

UTAH MAGAZINE

THE UNIVERSITY OF
TEXAS AT ARLINGTON

Building Momentum

New residence hall, new programs,
new alliances. . . ***New Outlook***

PLUS: Student Eddie McGee
wins *Big Brother* grand prize



6 Everybody's big brother

By Glen Golightly

Persistence—88 days worth—paid dividends for broadcast communication junior Eddie McGee as he captured the \$500,000 grand prize on the CBS reality show *Big Brother* in September. But don't let the tough-talking New York native fool you; he's actually a kindhearted fellow.

Building momentum

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Photographs by Joel Quintans and Robert Crosby

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Everybody's

Student and cancer survivor Eddie McGee wins grand prize on CBS reality show

big brother

By Glen Golightly

Much to his chagrin, Eddie McGee just might shatter the cynical philosophy that good guys finish last. Not that he ever finishes last. It's the good-guy part that bothers him.

Last fall, the 21-year-old UTA broadcast communication junior captured the \$500,000 grand prize in the CBS reality show *Big Brother*. He outlasted nine other people by living 88 days in a 1,800-square-foot house at CBS Studios in Los Angeles while the world watched on television and the Internet. Supporters hit the phones in late September to vote the boisterous and opinionated Long Island native to victory over the other two finalists.

McGee, a power forward on the Movin' Mavs wheelchair basketball team, denies the good-guy rumors. "Don't let the word out," he admonishes, then reconsiders. "I guess I am a bit of a softie."

Instant fame and fortune notwithstanding, McGee says the experience hasn't changed him. But he does have a newfound respect for freedom.

"It was wild to be secluded. It felt great to walk out of that house and not be confined anymore," he says. "My bank account got a lot bigger and I'm excited about that. But being back with my family and friends is priceless." He

plans to give some of the money to his parents and use some for continued schooling.

"He deserved to win and he deserves the money," says friend Elsa Corral. "I know he's going to do good with it."

Survival instincts

Corral, an administrative assistant in the UTA President's Office, can vouch for her friend's supportive nature. In February, she was hospitalized with leukemia and, after rounds of chemotherapy, lost her hair. McGee and teammate Jon Rydberg showed up one day in the hospital with junk food—and shaved heads.

McGee could empathize with Corral. In 1991, doctors amputated his left leg after a cancerous tumor spread through it.

"He knew how I felt," Corral says. "We would talk or just sit and be quiet. He understood."

While in the hospital, Corral heard that the *Big Brother* show needed contestants and thought McGee would be the perfect candidate. "But before I could tell him, his roommate already had an application and they were filling it out."

The residents entered the house July 5. As the weeks passed and McGee continued to





avoid banishment, his backers multiplied. New York radio station WNEW urged listeners to support their new favorite son. SaveEddie.com, a few other Web sites and a booth in the UTA University Center encouraged people to call a special 900 number and cast their vote for him.

As the last contestant standing, McGee has gained a measure of notoriety. He has appeared on CBS's *The Early Show* and *Hollywood Squares* and has several projects under way, including a book and possible parts in a movie and an off-Broadway production.

McGee, who has traveled the world playing on the junior U.S. wheelchair basketball team, couldn't have predicted it all when UTA recruited him in 1996.

Coach Jim Hayes considers McGee an

Hayes says he can count on McGee in practically any situation. "If I'm one of four people left in the world and two are my enemies, I hope the other person is Eddie."

Can't keep a good man down

McGee likely wouldn't mind. He has overcome adversity before and suggests that incidents such as the loss of a leg can morph into opportunities.

"It's hard to say that ordeals made me the person I am today," he says. "But without support of friends and family, I wouldn't be the person I am."

The person he is occasionally used language on *Big Brother* that kept the CBS production crew on beep alert. But Hayes is



Left: Eddie McGee triumphantly exits the *Big Brother* House. Above: Student Jon Rydberg shoe-polished his truck to support his teammate.

exceptional student-athlete who brings the squad together. "Eddie's a fun-loving kid. He sometimes has an abrasive New York approach to things, but as an athlete he works hard on the court. There's never a problem with his work ethic."

Hayes says he respects McGee for his commitment to those close to him, often at personal cost.

"He called me once and said he couldn't make a tournament," Hayes recalls. "There's an older gentleman back home, and Eddie gives a week each summer to fix up his house. That's Eddie's brand of loyalty."

pleased that the show depicted McGee as he is. *Big Brother* roommate and second-place finisher Josh Souza of Santa Monica, Calif., adds that McGee is the first to launch a laugh, even at his own expense.

"We always joked around," Souza says. "We were in New York recently, and when we crossed a street, I said, 'Hey, jerk, the sign says walk, not hop,' and he's the first to start laughing."

After the two began sharing a room in the *Big Brother* house, it hit Souza what McGee went through as a child. "He was just Eddie to me, and I never thought about

"He called me once and said he couldn't make a tournament," says coach Jim Hayes. "There's an older gentleman back home, and Eddie gives a week each summer to fix up his house. That's Eddie's brand of loyalty."

him losing a leg. Then he brought out some pictures of when he was 11, and I can't imagine it. He's not bitter. Eddie made the best of what God's given him."

Souza and McGee bonded during their time in the two-bedroom, one-bathroom house. The rules stipulated no outside contact and very little privacy. There were 60 microphones and 28 cameras, including three in the bathroom. The residents, with help from viewers, voted to banish a contestant every two weeks.

"His views were respected and he's a guy's guy," Souza says. "We lifted weights since there was no TV to watch. And you can't vote out your lifting partner, so he was safe from me."

Playing to win

McGee's early strategy—keep a low profile and say little—mimicked that of some cast members on the network's other popular reality show, *Survivor*. But he was unable to fly under the radar for long.

Ten days into the show, McGee and soon-to-be-banished William Collins engaged in a verbal battle that would make Bobby Knight blush. Spouting language as colorful as house guest Brittany Petros' neon hair, the two argued for more than an hour while dazed roomie George Boswell watched in silence.

Though McGee altered his initial plan, one



Above: Members of the Movin' Mavs wheelchair basketball team dog pile Eddie McGee's jersey at J. Gilligan's Bar & Grill in Arlington after watching their teammate win the \$500,000 *Big Brother* grand prize on television. Right: McGee dribbles upcourt during a Movin' Mavs game.

thing remained constant: While his housemates adopted a feel-good, egalitarian approach, he played to win.

Beneath his competitive, sometimes rowdy image was a fellow who Petros found would listen and offer advice but not insist that it be followed. "You could talk to him and find out what he thought, and he wouldn't say you were an idiot if you didn't do it."

After Petros was voted out of the house, she began rooting for Eddie to win. She wasn't surprised that he lasted until the end and attributes his no-nonsense outlook.

"Anybody who has a strong personality like Eddie is going to have some people who

like him and some who don't," she says. "The middle person who says whatever everybody wants to hear gets along just fine. But Eddie won because of his personality."

Though gone forever from the house, McGee keeps up with his former housemates. He recently helped Petros move from Minnesota to Los Angeles, and he talks with Souza and some of the others regularly.

He's not sure when he'll return to UTA, but two things are certain.

He intends to continue his education.

And, in spite of himself, he'll keep on being good-guy Eddie. ■

Glen Golightly (BA '84; MA '93) is a free-lance writer living in Los Angeles.



Eddie's Top 5

Big Brother moments

#5 Day 76: Eddie and the pug

Big Brother challenges the house guests to find their pet pug, Chiquita, among 40 pugs they've released in the backyard. Eddie doesn't win the contest, but he does discover a three-legged pug among the pack. The two bond instantly. "I'm taking that one home with me," he says.

#4 Day 10: Eddie battles William

Eddie confronts William on the patio after William intentionally gives wrong answers in the "is this celebrity alive or dead?" challenge. The two spar for more than an hour as a dumbfounded George silently watches. "I know when it came down to crunch time, I performed and you didn't," Eddie says. William's reply: "I did what I needed to do."

#3 Day 46: Eddie crowned Sumo champ

Eddie defeats George, Josh and Curtis to win a makeshift Sumo wrestling tournament. He's rewarded with a massage from a mystery guest who gleefully delivers a barrage of elbows and kidney punches. "Where did you get your massage license?" a blindfolded Eddie asks. "Barnum and Bailey?" Later, he discovers the masseuse was William.

#2 Day 67: Eddie rejects George's plan

Eddie reluctantly agrees to join George's half-baked plan to exit the house en masse, leaving the show with no winner. But after a night's sleep, he changes his mind. "I'd be foolish to walk away from this, foolish," he tells *Big Brother* in the Red Room. "I'm gonna play the game and play it hard."

#1 Day 88: Eddie wins the grand prize

After host Julie Chen announces Eddie as the winner, he embraces runner-up Josh, then tells Chen: "I am awestruck. I did not expect to win. It's wild. My heart is pumping like you wouldn't believe. I have to remind myself to breathe."

Compiled by Mark Permenter

Video captures from CBS's *Big Brother*

