

HK Stephens: humble beginnings, big achievements

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Photo Credit: Alan P. Santos

Heungkook “HK” Stephens is uncommon in many ways.

He is married. He is a youth minister. He has a 4.0 GPA. He is the 2012 student commencement speaker. He once rode a bicycle from College Park to Ocean City. He loves modern dance. He has been receiving awards, like the Banneker/Key Scholarship, for as long as he can remember.

But one of the most unique things about the senior civil and environmental engineering major is his desire to use his degree for altruistic projects; his dream is to bring clean drinking water to impoverished countries like Bangladesh.

Beyond the achievements stands a regular guy—a laidback student who works hard and just wants to help others.

“I want to be an inspiration to people,” Stephens, 22, said, sitting barefoot in shorts and a white undershirt on the patio of the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, with slightly messy hair from having just practiced head spins. “I feel good when I can motivate through my works.”

Alan P. Santos, director of undergraduate student services in the civil and environmental engineering department, said that Stephens “makes you want to be kinder to people.”

According to Santos, Stephens is receiving a departmental award for his academic achievements as well as his excellent record of helping others. He has an outstanding reputation for helping his classmates understand the difficult coursework.

“It’s difficult enough to get [into the major], and then things get more difficult,” Santos said. “[Stephens] is like a civil engineering Tim Tebow,” Santos added.

Similar to the popular, religious NFL quarterback Tebow, Stephens is known for being deeply involved in his faith, the Unification Church. It was through his family and church that he met his wife, Jin Soon Stephens, a fellow youth minister and business administration student at Howard Community College.

“In our religion, marriages are arranged through our parents, although we make suggestions too,” Jin Soon said. “We got to know each other and married eight months later. I never regretted marrying young.”

According to Jin Soon, the couple had a mass wedding known as “The Blessing,” where different religious figures offer their blessings to bring God into the marriage.

“One thing that has helped with our marriage is that we have the same vision,” she said. “We both want to make a difference and want people to be happy. I appreciate that about [Stephens].”

Religion and upbringing has cultivated this sense of family and appreciation for diversity. Jin Soon is half-Brazilian and half-Malaysian-Chinese, while Stephens is half-Japanese and half-Caucasian.

“A big part of our religion is creating world peace through families,” Stephens said. “It’s nice to know I don’t have to sacrifice what I want to do in life just because I love [Jin Soon.] We have the same goals.”

Besides their faith, both Jin Soon and Stephens have a passion for dance. “I was a breakdancer in high school,” Stephens said. “I started doing hip hop choreography and modern dance [at Maryland]. I was always good at math and science, but I’ve had to learn dance. It’s exciting discovering something new.”

Cameron Bennett, a senior information systems major, is the director of the Dynamic Dance Team on campus that Stephens is a member of.

“I first met [Stephens] three years ago, when I joined Dynamic,” Bennett said. “He was very welcoming. Being new is intimidating. He wants to cultivate a sense of family.”

Bennett described Stephens as “one of the hardest-working dancers,” and that he always finished team-related tasks on time and thoroughly. But he says the thing he respects most about Stephens is the way he would speak up to voice his opinion if he felt that not everyone’s views were being represented.

“[Stephens] isn’t afraid to question my logic or thinking,” Bennett said. “He has a care for the greater good.”

Senior bioengineering major Daniel Shin said that he became roommates with Stephens after becoming friends after dancing together during their freshmen year.

“He’s also great with time management,” Shin said. “He always has this little notepad with him. Everything goes in there, even small things like lunch.”

Growing up as one of five children, Stephens was told that he should do well in high school because there was no money for college.

“He doesn’t take anything for granted,” Shin said. “He appreciates what he has, which is apparent with the amount of work he puts into school.”

“I don’t want people to see [my success] and think ‘I can’t do that, that’s HK,’” Stephens said. “I want them to think that if [they] work hard, [they] can be like me. I’m just a normal guy.”