up." I said, "Okay." He said, "His name is Ty Cunningham," and I said, "Okay." I later learned that he went home from that trip and told Ty, "Hey, I have found the girl you're going to marry." (Laughter)

**Gill** *Great story.*

**Cunningham** And so, I went to school and didn't meet Ty. I knew of him. We had mutual friends, but we still didn't connect. I was at the Tulsa State Fair loping horses for my dad. He was getting ready to go cut at the cutting at the fair. It was raining, so my hair is a mess, you know, I'm a mess, and I walk into the building, and there sits Ty next to my mom. I just knew it had to be Ty because he looked so much like his brother. I thought, "How in the world did he meet my mom?" I look up there, and my mom says, "Well, this is Clint's brother, Ty." That was in September of 1997, and we started dating in February, and we've been together ever since. We've been married ten years.

**Gill** *That was your freshman year?*

**Cunningham** That was my freshman year in college.

**Gill** *And Ty is a couple years older?*

**Cunningham** Ty is three years older.

**Gill** *Three years older, so he was a senior?*

**Cunningham** Yes, but he stayed one more year, so he ended up going five years. So, we went to school together two years.



- Gill** *When did you first think about trying out for Spirit Rider, and what appealed to you about being the Spirit Rider?*
- Cunningham** Well, that's another one of those things. I was the first person in my family to go to college, so my parents didn't know, which is probably why I didn't even consider college, OSU, or whatever until two weeks before I graduated. Everybody else was looking at schools and things their whole senior year, and my family didn't know anything about that. They just knew work, so when I did go, my dad decided, "Hey, let's go to a football game." So, he came up, and I think it was Dad's Weekend with the sorority, and he bought tickets to the football game, and he and I went.
- That was my first inkling that there was a horse on the football field. I had never known like a lot of kids grow up knowing, my kids grow up knowing, that there's a horse on the field. I didn't know that, and so here we are. We score a touchdown, and here this horse comes, and I thought, "Oh, wow! That's neat," you know. "That's right up my alley." So, that of course stemmed my interest in "Let's keep going to these football games because I really want to find out more about this program." The following year, then, Ty was the Spirit Rider, so that introduced me to it on a firsthand basis because somebody I knew very closely was the Spirit Rider, and that's how I learned how you tried out and how you got to become involved.
- Gill** *About the same year, (or was it two years later?) your senior year that you...*
- Cunningham** It was my senior year.
- Gill** *So, in the spring of your junior year, you tried out for that.*
- Cunningham** Exactly.
- Gill** *And what do you remember about the process and the application procedures for being the Spirit Rider? Could you kind of walk through that with me?*
- Cunningham** Well, you filled out an application, that you discussed your horse background and your desire to become the Spirit Rider and all those things. Your GPA was on the application, and then you had to have three letters of reference. A former Spirit Rider wrote me a letter of reference, who I had gotten to know via OSU Rodeo. My rodeo coach wrote me a letter of recommendation, and Lou Watkins wrote me a letter of recommendation because I had worked closely with Lou to get some of

the rodeo things accomplished, that we got accomplished over the years. Then you had to go and try out on a horse, and it was the luck of the draw. There were two different horses that you had to do a horsemanship pattern with a flag, and then you had to go through an interview. There were six to eight people that sat in the stands. You went and stood in front of them, and they interviewed you, and they asked you a series of questions about safety and the program and the what-ifs. That's how it came about.

**Gill** *Do you remember who some of the people were that were evaluating you?*

**Cunningham** Yes, Dr. Dave Freeman was one. Dr. Steven Cooper was one. I believe it was one of Dr. Cooper's teaching assistants or graduate students. I can't remember at the time what her title was. Amber Moffett, I believe, was part of that group, and Alicia. She was the Spirit Rider before me, and so, she was part of that group.

**Gill** *Normally the Spirit Rider that steps down is part of that interview.*

**Cunningham** The previous, yes. Then after I was the Spirit Rider, I was on the committee the next year to pick.

**Gill** *And this would've been your first year, in the fall of...*

**Cunningham** This would've been the spring of 2000 when I tried out.

**Gill** *Now, was there a couple years between you and Ty?*

**Cunningham** Yes, he was '98, and I was 2000.

**Gill** *Did you do anything special to prepare for the tryouts?*

**Cunningham** Just rode my horse at home. I can't remember if I practiced with a flag because I don't think that I had a flag at home to practice with. But, no, I just had Ty come out there and watch and say if there was anything I needed to fix or do better.

**Gill** *Did he give you some advice, some help?*

**Cunningham** Oh, he still gives me advice. (Laughter)

**Gill** *Sometimes unsolicited.*

**Cunningham** We've been married ten years, and he still tells me how to ride a horse. (Laughter)

**Gill** *Do you recall how many students tried out, Jennifer?*

**Cunningham** I don't, exactly. I was trying to think of that. I remember we were outside at that time. I remember around the arena it being pretty full. I'm going to guess there were between fifteen and twenty that tried out that year.

**Gill** *So, then, in the fall of 2000...*

**Cunningham** Fall of 2000 is when I started.

**Gill** *...you started as Spirit Rider. Is there an alternate or a second Spirit Rider, like there are two Pistol Petes that alternate? Do they have the same way for Spirit Rider?*

**Cunningham** At that time they named an alternate or a backup or whatever, but in the entire time that I have been a part of the program, I've never known the backup to have to be utilized. Now, this year, that's probably not going to be true. I think we are going to have to utilize a backup because our Spirit Rider this year has had a conflict come up with one of the games, and it's something that she can't get out of. So, we've got another girl lined up that she'll step in for the one game. But yes, in years past there has been an alternate named. We've not particularly named an alternate in the last few years.

**Gill** *Was it pretty cool to be Spirit Rider?*

**Cunningham** Oh yes, absolutely.

**Gill** *How did other students react to you when they found out you were the Spirit Rider?*

**Cunningham** There was a bit of honor attached to it, and so I, of course, appreciated it. I mean, I've always appreciated it, the fact that of twenty or thirty thousand students in the school, one person every year gets to have that title. I just think, "What an honor to be able to have that privilege, that you get to be the person that rides that horse on the football field." The most amazing experience. I mean, exhilarating is probably the best word I can describe, to run a horse down the middle of a football field as fast as you can go through two hundred band members that split open just for you to come through them.

**Gill** *A pretty neat experience, huh? (Laughs)*

**Cunningham** It is. I mean, I don't know that I could ever—you can't replicate that

anywhere, just like we can't replicate that with getting this horse ready for a game. You can't replicate that atmosphere, and so I think it takes a bit of fearlessness to go and do that for the first time. I will say it's a different thing now, but as a twenty-year-old student, you had no fear. You don't think about any of the what-ifs. You're just so excited, and your heart is pumping, and the adrenaline is just rushing.

At that time, there was the middle tunnel that you came down, so no one could see me, and we had it timed just perfect that we knew when that band was going to split. So, Ty would walk alongside me. He was always there with me, and he'd walk alongside me. Having done it previously, he had the timing down. We knew how slow to walk down that tunnel so that when I hit the turf, I could start at a long trot and then a dead run. It was just the element of surprise, that here came this horse out of nowhere that just added electricity to the game, I think, or to the pregame. You can't describe it. I mean, it's the most exhilarating feeling in the world to get to do that.

**Gill** *When you were around other students and alumni, what questions were you frequently asked?*

**Cunningham** Oh, they want to know how old he is. They want to know if he's the only Bullet, and, of course, those questions have been different. As a student, I rode a different horse than we ride now. The horse that we rode then, he was the only one that was ridden on the field, but sometimes there was a backup that was in photographs. A lot of people didn't know that, but, say, for the spirit calendar that the cheerleaders do along with Pistol Pete and the Spirit Rider, we would sometimes get on the other horse, which just was prettier. Nobody ever really recognized the difference, but anyway, that's pretty much all he was good for, though, was the photographs. He was not going to make it on the football field, (Laughs) but we're asked that. We're asked who gets to ride him, how do you try out, just a lot of different things.

**Gill** *After you were selected, what did you need to do to prepare for your duties? Do you start getting ready? I mean, you had to bond with Bullet, I guess, and other things.*

**Cunningham** Well, I made a special request, and I don't know that it had ever been done previously or ever. I know it's not been done since. I asked to take both horses home, both of the black horses. I asked if I could bring them here. Dr. Cooper and Dr. Freeman were familiar with my family. They were familiar with our ranch. I think that they felt pretty safe letting Ty and I bring the horses home because at that time Ty and I were married already. So, we brought both horses home, and they stayed right here on this ranch. All summer long they were ridden early in the mornings.

They were kept in a stall all day, and then they were turned out at night to keep their coat the blackest. We still use that procedure. (Laughs)

**Gill** *Explain that again. You keep their coats darker.*

**Cunningham** Their coats, yes, to keep them out of the sun, and so we'd ride them really early in the morning so that we weren't riding them in the sun, and then, of course, they would get a full bath, and then we'd put them back up in their stall. At night, as soon as the sun went down, then they got turned out here in this front pasture to run.

**Gill** *So, you had the whole summer, late spring and through the whole summer, to get them...*

**Cunningham** I had them all summer long.

**Gill** *...to ride them and get, I'd say bonding, if that's the right word, for you all to get familiar with each other.*

**Cunningham** Yes, and at that time, the horse we were riding on the field was having a lot of trouble staying sound. He was having a lot of trouble with his feet, so we had a horseshoer come that we used on all of our show horses here at the ranch, and he came and he made special shoes for that horse. So, over a matter of three months he became sounder than he had been in years. When school was back in session, we brought both horses back. Dr. Freeman was sitting in the barn with a student, and they were both sitting in chairs. I came leading this horse in, and they looked at me and said, "Well, what horse is that?" I mean, he looked so different. They both stood up immediately and said, "Oh, my goodness! He just looks great, and he's sound." So, they were willing, and the school was willing, to continue that shoeing process. That shoer was able to continue putting shoes on that horse.

**Gill** *That brings up the follow-up question. Do you have special shoes that he wears on the turf?*

**Cunningham** No, they are just like any other shoe. That particular horse was just corrective for him, particularly, but they were still just normal shoes.

**Gill** *So, there's no fear of tearing up the turf or anything with regular shoes?*

**Cunningham** No, the turf now is so different than it used to be. It's so much thicker now, and it's got a lot of rubber, the little granules that are in it. So far, we have not had a problem. Now, I'm not going to say that there won't be a problem, but so far there's not been a problem.

- Gill** *Jennifer, do you have to get the horse familiar with that kind of soft feel and rubber pellets? That's a totally different feel than they normally have. How do you do that?*
- Cunningham** I showed you a picture a few minutes ago of Ty when he was on the thinner turf before, with the older horse. Well, my year as Spirit Rider was the first year for the new turf, so it took me awhile because that was also the first year for the orange end zones. I finally had to back Bullet over them because he would not walk over them. Horses only see shades. They don't see actual color, and so he didn't know if he was stepping into a hole or what he was stepping into when he saw that orange because it was a different color than the green. So, he didn't want to go over it. And so finally, like I said, after about thirty minutes, Dr. Cooper and I decided that maybe backing him over it would be the best idea. That's how I got him over it, and that was, of course, at a band practice before the games. We always go to band practice to practice pregame. So, anyway, yes, we try to re-acclimate them to the field every year.
- Gill** *We were talking earlier about your selection. Was there an added responsibility, an expectation of how you presented yourself, your behavior in public as you were Spirit Rider?*
- Cunningham** Absolutely. Yes, absolutely.
- Gill** *Can we talk about that?*
- Cunningham** Yes, my parents had taught me that, anyway, to always carry yourself—you're representing yourself, your family, and whatever else you're involved in. So, I had always tried to remember that in any situation. But yes, I always knew that eyes were on me for that reason, that I needed to take extra care of my character and my reputation, and what kind of a leader I was being, and I still expect that out of the students we pick today.
- Gill** *Do you have conversations about that when you try out? Is it part of the process, or right after they're selected?*
- Cunningham** Yes, I do. Particularly, they have shirts that they wear, and they have jackets that they wear, and I tell them that they're not to be worn in certain places, and that they're to be well taken care of, that they are representing us. I tell them now, I live an hour away, and so I'm not here all the time. I tell them also that they're representing Ty and me, and that I expect good behavior out of them, and that it's a privilege to be able to do that. It's not their right to do that. It's a privilege to be able to be a part of that team.

**Gill** *We've talked and had some conversation with a little bit more detail about game day preparation and responsibilities. A lot of things happen before someone says, "Here comes Bullet."*

**Cunningham** Yes, there are a lot of things, yes. (Laughter)

**Gill** *Could you talk about how you prepare for game day? Of course, you have the parade you march in, and running out, all that stuff. How do you get prepared for that?*

**Cunningham** Well, like I said earlier, there's no way to replicate any of those situations that you have, but speaking now, the horse that we have right now, the only thing Ty and I feel like we can do is make sure that horse trusts us. If he trusts us, he knows that we're not going to put him in a situation that's going to be harmful to him. Now, in the end, we all have to remember that he's an animal. I mean, he's not a dog on a leash. He's a horse, so in the end, he does probably have the final say. (Laughter) But we try to make sure that he's as broke as he can be.

One of the very first things we did with him, and what we still do with him to this day, is we take him to the hills. Ty's family has over one thousand acres there in Jay, and there are creeks that run through it, and there are many big hills that you can ride him through. So, we take him, and we ride him through the trees, and we ride him through the creeks, and we ride him through any of the brush and any of that. We ride him through cows and just make sure that they're broke and that he trusts us and that he listens, make sure that he's listening to us.

One thing that Ty and I do here, because we ride him in an arena a lot here also, and we ride him through the hills here also, but one of the things we do make sure is that he's listening to our legs. We're not just pulling on him with our hands because, you've got to remember, you only have one hand out there on that field. So, we make sure that he's listening to our feet and our legs, and he moves off of that leg pressure. That's something that, when the students over the past few years have come, we make sure that they understand that this is not a game of pulling on his face, you know. Yes, he will follow his nose, and we want him to tip his nose and follow his nose, but we want them to understand that most of their control is going to be in their legs because they've got to hold the flag in one hand.

They also need to know that that horse is going to listen. When we say, "Whoa!" he has to know, "Whoa!" We tell them that, too. "When you're running down the middle of the field, do not say, 'Whoa!' because he will stop." (Laughter) So, many times you hear people, and they're

saying, “Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!” and they really just want them to slow down. Here, if we say, “Whoa!” that means, “Stop.” (Laughs) We make sure that they understand that.

Before a game, we get to get on the field, and we practice. I take him, and I ride him over the “OSU” in the middle of the field, over the “Big XII” and over the Pistol Pete. We try to re-acclimate him every year to that field. That kind of takes out another element come game day. We make sure, also, that when the cheerleaders are over here practicing, and the band’s over here practicing, and we’re on the field getting him readjusted, I’ll go out there, and I’ll have my hand down, and I’ll say, “Whoa!” and he stops. Somebody will say, “Well, what are you doing?” I’ll say, “I’m just making sure he’s listening to me,” because you want to make sure that his focus is on the person that’s on top of him.

**Gill** *Back to your comment about the Pistol Pete logo on the field and the brand, that’s spooky to a horse when they see things like that, isn’t it?*

**Cunningham** Yes. The first year, he tried to jump the OSU that’s in the middle of the field because we have to go down the middle to get through the band. We have pictures of all four feet off of the ground because he was not comfortable with it. I tell you, next week we’re going to go, and we’ll practice, and I’m sure he’ll be a little bit skittish about it again, but overall, he’s become acclimated to that facility.

**Gill** *Jennifer, back to the previous conversation, it sounded like, to me, you have a job of training Bullet, but you probably also have a job of training these Spirit Riders.*

**Cunningham** Yes.

**Gill** *Is that right?*

**Cunningham** Well, yes, and we pick people that are more than qualified to ride a horse, but it’s hard. Like I said, just as you can’t replicate the situation with the horse, you can’t replicate it with that student either. So, you can do your best to prepare them. For instance, this summer I’ve had the young ladies, and I’ve said, “Now, you need to practice carrying a flag,” because she’s not used to carrying a flag. So, she’ll come, and she’ll lope circles carrying a flag here at the ranch, just to get herself used to only controlling a horse with one hand and only having that option, and having to hold a flag, and I want it to be standing up and look good. So, she’s got to work on how she’s holding it and how it looks. Also, she adjusts herself. He or she (this year it happens to be a she) adjusts herself to that particular saddle. There was a saddle donated years ago. It’s a beautiful saddle, particularly for the Spirit Rider, so we make sure she’s



riding in that saddle and she's becoming comfortable with that.

**Gill** *Could you talk about what your typical game day activities are? I mean, a lot of people think it's just Bullet runs out on the field, but there are other things you do.*

**Cunningham** Yes, there are other things we do.

**Gill** *Could you talk about your typical game day, what you'd be doing activity-wise?*

**Cunningham** That's evolved over the years, too. As a student Spirit Rider, I would go, and we would do the walk. So, you'd go to the Seretean Center and lope some circles to get him all warmed up, and then the band would escort the team down to the field.

**Gill** *Jennifer, listening to this, some of them might not understand the walks. The football team comes out of the Student Union there. The band and the Spirit Rider leads the team into the stadium. Is that right?*

**Cunningham** That's correct. Bullet has not been able to do that over the last five years because of construction and the way the team enters the field now. They enter the field now from the south gates. That's a parking lot and a pedestrian entrance. Bullet can't enter through the pedestrian entrance there because he doesn't have anywhere to go. So, the walk is no longer part of his routine, but instead we now go to the Alumni Center an hour and a half before each game, and Bullet is there for thirty minutes for petting and pictures. So, anybody can come to the Alumni Center, and they get to line up and see Bullet. He's fully attired, and all the Spirit Rider crew is there, and they're attired, and everybody comes and takes their pictures. It's funny. You have people come and take Christmas card pictures and everything else. (Laughter) So, he's there an hour and a half before, and then we lope him in the grass there, and then we head straight to the stadium. We arrive at the stadium about thirty minutes before, and then he runs through the band, typically, about twenty minutes before kickoff. The last year, he's been leading the team out from their tunnel onto the field when they're coming out for the game.

**Gill** *When they're dressed out, coming out for the pregame practice?*

**Cunningham** Yes, they're dressed out, and yes, Bullet has gone back out. Then he has led the team onto the field.

**Gill** *I understand that Bullet has a built-in stall?*

**Cunningham** He does.

- Gill** *It's part of the stadium? They designed that in there?*
- Cunningham** They did. They designed it. The designers contacted us a few years ago, and we were able to be part of that design process and told them what our needs were. Now he has a beautiful area down there that we have places for all of our things, and he has a place to stand. He's got a fully enclosed stall, and it's beautiful.
- Gill** *About how large? Your trailer's still outside, right?*
- Cunningham** The trailer's parked underneath. We drive underneath the stadium, and there's a big parking area down below. We park the truck and trailer down there, and then we walk just a little ways up the tunnel because you can only drive so far.
- Gill** *When he comes out on the field, he comes out from that stall or from his corral area?*
- Cunningham** His stall's right around the corner there, yes. There's a tunnel area there, and then right around the corner is his stall. He stands in the tunnel, and then at halftime we take him back to the stall, and he can get a drink of water and stand. A lot of times he has visitors at halftime, but before we even get to the stadium, we get up, and we ride him the morning of game day. He gets a full bath, and the truck and trailer are washed. The students will polish the saddle. Once we get there, they polish the saddle, and it's a process.
- Gill** *You refer to the "crew." Can you tell me a little bit about how many, what the crew does, and how they're selected?*
- Cunningham** Well, typically we have five. Including the Spirit Rider, there would be six students that we have on the field with us. They're selected, same selection process as the Spirit Rider. Whoever doesn't get the riding position, they typically are interested in just being on the ground crew, so we pick from that same group of people during the same set of tryouts. They are asked to be his eyes and his ears. They keep him safe, and they keep the crowd safe. They keep the people on the field safe. We position them in different positions throughout the game. Pregame, we have two people waiting at the opposite end of the field from where he starts. They're waiting out there. We call them the "catchers." They're down there to catch him. They wait, and then they lead him back down the sidelines. So, they're waiting to start running, and then they just flank him and start running down the sidelines because they've got to kind of clear those sidelines out to get him back down for the national anthem and things.

**Gill** *How does that work when you score the touchdown and he rides out? Do you have catchers out there for that as well?*

**Cunningham** We have them, and they kind of form a human tunnel for him. They just make a V coming out of his tunnel. They make a V, and that protects all the cameramen, and that protects him. They come out—they typically don't go out onto the field unless necessary. They're there, and, like I said, we're his eyes and his ears, and I suppose we're his mouth, too, because a lot of times we're having to yell at the referees, "There's a horse coming!"

**Gill** *Do you talk to the referees to let them know in advance of the game?*

**Cunningham** Yes.

**Gill** *Of course, I guess some of the more experienced ones are used to being there after a couple years.*

**Cunningham** Yes. You know, I think they forget. Sometimes they forget play-to-play. I can understand. They have a job to do, and so some things...

**Gill** *Do you and Ty visit with them?*

**Cunningham** We do. The athletic department, they give them a warning, but then before each game, I go and find at least one referee. I have to have an escort to go do that. I go find a security guard or police officer, and they escort me to a ref. Then we discuss what the process is to make sure everybody can stay as safe as possible. So, yes, I do that before every game.

**Gill** *It's sort of interesting. Some of the games, you watch those referees. When they come out, they learn. They're looking. (Laughs)*

**Cunningham** I know.

**Gill** *They're looking for Bullet now. (Laughter)*

**Cunningham** I know, and, like I said, some of them remember, and some of them don't. (Laughter)

**Gill** *That's good. Again, just to ask, if I understood, the crew, a lot of the crew are people who tried out?*

**Cunningham** Yes.

**Gill** *At the Spirit Rider tryout?*

**Cunningham** They are. That is how they're selected.

**Gill** *So, there's no sense of discouragement or like, "We didn't make the Spirit Rider"?*

**Cunningham** No, and that's one of the questions we typically ask them. "Are you here only because you want to be selected as the rider, or are you comfortable being part of the crew?" And I've never had a person say that they weren't comfortable being part of the crew. So many people just want to be part of the tradition. They just want to be part of the program.

**Gill** *This is at the beginning of the process, and you have that conversation with everybody?*

**Cunningham** We have that conversation. Even before we put people on the horse, we will ask, "If there's anybody here not even wanting to try out to be the rider, if you just want to interview for the ground crew position, then let us know."

**Gill** *Jennifer, you were talking about earlier, I think you said "adrenaline rush," going out on the field. Do you remember your first game, and can you get some memories of that very first game?*

**Cunningham** I do. (Laughs) Dr. Cooper used to tell us that, "If your hat's on the ground, your head better be in it." (Laughter) I can assure you, that was going through my mind the first time I ran through the band, yes. (Laughs) I have a very vivid memory from my very first trip onto the football field with a crowd, a stadium full of people. I was going down there, and my hat started to slip, and I thought, "Oh no!" Finally, I take my hand that I'm holding the flag with and push my hat back on, and then stand the flag back up because I thought, "I do not want my hat to fall off." I knew that I would be in all sorts of trouble. But after that, I never had any trouble with my hat, and I still haven't had any trouble with my hat. (Laughs)

**Gill** *You look up in the crowd, and you go, "Wow! Fifty thousand-plus people up here." Is that pretty intimidating?*

**Cunningham** You get a really good view of them. As soon as you go through the band, you turn the corner, and then you just trot right back down the sidelines. So, you get to look eye-to-eye with them. I'm sure you can't wipe the smile off my face because it pumps you up. It pumps them up. You're screaming. You're excited. Yes, I can't even describe the feeling, but it's pretty incredible.

- Gill** *As part of your Spirit Rider activities, are there some special memories that you have? I mean, maybe some funny, some scary?*
- Cunningham** I had to make an appearance my senior year. I had to make an appearance at OSU-Oklahoma City. I'm not sure what they call it, but anyway, we were on the campus there, and a man walks up. I'm mounted on the horse, and he says, "Well, I bet I can tell how old he is." And before any of the ground crew can do anything, he just rips his mouth open and starts to mouth this horse. That's one of those memories that I just think, "Oh my goodness!" It was a wonder, and then he kind of did start running backwards, but, I mean, we survived that without a problem. But that's one of those funny stories that you never know what you're going to run into.
- There are just so many different opportunities it's afforded me. I was able to bring one of the handicapped classes from Stillwater High School. I was able to host them one day at the Equine Center. I let them help me give Bullet a bath and let them lead him around and pet him. There are a lot of special memories like that. Last year, I had a girl come out, and she had cancer, a little girl. She wasn't even eleven. It was very special to her to get to meet Bullet, so I was able to host her here at the ranch, and she was able to meet Bullet. It just meant so much to her. So, it's afforded us a lot of different memories and opportunities. I get to go speak at the vet school this weekend because of it. I've gotten to go to preschools, elementary schools, rodeos, just a whole lot of different opportunities that it's provided for my family and me.
- Gill** *In a year's time, not counting of course home football games, how many other activities are you participating in typically, or that you did, and currently, as a current Spirit Rider?*
- Cunningham** I'm going to say six to ten, depending on the year. Some years, you're busier than others. Some years, I'm not able to make some of the requests people have asked, but I would say six to ten.
- Gill** *Do you still make some of them yourself?*
- Cunningham** Absolutely. Every one of them.
- Gill** *But the student maybe is away, and so you'll make a lot of those appearances yourself as the Spirit Rider?*
- Cunningham** I do, as the Spirit Rider, yes. I do sometimes still appear as the Spirit Rider, and so does Ty.

- Gill** *Now, I've got to ask you this question. (Laughs) I'm sure a lot of people want to see Bullet and get their pictures taken, but how does it feel to be second fiddle to a horse? (Laughter)*
- Cunningham** Oh, I don't mind it at all! (Laughs) I don't mind it at all. It is funny, and it is amazing to me what a celebrity he is. I mean, that's what I had told a lady that was interviewing me last year. The next thing I was going to do was teach him to talk because if he could talk I could fill his schedule every day with an interview. (Laughs)
- Gill** *We're going to interview him after this. (Laughter) Well, I was fortunate to be part of the Alumni Association when we talked to the Spirit Rider, and probably yourself and Ty, about having Bullet and the Spirit Rider at the Alumni Center before the games. That has been just a huge [thing]. I mean, kids love that, don't they? Could you talk about that?*
- Cunningham** They do. Like I said earlier, I think people come and they'll take their Christmas card pictures with Bullet. I mean, people just stand in line. My daughter—I'm sure they wait for my daughter because they know that she's going to be there. She brings the little trading cards with her, and she passes them down the line to everybody.
- Gill** *Now, explain what kind of card that is.*
- Cunningham** Well, that's another story if you want to hear that. When I was the Spirit Rider as a student, there was an eight and a half by eleven or eight by ten black and white picture of the statue. I talked to Dr. Cooper, and I said, "If it's all right with you, I'd like to change that."
- Gill** *That was the Spirit Rider statue outside Gallagher Iba?*
- Cunningham** That's correct. And that is what the Spirit Rider—at that time, the Spirit Rider at halftime would meet and greet students and fans down behind the tunnel or whatever. People could come at halftime, and that is what he had to give out, he or she had to give out, was this black and white eight and a half by eleven or an eight by ten picture of a statue. Like I said, that was the very first thing I wanted to change. I talked to Dr. Cooper, and I said, "You know, if it's all right with you, I'm going to try to change this." He said, "Okay." So, I saddled Bullet, and my dad took a picture of Bullet saddled for me. Then I went home to the computer and wrote a history of the Spirit Rider program, and I presented it to the athletic department and asked if they could make a trading card because Pistol Pete at the time had a little card.
- Gill** *Like a baseball [card]-size trading card?*

- Cunningham** Like a baseball-sized card because handing out those big sheets of paper, I thought, “They’re getting bent,” and that’s not a picture of the actual horse. A little kid really would like to have something small that they can take and show off to their friends. That was the first thing I did, and the athletic department went right along with it. They took my picture, and they took my history, and they put it on a card for me. That has evolved, also. Now that we’ve come back as the coordinators of the program, I asked that it become an action shot rather than just a picture of a horse standing still. Now there’s a picture of me on the card on the football field. Now, that’s another story, too. I didn’t want to be on the card. (Laughs) I wanted it to be my husband because I don’t like to have my picture taken. I wanted it to be my husband, so I presented the athletic department, once again, with a picture of Ty on the field with Bullet. They gave me the box of a thousand, or however many it was, and I opened it up, and it was a picture of me. And I said, “Oh no! This is not...” (Laughter) But they had a great photographer take a great picture.
- Gill** *Had you ever thought about like when you collect baseball cards, maybe if you had an action shot of Ty and they traded it for an action shot of yourself?*
- Cunningham** I know, no.
- Gill** *Each new Spirit Rider may be on a new one. They can be collected. Have you thought about doing that?*
- Cunningham** We haven’t thought about that, but I think that would be a great idea. I don’t know if the athletic department wants to reprint them every year... (Laughter)
- Gill** *Oh mercy.*
- Cunningham** ...but that’s a great idea. The history on the back has changed a little, and now it’s kind of a facts sheet. It doesn’t so much give the former history as it gives the current news of who this horse is and what his likes and dislikes are. It has been a unique process to watch that.
- Gill** *Do you feature the Spirit Rider at all, or say anything about the Spirit Rider?*
- Cunningham** It doesn’t, no, because the cards, they print them and sometimes they last us a year or two, sometimes three years. So, it has just kind of stayed the same, but, once again, I’m sure that’ll change. (Laughs)
- Gill** *Just playing second fiddle to Bullet again, right? (Laughter)*

**Cunningham** Exactly.

**Gill** *We know who the star is.*

**Cunningham** Yes, we know who the star is.

**Gill** *Well, Jennifer, when you were Spirit Rider as a student, typically during season, how much time would you spend? Most of Saturday was probably just blocked out...*

**Cunningham** Right.

**Gill** *...and I guess probably on Friday you needed some preparing, but how many hours would you spend?*

**Cunningham** Oh, I mean, I would go ride him and bathe him at least three days a week, sometimes four. I'd spend a couple hours at the barn, those three days a week, with just him and riding him and grooming him or whatever. You could pretty much count on it being a really long day on a game day because by the time you polish that saddle and you wash the truck and trailer—and at that time, we hand-washed the truck and trailer. We still do that sometimes, but now life has changed for us, and the whole program has changed, and we've got an hour drive, and we've got two children that go. So, sometimes it gets ran through the truck wash. (Laughs)

**Gill** *Jennifer, that's a lot of time that you spend in that. Is there any compensation, any financial compensation for being Spirit Rider?*

**Cunningham** As a student? I was given a scholarship. In the capacity we're in now, we are contracted by the athletic department. They pay us a monthly management fee to manage that program. Also, anything outside of athletics, we're compensated for those things as well.

**Gill** *Do the students still get a scholarship to be the Spirit Rider?*

**Cunningham** Students still get a scholarship, yes, and the actual rider gets a little bit more than the ground crew just because they invest a little more time than the other students do.

**Gill** *You talked about when you first did the card, kind of the history of the program. I want to ask you some questions about how you think people perceive the Spirit Rider and Bullet and the Spirit Rider program. How do you think fans relate to the Spirit Rider and to Bullet?*



- Cunningham** Well, I just think that the feedback we get is always so positive, that people love to see him, and they like the energy he brings to the game. They appreciate that, the rider, and the time they put in. They appreciate that they're there to be an encouragement to the team and the fans.
- Gill** *In your opinion, how does the Spirit Rider represent the history and the heritage of OSU and Oklahoma? What's the connection there?*
- Cunningham** Well, I think just in how we present ourselves on the field, it shows western heritage, it shows cowboy spirit, the way we dress, and just the fact of what he is. I mean, he is a horse, and that's what a cowboy rides. (Laughs)
- Gill** *And we're cowboys.*
- Cunningham** We're cowboys, yes, and everybody looks sharp. Everybody's dressed neatly. I think that we're a classy group of people. I think cowboys are classy people, and that's why I think we try to personify that in our group.
- Gill** *Some people might ask, Jennifer, "Since we have Pistol Pete, why do we need a Spirit Rider?" How would you answer that question?*
- Cunningham** Well, I'm the biggest fan of Pistol Pete that there is, too. I think Pistol Pete is great. His history is incredible. Whenever Eddy Finley started this program in 1984, he wanted to bring just western tradition and cowboy heritage to the field, also, not to take anything away from Pistol Pete, but just to add to the atmosphere. I think that's still what it does. I think that Bullet just brings a little bit of something extra special to the football games. It's unique to only the football games. I think that that's a great part of it.
- Gill** *In your opinion, how are the roles of Spirit Rider and Pistol Pete similar, and how are they different?*
- Cunningham** I think that they both pump the fans up. They both bring a lot of joy to the kids. I mean, my daughter, she loves Pistol Pete. She loves Bullet, too, but she still gets excited. As many times as she's seen Pistol Pete, she just, she loves him. I think that both of them complement each other in that he's the cowboy and he's got the gun, and then here comes the horse. It brings a lot of that western tradition to the atmosphere.
- Gill** *Have you ever made any joint appearances?*
- Cunningham** Oh yes, we do that a lot. Bullet, this particular Bullet, is not afraid of Pistol Pete in any way, shape, or form. He's not afraid of the gun, the

sound of the gun, so they go really well together. And yes, we're at a lot of different events, alumni events together, elementary school events together, yes.

**Gill** *And again, kind of relating back to my question earlier, how many appearances at schools and other functions? You said about six?*

**Cunningham** Six to ten a year. I mean, it just depends on that particular year. It depends on our schedule, and it depends on how many people ask him to come, or what they ask him to come to. If I advertised it, I'm sure I could keep him busy every day of the week, but we kind of keep that under our hat that he's available. (Laughs)

**Gill** *It's a little tougher to get Bullet to an event than it is Pete.*

**Cunningham** It is.

**Gill** *Jennifer, your equipment that the rider wears, can you describe the apparel of the Spirit Rider?*

**Cunningham** Well, there is yet another story. Whenever I was a student, we wore white shirts and orange vests, and we wore a black tie and black jeans. We had a lady that made the vests. She did a great job making the vests. When we took the program over again, (in 2005, I believe it was) I once again said, "Well, I'd like to make some changes." (Laughs) So, I went down to Causley's and Dupree's, and I said, "I want this black shirt, and I want 'OSU' on the back." It's an awful lot of monogramming, but I just thought that that bright "OSU" on the back would really stand out on the football field. So, we changed the uniform to where it's black and it's got the bright OSU on it.

The day before the game, I went down and worked with the lady at Dupree's, and I said, "It's just got to have something else to it." And so we found some patches in a desk drawer, if you can believe that, little OSU patches and little O-State patches. So the first year, our shirts didn't all match. Some of them said "OSU" on the front, and some of them said "O-State." And so she sewed quickly, and we got those all together. Anyway, that's just kind of a simple term, but we just wanted to keep it more cowboy. We had pearl snaps on our shirts, and, anyway, we went to a black shirt and just went to denim jeans.

**Gill** *Did you have a vest?*

**Cunningham** We no longer had vests. We took the vest away, and we took the tie away, and we just wear the black hats. But now the Spirit Rider, she will wear a pair of chaps. When the brand changed in 2001, (they changed

the brand) it's a little bit slanted now. There's an old set of chaps that Ty and I wore as students, and they have the old brand on them. We still have that pair. A new pair was made with the new slanted brand on it. So, now, the Spirit Rider will wear a black shirt, and she'll wear those chaps, and she'll wear denim jeans and black boots and black hat. And I believe the girl this year is going to wear an orange scarf, and the girl last year wore an orange scarf.

**Gill** *Jennifer, who provides the apparel for the Spirit Rider? Does someone pay for that for them?*

**Cunningham** Yes.

**Gill** *Does the athletic department pay for them?*

**Cunningham** Well, it's a little bit different. Now, as students when Ty and I did it, Drysdales paid for those. We'd come to Tulsa, and you'd go to Drysdales, and you'd get to pick out your attire. The last several years, The Territory has worked closely with the athletic department. The athletic department purchases things, but I know The Territory sponsors in a way that they give a discount of some sort. So, The Territory orders the jeans, the boots, the belts, and the hats, and then in the last two years, Purina has provided the shirts. We've brought them on as a sponsor for Bullet. So, now they provide the black shirts. They have their logo put on them, and then we bring them to Stillwater. That's something I have to do this week, take them to Stillwater and get the "OSU" put on them.

**Gill** *Who provides the chaps?*

**Cunningham** I believe it's OSU-Okmulgee. I think that they have a leatherworks program of some sort. That's something that I'd have to verify, but I'm pretty certain that that's where those come from is OSU-Okmulgee.

**Gill** *Does the Spirit Rider get to keep their uniform?*

**Cunningham** They get to keep their clothes. They don't get to keep their chaps. (Laughs) The chaps are passed down year to year, and the Spirit Riders are allowed to wear those. We also have jackets made for them. Before, you didn't get to keep those. Now, in the last few years, we've been able to provide those for the students, and the athletic department provides those jackets.

**Gill** *We're talking about apparel, but I kind of want to change just a little bit, Jennifer, from your days as Spirit Rider to what your participation in the program is now for you and Ty. But before I do that, I wanted to ask you, could you share a little bit about your family life? I know you and*

*Ty got married at OSU. Then you graduated. Could you kind of bring me up to speed on your life since?*

**Cunningham** Well, like I said, we started dating in February of '98, and then we were married in March of 2000. In March of 2000, I was taking twenty hours. I was the president of the rodeo team. I was college rodeoing, and we decided the only time we had to get married was over spring break. So, we got married over spring break. Then I tried out for Spirit Rider and was chosen to be the Spirit Rider, so we've never known any sort of quietness in our life, I don't guess. There's not much grass growing under our feet, you could say. (Laughs) He had graduated and worked here at the ranch in Tulsa, and he would drive back and forth. I still lived in Stillwater and went on, and I was Spirit Rider my senior year and rodeoed my senior year. I'd go from a college rodeo on Friday night to a football game on Saturday.

**Gill** *Wow.*

**Cunningham** Anyway, we made it work, and then as soon as I graduated in 2001, we moved back here. We moved to Sand Springs. We had a house there in Sand Springs, and that was 2001. It's 2010. We've had two different houses in Sand Springs. Now we're currently building a house here on the ranch.

**Gill** *And the ranch is—are you in Sapulpa or Sand Springs school district?*

**Cunningham** We're a Tulsa address, we've got a Sapulpa phone number, we're in the Tulsa school district, but our daughter attends a private school in Sapulpa, a little Christian school in Sapulpa. That's just in the county. We're not in city limits of any sort. We're just in Creek County right here, and it's Stone Ridge Ranch, my parents' ranch.

**Gill** *And you have two children?*

**Cunningham** I have two daughters, yes. We have a seven-and-a-half-year-old, Keaton, and we have a thirteen-month-old, Falyn. Keaton Belle. Everybody calls her by her middle name, also.

**Gill** *And, as I recall, (and you may or may not want to share) but I remember reading you had some complications acting in some of your pregnancies?*

**Cunningham** Yes, I did. Over the last eight years or so, well, I don't know. Over the last ten years, maybe, I've had to have twelve surgeries in those years. So, Ty says we signed up "for better or for worse," and he said he's waiting for the better, or said, "in sickness and in health." He's waiting

for the health, (Laughter) but we've survived all of it, and it's been just fine. But yes, we lost a set of twins, and we lost another baby in between our two girls. Then, when I had the last one, it separated my hips and injured my tailbone and some other injuries, and five and a half months of physical therapy. I was on a walker for quite some time, couldn't walk at all and couldn't move my legs. So, I'm blessed to be able to walk, and I'm blessed to be able to ride a horse again. I've just recently been able to ride a horse again.

**Gill** *Was there concern that you might not be able to walk again?*

**Cunningham** There was concern. They said, "This will go away." They just didn't know when it would go away, and apparently the injuries I had went hand in hand, and she was a big baby. She was turned the wrong way, and she was a big baby. They immediately sent physical therapy to the hospital room, and they immediately put me on a walker, and I stayed in the hospital additional days. Like I said, we started physical therapy. They had me just sit still. I couldn't move for three weeks. I just had to sit in a chair.

**Gill** *I can't imagine you not moving.*

**Cunningham** It was very hard, yes. (Laughs) I got up every day, though, and took a shower. I made sure that somebody helped me. I wanted to try every day. I did not want to give up. I'll tell you that it was a little scary there, but after about that tenth or eleventh day, I could start to feel that I could move my legs a little bit. At three weeks, I started physical therapy. Somebody would take me and the baby, and me and that baby would go three days a week, two hours at a time, to physical therapy. Then, when I could get around on my own, I'd drive myself. The baby and I would stay as long as I needed to, and I had a great physical therapist who had worked with me before with some other injuries. He was actually the first phone call I made when we left the hospital. I called him, and he started doing research on how to make me better because he knew that I was not going to allow it to get me down any longer than it had to.

**Gill** *You really appreciate every day now, don't you?*

**Cunningham** Absolutely.

**Gill** *It's a gift.*

**Cunningham** This is the second time that I've been—I guess you could say it's the third time, but it was the second time that I had been completely crippled, that I could not walk for a short period of time. I tell you, it made me appreciate some of the struggles that other people go through

on a daily basis. I had broken my leg, severely, six years ago. I split my tibia from the top down and tore my ACL, and I broke my ankle at the same time. Three surgeries later and two years later, I was finally starting to get back to normal.

But, I tell you, the first eight weeks, I was flat on my back. That was hard because after three weeks, they still hadn't told me what was wrong, and after three weeks, I had started to try to walk, and the doctor called and said, "Don't so much as put your toe down," and I said, "Well, you're a little late. I've tried to start walking." And he said, "I'm as serious as I can be. You can shatter the whole bone." That's when he had finally gotten all the results of the MRIs and everything, and so he said, "You have to be flat on your back, or that leg could shatter." So, I appreciate anybody that has a struggle with an injury because it's definitely an eye opener to the things we take for granted.

**Gill** *In addition to, of course, parenting the two children, you help with the ranching operations here, then, I'm sure. Right?*

**Cunningham** Yes. I'll tell you, we had a load of 600 bales of alfalfa come in the other day, and I guarantee my hand touched five hundred of them. I unloaded them, and I helped stack them. Ty was out of town, so some teenage boys, my dad, and I unloaded all of them. I love it. I was so thankful that I was able to do it because of those times I've not been able to do it. It brings me a lot of joy to be able to get up and accomplish something in the day. I really enjoy being outside, and I enjoy working around the animals. I unload feed, I feed horses, I feed cows, and I love it.

**Gill** *You talked earlier about you and Ty currently supervise the Spirit Riders, and Bullet stays here. If we could talk about that a little bit, I have a couple questions I want to ask you. First of all, your relationship is with the athletic department?*

**Cunningham** Yes.

**Gill** *Now, there used to be an advisor, (you talked about Dr. Wilson and all those doctors) Dr. Steven Cooper. Is there still an academic faculty advisor to the program, or is that you and Ty now?*

**Cunningham** No, Ty and I are the only coordinators of the program now. That evolved, I believe—I cannot remember if it was five or six years ago when the call came. I'm going to say that it was 2005 when that happened. Dr. Cooper and Dr. Freeman had decided that they no longer wanted to oversee the program, for various reasons, I'm sure. They called the athletic department and informed them that they would like to hand the horse back over into their hands. Of course, the athletic

department needed a solution, and I believe they approached Larry Sanchez, the equestrian coach, about it. He had too many things on his plate to be able to fit that in as well. As far as I know, it was a discussion between Harry Birdwell and Dave Martin, and Larry Sanchez's input, I believe, was in that also. They said, "You know, why don't we call Ty and Jennifer?" I had become familiar with Dr. Birdwell and Dave Martin through the lobbying I had discussed earlier for the rodeo team, so they were familiar with me. They knew that I had been the Spirit Rider. They knew Ty had been the Spirit Rider. We got a call that summer, and Dave wanted to know if we would sit down and discuss with him the possibility of taking over the program. We did, and here we are.

**Gill** *What were your first thoughts when they asked you?*

**Cunningham** Well, we were first a little surprised. We didn't know why the animal science department didn't have it anymore, what had happened, and then we were able to talk to Dr. Cooper and tell him we were going to make that transition, but honored. I think we both just thought, "Wow, this'll be fun. This'll be great to be able to carry on the traditions that we so enjoyed." I mean, those were probably the highlights of both of our college careers, was being a part of the Spirit Rider program, so we did not want to see that end. We wanted to be able to carry that on and open it back up to students. That's why he and I rode the horse the first three years that we took over the program, but after that, that's why we wanted to get it back to a student organization. We wanted students back on the horse, so this'll be the third year to have a student back on the horse.

**Gill** *Can you give the off-season program for Bullet? When the season is over, what happens before you start again next fall?*

**Cunningham** Well, it depends on the weather a lot. The athletic department has given us the okay to just let him be a horse. For six months or so, let's just turn him out in the pasture and just let him have some freedom and some time without the high stress of a crowd, etcetera. We end, always, Thanksgiving weekend, and if it's just cool and it's not cold yet, then we can go ahead and turn him out. He stays in a pasture and runs with some other horses, and he's just as happy as he can be to have his freedom. Now, if it's cold, he stays in a stall a little bit longer because he doesn't have much hair. We try to keep him slicked off, and so we've got to wait until he grows a little bit of hair so that he can survive outside and not be uncomfortable.

**Gill** *Do you work him at all during the year?*

**Cunningham** From January to June, no, unless he has a special appearance. Now, I

take that back. I guess we do get him up about a month to three weeks before tryouts because he is used to in tryouts for students to participate on him. We do get him up, and we put shoes back on him, and we ride him to get him back in shape just for that evening process, but then we turn him back out for the month of May.

**Gill** *Jennifer, just a quick question, kind of stepping back, when you do the tryout, are all the students using Bullet? Are they using the same horse?*

**Cunningham** No. I think this year they did just use one horse. We did just bring Bullet. I can't remember, though. That's terrible. But before, we've taken two and three horses. It depends on how many people I have try out. Not this year, but last year, we had twenty-five people try out, so I brought three horses.

**Gill** *Are you trying out on the field?*

**Cunningham** No, we try out in the animal science arena, indoor, because we had tried to schedule it before outside, and the weather wasn't going to cooperate. Now we just do it in the animal science arena. Like I said, depending on how many people I have coming, we use two to three horses.

**Gill** *So, I'm thinking when you tried out, you said, maybe less than a dozen?*

**Cunningham** There were fifteen to twenty.

**Gill** *So, it's about twenty-five, typically, a year.*

**Cunningham** Yes, and you could put all twenty-five on the team. I mean, the quality of students that come and try out are just—it's impeccable. I mean, they're really good kids that want to be a part of the program.

**Gill** *Are you and Ty part of the judging team?*

**Cunningham** We are. This year we did it on our own. In previous years we've had a panel, just like it was when we were students. We had a panel of eight, I believe, last year. The year before that, I think I had six people. We use horsemen, we used the Purina representative last year, and we have also used veterinarians because we also have two veterinarians that help us on the football field. Whenever we took over the program, I wrote a safety plan. Dave Martin needed me to write a safety plan, and I wrote a safety plan, and in order to implement that safety plan, we kind of brought some new things into the atmosphere. One of those things was we brought in a vet that stays underneath with us at all times. In case anything was to go wrong, we have immediate care available. So, they have become such a part of the program that they help us in the process



of picking our students.

**Gill** *Do they volunteer their time?*

**Cunningham** They volunteer their time.

**Gill** *Are they there on game day with...*

**Cunningham** They come on game day. They meet us at the Alumni Center, and then they ride on with us to the field. They stand right down there with us, and they're prepared in case anything goes wrong.

**Gill** *Do you know the names of those two individuals?*

**Cunningham** Well, it changes, but mostly it's been Dr. Lyndi Gilliam, and Dr. Heath Qualls. Dr. Qualls just left us, and I think he moved to Tennessee or Kentucky. He got a job in that direction. But Dr. Lyndi Gilliam, she still helps us. I initially started that relationship with Dr. [Charles] MacAllister, and he's the one who suggested that Dr. Gilliam become involved, and she's just stuck with us.

**Gill** *Jennifer, is there anything that you didn't change with your Spirit Rider, haven't changed since? (Laughter) It sounds like you're pretty hands-on with this program. I say that positively. I mean, it's great, a lot of wonderful ideas and a lot of change. Refresh my memory again. Dave Martin and the athletic department came to you in what year?*

**Cunningham** It was 2005 that he came to us, that summer. We acquired the horse that they had at that time. We brought him home, and that was in June. At the end of July, I believe it was the last weekend in July—no, I take that back. It was in August. It was three weeks before the first football game. He colicked and died here on the ranch.

**Gill** *Wow. That had to be, just, I mean, first of all, so devastating. You get so attached to the horse, and then second thought is, "Where do we go from here?"*

**Cunningham** Where do we go from here? And those were our immediate thoughts. There's nothing we can do about the fact that he's gone. We've got to move forward because we have three weeks to find a horse and get him adjusted to the situation we're going to put him in. So, Ty and I had been working a horse show in Tulsa, and there was going to be a sale. So, we immediately went to the barns and started looking up and down the rows of horses, and I found a black one. I said, "Here's a black one. Let's see if we can try him." We immediately set up a time that night to try him with a flag, with the people. We tried him at the Tulsa fairgrounds. He

was really small, a gelding, and I called the equestrian coach, Larry Sanchez. I said, "Larry, if we buy this horse in the sale, if he doesn't work for our program, would he work for yours?" And he said, "Yes." He said, "I know you've got to have a black horse. Just go ahead and get him bought," and so we purchased him here in Tulsa.

Ty began looking on the internet for any other black horses that we could find to possibly use because we needed a backup. If that horse wasn't going to work, we needed a different plan in place, and so we scoured the internet, and Ty narrowed it down to about six horses. I mean, he looked at thousands of horses on the internet. He narrowed it down to about six. He began calling those people. Some were already sold. For others, there were other situations. We called about a horse in Coal City, Illinois, and they said, "We have promised a couple that they can come and look at this horse this weekend, so you can come and look at him after that. They have first dibs." And so we said, "Okay." So, now we're a week into this, and they call us on that Monday morning and said, "Okay, they didn't take him. You're welcome to come and look at him." We called the athletic department. They bought us plane tickets, we flew to Chicago, we rented a car, and we drove to Coal City, Illinois, and we tried this horse.

We didn't tell them what we were trying him for. We just went and tried the horse, and we both rode him. The eleven-year-old little girl rode him. It was her horse. She rode him around, and Ty said, "This horse is a lot bigger. He just looks a little more ranchy. He just looks more the part of what we're looking for." He said, "I think that he's going to work," and so we bought him, or the athletic department bought him, and we couldn't pick him up for another week. I don't remember what that situation was. To make a long story short, (the details I don't remember) he came to our barn one week before the first football game.

- Gill** *Jennifer, do you mind? Do you remember how much he cost?*
- Cunningham** Fifty-seven hundred dollars.
- Gill** *Thank you. So, you're one week before, and you get this new horse.*
- Cunningham** One week before the first football game.
- Gill** *And you're panicking.*
- Cunningham** We have a new horse, and we're trying not to panic. (Laughter) And so we bring him home, and we immediately start carrying a flag on him and loping him around. We always keep a radio in the barn, but we kind of turned it up a little more than normal to try to keep music playing, but

the first thing he did was just start high stepping when he walked into our barns because we have concrete floors. He came from dirt floors. He came from a low ceiling. We have high ceilings. We have concrete floors, and he immediately started high stepping.

Just this atmosphere was a change for him, so you can imagine, then, what we took him into a week later. I tell you, one of the first people I saw at the game that day before the game actually started was T. Boone Pickens, and I just was swallowing hard thinking, “What are we going to do?” I mean, number one, Mr. Pickens has just put this brand new turf down. We’ve got this brand new horse, and what if he doesn’t do it right, or what if we have a wreck out there, and it just becomes madness? And so he came up, and he was asking me about the horse, and he and some other folks, (I believe Mike Holder was with him that day) some other folks were asking us about it. I said, “We’re just going to cowboy through it, and that’s how we’re going to do it.” (Laughs)

**Gill** *Cowboy through, huh?*

**Cunningham** “We’re just going to cowboy through it.” And Ty did a great job with the horse in that first year, did a great job. Then I rode him the second year, and, of course, construction had changed at that point, and I was behind a wall that second year. So, it’s been an interesting five years when it comes to the Spirit Rider program.

**Gill** *Have you been satisfied with the horse?*

**Cunningham** I could not be more satisfied. I think this horse has done an excellent job, to be thrown into the situations we’ve thrown him into because, yet again, previously, the horse that did it for fifteen years, every year he had to be re-acclimated to it. Every year, he went to band practice two or three weeks before the games started, and he went several times. Well, this particular horse, number one, like I said, he got to the house a week before, but number two, there was construction and such going on, and we couldn’t get on the field to practice with this horse. And so he hadn’t seen the field until two nights before the first game. So, you know, you can imagine just bringing him into that situation, the field was a shock, but then to bring him in when there’s thousands of screaming fans and a band playing.

So, then, the next year, he couldn’t get on the field until the night before. Construction was such that we couldn’t get there until the night before. There was just no possible way to bring a horse on. So, he has done an incredible job, and we’ve had our moments. There’s been a time that he got scared of the pom-poms, and I had to go out there and lead him off the field with one of our girls on him. There was a time when I was on

him that he had gotten an injury. We were back there in the construction zone, and there was something sticking up, and he had stepped on it. He had stepped on it the night before, and we didn't realize how bruised and how bad it was until I went to go to the left and he would stop midway. He would just stop, and he wouldn't go any further, and we didn't know if he was getting scared of something. Finally, after bringing him back there and looking at everything, we realized, "Oh my goodness, that's where he had stepped on that last night," because we knew he had stepped on something the night before. We didn't realize that it had bruised him so bad. I said, "Well, go out there and tell the cheerleaders that I'm coming the other way. Tell them not to flip because I'm going to go to the right. For twenty-three years he's gone to the left, but tonight we're going to go to the right." (Laughs) And so, that night we did. I finished the game going to the right. But it was after two different times of us getting halfway through and him stopping that I said, "Something's wrong," because you just knew that there was no other reason other than there was something going on pain-wise.

**Gill** *So, when you'd ride out after a score, you'd go out and go clockwise.*

**Cunningham** Yes. We went clockwise instead of counterclockwise. We needed something that I had to send somebody onto the field and tell the ROTC, go tell the cheerleaders, tell the pom squad because typically when you come to the left, then they'll flip and do flips behind you. Well, I didn't want them to start doing flips over here if I was going to come at them. (Laughter) So, it's an interesting life that we have with this horse and all the things you have to think about on the field. You've got to think about pom-poms. You've got to think about referees. You've got to think about cheerleaders doing flips. You've got to think about ROTC people shooting t-shirts or shooting a cannon or doing push-ups. You've got to know where all those things are and how everybody fits into the picture.

**Gill** *Jennifer, when you come in, typically what time do you get in on a Friday for a game? What's your pregame-day procedure?*

**Cunningham** It all depends on when we have access to the field. If it's raining, obviously, the team has first dibs on the field. So, band practice might be scheduled, but if it starts to rain, the team always gets precedence on the field, which is how it should be. But we will just practice whenever the band has the opportunity. The last few years, that has been in the evenings. It's been, like, from four to six on a Thursday night or a Friday night or whatever.

**Gill** *You trailer him over on Friday?*

**Cunningham** Yes, we'll take him over, and we'll go practice, and we make sure all of

our students know their stations. We kind of give them assignments at the first of the year. We went through a few years where I'd switch positions on them, but the last couple years I've just said, "Once you get that position, that's yours so that I don't have to worry about you not knowing where you're supposed to be or what area." So, we go, and we go over that with all the students. We take them up there on that Friday night, and we let the Spirit Rider or whoever lope him around on the field and just get him re-acclimated to the field, and we let the students look around because they're in awe, to get to stand on that field. They just think how incredible it is, and they're looking around. So, it gets their butterflies out for them to go and practice. We send the two down and say, "This is where we want you to stand, and this is where we want you to run, between these marks and these marks. Come back down here, and we'll do the national anthem," and we explain the whole process to them.

**Gill** *That's pretty complex. There are a lot of moving parts in that plan.*

**Cunningham** There are a lot of moving parts, yes, and, like I said, typically, we actually send three people. We send two down at the end, but we keep one stationed on the sidelines, and that's our lead man or woman, and they lead them down the sidelines so that they can be the first person to kind of scoot people out of the way. Bullet follows right behind them, and the other two flank behind him so that they just make sure everybody is safe.

**Gill** *Are you and Ty just sort of observing this from the ground area?*

**Cunningham** One of us stays with the horse at all times, back behind, so one of us is typically on the field waiting for him over here on the side where he's coming to stand for the national anthem. The other person is right next to him to get him, to make sure he's going to come up that tunnel and he's going to go where he's supposed to go, through the band. We don't ever leave him alone back there.

**Gill** *So, how old is Bullet now?*

**Cunningham** The little girl that owned him, the little girl was eleven, and then when we bought him—he was born in '97, so he's thirteen now.

**Gill** *And how many more years do you think you'll have with him, like, if he stays healthy?*

**Cunningham** I hope eight or nine. I mean, ten would be a really good—we'd be pushing it, probably, but I hope that we can at least get another eight or nine years out of this horse.

**Gill** *Do you ever think about having a backup horse?*

**Cunningham** We do.

**Gill** *Even now, in case of injury, do you have one?*

**Cunningham** We think about it. We do not have one. It's hard to find a black horse, and I think it's hard to find one that'll do what we ask him to do. The athletic department asked us that initially. They said, "Look for a backup." We probably should put a little more effort into that. (Laughs) I think we're so happy with this horse that we haven't felt the need to have one, but at any moment, I suppose, he could have an injury that we needed one. So, we need to look for one.

**Gill** *We talked about the apparel of the Spirit Rider. What about Bullet? His saddle and his tack, would you describe that?*

**Cunningham** I believe the saddle was built in 1989. I can lift the fender and tell you. It's stamped on there, the date, but it's fully tooled. Well, it looks like a pleasure saddle to me. I don't know if the builder would argue that or not, but it's...

**Gill** *Does it have the saddle horn? Is it a working saddle?*

**Cunningham** No, it's like more of a western pleasure type, but it's got a real short saddle horn on it and wide, but it's got "OSU" on the side of it, and it's just a beautifully tooled saddle. Then we put some sort of black or orange pad on him.

**Gill** *Is it black leather, or is it just natural leather?*

**Cunningham** No, it's natural leather. Now, it's got some black coloring in some of the tooling where "OSU" is and such, so that stands out a little bit more, and then it has silver conchos on it that say, "OSU." Some say, "Cowboys." Then, the breast collar, as well, has silver on it and says, "OSU," and it says, "Cowboys," and then a headstall, as well, that has silver.

**Gill** *It's got the bridle and the...*

**Cunningham** Yes, and then the tie-down. The other has a tie-down on there also.

**Gill** *What is the thing across?*

**Cunningham** That's the breast collar.

**Gill** *It's got engraving on it, too, doesn't it?*

**Cunningham** It does.

**Gill** *Does it say, "Bullet," or does it say, "OSU"?*

**Cunningham** I believe it says, "Oklahoma State" on it, and it may say, "Cowboys." I need to look at that.

**Gill** *Is "Bullet" on there anywhere?*

**Cunningham** No, "Bullet" is not.

**Gill** *Oh my goodness, it should have his name on there.*

**Cunningham** I know. It's not on there.

**Gill** *That may be one of your new ideas, Jennifer.*

**Cunningham** Well, he has a little patch. (Laughter) It goes right on the saddle, and it says, "Bullet," yes.

**Gill** *It's, as we speak, eleven days away from the first game. Is Bullet ready this year?*

**Cunningham** Ty rode him this morning, and I'm sure he's had his bath, and if he hasn't, he'll get it later. The Spirit Rider is scheduled to come in Thursday. Today is Tuesday. She'll be here Thursday to come and ride. The girl that I mentioned earlier that's going to ride him at the second game, she's already been here three or four times to ride, but, yes, I think he's ready. He's looking good, and I'd say he's ready.

**Gill** *You talked earlier about the cards. Well, first of all, the eight by ten that you did with the history, but can you share just briefly the history of the Spirit Rider program that you know?*

**Cunningham** The part that I know is that it started in 1984, and it was Eddy Finley who started it.

**Gill** *He was on the faculty at Oklahoma State University?*

**Cunningham** He was on the faculty, yes. He and his wife had both graduated from Texas Tech, and so that's what familiarized them with the horse on a football field, that program. They had the Red Raider, and he wanted to incorporate something like that into Oklahoma State.

- Gill** *So, that's where he got the idea?*
- Cunningham** Only he wanted it to personify a cowboy. He wanted it—where theirs is the masked rider, he wanted it to personify a cowboy. That's where the cowboy hat and—I mean, we just look like a normal cowboy, a ranch-hand cowboy. And so it started with John Beall, and he was the first Spirit Rider. He rode his black mare, and her name was Della, and he also had a dog. So, it was actually a little trio that went out on the field.
- I believe you had to be the president of the rodeo team to be the Spirit Rider in those years because Brad Bailey followed, and then his brother followed. They were one of those first few Spirit Riders. At that time, they used their own horses. That started in '84, and then I believe it was just a few years into the program, that's when they had a black gelding donated, and that was Stars Parr Money. That was the horse that did it for fifteen years. If you remember, they had a retirement ceremony for him at one of the games. So, that was when he came onboard, and his name was Possum. They called him Possum, and they had a vote with the student body as to what to name the horse, and that's where the name Bullet came from.
- Gill** *A ballot, or how did they—do you know how they got that?*
- Cunningham** I don't know the process. I just knew it was a vote somehow with the student body as to what to call this horse, and they called him Bullet, and that's how that came. So from then on, each rider rode that horse.
- Gill** *There have been, I'm thinking, almost as many female Spirit Riders as there have been male. What do you think about that?*
- Cunningham** I'm sure there have been, yes, if not more. There have been a lot. I think in the early years, it was probably mostly men, but then once they got into the mid-'90s or so, then women became interested and started to...
- Gill** *Got to the Age of Enlightenment? (Laughs)*
- Cunningham** Yes, yes, and so women started to. I think since then, there's probably been more women than there have been men involved. But then, after that horse did it fifteen years, then there was another horse that did it for two. He did it for two seasons, and then the horse that we have now. So, this is the third horse.
- Gill** *The one with two seasons, that's the one that ended, died.*
- Cunningham** That's the one that passed, yes.



- Gill** *Back to the Spirit Riders, do you stay in touch with other Spirit Riders? Do you ever have reunions, get-togethers?*
- Cunningham** We don't. We've tried. We did the first year Ty and I took it over. We had them come for Homecoming, and we were working on trying to do that again this year. Just having a few ride in the truck with us during the parade or whatever. But just in our everyday lives and our horse industry connections, we do see several of them because so many of them have continued to stay in the horse industry. I continue to talk to Brad Bailey because of my relationship with him through the OSU Rodeo Team. I talk to him frequently and see him. He was a Spirit Rider in the eighties. I talk to Dan Bomhoff. He was on my ground crew when I was the Spirit Rider, and then he was the Spirit Rider that followed me. I still see him and talk to him. I still talk to Ty Peverly. He was the Spirit Rider probably three years after me. Meriruth Cohenhour, we still talk to her, so there are several of them that we still see and talk to.
- Gill** *Typically, how many years [did someone serve as] the Spirit Rider, one year, two years?*
- Cunningham** It was a one-year term.
- Gill** *Can one try again the next year? Is there a term limit of one year?*
- Cunningham** I don't suppose there's a limit. I mean, I guess we could have somebody come and try out a couple years in a row, but I think it's more of if there's another qualified person or whatever, you'd really like to give as many people the chance to get to do it as possible.
- Gill** *Maybe been on the crew for a year or two, and kind of...*
- Cunningham** Well, that's how it used to be. Before Ty was the Spirit Rider, you did have to be on the ground crew, and that's how you became the alternate, and then the alternate immediately moved up to be the rider. And then after that they just began to pick it on riding ability, number one, because safety was the number one concern. So, then they began picking it on a combination of riding ability, personality, application, your GPA, etcetera. And that's how we still do it, because we look at the number one thing as being safety on the field, and so you want it to be somebody who you know can handle the horse in those situations.
- Gill** *Jennifer, what does it mean to you to have been Spirit Rider, to have represented Oklahoma State University to thousands of people in the stadium and around the state?*
- Cunningham** It means a lot to me. I mean, I'm still honored to be a part of the

program, and it's still a little strange to me to see my picture in a magazine on a horse or whatever. People recognize me, or they recognize Ty, or they certainly somehow make that connection, and we're proud. We're proud to have been part of the tradition as students. We're proud to be able to continue to carry on the tradition now as alumni and just to get to still open that opportunity up to students that are there so that they can have those memories to carry with them the rest of their lives, that were able to be a part of that.

It meant a lot to me as a student just because it was an honor and it was a privilege to get to be that person. But now I look at it, and these kids that we deal with every day, they become a part of our family. I so much appreciate just having them as part of our lives because once they're a part of our life, they're forever a part of our life. But just the experiences, I mean, some of those things I was telling you about earlier, just the opportunities that it's afforded us and the people it's introduced us to, we have friendships for life that have come out of us being a part of this.

The doors that the horse opens, there are things that never would have happened in our life had he not been a part of it, and he's part of our family. The old horse that we both rode on the field, he means a lot to us, but this horse, here, we hope that we get to keep him the duration of his life, and we hope that we get to stay a part of the program as long as he's a part of it, and he's part of our family. And our children have grown up with this. I mean, our daughter doesn't—she's my right-hand lady, and she goes everywhere with me. She goes to all the appearances with me. We went to a rodeo a couple of weeks ago, and, like I said, her job is she really likes to hand out the trading cards because she likes to see the smile on the kids' face, that they get to take something home that represents Bullet and get to keep something.

**Gill**

*Does she have any outfits she wears?*

**Cunningham**

She has an outfit. The athletic department allowed me to have "O-State Spirit" printed on hers. You can't just go have that printed on your shirt. You can't go have "O-State Spirit" put on your shirt, and they approved me to have that for her because they know that we're not going to allow her to wear that anywhere or misrepresent them in any way, but she wears her outfit to the games if she wants to. We don't make her, but if she wants to come and help Mom and Dad at the Alumni Center, she wears her hat, she wears her shirt, and she has a jacket just like we do. But she's always been around it because, I believe, she was two when we took it over. I have pictures of her coming down to see me at halftime and kissing me in her little cheerleading uniform. Now I have pictures of her dressed just like me, helping us out. She can ride him, she

can help us, and she helps give him a bath. So, it's just been a really unique opportunity for us, and it's been a blessing to our family to be able to be a part of it.

**Gill** *You're talking about Bullet being a part of your family, and I meant to ask you earlier. Can you describe some of the traits of Bullet?*

**Cunningham** Well, he definitely has his quirks.

**Gill** *A lot of people know that horses are like people. They have distinct characteristics and personalities.*

**Cunningham** They do. They do, and they require discipline, too, I think, sometimes. (Laughs) I mean, this guy is unique. He stresses out easily. That was something we learned the first year. He starts to exhibit, kind of, these colicky symptoms, and we think, "Oh my goodness, he's colicking," and he's not. We've learned to not panic about that. The first couple years, we panicked, and he'd spend a couple days at the vet school having all sorts of tests ran on him. But it was just his way of exhibiting stress. He'd show a sign of stress. So, now we've learned not to take him out of his element too soon.

That first year we would go, and we would let him spend the night at the Equine Center the night before so that if we had an eleven o'clock game the next morning or if we had band practice the morning of the game, we were already in Stillwater, and it was handier with us. Well, we learned that that stressed him out to get out of his environment here and to go somewhere else and spend the night. So, now, we don't go the night before unless we absolutely have to. We keep him here, and we just take him straight to the Alumni Center, or we meet our students somewhere, and then we take him straight to the Alumni Center.

So, he has those quirks that we know what stresses him out and what doesn't stress him out. He is as friendly as he can be, and then one day he'll be in a really bad mood. It's funny because you know that that's all it is, and you have a lot of horses that they're just hard to get along with all the time. This horse is not hard to get along with all the time, but he has a day or two a month that he's just in a bad mood. (Laughs)

**Gill** *Like some people we know. (Laughter)*

**Cunningham** Yes, he's just in a bad mood. Ty and I both understand that, that it depends on which one of us had ridden him that day. You'll say, "Well, how was Bullet today?" "Oh he was terrible." You know, "He was in a bad mood," or whatever. I mean, you just know that the next day you might get on him and he's going to be perfect for you. But for the most

part, he's pretty easy to get along with.

**Gill** *Jennifer, how do you see this Spirit Rider program evolving in the future? You put in place a lot of changes yourself. Do you see some ways it'll evolve and change, maybe, in the future?*

**Cunningham** Well, there have been many things that have crossed my mind, but there just aren't enough hours in the day. I've thought about, "Well, Bullet needs his own Facebook," or "Bullet needs his own Myspace," because he has so many people interested in him and what he does. I mean, I'm sure I could...

**Gill** *That would be cool.*

**Cunningham** Yes, I'm sure that I could kind of document some of those things, and they would love to see, just watch him run in the pasture or whatever, be turned out, or watch somebody exercising him at home, or just kind of hear where he's going or what he's doing. But, like I said, there are not enough hours in the day to do that. We've also considered raising scholarship funds for our crew. We've talked about having t-shirts, caps, or little stuffed animals made because Bullet is becoming such a popular guy, so there are a lot of things that I could definitely see happening in the future.

**Gill** *Think we could market Bullet differently.*

**Cunningham** We could market Bullet, yes. (Laughs)

**Gill** *Publicize and market.*

**Cunningham** Yes, but I don't know if this family could handle it.

**Gill** *Is there anything in your mind that you and Ty have to strengthen the program in the future? Not to say it's not good now, but to further strengthen it?*

**Cunningham** Well, I know that there's always room for improvement. (Laughs) No, just keep quality kids coming. If we can continue to have quality kids coming to try out and just to come and do a good job. We've got a lot of good kids that take a lot of pride in what they're doing. They just come, and they put all their effort into it. If they keep the mindset that it is a privilege for them to be on the field, and as long as they continue to respect the field, the players, the athletic department, and the fans, just keeping quality people involved, and just making sure that this horse is happy and healthy and ready to do his job.

- Gill** *Jennifer, I know the program is just for home games. Because of the difficulty of being out of state, you just couldn't do it, but do you see any future problems with NCAA or Big Twelve in continuing to have Bullet ride at football games?*
- Cunningham** I think as long as safety is our number one priority, and I think as long as we can do our best to keep anything from happening on that field to injure anyone or anything, any animal or any person, I think that we wouldn't have any problem continuing the program. Obviously, we'll stay within whatever guidelines they set for us. As of now, I think we'll just keep coming out after touchdowns and doing the pregame show with the band and just try to keep it as safe as possible, and I think we'll be okay.
- Like I said, we wrote a safety plan five or six years ago to comply with NCAA, to know that we have a plan in place. We make sure that that's implemented. It's not just on paper. We make sure that there is a vet there with us and that they're prepared for any incidents. Also, the athletic department, per my request, purchased what's called a rescue glide. That hangs down in his stall, and so if he were to ever break a leg or have an injury that he could not walk off of the field with, we can take that rescue glide right out onto the field and we can put him on it, and we can take it—it's otherwise referred to as a sled, and we can pull him right off of the field and take him immediately to care at the vet school. I think that that's probably something.
- Also, that we have an advantage over other colleges because we do have a vet school right there on our campus, and so that's something that gives everybody peace of mind. They know that if anything ever were to happen to him, number one, he's got a vet right there with him all the time, but number two, we're less than five minutes from the vet clinic where he has anything available to him.
- Gill** *Jennifer, we've covered a lot of things. What would you like to mention that we haven't brought up about the program that would be important to know?*
- Cunningham** We've covered a lot of it. (Laughs) I don't know. Bullet's involved in Homecoming and the parade. I can't think of anything that we haven't covered.
- Gill** *Well, we appreciate it, Jennifer. It has been awhile, but you've given us some great information. Thank you for taking the time to do this, and thank you for all the work you've put into the program.*
- Cunningham** Well, thanks for coming and giving us the opportunity to be part of this.

----- *End of interview* -----