

## **Press On: The Survival of a University Press**

The screeching and grating noises of nearby construction disturb the ears of those who work in the building nestled on the corner of Bowie St. and Sandage Avenue. The sun beats down mercilessly on the property far off from the edge of campus, splaying harsh shadows across the sidewalk. The building is short and wide, shaped like a U that wraps around an overgrown courtyard. Tan slabs of stone jut out from the building's exterior, creating a jigsaw-like pattern to contrast the smooth, square metal sign that details the company's name and year of establishment. There is a continuing line of neutrally toned properties on Sandage Ave, but these places remain unoccupied.

Upon entering the door to the right, you will see the tan stones continue along the right side of the wall. Around the corner of the entry, there is a large, warm wooden table that grounds the open space and provides a place for its inhabitants to converse. Bookcases, cabinets, and whiteboards line the walls in the area surrounding the table. The cabinets hold all the necessities of an office space, while the whiteboard details the progress of and who is working on the books being published this season. But the most prominent feature of the space is the hundreds of books in a myriad of sizes and colors that adorn the shelves everywhere you look.

There are two truths contained within the pages of these books: they were published by the TCU Press, and their building—their home—is set for demolition.





*TCU Press Interior*

Founded in 1947, the TCU Press is categorized as one of many university presses—a publishing establishment that is associated with and supported by their parent university. [University presses](#) tend to publish more scholarly-based works that are of interest to their surrounding communities and outside regions in service to their institution. Many university presses also publish books of common interest to the public. The TCU Press has traditionally published books on the topics of Texan history and culture, such as [Fort Worth Then](#)—one of their newest titles that displays various art pieces of Fort Worth by artist Samuel P. Ziegler. Fictional works, such as Santa Clause’s origin story ([Young Claus](#)), and scholarly ones, including an in-depth study of Littleton W. T. Waller’s role in the evolution of the Marine Corps ([Empire Marine](#)), are published as well. Daniel Williams, Director of the TCU Press, is pleased with the variety of books that the Press publishes. He notes that most university presses don’t publish fiction literary works as they tend not to sell as well. Williams relates these texts back to the mission of the Press, which is to discover and disseminate knowledge, and sees them as integral to the Press’s values.

Recently, the Press published the final book of TCU Press’s sesquicentennial series in honor of TCU’s one-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary. [A Remarkable Story to Tell](#) is regarded by the TCU Press employees as a passion project, one that took many years but ultimately is something everyone is proud of. Abigail Jennings, Production Manager at the Press, began working on the book in Spring 2022. [This work](#) describes TCU’s growth through utilizing over 140 oral histories of campus leaders, managed by the John V. Roach Honors students during 2011-2018. Jennings and other editors at the Press read through and edited a multitude of these transcripts. She recalls feeling challenged by editing the interviews, as some reached nearly 950,000 words but is grateful for the experience as they made her a much more efficient editor.

As Williams wanted from the beginning in 2010, the book blends a series of stunning pictures of TCU and its students with text that illustrates TCU’s conception and development

from 1973 to 2023. The book is sectioned into 22 chapters, each discussing their own respective theme—student life, culture, athletics, academics. The opening of the book features a chapter written by Don Mills, who has been with the university for the past fifty years, and concludes with a reflection by Chancellor Victor Boschini, Jr. Without this book, TCU’s intricate history of rising to excellence would risk fading out of existence.

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The year is 2009, and Williams is sitting in the airport lounge of the DFW Airport, awaiting his plane. He has plans to go to an academic conference and is pondering what his days will look like when he gets there. He adjusted the sleeves of his usual button-down shirt and was pulled from his deep train of thought by the ding of a notification from his phone. He fished his phone out and opened his email only to find a message from June Caulker, the Library Dean and Interim Director of the Press. His green eyes scanned the dreaded subject line and floated down the page to reveal that Brian Guterrez, TCU Vice Chancellor for Finance and Administration, has just proposed to close the TCU Press.

Dozens of thoughts raced through Williams’ head, each one contemplating how TCU could consider closing the Press. Williams understood that the university was under economic pressure, but he felt that the Press brought quite a large amount of prestige to the university. Passionate about the continuing of the press, Williams’ fingers moved swiftly across the screen as he raced to message the Chancellor. His finger lingered a moment before hitting send and then settling back into his seat to await the Chancellor’s response.

Like many other universities at this time, TCU was facing [economic difficulties](#) as the recession of 2008 was in full effect, and in an effort to combat this, TCU cut various expenses by eight percent, conserved the use of energy and paper, raised tuition by five percent, and planned to reduce costs in any other way possible. But the TCU Press wasn’t the only university press on the verge of being dismantled; [many university presses](#) faced similar struggles—low sale figures and tight budgets—as university expenditure cuts loomed around the corner. Just a year later, the university press at SMU, the oldest in Texas, closed down, creating an uproar in the publishing community. [The closing of the SMU Press](#) was dually regarded as “horrifying” by Judy Alter, former director of the TCU Press, and as a necessary cut by Paul W. Ludden, SMU vice president and provost.

Williams understood that the main issues were the budget and, by extension, the allotment of funds for the Press’s personnel salaries. “If that’s the case, you know I’ll just volunteer down there for free, save some money,” Williams offered. The Chancellor agreed to this, adding a small supplement on to his salary as a faculty member, and before he knew it, Williams joined the staff of two as the director of the press, replacing Caulker.

However, budget cuts (amongst other hardships) would continue to burden the Press for a long time to come.

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Fifteen years ago, James Lehr (present Marketing Coordinator for the Press) had begun his usual workday at Texas A&M as the Director of Media Relations. He had a meeting scheduled for that day with a male student and was sitting at his desk when he heard him come in. The student was curiously looking around Lehr's office when his gaze landed on a book on Lehr's desk. Still staring at the book, he nonchalantly said to Lehr, "Oh, you have a book. I hope to own a book one day."

Lehr looked up immediately at the student, shocked and frankly confused as to what he meant. He assumed the student was joking, and then he realized that the student was being *completely serious*. He thought to himself, do students really not own physical books anymore? He had never really understood the insistent emphasis on the necessity of parents reading to their children; he knew it was important, of course, but it was in this moment that he began to grasp just how important it really is.

According to [Amirtharaj and others](#), 74.6% of undergraduate students reported that they prefer to use eBooks instead of physical copies. Lehr tells me that when he had spoken to the male student, he realized "a lot of students don't own books. Just because they're bulky or heavy, they subscribe to everything and get it through their tablet or their computer." While [Errera](#) states that many people still prefer physical books over eBooks, statistics show an uptrend of 3.7% between January 2022 and 2023 in eBook sales.

When I sit down with Lehr, he looks the picture of a casual businessman with a standard blue button-down shirt and polished brown shoes to match his eyes and hair. As Marketing Coordinator, his primary responsibility is to promote newly released titles. Lehr's main focus when developing promotions for the books is always the audience. However, he discovered early on that finding buyers for the Press's books would be challenging as some are for a "niche market," primarily for older individuals. One of the books that fits this demographic is [Talking to the Stars](#), a memoir about Bobbie Wygant and her career as a reporter for Dallas-Fort Worth Channel 5. Lehr explains that "if you were a child in the seventies or eighties, she was like a member of your family" and that those who don't have that connection with her may not be as interested in her story.

In order to accommodate both younger and more tech-savvy audiences, the Press has shifted to publishing more digital and visually dominant books. Williams describes a few of their books as being visually dominant and therefore bearing a slight resemblance to "website pages," in which they contain many images and don't feature long, overwhelming paragraphs of text. [Fronterra](#), a book that details the intricate history and culture of the cities along the US-Mexico border, is an excellent example of this new style. There are a variety of images that display the different geographical locations, and the text is efficiently formatted in a way similar to bullet point listing. The TCU Press publishes nearly all of its books in both a digital and physical format. While eBooks cater to many people as they contain a variety of [benefits](#), such as being cheaper, easily transportable, and shareable, they also serve the publishing industry as they are

cheaper in production value. This, as noted by Lehr, is helpful for university presses as they are given tight budgets.

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As with any new job, a few members at the Press mention how when they first started, they felt challenged as they weren't certain about the requirements and duties of their roles.

When Lehr began working at the TCU Press in October 2021, he wondered about the operations of the Press: Is there a website? What does it look like? What kind of books are we going to publish? How many each season? With these questions fresh on his mind, he pushed open the door to his new office in hopes that there would be *something* to provide context for his new type of work. But much to his surprise, the office had been gutted out, save for a desk and a chair. There were no books, no files, no crumbs left behind to suggest anything about his new position. James looked around, and while grateful that he wouldn't have to clean out the leftover remnants of his new office, he knew he would have to start from the ground up.

Williams faced a similar challenge with his new role as director when he began working in 2009. To combat this uncertainty, he attended the annual Association of University Presses ([AUP](#)) conferences. The Press is a part of the AUP, an organization of university presses whose mission is to advance scholarship. He described his experience as having “found the annual AUP conferences, always in June, to be my life's blood... It was a vital connection.” According to Williams, the conferences consist of six to seven panels going on at one time, and the attendees may choose what piques their interest. In the past, these conferences have covered topics such as marketing techniques, sustainable publishing, cover designs, current trends in book publishing, book banning, etc. [The conferences](#) usually take place in person; however, the pandemic caused the 2020 and 2021 meetings to occur virtually. The AUP conferences provide a source of comradery amongst university presses and seek to help one another with whatever challenges they may face. This strong sense of teamwork carries over into the workplace environment at the Press as it's one of consistent collaboration and communication.

Now, two years later, Marco Roc stared at his computer screen, resting his flannel sleeved arm on his desk and his hand on his bearded chin. He had been sitting here for a while now, trying to figure out how to solve this issue. Sighing, he stood from his desk, pushed his chair back underneath it, and headed out of his office, which is located right next to Lehr's office on the left-hand side. He passed Lehr's office, where he could hear him excitedly conversing with an author over marketing plans. He smiled and ducked his head in acknowledgment at the intern sitting at the lobby desk before rounding the corner into Jennings' office. Jennings looked up at him from her computer when he knocked on the door to say, “Hey, Abby...”

Roc, the Editor at the Press, labels himself as a perfectionist. Before coming to work at the Press, he edited various scholarly papers for a journal whose subject matter was Black studies. Much of the work Roc does at the Press involves copyediting and acquisitions for new books, so he wants to ensure that the work he does is of the highest quality. When he does face an issue related to his projects, he likes to seek his colleagues' opinions. This is not uncommon at

the Press as heads will often poke in and out of offices to offer advice or inquire after specific updates for manuscripts. Occasionally, people will be drawn out by intriguing conversations or collaborative activities, such as taking a Halloween picture of Muffin (Jennings' cat who sometimes visits the office).

Collaboration is not just a key component at the TCU Press, but amongst other small presses as well. The TCU Press was formerly with the [A&M Book Consortium](#)—in which they assist with the warehousing, accounting, and fulfillment of books—with nine other small or university presses. They would have meetings, sometimes twice a year or quarterly, where various members from each press would gather in person to hear and discuss A&M Book Consortium's policy changes and then answer any questions the university presses had. Recently, the Press has switched to [Longleaf Services](#), who provides production and operational assistance (such as marketing, design, warehousing, and order processing) for over a dozen university presses and other small presses. Longleaf utilizes Basecamp, a messaging and online collaboration platform, to keep open, continuous conversations between the presses. Lehr describes it as “topics that just come up and, you know, somebody will pitch something out there and say, ‘Hey, we just had this happen. Has anyone else dealt with this?’ And pretty soon, everyone's chiming in.”

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Jennings reached for the small stack of papers that had been shuffled around her desk throughout the day. Closing her hand around the stack, she flipped through the thin packet that details the production schedule for this season. She tucked a strand of her blonde, curly hair behind her ear and scanned her quickly written notes in the margins. A glance at the clock on her computer tells her that it is 2 p.m., and it's time to start the meeting. She rose from her chair, smoothed the fabric of her midi length dress, switched off her computer, and entered the meeting space.

Each of the four members of the staff gathered around the table, settling in their respective seats. Jennings pulled out her chair and sat on the left side, accompanied by the two student interns working that day. The table is suited for a much larger staff, leaving many chairs unoccupied. Jennings glanced at the long line of empty seats before clearing her throat and turning to Williams to ask, “Do you want to start with schedules?” Williams nodded, and she flipped to the first page of the Spring 2024 list.

During COVID-19, the TCU Press suffered a significant budget cut that went into effect in August 2023. According to [Brown](#), a large majority of university presses suffered similar expenditure cuts during the pandemic. Many of the cuts affected the operations expenses, such as limiting the budget for travel and conferences. In addition, in order to compensate for the shortfall in sales due to the pandemic, some university presses were reported to have frozen salaries, furloughed employees without pay, and stalled the filling of positions. While the TCU



Press did not take similar actions, there were mandated budget cuts of 11% across campus, which caused the Press to lose a staff member, editor Kathy Walton.

As part of his duties as director, Williams manages two primary budget lines: production and operations. The production budget is annually estimated based on what the Press believes the revenue will be for the publishing season, whereas the latter covers supplies and other necessities for the Press. The personnel lines are described as being paid “two and a half” by the university, while the other half of the third position and the fourth are paid in full by gift funds, such as the Boller Fund. Paul F. Boller, an accomplished history professor, named the Press as the primary inheritor of his estate when he passed in 2015. The Press received the entirety of his funds in 2017.

Because of these 2023 budget cuts, the Press currently has an insufficient number of editors, thus creating new obstacles during production. Jennings, who creates and manages the schedules, comments on her frustration with the lack of editorial staff as “it just makes keeping everything on schedule a lot more difficult. And now our priorities have to be juggled a lot more.” To keep production on schedule, Jennings has turned to enlisting the help of freelance editors. Jennings, having done freelance work for the University of Arizona Press, knew that her former employer would likely have excellent referrals, so she asked Williams to send an email to the managing editor. She responded promptly with a list of a few exceptional editors, and Jennings reached out to them over the following days. One freelancer in particular, Alex Gergley, a doctoral student at the University of Kentucky, contacted the Press recently. Jennings agreed to test his editing capabilities, a process that she described to me as “try[ing] them out on proofreading first because that's easier. Then, if it seems like they're really competent and confident with that, I'll give them a try with editing, doing the copy editing.”

In addition to freelance editors, Jennings is grateful for the work of the students at the TCU Press. At the Press, there are student workers and student interns. The former group completes whatever tasks the press requires, such as writing copyright material or updating royalty sheets, whereas the latter group has specific assignments with an emphasis on what they are most interested in (i.e., marketing, design) and thereby help them achieve a well-rounded education in publishing. They tend to primarily work on editorial assignments like style sheets (marking any changes to the manuscripts and the reasoning behind them) and internal reader reports of manuscripts.

Before the downsizing of the staff, there was usually only one student worker to assist with minimal tasks, such as mailing. However, as the Press is short-staffed, they require more assistance with production and currently have five students at the Press, some student workers and some interns. Jennings explains, “The student workers have taken on a lot of our workload this past six months, more than they probably ever had in the past.” I currently work at the TCU Press and have been there since July 2023. My work has been comprised of converting photos to the correct format to be inserted in the manuscript, consulting on design choices for manuscripts, and any other editing that needs to be completed.

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In Williams' office, there are four tall shelves of varying shades of brown that border the lefthand wall and are packed tightly with every book that the Press has published since he began working there. Some are displayed with the cover facing forward (*A Remarkable Story to Tell* being one of them), and others face outward with their spine telling their stories. There are books stacked horizontally and vertically on each shelf, threatening to crash to the floor and cause a cascade to follow. On the two desks next to the shelves are miscellaneous piles of papers, and below are cardboard boxes filled with more books.

Williams interlaces his fingers and leans back comfortably in his seat. He glances at his books and then smiles slightly to himself as I ask him, "Why do you keep them all?"

He looks at me with a vibrant light in his eyes and answers, "Pride."

News of the Press's demolition has been floating around for a few years now; however, the details concerning the exact timing of when the demolition will take place has not yet been communicated. Roc told me that with the recent construction for the new dorm and dining hall on the east side of campus, TCU needs more parking lots. He notes that most of the buildings on Sandage Ave are unoccupied, thus making the area a good fit for new parking structures.

Williams shakes his head when he tells me that he hates to think about boxing up his office and all the time spent doing so. But on the brighter side, he remains hopeful that they will be relocated to gain better visibility. Jennings chimes in and says she believes "it could be a really good thing because our location now isn't ideal." The Press is far off the edge of campus, where they don't get much foot traffic, resulting in many people not knowing that TCU has a university press. A more visible spot—Williams is hopeful for one of the many storefronts TCU owns on Berry Street—will help the Press become more noticeable and gain better traction, whether that be from potential authors, customers, or students wanting to begin an internship.

Currently, there are no plans for relocation for the Press or even a definite date for the demolition. But no matter the tumultuous, uncertain future the Press may face, Williams holds fast to the idea that people are always reading and writing—that will never go away, and neither will storytelling.