



Albert Lee has created three Iron Man costumes for his outreach events.

PHOTO BY  
PATRICK RAY DUNN

## Commitment to Cause

COMMUNITY SERVICE | DESPITE HAVING TO KEEP UP WITH COURSES, IT'S NOT DIFFICULT TO FIND STUDENTS WORKING TO GIVE BACK

BY MICHELLE MONDO

UTSA students don't shy away from opportunities to serve their university or San Antonio. Last year alone, 12,000 students provided services and programs to more than 660,000 people across South Central Texas. *Sombrilla Magazine* caught up with three busy Roadrunners—Iron Man, the Queen of Soul and Miss San Antonio—to learn what motivates them.

### Albert Lee: Iron Man

His Iron Man suit has made him a popular figure on campus, with people asking for autographs and to take photos,

but Albert Lee says he still enjoys some anonymity. "No one recognizes me without the suit," the international business major says. "I like it like that. I like the peace and quiet."

When he dons one of his three custom-made suits, though, that's when Lee transforms into the superhero—with the outgoing personality to match. The suits he builds are not just for fun, although



Miss San Antonio Emma Faye Rudkin wants to bring awareness to deaf causes.

he admits the projects are just that. Lee creates the suits to help UTSA student organization For the Kids, which hosts a dance marathon each year to raise money for children with cancer. “Last year was the first time I got involved,” he says. “I wanted to use the suits to help recruit people to the organization, promote the dance marathon and do hospital visits.”

Lee recalls one girl from this year’s event who was undergoing chemotherapy. Unlike some of the more shy or nervous kids, this young lady, he says, walked right up to him and took his hand: “She goes, ‘OK, Iron Man. Let’s dance.’”

Spending 12 hours dancing in the suit got hot at times, but, Lee says, he didn’t really consider it: “The children with cancer, the children doing chemo—they have it so much harder. I would gladly wear my suit to help them.”

### Kamilah Avery: Queen of Soul

Since she began classes at 5 years old, dancing has been a salve for Kamilah Avery, especially after moving to Texas as a preteen. “I found a studio and started taking dance again—contemporary, jazz and modern,” which helped her cope, she says, with what was a difficult change.

Avery decided to stay in her newly adopted home state for college, opting for UTSA because she liked its reputation. She says mixing dance, business and communication into a multidisciplinary studies degree has helped her prepare for her ultimate goal—owning her own performing arts school for girls. Meanwhile, she’s been traveling to her native California every summer since she was 16 to help her aunt run a summer conservatory school for singing and dancing.

Now that she’s been crowned Fiesta San Antonio’s Queen of Soul, she’s representing the pageant at schools, senior centers and other locations while balancing her final year of university as well as her job as a stylist at Saks Fifth Avenue Off 5th.

As a pageant queen, Avery experienced Fiesta for the first time this year and was blown away by the size of the 10-day party. “Everyone comes out to celebrate,” she says. “It was amazing!”

Avery is also raising awareness about the need for more scholarships for African American girls, a goal of the pageant. “I do believe that African American women experience a lot more marginalization,” she explains, “but you still have to be the best you can be, work 100 times harder, which says so much about our race and how beautiful and strong we can be.”

### Emma Faye Rudkin: Miss San Antonio

Riding on a float during the Battle of Flowers Parade, Miss San Antonio, Emma Faye Rudkin, was waving to the crowd when she spotted a woman who started to sign with her hands. “She signed to me, ‘I’m deaf too,’” Rudkin says,



PHOTO BY MICHELLE TRAVIS

recalling the “coolest thing” that happened during her first time at Fiesta. “We both had this intimate moment, just her and I, because we shared this. That’s why I wanted to do the pageant—to say, ‘You aren’t alone.’”

The first legally deaf Miss San Antonio, the 19-year-old says her childhood was marked by acute loneliness and depression. The curiosity of her classmates about her bulky hearing aids and limited speech sometimes came with stinging words: “I was made fun of because of how I talked.” Although Rudkin lost her hearing at age 4—likely caused by a high fever that led to an infection—she learned to talk by working with a speech therapist to move her mouth to the shape of certain sounds.

Rudkin says a Christian camp for the deaf was the transformative experience needed for her to accept herself. “I took vocal lessons,” she says, “and did the school talent show. I learned to play the guitar, ukulele and piano.” She entered high school afterward with a newfound confidence.

Her talent in the Miss San Antonio pageant was singing and guitar, which she plays by feeling vibration on the strings. She’ll be competing for Miss Texas in July.

Her parents, who she describes as her biggest advocates, helped her start her nonprofit, Aid the Silent, to bring awareness to deaf causes. She hopes to someday have her own camp for deaf children and wants to dedicate more time to becoming fluent in sign language. “I want to reach out to all kids who might need support,” she says. “I want them to be proud of themselves just as they are.”

Queen of Soul Kamilah Avery helps highlight the need for more scholarships for African American girls.

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