Five new Distinguished Alumni were added to the wall of honorees already there in the Student Center during Homecoming festivities. They join 141 other outstanding graduates stretching back to the first, Lyndon Johnson in 1959. Here is a glimpse of why they were chosen.

**Business is business**

There are certain universal truths all business subscribes to, says Herbierto “Berto” Guerra. People skills, organizational structure, setting goals, learning and understanding the product, delivering quality at a reasonable price — these are all keys to business success, no matter what that business happens to be.

That philosophy proved true when he made the jump from restaurants and movie theaters to telecommunications, and it’s proved true with his jump from telecommunications to the automotive industry.

“Business is business is business. It’s the same thing, just another product,” says Guerra, a 1984 interdisciplinary management graduate. Now, as chairman-CEO of Avanzar Interior Technologies in San Antonio, it’s his job to ensure his company provides the interiors for Toyota’s Tundra pickup trucks. With Toyota’s “just in time” supply strategy, that means producing a complete, custom-ordered interior every 73 seconds.

“Basically, every 73 seconds we’re handing them a complete interior so they can install it in the Tundras. Of course, it saves them a lot of money in inventory, but it also teaches you discipline,” Guerra says. “The difference here is that there is no other plant in the world that has 21 on-site suppliers on their campus, and all are in sync with each other.

“I think we’ve learned a lot from the Toyota way, which is very efficient and very successful,” he says. “Toyota is obsessive about perfection, and after working with them, now I understand why their products last so long — they have to be perfect.”

As an example, Guerra explains that when putting door panels together, the insulation is measured by infrared laser down to the millimeter. If it is off by so much as a hair — a seemingly negligible amount — that variance lets noticeable extra road noise into the passenger compartment.

“In our culture, when you study business courses, you learn about sales as a growth curve which eventually reaches a plateau,” he says. “The Toyota way is to avoid that plateau, to keep climbing and climbing.

“We’re encouraged to ask ourselves ‘What are four things I did today I could’ve done better?’ When you answer, you say, ‘Okay, I’m going to improve those four things.’ Once you’ve improved those things, name four more things,” Guerra says. “If you do this throughout your life, you’re going to continuously improve. That’s the biggest thing I’ve learned in working with Toyota, to never rest on your laurels — improve continuously.”

**Event planner extraordinaire**

Life is fabulous for Steve Kemble. No, on second thought, better make that FABULOUS! Kemble, America’s sassiest lifestyle guru, never does anything by half measures.

Since founding Steve Kemble Event Design two decades ago, the 1982 public relations graduate has built his Dallas-based firm into one of the most successful special events operations in the nation. He’s managed everything from massive Fourth of July
celebrations in downtown Dallas that drew 250,000 people to small soirees for presidents Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, George Bush and George W. Bush.

“I had no idea it would ever get this big,” Kemble says, a hint of amazement creeping into his voice. “All of the events have been incredible in their own special way. Every single day and project is fascinating to me. I’m very much a project-oriented person — I can’t imagine going into the office every day, doing the same thing over and over.

“I love the closure of it. I work on some of these events for a year, a year and a half,” he says. “These are major, major events. This party in Boston I’m organizing — we have 90 people working on it. Ninety people. But when it’s over, I’ll walk away and be ready for the next challenge.”

Kemble has made his mark in the event-planning industry, racking up more than two dozen awards for his work, including the Special Event GALA Lifetime Achievement Award in 2002. He has served as president of the International Special Events Society, but he’s probably best known for his numerous television appearances on programs ranging from CBS’ Early Show to Extreme Makeover: Wedding Edition.

“I started doing a lot of media stuff about five years ago. My event business has always been fabulous with blue-chip clientele, but to really take it to the next level, I chose to start doing television,” Kemble explains. “For some reason, a lot of people are fascinated by somebody on TV planning a party. It’s propelled me to another whole level.”

That success doesn’t come without a price, though. By his own estimates, he’s now spending 90 percent of his time on the road — and a good chunk of that involves waiting in line to get through airport security. His last trip was 53 days straight, taking him to Portland, Montreal, Chicago, Boston, Las Vegas, New York, Miami… With a schedule like that, living out of a suitcase — even one as expansive as Kemble’s — gets old quickly.

“That’s very much what my life is now. I’m so involved in the growth of the industry, there’s no way to avoid it,” Kemble says. “Before, we were just ‘party planners,’ but now, with our success, this industry’s become legitimized.

“And this,” he says, “is exactly what I’ve always wanted to do.”

Too idealistic to know better

Women’s athletics have come a long way in Marilyn McReavy Nolen’s lifetime. That’s not surprising, since she’s done her best over the years to elevate women’s status in the sporting world.

Nolen had an impact almost immediately, earning a spot on the U.S. national volleyball team that won gold in the 1967 Pan American Games shortly after graduating from Texas State with a degree in education in 1966. She went on to finish eighth in the 1968 Mexico City Olympics and was a member of the first U.S. women’s team to defeat volleyball powerhouse Japan in 1972. Not that any of those accomplishments came easy, mind you.

“When I played in the Olympic games, we all had to pay our own way. There were no sponsorships, no support. My mother and brother traveled with me out to California to try out for the team,” Nolen says. “My dad just about had a coronary — he thought I was throwing away my degree to be a beach bum.

“At this same time, Billie Jean King and a group of women had started women’s tennis, so I was committed,”
she says. “There just weren’t that many women in any given sport. The women’s volleyball team was like hidden mystery: How do you try out? How do you get there? Nobody could give any answers.”

In October 1968 she started working on her master’s at Sul Ross State and became a graduate assistant coach for the fledgling women’s volleyball team. Drawing on her connections through the Olympics team, she recruited a talent-laden roster that went 72-0-3 over three seasons and won back-to-back national titles — the first two women’s collegiate volleyball titles ever — over UCLA and Long Beach State. Even so, respect for those accomplishments was a fleeting luxury.

“That’s just how it was in those days. When the athletic director realized (All-America setter) Mary Jo Peppler had a $50 scholarship, he took it away. He said, ‘Girls can’t have scholarships.’ And it was an academic scholarship!” Nolen says. “It certainly was a different day and age. Most people asked why we weren’t content to be cheerleaders.”

After leaving Alpine, she made coaching stops at New Mexico State, Utah State (winning the Association of Intercollegiate Athletics for Women national championship in 1978), the University of Kentucky, the University of Florida and Saint Louis University, building winning programs at each stop. She retired in 2003 with a career record of 809-363-12 and was immediately inducted as an inaugural member into the American Volleyball Coaches Hall of Fame.

One of her proudest accomplishments to this day remains the founding of the first national volleyball training center — in Pasadena, Texas, of all places.

“When we started the first training center, everyone told us ‘No girl is going to leave home to play volleyball in Pasadena,’ but they came from all over the country,” she says, delight filling her voice. “The City of Pasadena funded the center. We hired a full-time coach. The girls all got part-time jobs. It was wonderful.

“They eventually moved the training center up to Colorado Springs, and then professional co-ed volleyball started. A lot of people make a good living at it now,” Nolen says. “Back then, nobody thought we could do it, but we were just too idealistic to know better.”

A specialty in healing

For most people, mentioning “plastic surgery” conjures images of liposuction and nose jobs, maybe even the television series *Nip/Tuck*. But Wyatt Payne is a plastic surgeon whose daily work goes beyond such cosmetic stereotypes into the cutting edge science of wound healing.

Any injury to the body — whether it originates from an operation, trauma or disease — requires healing of the wound afterward explains Payne, who earned his B.S. in chemistry in 1980 and followed that with his master’s in 1982. If the body can’t heal the wound properly — vascular disease and diabetes are common contributors, as well as burns — infection becomes a very real danger.

“Chronic non-healing wounds are what I study. Our investigations focus on wounds that are slow to heal, and we push them to heal,” Payne says. “It’s a global problem. Literally millions of people are at risk for having wounds that are slow to heal or won’t heal.”

In his work as a professor of surgery at the University of South Florida and in the research labs at Bay Pines V.A. Medical Center in St. Petersburg, Fla., Payne studies how biochemical agents in the body — growth factors — influence healing. Currently, only a
A single drug is approved by the FDA to treat non-healing wounds via growth factors, but Payne says the line of investigation holds great promise.

“In our lab, we’re fortunate to be involved in researching these biochemical agents. We’ve been involved in studying a number of these growth factors in the lab at the basic science level, as well as clinically in research protocols treating various non-healing wounds in patients,” Payne says. “There are a lot of promising aspects of the treatments. There is no single treatment that’s going to be the magic bullet, but possibly combinations or cocktails of the necessary growth factors in some way, shape or form will work to heal these chronic non-healing wounds.

“There’s a whole body of research being done looking at combinations of growth factors, and people are starting to look at the treatment of cells that secrete these growth factors,” he says. “It’s amazing when you consider that it’s just been over the last 25 years that these growth factors have been discovered and their roles in the process of wound healing understood. It’s an exciting time to be involved in this research.”

When opportunity knocked

Michael Young didn’t set out to make his mark in the competitive restaurant business world, but that didn’t stop him from seizing the opportunity when it presented itself.

Young, a 1971 geography graduate, was all set to enter his degree field when his part-time bartending job turned into something more.

“The guy I was bartending for was opening a restaurant, and he asked me to run it,” Young says. “I said I would if he’d give me some ownership. And he agreed.”

That restaurant was Mike & Charlie’s in Austin. Since then, Young and his business partner have expanded their restaurant holdings to include eight of the popular Chuy’s Tex-Mex eateries, seven Krispy Kremes and three other restaurants with 1,500 employees.

“The thing I like most about this business is that our employee base is generally a young group of people — many of them are in school, and many are just starting their lives and leaving home,” Young says. “Being in this business so long, I see people who are doctors, attorneys and professionals, and I remember them as kids from 10 or 15 years ago. I get to see them develop, and that’s a gratifying experience.”

Early in 2007, Young sold part of his interest in the company and brought in new equity partners from New York to fuel a major expansion of the Chuy’s brand. On the drawing board are plans for new restaurants in south Austin, the Clear Lake area south of Houston, northwest Houston and north Dallas.

That rapid growth is understandably consuming most of his attention — and what he has left over after work is taken up by his 6- and 3-year-old children at home. Even so, he’s managed to keep abreast of developments in geography and maintain his contacts at Texas State, being named a Geography Distinguished Alumnus by the department in 1995.

“Mainly I stay involved by reading and studying about it, and I travel a lot,” he says. “I’ve done some stuff with the department at Texas State in the past, and I hope when things slow down here in the office, I’ll get to do more with them.

“I am so very proud to have my degree from Texas State,” Young says. “The geography program is one of the best in the entire country, and I’m very excited about their future. I like all those guys a lot.”