

# Silent Servant

## Residence hall leader improves community

By John Lamothe, associate editor

Joseph McKenna doesn't understand why *Student Leader* is featuring him on the cover. The 22-year-old architecture major from the University of Idaho sees his work in residence halls and the community as simply part of his everyday activities. "I don't feel like I've done anything," he says. "I just do my thing day-to-day, so I figure there has to be someone out there doing better things than me."

Don't let McKenna fool you, however. Behind his genuine modesty is an extensive resume of service to both the university and the surrounding community—much of which he did without recognition. McKenna is the first student from Idaho to be featured on a *Student Leader* cover.

A passion for architecture and a desire to stay close to home drew this Idaho native to UI. Although he wasn't active in service during high school, something clicked his freshman year of college that led McKenna down a four-year road of involvement with residence life. "I regret that I didn't get involved in high school," he says. "Once I got started, I couldn't stop. When it's done, I'm going to miss it a lot."

McKenna began as a residence hall president his freshman year. "I first had a few hall positions—secretary, intramurals chair—those were pretty fun, so when it came time to run for president for the hall, I was up for it because I loved it so much," he says. When a spot opened on the residence hall executive board, McKenna jumped at the opportunity to get more involved.

For the next two years, he served as UI's National Communications Coordinator. His new position brought him in contact with other National Residence Hall Honorary chapters across the region, and it wasn't long before

McKenna felt the need to take on a new position. "I like to keep pushing myself," he says. "Seeing different opportunities and different places I can make a difference, I move ahead." McKenna accepted a position as the Northern Regional Communications Coordinator for the Intermountain Affiliate of College and University Residence Halls chapter of NRHH. McKenna served as the IACURH Associate Director of NRHH where he facilitated communication between 20 chapters and the national



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NRHH office.

"He's probably the most organized leader I've ever worked with," says Don Yackley, director of residence life. "He has an amazing sense of the importance of follow through." Between pursuing his masters degree in architecture, which Yackley says is one of the most time-consuming programs at UI, and his work with residence halls, McKenna has become an expert in time management. His system, however, is far from conventional. "I don't carry around a planner. I don't have a Palm Pilot. I have all these notes because as soon as I write something down, I remember it," McKenna says.

What makes McKenna different from most other student leaders is his commitment to improving not only his own university but the other schools in his region. "Joe has become someone that I can ask questions to, someone who'll respond with respect and work with me to find the solution," says Sara Orgill, former Residence Halls Association president at Brigham Young University. "I know that this is something Joe does for many schools, not just my own."

Although McKenna has found success

on a national level, he hasn't forgotten where he came from. "He's still stays really rooted here," Yackley says. "In my experience, when students advance to the national level, they refocus and that's what they do. He doesn't do that. He stays true to what his priorities are."

When UI began taking steps toward building new residence halls, McKenna was given the chance to combine his two loves—architecture and residence life. The university formed the "Future Housing Dream Team"—made up of both faculty and students—to decide what they were looking for in a new residence hall.

McKenna says his knowledge of architecture has helped him tremendously with the task force. "I have a different insight than most people on the committee. I can actually say, 'You probably wouldn't be able to do that,' or 'Maybe this idea would be better and cheaper.'"

"[Joe] brings energy to the Residence Hall Association," says Kasey Swisher, former Associated Students president. "His energy and leadership have allowed them to receive national attention." Helping UI receive recognition for its successes is one of McKenna's main goals. When he saw a chance to bring the "No Frills Conference"—a regional residence life conference—to UI, McKenna headed up a committee that spent a year working on a bid. His team beat out the competition and hosted the conference this past February. "We organized everything from travel to food to where they would stay—pretty much everything while they were here," McKenna says. "It was a lot of work, but it's so worth it. Just getting schools together is always good because the communication is so open."

Of all his activities, however, McKenna says his most rewarding undertaking is the community-service project "Paint the Palouse." Each year, residence hall students go out into the community and paint houses for those unable to do so themselves. McKenna has held positions as materials team leader and house coordinator over the four years he's participated. The program was awarded recognition as the National Program of the Year by NRHH in 2000. "It's so great to see the people painting the houses and having so much fun," McKenna says. "At the same time, they're working toward the greater good. The community shows so much support for the university. We need to give back to them to show our thanks." **SL**

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Learn more about McKenna at [studentleader.com](http://studentleader.com)

### McKenna's Leadership Tips

- **Keep your sense of humor.** "In good times, it'll keep you motivated. In bad times, it'll help the group bond."
- **Titles don't mean a thing.** "Whether you're the president of an organization or community or simply a member, you can both make an incredible impact if you use your resources."
- **Never become complacent.** "Be happy where you are, but always look ahead."
- **Use your intuition.** "When in doubt stick with your gut feeling. Ninety-nine percent of the time, it's right."

**Be on the cover:** *Student Leader* searches for different types of leaders to appear on the cover. If you'd like to nominate a student (or yourself), send a letter, resume, and photo to: Cover Search, *Student Leader*, PO Box 14081, Gainesville, FL 32604-2081. Check out past covers at [www.studentleader.com](http://www.studentleader.com).