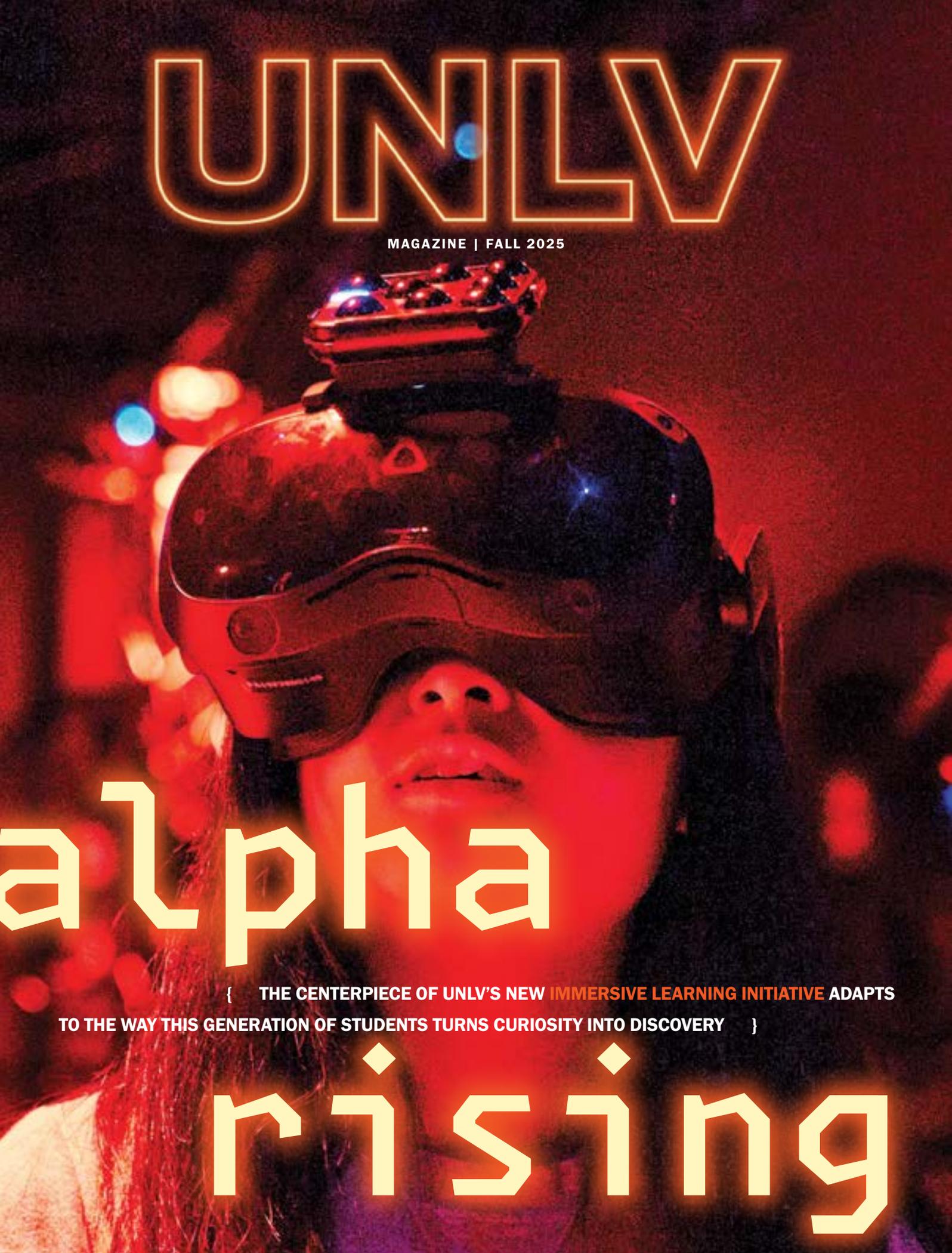


UNLV

MAGAZINE | FALL 2025



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{ THE CENTERPIECE OF UNLV'S NEW **IMMERSIVE LEARNING INITIATIVE** ADAPTS TO THE WAY THIS GENERATION OF STUDENTS TURNS CURIOSITY INTO DISCOVERY }

rising

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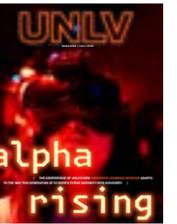
The transfer portal and NIL issues have sent college athletics into an on-the-fly industry makeover. Three UNLV coaches share their thoughts.



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After the Fire

For decades, University Gardens plaza connected the campus to everyday life in our neighborhood. Now, we wonder what will emerge in its place.



A student navigates a virtual learning module in the Dreamscape Learn center.
[PHOTO: JOSH HAWKINS]

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Our flagship publication is free for alumni and friends, but distribution is limited. Opt in now to keep getting the print copy or to request a digital version.



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Dream Weavers

UNLV's new virtual reality center leverages storytelling technology to transport students to alien zoos and ancient cultural sites. The goal: deeper learning of tough concepts.



“The students you support today will go on to heal, to teach, to lead — and in doing so, they will carry a piece of you with them into every life they change.”

”

Joseph Cadiz, BS Biology '23, MS Nursing '24, Executive Master of Healthcare Administration '25, Current Nursing Ph.D. Student

Scholarship Recipient and Joseph Cadiz Scholarship Creator and Donor

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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The University of Nevada, Las Vegas, wishes to acknowledge and honor the Indigenous communities of this region, and recognize that the university is situated on the traditional homelands of the Nuwu (noo-woo), Southern Paiute (paioot) People.

Full statement:

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From the President

*UNLV's six-year graduation rate has grown 11 percentage points over the past decade, hitting a new high this year at **52%**.*

Nurturing Our Growth

This fall, UNLV's enrollment topped 33,700 students, which is both a new campus record and continues a three-year growth trend. First-year retention is also steadily improving, and UNLV's six-year graduation rate has grown 11 percentage points over the past decade, hitting a new high this year at 52%.

These numbers speak volumes. During a period of uncertainty and flat or declining enrollments for higher education nationally, more students than ever are choosing UNLV to complete their degrees and launch their professional careers.

I believe they choose to be Rebels because they know a degree from UNLV will improve their lives and the lives of their families. More than half of our graduates are the first in their families to earn a bachelor's degree, and we are adapting and growing in areas vital to the region's current and future economic success.

Leading our enrollment growth are the Lee Business School and the Howard R. Hughes College of Engineering. This fall, they collaborated to launch an interdisciplinary undergraduate degree in cybersecurity. It complements the highly popular hybrid master's program launched earlier this year and a traditional master's that *Forbes* ranks among the nation's best. Business also created Nevada's first bachelor's degree in insurance and risk management to serve an industry in dire need of an infusion of new talent.

We're also seeing double-digit growth in health-related programs, and we continue to be the state's largest producer of new nurses and teachers. A 6% spike in professional

students also contributed to the new record, driven by booming Boyd Law School enrollment.

We recently introduced a collection of credit-bearing microcredentials — including in fields like nuclear technology. The credentials will help our graduates stand out as they enter the workforce or prepare for graduate studies.

But degree programs aren't the only way we're evolving to meet the needs of today's students. You'll find no better evidence of that than our new Dreamscape Learn space (page 24). It represents an exciting innovation for the delivery of instruction.

Dreamscape does so much more than make learning fun — it makes learning accessible. It engages students in real-time problems to deepen their understanding of tough concepts and level-up their critical thinking skills. They don't just acquire knowledge; they master new challenges through focus and effort. That is the key for developing a lifelong growth mindset.

I truly believe there is no better place to learn and to discover than right here at UNLV. In a relatively short span, UNLV has grown — with the support of our great community — into a powerful engine of talent, innovation, and opportunity. Together, we'll continue our upward trajectory and find even more ways to accelerate innovation, workforce development, public service, and the incredible potential of our students.

Chris Heavey,
Interim President

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PHOTO: BECCA SCHWARTZ

The Flashlight



AN ICON AGING BEAUTIFULLY

We're still in love after all these years. Lied Library is celebrating its 25th anniversary as the heart and soul of student learning at UNLV. Photos of its soaring roofline against the backdrop of our dramatic city skyline always make us swoon, but what happens inside really causes the pride to swell. Patron visits were up 20% this year, to 1.1 million students, faculty, and community members. The building has aged with grace, adapting every year to meet the needs of our 33,700 (and counting?) students. There's now a makerspace with sewing machines and 3D printers; a multimedia studio for podcasting and video production; and booths that allow students to take video meetings in private. And the most recent addition, Dreamscape Learn, transports students to other worlds altogether (see p24).

[PHOTO BY JOSH HAWKINS]

Watch the proof-of-concept short for *A Very Lovely Girl* > vimeo.com/1031958334



A Vision for the Emerging Nevada Film Industry

Incubator program offers real-world experience by having emerging professional filmmakers collaborate with students.

UNLV's new Filmmaker Vision Lab is bridging the gap between coursework and creative practice. Through the incubator program, filmmakers leave with a fully produced proof-of-concept for a feature film while students gain real-world experience and career connections.

"This new program is essential to UNLV Film's trajectory," said professor and program coordinator Adam Paul. "It's more vital than ever that our program grow to meet the coming needs of an industry that no longer is anchored to Hollywood."

Throughout the week-long intensive lab, students participate in all stages: pre-production meetings, a three-day shoot, and post-production, with a final screening in the department's Dolby Atmos theater.

The filmmaker fellows chosen for the program are artists with industry or festival recognition. For instance, alumna Andrea Walter, '12 BA Film, worked with students to produce *Daylight*, a short film she wrote and directed. The film was screened in Los Angeles at Cinema Sala's Fahm Bam series, celebrating Filipino-created films and sponsored by Amazon.

"One of the best things that I had learned from when I attended UNLV's film program was having a community who took care of me and supported me," she said. "The lab gave me a chance to do the same for the students who crewed

"As Nevada becomes recognized as a film industry hub, it's more vital than ever that our program grows to meet the coming needs of an industry that no longer is anchored to Hollywood."

Adam Paul
Program coordinator for Filmmaker Vision Lab

our film. *Daylight* is a deeply personal project for me, and through the lab process, a lot of the students learned that their personal journeys and their unique voices are super important to storytelling."

Working closely with UNLV professors and a student crew, Emmy-nominated

Above, writer-director Rod Blackhurst discusses a scene shot in the basement studio in the Flora Dungan Humanities Building with actress Quinn Jonic. At right, Andrea Walter, left, directs fellow alumna Jackie Martin on the set of *Daylight*.

filmmaker Rod Blackhurst produced a proof-of-concept for his next project, *A Very Lovely Girl*. The crew came from students enrolled in Production II and Film Sound classes. The short scene required a location to be built in the basement studio of the Flora Dungan Humanities Building. Alumna Nicole Peterson, '19 MFA, was tapped as the production designer and art director while editor Mark Bricker, '16 BFA Film, led a team of editors to assemble footage in near-real time.

No other university film program in the United States offers this model, Paul said, and the intensive structure suits academic schedules. "Students tend to have a lot going on, which makes finding a committed crew a challenge," he said. "With a tight turnaround, it could be next to impossible to leave enough room for learning, explanations, and patient mentorship.

"But this project is proving — with the right filmmaker and short project — we can bring working professionals to UNLV Film to share their expertise in a real-world setting without compromising the project or the students' learning experiences."

And by focusing on emerging filmmakers, Paul said, "we're establishing long-term connections to the film industry to keep our program relevant, current, and dynamic."



PHOTOS: UNLV FILMMAKER VISION LAB

CANT MISS ARTS ANNIVERSARY EVENTS



Photographer Stardust Fallout captures the Black Mountain Institute's "Your Writing Live!" event in April 2024 at Majestic Repertory Theatre.

A THOUSAND WORDS

As part of its 20th anniversary celebration, the Beverly Rogers, Carol C. Harter Black Mountain Institute has assembled an exhibition of 50 images of the people and programs that have shaped the institute's legacy at UNLV and in the community. The works are by former and current UNLV staff members Aaron Mayes, Geri Kodey, and Josh Hawkins, as well as a dozen local freelance photographers.

"I've always been captivated by capturing raw emotions and the profound connection between the performer or artist and the audience," said freelance photographer Stardust Fallout. "It's a delicate balance between pressing the shutter button at the perfect moment to freeze that fleeting second of emotion, and understanding the room's energy and the performer's connection with the audience while they're watching and listening."

► **Weekdays through May 2026**
Beverly Rogers Literature & Law Building

A DICKENS TWIST

Nevada Conservatory Theatre's 25th anniversary season is all about reinventing timeless classics, so no ordinary holiday production would do. *A Christmas Carol 1941*, directed by NCT Executive Director Kirsten Brandt, is a jazz-infused version following the tightfisted Ebenezer Scrooge through WWII-era Chicago.

"A key goal for us was to celebrate and carry forward the legacy of what the NCT has accomplished," Brandt said. "It's still in our mission to do classics, but we're looking to the future and infusing these works with innovation and imagination."

► **Nov. 29-Dec. 14**

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For details on these events and full listing of activities > unlv.edu/calendar



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THE COURSE

HON 410: THE HISTORY OF LAS VEGAS

BY REN MCMULLIN

For anyone who thinks that Las Vegas history started with Bugsy Siegel, historian and associate professor Michael Green has a simple retort: “Remember the mobster’s initials.”

From organized crime and the rise of corporate casinos to atomic testing and booming populations, Green’s Honors 410 class offers students a deeper understanding of this unique, occasionally scandalous, and iconic city.

THE TEACHER

Green, who created the course, is a double UNLV alum and a nearly life-long Vegas local. “My family moved here in 1967,” he says. “My father was a dealer at the Stardust Hotel, which is depicted in the movie *Casino*, and was personally fired by the character played by Robert De Niro.”

When he was a newspaper reporter, someone remarked that Green was a true expert on the history of Las Vegas. “I said, ‘Well, when you have a monopoly, you might as well take advantage of it,’” he recalls.

THE ASSIGNMENTS

Students visit the Atomic Testing Museum, Mob Museum, and Clark County Museum, and also explore the many resources in UNLV Special Collections & Archives. The main research project is open-ended, allowing students to tailor the topics to their interests. A business student might explore the history of local real estate, while a life sciences major could examine environmental changes in the region.

SKILLS FOR ANY CAREER

Green points out that history plays a role in every industry – from a patient’s medical history for healthcare professionals to stock market history for financial planners. “If you want work and life skills, you take the liberal arts, you take history,” Green says. “You learn how to find out things and



THE READING LIST

There’s no shortage of films and books set in Las Vegas, but if you want the real story behind the glitz, Green recommends:

- ▶ **Doom Towns: The People and Landscapes of Atomic Testing, A Graphic History** by UNLV history professor Andy Kirk
- ▶ **The Money and the Power: The Making of Las Vegas and Its Hold on America** by Sally Denton and Roger Morris
- ▶ **Sun, Sin & Suburbia: The History of Modern Las Vegas** by Geoff Schumacher
- ▶ **Bright Light City: Las Vegas in Popular Culture** by Larry Gragg
- ▶ **Reno, Las Vegas, and the Strip: A Tale of Three Cities** by the late history professor Eugene P. Moehring

And, of course, there are Green’s own books: *Nevada: A History of the Silver State* and *Las Vegas: A Centennial History*.

how to gather a lot of information in a short period of time.”

MEETING THE HISTORY MAKERS

Over the years teaching this class, Green

has invited notable guest speakers, including senators, governors, and mayors – but “no mobsters,” he clarifies. “The history here is recent enough that some of the newsmakers are still around.”

In spring 1948, P.O. Silvagni receives the deed for the North Second Street lot – the site of the old city jail – he bought at auction as “some of the old timers” who attended the city’s first land auction in 1905 look on, according to the records in UNLV Special Collections & Archives. A field trip to the archives is a popular part of the History of Las Vegas class.

PHOTO: UNLV SPECIAL COLLECTIONS & ARCHIVES



Making Less of an Impact

Chill vibes and a chance to help conservation efforts have students flocking to UNLV's Birding and Conservation Club.

BY BETH DEBOUCK

For the 20-plus members of UNLV's Birding and Conservation Club, the saying "birds of a feather" is more than an idiom. The club is a way for students, faculty, staff, or even community members to "unplug," connect with nature, and practice conservation alongside others who share a similar enthusiasm for avian observation.

The club's conservation projects have included revegetating areas at

Corn Creek in the Desert National Wildlife Refuge with native plants and creating a pollinator garden located north of Beam Music Center. But the club's most recent and biggest initiative, however, was about creating less of an impact on campus.

In the spring, the club performed a bird window collision survey. In the United States, 1 billion to 3.5 billion birds die annually from such collisions. During monthly campus bird walks, members collected evidence of dead

birds around buildings or imprints on windows. They identified three significant architectural offenders: the William D. Carlson Education Building (77 collisions), Beverly Rogers Literature and Law Building (28 collisions), and Student Recreation and Wellness Center (23 collisions).

After submitting the findings to administrators, and with the help of a grant from Red Rock Audubon, UNLV's Facilities Management began installing special anti-bird collision decals to windows in September.

Franklin Ung, a fourth-year biology student and the club's president, has led a series of conservation initiatives both on and off campus. "Being in this club allowed me to notice all the things that we are doing to affect it, and made me conscious of how much [harm] we're actually doing to the environment," says Ung.

UNLV's Birding and Conservation Club, including Vice President Paeja Salgado (center) and President Franklin Ugh (right), host monthly birding walks on campus and participate in conservation initiatives around the Las Vegas Valley.

Although many members are School of Life Sciences students, the club is open to all majors. Aaron Smith, a cybersecurity major from Menifee, California, says, "People I've met through birding and this club come from all walks of life, all sorts of careers and backgrounds, and are all necessary and important to further the cause of conservation. Protecting wildlife for the next generations is something we can all be involved in."

AN OASIS FOR MIGRATORY BIRDS

The Maryland Parkway campus provides a waystop for migrating birds during the spring and fall seasons. The 350-acre campus — home to the Xeric Garden and recognized as a Tree Campus USA — supports native and migrating birds by providing shelter, food, and water.

It's also why UNLV is considered a

"hotspot" for local birders.

"Birding around UNLV is always a great experience and showcases more species diversity than one might think," says Smith. "A constant star on just about every bird walk that always gets a big reaction is the Cooper's hawk. We had several sightings of a nesting pair in the spring semester, and I'm hoping to see them again soon."

Other commonly observed varieties include yellow-rumped warblers, finches, sparrows, mockingbirds, hummingbirds, and brown-headed cowbirds.

A 'TWEET'-WORTHY ACCOMPLISHMENT

David Zechman, a scheduler for the School of Music, sits at the top of the pecking order when it comes to bird identification on campus.

"In the three years I've been on campus,

I have been fortunate to identify 90 different bird species on my lunch hour," says Zechman, who is acknowledged as the "top birder" at UNLV on eBird.org. "Anyone in the world can check the website to see what birds are being reported in any region, country, city, or specific hotspot."

Zechman's interest in birding took flight in 2000, while taking his dachshunds for a walk in North Las Vegas' Craig Ranch Park. He became curious about two birds he saw but couldn't identify without research: black-crowned night herons and common mergansers.

"Everyone has different joys, experiences, and motivations for birding. I enjoy watching the behavior, relationships, and interconnectedness of wildlife — birds, insects, plants, and others. The physical and mental health benefits are the icing on the cake."



After conducting a bird collision survey on buildings and gaining a grant from the Red Rock Audubon, the Birding and Conservation Club worked with UNLV Facilities to install special decals on windows to curtail the problem.

SPARKING JOY

Most birders can name their "spark" bird, an initial sighting that introduced them to a new hobby. Here, members of the UNLV Birding and Conservation Club share theirs.

The Birder:
Paeja Salgado, biology major

The Spark Bird: Rock pigeon. "While it is a rather 'boring' and common bird, my casual observations of pigeons are what kickstarted my birding journey."

The Flock: She likens birding to a meditation experience: "What I enjoy most about birding is how relaxing and freeing it can feel. At the end of the day, we are a collection of people who have a strong interest in birds, and it's nice being able to explore that hobby with others."



The Birder:
Aaron Smith, cybersecurity major

The Spark Bird: Mourning dove, for its gentle coos.

The Flock: "I'm not knowledgeable about the particulars of every species I see, but I still enjoy getting out in nature and spotting either familiar birds or some that are new to me. As long as you're willing to listen, others you meet through birding will always be excited to share interesting facts and stories about birds and other wildlife."



The Birder:
Franklin Ung, biology major

The Spark Bird: Green-tailed towhee, a songbird identified by its reddish-brown cap, a gray head and breast, and bright greenish-yellow wings, back, and tail. "I saw that bird as my first kind of, like, favorite forever," he says, adding that it was at that moment when he knew he wanted a career in ecology.

The Flock: "Especially during the bird watches, you kind of lose all your stress. ... [It's] an outlet to decompress and to kind of not think about so many things all at once."



PHOTOS: BECCA SCHWARTZ; ADOBE STOCK (ILLUSTRATIONS)

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Sports



UNLV quarterback Anthony Colandrea (10) had 423 combined rushing and passing yards in the Rebels' wild 51-48 Homecoming win over Air Force on Oct. 11 at Allegiant Stadium.

REBELS CONTINUE TO SOAR ON GRIDIRON

For the alumni contingent that packed Allegiant Stadium for the 2025 Homecoming Game against Air Force on Oct. 11, the experience had to feel a bit surreal. Here was their football program overcoming five different deficits — including three in the fourth quarter alone — to pull out a wild 51-48 victory.

It was a victory that wasn't secured until quarterback Anthony Colandrea capped a sensational day with a 19-yard touchdown run with 36 seconds to play — and until Air Force subsequently missed a chip-shot, game-tying field goal as time expired. A victory that pushed the Rebels' 2025 record to 6-0, the best start since the school started playing major college football in 1978. A victory that would've been far beyond the grasp of previous

teams — the ones that struggled mightily when the vast majority of alumni in attendance were in school.

Ah, but times, they are a-changing. The UNLV football team, once a perennial punching bag, is now a formidable force. The proof:

- A 26-8 record from the start of the 2023 season through the victory over Air Force.
- Back-to-back Mountain West Conference Championship Game appearances.
- Back-to-back bowl games for the first time in school history (on the verge of being three in a row).
- First-ever appearance in the Top 25 media, coaches, and College Football Playoff polls.

Perhaps the most significant element of the football program's remarkable turnaround? Rebels fans no longer have only pie-in-the-sky hope for success but legitimate expectations. Expectations that no matter the deficit — or, in the case of the Air Force game, deficits — victory is attainable.

Indeed, the culture of winning that former head coach Barry Odom established — and current coach Dan Mullen continues to cultivate — is real. It's also infectious.

The best part? There's still plenty of room on this bandwagon, one that shows no signs of slowing down.

— Matt Jacob

Playing By a New Set of Rules

The transfer portal and NIL issues have sent college athletics into an on-the-fly industry makeover. Three UNLV coaches share their thoughts about competing on a new – and still-developing – playing field. **By Matt Jacob**



LINDY LA ROCQUE

UNLV women's basketball coach since 2020-21 season

Career record: 128-30 (all at UNLV)

Highlights: Four-time regular-season Mountain West Conference champions (2021-24); three-time Mountain West Conference Tournament champions (2022-24); three NCAA Tournament appearances (2022-24); two-time Mountain West Coach of the Year (2022, 2024)



DAN MULLEN

UNLV football coach (first season)

Career record: 103-61 in 13 seasons at Mississippi State (2009-17) and Florida (2018-21)

Highlights: Maxwell Club National Coach of the Year (2014); SEC Coach of the Year (2014); 7-3 record in bowl games; coached 76 players who were selected in the NFL Draft



JOSH PASTNER

UNLV men's basketball coach (first season)

Career record: 276-187 in 14 seasons at Memphis (2009-15) and Georgia Tech (2016-23)

Highlights: Two-time Conference USA regular-season champions (2012-13); three-time Conference USA Tournament champions (2011-13); ACC Tournament champions (2021); five NCAA Tournament appearances; two-time conference Coach of the Year (Conference USA in 2013, ACC in 2017)

Focus on the things you can control; forget about the rest. College coaches have been imparting this message to players for generations.

Recently, though, modern-day coaches have had to flip the script, applying that mantra to themselves.

And it's all because the rigid black-and-white rulebook that governed college athletics for more than a century has been cast aside for an updated version that's often vague, constantly evolving, and written in various shades of erasable gray ink.

For instance, the rule that required scholarship athletes to sit out a full year of competition if they transferred to another university – a rule designed, in part, to prevent college athletics' version of free agency? Obliterated.

Thanks to the advent of the transfer portal, student-athletes can theoretically play for four different schools in four successive years (if not more).

And the rule that flatly prohibited schools or boosters from compensating players – the one that brought severe sanctions to those who violated it? Also gone. Now it's not only legal to pay student-athletes above (rather than under) the table, but those athletes can sell themselves to the highest bidder.

These are the most significant among many changes that have completely altered the aesthetic of collegiate athletics in just the past five years.

Considering the college coaching community is, by nature, averse to change, this sudden jolt has felt more like an 8.0-magnitude earthquake. So much so that several iconic coaches have chosen to hang up their whistles rather than adapt. (Two of the biggest names to walk away: Alabama football coach Nick Saban and Duke men's basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski.)

The rest – including the 14 coaches who lead UNLV's 17 Division I athletics programs? Well, they've been repeating their own words on a seemingly never-ending loop: Focus on what you can control; forget about the rest.

"My thing is you can't look at the glass as half-empty; you have to look at it as overflowing," says new Runnin' Rebels head coach Josh Pastner, who took over the program in March after previous head coaching stints at Memphis and Georgia Tech. "What I mean by that is: This is the deal now. These are the rules we're all playing by.

"So from my viewpoint as a coach, if you have any negative feelings, if you're overly frustrated, if you're going to complain about it, you're just going to get left behind."

Sharing a similar perspective? Pastner's UNLV counterpart, women's basketball head coach Lindy La Rocque.

"I've told a lot of people that my personal opinion of how the new model is working and where things are going doesn't really matter," says La Rocque, who is embarking on her fifth season leading the Lady Rebels. "This is what's happening, and you either have to figure it out, adapt, and make it part of your strategy, or you probably need to find another line of work. Because one thing we've learned throughout history is that we never go backward."

To shed light on how they're navigating these new and still somewhat murky waters, we chatted with Pastner, La Rocque, and new UNLV football coach Dan Mullen to learn how they're adapting to a new normal.

"Just because student-athletes are getting paid does not change the standards that we're going to hold them to or how we're going to coach them. Maybe our players – our roster – will change yearly. But our standards and our culture won't change."

Josh Pastner
UNLV men's basketball coach

PHOTOS: LUCAS PELTIER

» **Coach Mullen, prior to taking** the UNLV job in December, you spent three years as an ESPN commentator. With all the dramatic changes in college athletics, was there any hesitation to get back into coaching?

Mullen: There was a little bit, which is one reason why I spent the last few years doing TV – I wanted to let some things sort out and see how [the new system] was working. Doing the ESPN stuff gave me a chance to assess it from a 30,000-foot viewpoint rather than having to deal with it on a daily basis.

That helped me develop an understanding of the different game that I would be getting back into. And by "different game" I don't mean the one that you play on Saturdays or when you're on the practice field; that's still the same. I mean you have to run your program differently than you did in the past.

» **Doesn't this new model** add another layer to the challenges of managing student-athletes while developing a program's culture? In other words, has the job gotten a lot more difficult?

Pastner: Are there challenges we didn't have to deal with before? You're darn right there are. Are there some frustrations? Of course. But I'm one who believes there are certain things about the new model that make college athletics better.

Just because student-athletes are getting paid does not change the standards that we're going to hold them to or how we're going to coach them. Maybe our players – our roster – will change yearly. But our standards and our culture won't change. And if you don't want to be coached hard and held accountable, then this isn't the place for you.

La Rocque: I view myself as an educator, which is part of being a coach. So to me, this isn't any different than a teacher having to learn new technologies to reach their students. My mindset is you can continue to complain about it and get left behind, or you can figure it out and make [the new system] work for you.

The simple fact is the horse is out of the barn. So you better get on it before it runs away – or start chasing a different animal.

» **Change is always unsettling** and transition periods are hard. But what positives do you see from a coach's perspective?

La Rocque: I believe there are positives in pretty much everything. For example, the transfer portal. I think the intent is to allow our young athletes the chance to find where they feel is the right place for them. That's a positive.

There's also a much shorter recruitment period now, which is positive from a time standpoint — but it also can be risky. You have to do a lot of information gathering and research in a three-week window when you used to have three months, if not three years.

Pastner: I love that you're not wasting time anymore. And the great thing about the transfer portal is the players are older; they're 20, 21, 22 and have experience being part of a college program. Not only do you have tape on them playing at the college level, but they understand how a college system works and what you have to do to be successful.

When you're dealing with younger players — especially freshmen — they can get overwhelmed because everything is coming at them from different directions. When you recruit a player from the portal, they've been through all that. They understand about taking care of their bodies, about managing their time and how to juggle academic and basketball responsibilities.

Mullen: I also think the transfer portal can be very positive. For one thing, you can fix your program quicker if you make a mistake in recruiting.

The troubling part is how certain things have been set up.

The fact football's three-week transfer window [in winter] had started in December instead of January — which aligns more with a university's calendar — made no sense. Also, the lifespan of a team is one year, January to January. So I personally didn't care for the second portal window in the spring, which they recently did away with — even though I readily admit that the spring window actually helped us this year.

Still, I believe what's good for our game is to have one window in January, which is how it's going to be moving forward. This way our student-athletes understand when

they sign with a school that it's a [minimum] commitment of exactly one year.

How players are being paid also needs to be looked at. As originally designed, players could only profit from their name, image, and likeness (NIL). The reality is — and everyone knew it would end up this way — that it's a pay-for-play model. That leads to a lot of discrepancy and imbalance, and I don't love that.

Pastner: At some point, there has to be some uniformity and [governance]. From where I sit, there are only two ways to go about it: Either the student-athletes become university employees, or there have to be federal regulations established.

» **On paying players:** How do you manage this new dynamic in your program and keep jealousy, resentments, and/or pettiness from infiltrating your locker room?

Pastner: I like to be very up front with players: "Hey guys, let's talk about the elephant in the room. You all know that everyone is getting paid at different levels, but when the ball is tipped, my loyalty is to UNLV. I'm putting the best players on the floor to win the game. And before that, we're going to coach you as hard as possible to get you to be the best you can be."

La Rocque: Our young people are not naive to which of their teammates might be making more money — especially once things go public. But we try hard to teach them how to be adults in this financial space. Because out in the real world, not all salaries are equal.

Mullen: Listen, if our guys want to go play in the NFL, they better get used to that. I can go right down the street to the Las Vegas Raiders' complex, and they're all making different amounts of money.

La Rocque: Part of my approach also has been, "To whom much is given, much is expected." That's one way I can try to protect the culture: If you have been given a major blessing, then the expectation is going to be different for you — as it is in professional sports, as it is in life.

Pastner: You also can't be afraid of confrontation and telling your guys the truth.

All of that is part of the old landscape, too. Just because there's now a financial



Meadow Roland, shown here with the Mountain West Conference championship trophy after a win over Boise State at Cox Pavilion in February, is a returning sophomore for the Lady Rebels this season.

component involved, you still have to find the guys who deep down inside are driven to improve, who are about winning, and who want to be pushed and coached hard to achieve both goals.

In the end, when the guys get on the floor, we're not concerned about the money thing. We're coaching them every day in practice like it's Game 7 of the NBA Finals.

» **Not so long ago,** players recruited out of high school stuck around for three or four years. That gave fans the chance to develop connections to their favorites — an element that has been lost in the one-and-done

era. So how do you build and sustain a rabid fan base today?

Pastner: That is one of the downsides of the transfer portal — fans having to relearn their team every single year in college athletics. The flip side is, because of social media, people can pick up their phones and instantly find information about new players and learn about their personalities.

Mullen: That's where you encourage your fan base to become more attached to the program.

Now, one part that is going to be difficult — and we're going to see this become more of a thing the further down the road we get — is how players are viewed by fans and the university in a historical context. For instance, here at UNLV, Randall Cunningham is a Rebel through and through. Tim Tebow is a Florida Gator through and through. Now you're going to start seeing fans say things like, "Man, he was awesome for us! But he was only here for two years."

So when it comes to fan connections, it's going to be less of a year-to-year issue and more about how fans will have fewer historical ties to all-time greats.

La Rocque: This is where I believe women's sports finds its niche, with fans having an investment in the stories of individual players. That is a huge piece of how we get fans in the stands — and get them to come back and bring their friends.

But it's also important to turn the focus back to the whole program. Because we are a program that has won [conference] championships, we have this platform for our individual players to stand out.

» **To that point,** in the end, winning solves everything, doesn't it?

La Rocque: You would think so! And, for us, that's the part we've tried to control. Whether it's player retention or building the fan base, we want people around our program who value winning — on the court and in society.

The reality is not everyone shares that same mindset. So there will be players who [prioritize] something else, and that's OK. It just gives us an opportunity to find other young women who do value what we value.



TWO BONUS QUESTIONS FOR ATHLETICS DIRECTOR ERICK HARPER

How much has UNLV's brand, coupled with the fact that Las Vegas has become a burgeoning sports town in the last decade, helped when it comes time to hire a new coach?

Harper: The four letters — UNLV — are as strong as ever. And honestly, we have the early Tark [Jerry Tarkanian] days to thank for that. It's still the main reason why UNLV is a brand that everybody knows and understands. Now, it's been hotter in the last few years because of [our resurgence in] football and because of Allegiant Stadium. But those four letters mean a lot to Rebel followers.

One of the very neat things about UNLV are those last two letters: Las Vegas. Obviously, we have 40 million-plus tourists a year coming through here, but in general, there are always a lot of eyeballs on this city. And let's face it, most people want to go where there's energy, vibrancy, and passion, and we have that here.

When you're at a UNLV soccer or baseball game and you can look out and see the Sphere and see the High Roller ... these backdrops are as impressive as any college campus can offer in the entire country.

Plus, this is a pretty doggone good place to live.

In the past year, UNLV has turned down overtures to leave the Mountain West Conference for the revamped Pac-12. What went into the decision to say "no"?

Harper: When it comes to conference realignment, I'm someone who looks at and considers everything — short term and long term — before ultimately determining what's best for us. And based on the current landscape, we felt the best decision was to stay in the Mountain West.

For one thing, the Pac-12 is not what the Pac-12 once was. It's the same logo, but without USC, UCLA, Oregon, Washington, Utah — it's not the same conference. And that's no disrespect to those schools that are in the Pac-12 right now.

Also, there's going to be another conference realignment — everybody knows that. What that's going to look like, who knows? If anyone tells you they know exactly how everything is going to shake out, they're absolutely full of it. The good news for us is that we no longer have to worry about paying an exit fee if we receive an offer to join a power conference.

For now — and as I've said many times when the topic of conference realignment comes up — we simply have to continue being the best possible UNLV that we can be. And wherever things fall, they fall.

Taking the Bite Out of Summer Pests

From ballot proposals to research on pesticide resistance, one UNLV lab explores what to do when bugs do more than bug you.

BY KEYONNA SUMMERS

This summer gave Las Vegas something besides the heat to complain about: mosquitoes. Millions of the biting bugs swarmed the usually mosquito-free Las Vegas Valley.

As the pesky pests multiplied at parks, golf courses, and backyards, the UNLV Parasitology and Vector Biology (PARAVEC) Lab stepped up to better understand why there was such an uptick.

Climate change is one contributing factor, said lab leader Louisa Messenger, a public health professor and medical entomologist specializing in the prevention of insect-borne tropical diseases. “Mosquito season, which typically lasts from late spring to October, has been lengthening,” she said, “which means even more potential for them to spread West Nile, dengue, Zika, or other viruses.”

The lab is taking a multipronged approach to its research:

- ▶ Tracking mosquito species and migration patterns from other parts of the country and globe to Las Vegas.
- ▶ Tracing the genetic origins and evolution of mosquito-borne viruses.

- ▶ Surveying to monitor the increase in the critters.
- ▶ Working to develop pesticides or other abatement measures.
- ▶ Helping residents identify insects that are lurking in their homes.
- ▶ Running a “citizen scientist” program where locals can collect samples in their own neighborhoods for analysis.

COURTING PUBLIC OPINION

Clark County’s continual growth over the past decade means more neighborhoods with artificial lakes, irrigated grass, and poorly drained landscaping, which can create mosquito breeding hotspots. And while some species barely travel the length of a football field in their lifetime, others can travel miles, making pest control an uphill battle as the region continues to sprawl.

To get a handle on the issue, the PARAVEC Lab launched a survey in

May that explores how locals perceive the mosquito risk — and what they’d support in terms of solutions.

From mosquito traps and municipal insecticide sprays to water treatments that kill mosquitoes before they become biting adults or possibly even releasing genetically modified mosquitoes to reduce the population, the survey solicits feedback that could be used to establish an integrated, multipronged mosquito control program.

“We’re mapping responses by ZIP code to identify areas where residents see mosquitoes as a serious issue,” explained Analisa Ramirez, an environmental and global health graduate student and project lead. “It’s been eye-opening to see how concerns vary depending on where people live.”

So far, the data reveals that most residents want action. And they’re willing to support ballot proposals to

expand mosquito control measures, especially when they understand the risks associated with increased insect intrusion. The survey addresses environmental and health concerns by explaining the mechanics of the various prevention methods.

INSECTICIDE RESISTANCE

While government-led, community-wide solutions for mosquito reduction are important, the research team says creating avenues for private abatement is just as crucial. And a clue may lie in the PARAVEC Lab’s temperature-regulated refrigerator, where rows of mosquitoes are bred, tested, and analyzed.

Here, the team stores mosquitoes used to test the effectiveness of first-line insecticides that are most commonly used by private businesses and homeowners throughout the valley. The lab-grown control specimens are



compared with mosquitoes collected from four regions of Clark County, including Henderson and Summerlin, that are seeing higher activity among mosquitoes carrying West Nile virus.

Researchers say the results are alarming.

It takes more than 100 times the standard dose of typical commercially available insecticides to kill Southern Nevada mosquitoes than in other areas. In some of the UNLV researchers’ tests, Las Vegas mosquitoes survived 48 hours after exposure to doses that would normally kill in 40 minutes.

“It’s clear that they are highly resistant to certain chemicals or pesticides we use,” shared doctoral student Trishan Wickramasinghe, as he inspected the mosquitoes in the netted-cloth cages. “With the survey data and insecticide research, all of our efforts come together to create a broader picture of what’s going on — helping us determine how to approach each location individually, using insecticides tailored to the specific needs of each area.”

Meanwhile, the team is also trying to

UNLV professor Louisa Messenger, left, and student intern Truong Phan inspect a petri dish full of mosquitos in the UNLV Parasitology and Vector Biology Lab. The lab tracks the origin and evolution of mosquito-borne viruses in Las Vegas.



PHOTOS: BECCA SCHWARTZ

Louisa Messenger is changing the world.



Professor Messenger is on a mission to prevent deadly diseases like West Nile and Chagas disease.

She and her team develop and evaluate novel, innovative methods to kill mosquitoes, or at least prevent them from biting humans and transmitting deadly diseases.

Learn about research happening at the mosquito lab at UNLV:



UNLV | SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH

RECRUITING **WORLD CHANGERS**

Louisa Messenger, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor UNLV
School of Public Health



"We're mapping responses by ZIP code to identify areas where residents see mosquitoes as a serious issue. It's been eye-opening to see how concerns vary depending on where people live."

Analisa Ramirez
Environmental and global health graduate student, pictured on right with lab intern Aditri Phabhu

identify new chemicals, but it's not easy. "We're really limited in the number of insecticides that are safe for human use, cheap, and effective," added Messenger. "It takes about 20 years and a lot of investment to make new chemicals, so we want to preserve the efficacy of the ones we have."

CITIZEN SCIENCE AND YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Established in 2022, the PARAVEC Lab isn't just a research hub – it's also a training ground for laypeople bitten by the science bug. The lab partnered with the Southern Nevada Health District to empower citizen scientists – individuals without formal training in entomology – to collect water samples from mosquito breeding sites, which the lab can then screen for further analysis.

Children as young as grade-school age through high school tend to be the program's biggest fans. And collecting mosquito larvae from rain puddles, park ponds, and backyard fountains often turns into a fun family activity, show-and-tell classroom showcase, or science project.

Last year, the lab hosted an exhibition at the Nevada State Museum, where kids had the opportunity to learn about medical entomology and to get cuddly with seashell-sized cockroaches.

"It's a good learning opportunity for kids to get into science. While adults often get antsy around insects, kids tend to love bugs," Messenger added. "We're really interested in being able to mobilize members of the community."

LOOKING FORWARD: A SMARTER APPROACH

As Southern Nevada continues to reshape with climate change, urban development, and more, UNLV's mosquito researchers know that their work is only just beginning.

Through genetic tracking, resistance testing, education, and data surveillance, the lab is laying the groundwork for not only a regional abatement program but a long-term global solution: Contributing to the eventual development of vaccines that tamp down the spread of West Nile, malaria, and other mosquito-borne viruses.



"Las Vegas is like an island in the desert – and that gives us a unique opportunity," Messenger shares. "We're isolated enough that we're able to do good mosquito control tailored to our town and also incorporate lessons learned from around the world."

In other words, UNLV's mosquito research isn't just about bugs – it's about building a healthier, smarter, and more connected Southern Nevada. While the buzz around mosquitoes is growing, these scientists are working to take the bite out of the story.

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REBELS



MAKE IT



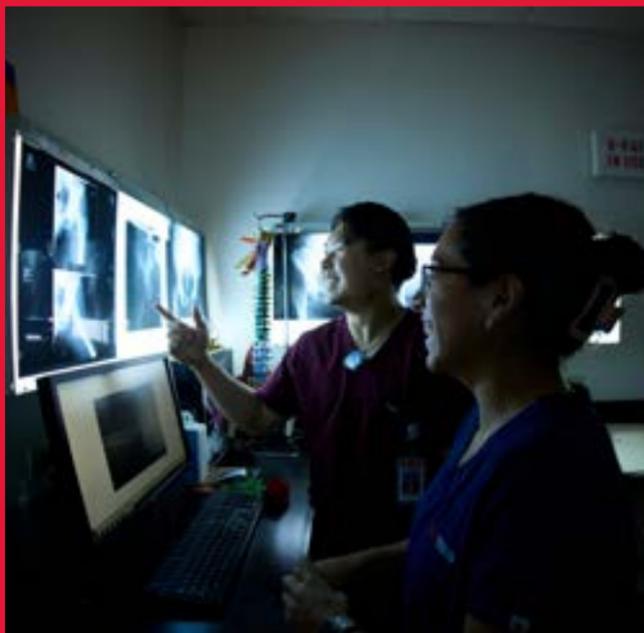
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Research

CAREER-DEFINING AWARD

In August, Chandrabali Bhattacharya was named UNLV's first recipient of an early stage investigator (R35 MIRA) award from the National Institute of General Medical Sciences. The five-year, \$1.88 million grant will allow her to continue research on innovative lipid nanoparticle platforms for targeted mRNA delivery.

to different places in the body, and after testing a particular composition of material, we found that it's routing to the pancreas."

The team had figured out that the mechanism through which these nanoparticles go to the pancreas is through the cell surface Vitamin D receptors – essentially the delivery driver of the nanoparticle. Vitamin D receptors are widely distributed throughout the body, but only a few are on the surface of cells. Leveraging that receptor helped route it to specific parts of the body, eventually leading to the pancreas.

"One of the most exciting aspects of this research is its ability to push mRNA therapeutics beyond the liver, expanding treatment options for diseases that haven't been easily addressed with current delivery technologies," Isaac said.

He plans to continue working in biopharmaceuticals, creating next-generation drug delivery platforms.

"I hope this work inspires further efforts in precision nanomedicine, where we can improve the safety of our treatments and enhance our tolerance for them," he said.

The researchers are pursuing further avenues for organ-specific drug delivery to other parts of the body. And both Bhattacharya and Isaac are working with UNLV's Office of Economic Development to commercialize the findings.

PUBLICATION DETAILS

"Reengineering Endogenous Targeting Lipid Nanoparticles (ENDO) for Systemic Delivery of mRNA to Pancreas" was published on June 12, in the journal *Advanced Materials*. Authors come from UNLV. In addition to Bhattacharya and Isaac, co-authors include Luv Patel, Nguyen Tran, Amarnath Singam, DongSoo Yun, Prasun Guha, and Seungman Park.



Targeting the Pancreas

"This research has given us a blueprint for the future of medicine."

Chandrabali Bhattacharya
Biochemistry professor

UNLV research team develops mRNA cocktail for the pancreas, allowing for more effective treatment for cancer and diabetes.

BY JOHNNY DOMOL

A patented breakthrough from UNLV researchers offers promise for patients with diabetes, cancer, and other diseases for the difficult-to-reach pancreas.

The team of chemical biologists detailed a way to selectively route mRNA to the pancreas by using the body's own endogenous pathways – the systems responsible for moving materials through the body.

"Until today, there has been no material that can be injected intravenously that automatically goes to the pancreas with 99% selectivity, an organ previously inaccessible to intravenous treatment," said biochemistry professor and research lead Chandrabali Bhattacharya.

"It is a colossal stepping stone and foundational block for so much more. This research has given us a blueprint for the future of medicine."

INNOVATIVE TREATMENT WITH "PINPOINT DELIVERY"

Most current medication options target cell receptors throughout the body – rather than specific organs – so very small amounts of administered drugs reach the desired location. Pinpointing delivery can reduce the likelihood of an immune response to the treatment or minimize side effects. It also may reduce long-term treatment costs, especially for diabetes.

"Traditional insulin therapy requires lifelong management with recurring expenses," said Ivan Isaac, a graduate researcher and first author on the study. "In contrast, mRNA therapies could slow down the loss of insulin, possibly reducing or reversing the disease condition with fewer routine injections."

UNLV's solution is made possible through the patented ENDO, or Endogenous Targeting Lipid Nanoparticles, the research team's platform for delivering mRNA to the pancreas.

"We wanted to see how endogenous material, such as Vitamin D, would change the nanoparticles carrying mRNA and interact with the body's pathways," said Bhattacharya. "These systems can take the particles

PHOTOS: JOSH HAWKINS

dream

on

Introducing the centerpiece of UNLV's Immersive Learning Initiative: **DREAMSCAPE LEARN** leverages extended reality technologies to add another tool to the academic toolbox.

BY MATT JACOB;

PHOTOS BY JOSH HAWKINS;

the floor rumbles beneath your feet. A gust of “wind” blows across your face. You reach for a lit torch that you know is not really there ... except it is. Then, as the walls of the *Indiana Jones*-like cave close in on you, you reach for a lever that opens a passageway — a lever that, like the torch, isn't really there ... except it is.

Welcome to Dreamscape Learn, an innovative 4,000-square-foot space in Lied Library. It was designed to supplement traditional learning methods — textbooks, classroom lectures, group projects — with mindblowing modern technology. And it's the shiniest, most visible part of a much bigger effort: UNLV's immersive learning initiatives.

The overarching idea: Give today's students a new way to engage with coursework through a platform that is familiar to them.



dream

“Today’s students grew up with cell phones and tablets in their hands,” says Aundrea Frahm, UNLV’s inaugural director of immersive learning. “And as Generation Alpha rises, many of them will have been exposed to screens from just a few months old. This is a cultural shift in how people grow up and engage with the world — students are used to learning, exploring, and engaging through a screen that teaches, shows, and speaks to them.”

Dreamscape Learn uses extended reality — an umbrella term that encompasses virtual (VR), augmented (AR), and mixed (MR) reality — to bring curriculum to life. It is highlighted by a 16-seat immersive classroom. Each desk and chair has virtual reality headsets and built-in haptics that allow students to feel things like movement and wind.

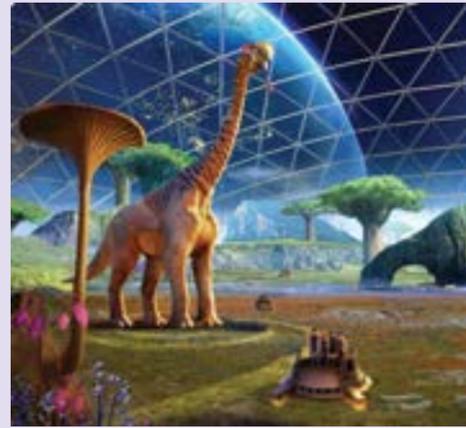
Here, faculty can lead students through foundational science concepts in the Alien Zoo Module, and explore environments ranging from the Colorado River to the Oval Office to the moon. An art history and architecture experience takes students to the nearly 1,500-year-old Hagia Sophia in Istanbul.

“Many of our students, along with myself, have never been to Turkey and may never visit in our lives,” Frahm says. “But through this technology, we’re able to learn about the history and architecture of the Hagia Sophia almost as if we were there.”

{ AN EXPERIENCE FOR THE SENSES }

A few steps from the classroom is a space that’s been dubbed the “free-roam pod.” At first glance, it resembles a slightly oversized steel boxing ring — at least until strapping on a VR headset and the accompanying feet and hand trackers. Once small groups gear up and nine supercharged computers on the other side of the wall power up, the mesmerizing virtual adventure begins.

Currently, the free-roam pod has two applications: Alien Zoo (think *Jurassic Park*) and The Curse of the Lost Pearl



MYLES LUM HONORS COLLEGE



Related class: Honors English 100 (Rhetoric)

Dreamscape Learn application: Alien Zoo

How the Alien Zoo experience applies to rhetoric: The goal of the class is to help students better understand the five elements of the rhetorical situation — which are author, audience, exigence, subject matter, and purpose — and how all these pieces move together. This VR experience will be a fun way to jump-start that conversation, so that by the time we get to our different readings and essays, they’re already familiar with rhetorical concepts and can better unpack them.

Working VR experience into the curriculum: I want to prevent students from only seeing this as a fun exercise — even though it is; it’s a blast. But it’s important to ask: What exactly did we learn?

We can answer that through a reflective writing piece and in-class discussions where we go back to [the experience] and say, “OK, yes there’s this creature that walks with you, but then there’s this different creature that comes up to you. What emotions do you think the authors of this experience were trying to evoke? And why those particular emotions at that point?”

I want students to explain their way through it so that later in the semester when we’re doing readings, they might think, “OK, why are they bringing up this particular story or moment right here in this section of the essay? It’s not by accident. Just like those interactions in Dreamscape weren’t accidental, neither is this text.”

Keeping the curriculum relevant: In the Honors College, professors are consistently encouraged to find innovative ways to offer familiar concepts to our students so that they’re better able to understand and apply the materials. This is a completely new frontier, and there are going to be a lot of different types of pioneering. Some things will be successful, and some won’t — but, hey, that’s what learning is about.

I mainly see VR as a fun, intriguing, different way for us to better appreciate our actual, physical realities. It’s a highlighter to what life is; it’s not life itself.



on



UNLV’s new Dreamscape Learn facility adapts creativity from the movie and theme park industries to improve students’ learning, particularly in challenging STEM subjects. **Above right:** In the free-roam space open to all students, small groups must work together to accomplish tasks. **Bottom:** Aundrea Frahm, director of immersive learning, explains the VR technology to students in the 16-seat classroom space.



(think *Indiana Jones*). Both last roughly 15 minutes and offer the kind of virtual thrill ride one might encounter at Disneyland — but with an educational component. And not just for students in such tech-focused majors as computer science or entertainment engineering and design.

Just ask Myles Lum. During the fall semester, the professor-in-residence is incorporating Alien Zoo into his Honors 100 English class on rhetoric.

“I’m sure a lot of people are thinking, ‘Rhetoric and virtual reality? How in the world are these two things connected?’” Lum says. “But I actually believe rhetoric relates to all fields, in that all fields need to figure out how to best communicate to varying audiences.

“I’m envisioning this experience just like studying any text, movie, song, political debate on TV, family dinner conversation — literally any other form of communication students witness in their day-to-day lives.”

Hospitality professor Marta Soligo is immersing her Tourism & Society students in the architecturally stunning Hagia Sophia module so they better grasp the concept of heritage — and the complexities specific to a site that evolved in its use.

“The class is rooted in the sociology of tourism,” says Soligo, a sociologist who also serves as the director of tourism research for the UNLV Tourism Development, Diversification, and Resiliency Initiative. “Among the sociological cases of contested heritage, the Hagia Sophia is a prominent example, due to its complex history as a Christian church, a mosque, and a museum.

“Now through Dreamscape, which will supplement classroom discussions and theories, I have a way to show students that what they learn in the classroom actually exists out there in the world.”

Students in Dreamscape Learn can build their resumes with virtual reality content development skills while helping professors make curricula more engaging and interactive.

{
THE LONG-TERM
STRATEGY
}

While the Dreamscape facility serves as a high-profile hub, UNLV’s investment in immersive learning extends well beyond the space. The university is creating flexible immersive learning spaces throughout campus to support a wide range of disciplines and teaching styles. These environments — which Frahm refers to as “agnostic VR classrooms” — give faculty access to a variety of extended reality tools and content, allowing them to tailor experiences directly to their curriculum.

Applications range from career readiness tools that help students practice interviews and presentation skills, to advanced programs in such fields as anatomy where learners can virtually examine the human body in detail. Immersive technology also enables engineering students to view and interact with 3D Building Information Models (BIMs) in collaborative settings.

“Electrical engineering leaders working in the commercial industry are actually using this VR technology right now,” Frahm says. “General contractors will have everyone put on headsets and ‘walk the job’ in BIM and take notes before the build for that section commences.”

This connection to real-world practice underscores why UNLV is investing in immersive learning: Industries across the spectrum are increasingly adopting artificial intelligence and extended reality.

dream



GABRIELA ORÉ
MENÉNDEZ_
ANTHROPOLOGY



Class: Archaeology of South America

VR application: Andes Mountains tour

The benefit for students: I can show my students pictures and videos, and through those, they can get a sense of how impressive the Andes are — or I can have them put on

VR headsets and take them on a “tour.” I can blast the air-conditioning to make the room really, really cold, and blast a big fan [to mimic high-altitude winds] to give them the physical sensation of being 13,000 feet above sea level. [That enriches] the scope of the Andes mountains and what it means to have an archeological site in that type of climate. I truly believe this experience will open their senses and imaginations.

Implications for research: A researcher might not be able to travel to, say, Machu Picchu for any number of reasons — maybe they can’t afford it; maybe they have travel restrictions; maybe they have a heart condition that prevents them from being in extreme altitudes. Now we have the ability to gather data and [virtually] reconstruct not only a monument but also an excavation process and give these researchers a chance to [virtually] be there, observe, take notes, and develop critical research.

For so many years, the ability to conduct academic research wasn’t accessible to all. That has begun to change — and will continue to change — thanks to AI and extended realities. And it’s important that academia takes advantage of it.

on

MARTA SOLIGO_
HOSPITALITY



Class: Tourism and Society

VR applications: Hagia Sophia and Alien Zoo

Lessons in tourism through a tour of the Hagia Sophia, a mosque in Turkey that was once a Christian church and a museum: In this class, I will be teaching about the concept of heritage and cultural tourism, which we often see [exhibited] in museums and religious

spaces. One of the areas we will discuss is what happens in cases of contested heritage, and Hagia Sophia is a prime example of a place with a rich history of contested heritage.

Lessons for entertainment developers through the Alien Zoo:

I also teach a class on amusement parks from the perspective of how they evolve sociologically, which is super interesting. For the past 150 years, the evolution of these parks has been mirroring societal changes. So students in this class will use the Alien Zoo free-roam experience to analyze how the dynamics of theme parks work — which is especially poignant in this moment when theme parks are transitioning from animatronic exhibits and rides to virtual experiences.

The reality of virtual experiences: It’s very important that students understand the implications of new technologies [before embarking on their careers in hospitality]. In the future, my colleagues who teach customer-oriented subjects in hospitality might find it insightful to virtually re-create, say, a hotel lobby or a restaurant setting and have students “manage” them so they can better understand how to solve the real-world issues that come with running those kinds of venues. This is another way to give students a taste of the real-world experience.

{
NOT JUST
PLAY TIME
}

Frahm notes that arming students with these tools now positions them to better compete in tomorrow’s workforce.

As an R1 research institution, UNLV also sees immersive learning as a driver of innovation. But the field still faces challenges — namely, XR-ready educational software remains limited and is often expensive.

“Many of our faculty across every department know exactly how they want to implement this technology into their classrooms and how it will benefit students,” Frahm says. “Unfortunately, the software hasn’t yet been created.”

And that’s where UNLV’s own students come in. “One of the long-term goals of our immersive learning initiatives as developers for virtual reality content, which we’re currently building this semester with six student workers,” Frahm says. The hope is for students to create content for faculty that enriches teaching at UNLV and develops their own skills for future positions.

Immersive learning can sometimes be misunderstood as little more than gaming with headsets. Frahm is well aware of this. “My hope is that [skeptics will] come experience what we offer and see that, ‘Wow, this can be utilized for educational purposes,’” she says. “For me, it’s about getting them in the headset for the first time; misperceptions change after that.”

Lum, the rhetoric professor, admits to initially being a bit of a skeptic. “I thought you just put on some goggles and everything will be somewhat 3D — like a movie — and that’ll be it.” But after experiencing Dreamscape himself, he realized that it could be a fun new way to teach.

Of course, fun is only part of the story. Because at its core, UNLV’s immersive learning initiatives are about more than headsets and new tech-

nology. They’re about providing students, faculty, and community partners a space to co-create knowledge, to push the boundaries of innovation, and to step confidently into a future where immersive learning is not a novelty, but a defining strength of higher education.

As for the concern that extended reality will someday nudge traditional instruction out the classroom door, Frahm insists that will not be the case at UNLV.

“Nothing beats a teacher at the front of the class offering instruction in a real-life setting. Just like in the medical field, the chance to study a real cadaver offers insights you can’t get any other way.

“So VR is not here to replace all the ways that teachers have taught and students have learned over the years; it’s here to add on — like another tool in the academic toolbox.” ♦



EVEN STRIP MALLS HAVE CHARACTER — AND CHARACTERS

While decidedly unremarkable in style, the shops of University Gardens plaza connected the campus to everyday life in our neighborhood.

BY SCOTT DICKENSHEETS

The news video is vivid, dramatic. A leaping fire consumes the two-story center of University Gardens, the plaza across from UNLV's Greenspun Hall, on the morning of Friday, July 25. Firefighters scramble to quell the flames even as nearby hydrants run low. The column of smoke is visible across the valley as much of this longtime Maryland Parkway fixture burns beyond recognition.

No one was injured, but there was plenty of pain. "It's devastating to the core," Marsean and Latricsha Nelson, owners of Tastebudz Creole Kitchen, posted on social media. Other tenants destroyed outright included a U.S. Post Office and a tattoo shop. Businesses in the two single-story wings — a hair salon, boba shop, photo shack, tamale joint, vape store, and others — were largely untouched by the flames but inundated by smoke and water. Clark County officials quickly condemned the entire building.

Now, in addition to the losses they sustained, the owners of these businesses face the costly possibility of relocating. And for some, that cost won't be just a financial one, says Donna Jordan, manager of the Supercuts outlet, which has operated in that strip mall for four decades. It's social, too. "It's going to be very difficult if we have to move," she told KLAS Channel 8, "because we love our little neighborhood here."

A PLACE FOR LOCALS

The strip malls around UNLV's little neighborhood haven't been especially

interesting from a design perspective. As a *Las Vegas Weekly* writer noted as far back as 2005: "It looks as though a tide of bland architecture has rolled out, leaving behind a jumble of clunky, graceless strip malls."

Time's judgment has been harsh, as some structures have been torn down and many businesses have come and gone. Longtime faculty still lament the loss of Paymon's Mediterranean Cafe.

Nevertheless, this stretch of Maryland Parkway has always enjoyed some level of street life, as generations of UNLV students, instructors, and staffers braved six lanes of traffic to gather in the bars, restaurants, and coffee shops, check their mail, get a haircut.

In the 1990s, the eastern side of Maryland Parkway came alive with cultural activity — poetry readings, rock shows, art happenings. Places like Café Espresso Roma, Café Copioh, the Freakin' Frog bar, and the record stores Benway Bop and Balcony Lights live on in the neighborhood's cultural memory.

In the early 2000s, then-UNLV President Carol Harter and developer Mike Saltman conceived of an ambitious, big-footprint makeover — fewer traffic lanes, wider sidewalks, more creative businesses. But in the post dot-com recession economy, progress came in incremental, rather than dramatic, steps.

At the moment, there is another boomlet of construction. A Regional Transportation Commission project is making extensive improvements along Maryland Parkway to include bus-bike lanes, wider sidewalks, better lighting,

"It was in between all the 'cool' stuff. It was a big, physical piece of connective tissue."

Pj Perez

'07 BA Communication Studies



more trees, and upgraded crosswalks. This follows a Clark County project nearing completion to move unsightly overhead power lines underground.

Through partnerships with private developers and property acquisitions, UNLV has expanded its footprint across Maryland Parkway and introduced mixed-use buildings.

"The vision is to support the growth of a vibrant and authentic University District in Las Vegas — a place for the UNLV community and the public to enjoy more homegrown local enterprises alongside popular brands," says David Frommer, UNLV's associate vice president of planning, construction, and real estate.

The seven-story University Gateway Complex, for example, houses retail shops and restaurants on the ground floor and two floors of UNLV offices, with apartments on the upper floors. It also holds University Police headquarters and a UNLV parking garage. Most recently, the Board of Regents approved the purchase of the United Methodist

Church property.

This is where we come back to University Gardens.

FUNCTION BEFORE FORM

Pj Perez, '07 BA Communication Studies, is a documentary filmmaker whose *Parkway of Broken Dreams* is a definitive chronicle of that 1990s scene. He noted that University Gardens rarely comes up in these narratives. It wasn't by and large a cultural hotspot. The joints that old-timers celebrate in nostalgic Facebook groups were arrayed on either side of the now-torched plaza.

"It was in between all the 'cool' stuff," Perez says. "It was a big, physical piece of connective tissue."

But there's a reason for this, he adds.

Whereas those other sites drew artsy strivers from elsewhere in the valley, University Gardens had evolved into "an essential-services sort of place," he says. It's where nearby residents and members of the campus community came for fabric-of-daily-life: to get a

haircut, have a meal, drop off a package, fulfill their smoke-shop needs. "It's necessary if you live there," Perez says. "Innocuous, but necessary."

That comports with memories shared by artist Holly Rae Vaughn, '15 BFA, who recalls "neighborhood children sitting around on the covered deck," hanging out. She frequented PhotoShack, which started in 1982 as a one-hour film store and evolved to serve a devoted base of professional photographers and artists.

History professor Michael Green used the U.S. Post Office. "It was so convenient. For that reason, it seemed to me that the people in line tended to be a little more pleasant than I found at other post offices. I'll miss it."

IF THE (WOODEN) WALLS COULD TALK

Still, it's not fair to say University Gardens was entirely innocuous. As with any location where varied types of people cross paths over many decades

A July 25 fire quickly engulfed the center portion of the University Gardens strip mall, home to locally owned restaurants, a well-loved photo shop, and a bar once frequented by mobsters and journalists alike.



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— the plaza was so old it predated sprinkler laws — this place has its share of stories to tell.

Its design was enlivened by octagonal windows and charming custom wood-crafted ceilings and walls. Vaughn, the owner of Battle Born Pins and an old-Vegas enthusiast, had turned her artist eye toward the building, recording the architectural details she loved and later sharing in Instagram Reels.

To her it speaks to a time before computers were ubiquitous in commercial design. “It was a beautiful old building that offered a more human experience,” she says. “It’s important as we lose these buildings to appreciate them while they’re there” — in particular for their noncorporate character.

During the early 2000s, Perez recalls, the It’s Yoga studio took up much of the second floor and hosted intimate performances by musicians from the Blue Man Group. Meanwhile, setlist.fm lists 22 music shows at Yayo Taco from 2010-13, including local bands and noteworthy touring outfits like Deafheaven, Touché Amoré, and Thou.

And, since this is Las Vegas, the plaza saw a few activities of a uniquely Sin City variety.

In a 1984 column for the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, the late journalist Ned Day described early morning private gambling sessions at a University Gardens restaurant called Rube’s: “Beginning at 4 a.m. on Saturday or Sunday, a strange transformation takes place and this lounge becomes a special blend of time and place that deserves a historical record.”

Alleged mobsters mixed with showgirls, entertainers, casino people, society figures, and everyday others in the kind of wildly mixed social swirl that Las Vegas specialized in then. At some point, a car owned by one of the alleged wiseguys burned in the parking lot.

A favorite hangout of mob figure Anthony Spilotro’s, Rube’s was also where the staff of the now-long-defunct *Valley Times* newspaper gathered for a wake in honor of publisher Bob Brown, who died in 1984. That night, Spilotro was also in the joint.

“As I remember the story,” says Green, who was on the paper’s staff but not at the wake, “one of our staff sent a drink



Although the side sections of University Gardens remained largely intact, the complex has been condemned, forcing the relocation of businesses and a convenient U.S. Post Office that have long served the campus community.

to Spilotro’s table first, with a note saying who it was from. Then Spilotro sent his round over, with a note saying it was in Bob Brown’s memory. They drank and then tore up the notes!”

That’s just one more Vegas tale among many from University Gardens that are now destined to outlive the place itself. The sad heap of condemned rubble represents another gap in this little neighborhood. More than one person has suggested that the scorched words “United States” from the post-office sign could be a glum metaphor for the state of things.

But some are adopting a more philosophical perspective. Computer science major Percy Kinser frequented the plaza and told KTNV-Channel 13, “It makes me thankful for life, really. Everything can just be gone in a second, so I’m thankful for where I am right now.” ♦

PHOTOS: JOSH HAWKINS/UNLV

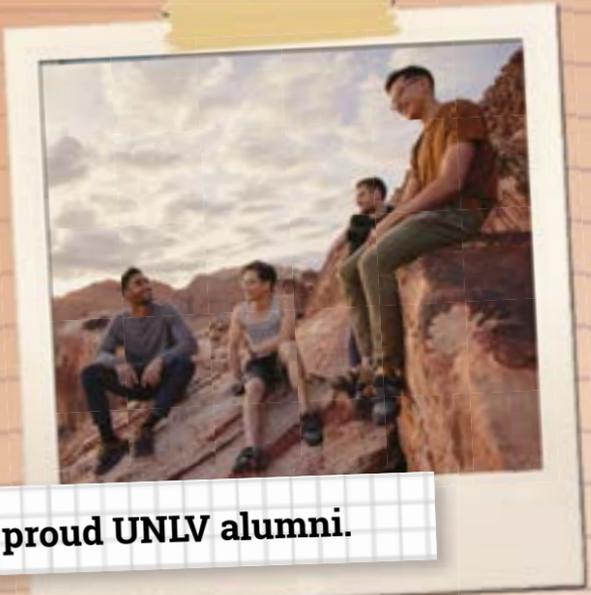


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THE DOERS, DREAMERS, CAREGIVERS, & CREATORS

Our Alumni of the Year



With an alumni base now topping 150,000, there's no shortage of Rebels worthy of recognition. The UNLV Alumni Association's 2025 honorees are standing out in their careers and their communities in myriad ways but woven through all their stories is a deep appreciation for their alma mater.

STORIES BY MATT JACOB | PHOTOS BY MICHAEL ROBERTS PHOTOGRAPHY



David Ross

'95 BS Business Administration & Management, '05 MA Hotel Administration

"I have such reverence for UNLV and the education I received. Being able to play a small part in helping the university raise money has been very rewarding. Hopefully it sets an example for our newer alumni. After all, through our education, the university has given us the tools to go out and be successful in our careers."

The 2025 recipient of the **Fred C. Albrecht Outstanding Alumnus** is the CEO of Gaming Asset Management Advisers and Gaming Asset Management Enterprises. Ross also serves as principal for Clarity Game Nevada and Clarity Game Colorado, which together own and operate three casinos. The Las Vegas native spent the majority of his gaming industry career with Coast Casinos, rising to the position of chief operating officer. Ross has served on the UNLV Foundation's Board of Trustees since 2013, including a two-year stint as chairman. He's also among three generations of dual UNLV graduates, joining mother Patricia and daughter Rebecca.

James Navalta

'98 MS Kinesiology

"My dad was a college professor. So when my aspirations for being a professional athlete and then a doctor didn't work out, I reverted to the family business. In some respects, I guess this is where I was always supposed to be. I just took a roundabout way to get there."



The 2025 **Outstanding Faculty Award** recipient is an associate professor in the Department of Kinesiology and Nutrition Sciences. After completing his graduate degree at UNLV and doctorate at Purdue University, Navalta began his teaching at Southern Arkansas University. The Hawai'i native then spent six years at Western Kentucky University before heading back to the desert and joining the UNLV faculty in 2012. He teaches kinesiology and physiology classes, earning high marks from students who praise his collaborative approach to learning in end-of-semester evaluations.



Heather Brown

'08 BA Political Science

"My parents were philanthropic in their own way — not with grand gestures, but through everyday acts of generosity and involvement. They gave their time, their energy, and their empathy to the people around them. They showed me that service is about showing up just as much as giving back. I owe my passion and purpose to my parents. They didn't raise me to be impressive. They raised me to care and to act."

The 2025 **Patrick T. Smith Achievement in Service Award** recipient is the president and co-founder of StartUp Vegas, a nonprofit whose mission is to uplift startup businesses in the Las Vegas Valley and bolster the entrepreneurial culture. Brown also is the senior vice president for entrepreneurial development for the Las Vegas Global Economic Alliance. Her commitment to service extends to the world of higher education as an elected member of the Nevada System of Higher Education Board of Regents. She donates her Regent stipend to UNLV, with the money funding book scholarships for College of Liberal Arts students.



Peter Arceo

'96 BS Hotel Administration

"One of the defining aspects of my time at UNLV was the strong emphasis on experiential learning — taking what you learned in the classroom and immediately putting it into practice. It wasn't just about theory; it was about applying those lessons in real-world settings, refining them, and learning through doing. I placed a lot of value on actually doing the work, not just studying it."

The **William F. Harrah College of Hospitality Alumnus of the Year** is chief gaming officer for Yuhaaviatam of San Manuel Nation, which owns and operates Yaamava' Resort & Casino at San Manuel (for which Arceo previously served as general manager) and Palms Casino Resort in Las Vegas. Throughout his 30-year hospitality career, Arceo has maintained strong ties to his alma mater. He's been a frequent guest speaker and student mentor and currently serves on the UNLV International Gaming Institute advisory board. Arceo also founded the UNLV Alumni Association's Arizona chapter in 2014.



Andrew Belanger

'98 BA Political Science, '00 MA Political Science

"The Honors College is unique. To be surrounded by dedicated students who are trying their best in their fields of study is really special. It's great for students who want to be exposed to a lot of different subjects and ideas. The breadth of learning for honors students is the perfect complement to the depth of study a student gets to experience in their major."

The **Honors College Alumnus of the Year** has spent the past 11 years as director of public services for the Southern Nevada Water Authority and Las Vegas Valley Water District. Belanger actually joined the public utility while still a UNLV student, securing an internship in the very same department he now runs. Belanger advocates for water policy, construction projects, and conservation initiatives at the state level and crafts related communications. For the past nine years, the Las Vegas native has served on the Honors College Advisory Board.

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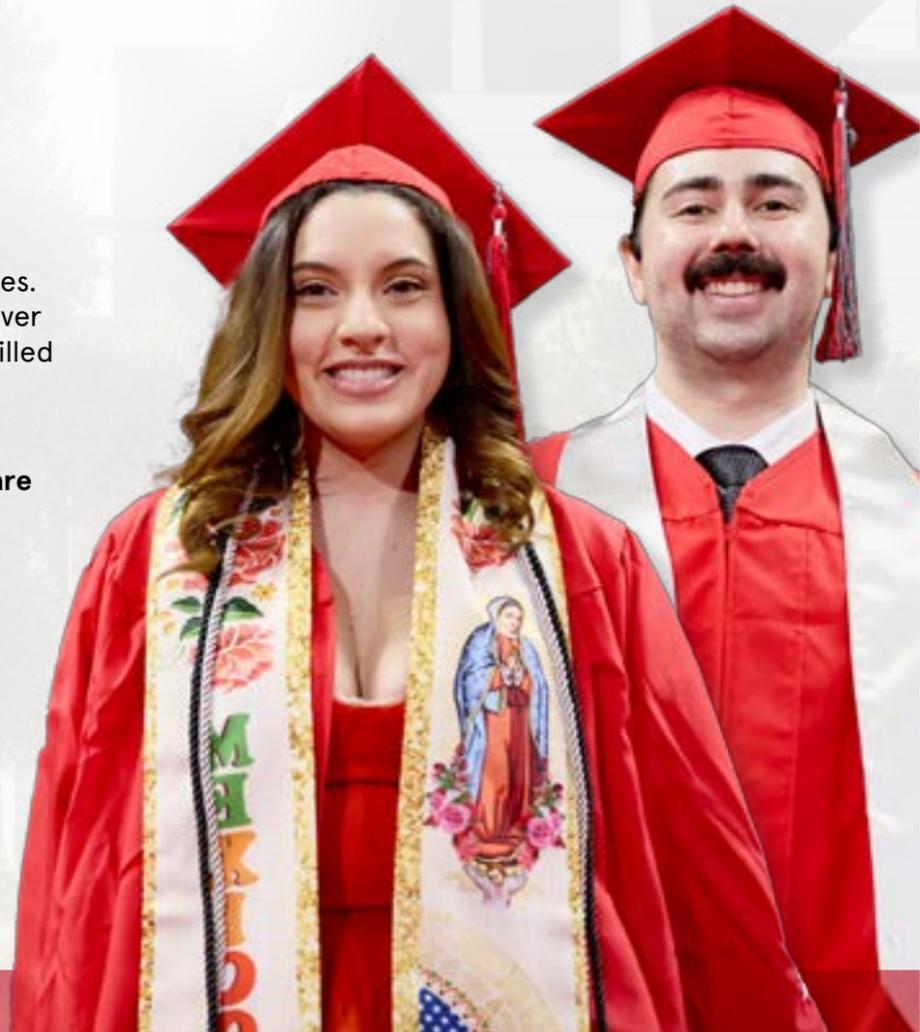
Here we share just a snapshot of their accomplishments. Read their full stories online: unlv.edu/news



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Alumni News



Sarah Bussmann

'14 MA Healthcare Administration

“Founding the UNLV School of Public Health Alumni Association was a natural extension of my connection to the university, shaped by my time as a graduate student, adjunct professor, and professional partner in the community. Sharing my knowledge and experiences – not just with students but also with faculty, current peers, and alumni – has been incredibly rewarding.”

The **School of Public Health Alumna of the Year** is the chief administrative officer and interim chief digital and technology information officer at P3 HealthPartners. The Las Vegas-based company supports healthcare providers with administrative services and care coordination for Medicare Advantage patients. When she’s not working to improve patient outcomes in a complicated modern healthcare system, Bussmann devotes her time and talents to her alma mater. Her many contributions include being an adjunct professor (2017-21); founding the School of Public Health Alumni Association; and welcoming UNLV students to P3 HealthPartners as interns, several of whom secured full-time employment post-graduation.

Justin LeMay

'19 BS Nursing, '24 MS Nursing Education

“There’s a certain satisfaction that I get when I can help my students or colleagues understand a complex concept. I’m also driven to change the world. So now instead of one patient at a time, I can positively influence the next generation of nurses who will go out and make positive changes themselves.”



The **School of Nursing Alumnus of the Year** spent the first four years of his career tending to cardiovascular patients in the intensive care unit at University Medical Center in Las Vegas. He recently transitioned to an administrative role at UMC and is teaching the next generation of caregivers as a full-time lecturer in the School of Nursing. The Las Vegas native also assists with student recruitment during an annual summer camp, offers critical mentorship to new nursing graduates, and is a regular donor whose goal is to one day sponsor his own nursing scholarship.



Felicia Hersh

'09 BA History

“I often find myself thinking back to a course I took on the History of Cowboy Films. The core premise of the class was powerful: Cowboy movies don’t necessarily portray history; they reflect the era in which they were made. That idea fundamentally changed the way I approach sources. Like so many of my history courses at UNLV, it taught me to question context, perspective, and intent – skills that have become invaluable in my work today.”

The **College of Liberal Arts Alumna of the Year** is the director of guest experience for the Bellagio and Park MGM on the Las Vegas Strip. Prior to joining MGM Resorts International in 2022, she spent nearly seven years with The Mob Museum in downtown Las Vegas. Hersh, who grew up in Las Vegas, was an Honors College student and serves on its advisory board. Additionally, she was one of the founding donors for the College of Liberal Arts’ “Friends of History” program and has helped raise more than \$100,000 to support scholarships for the College of Fine Arts and the Kirk Kerkorian School of Medicine. Both scholarships honor her late brother, **Robert Hersh**, '09 BS and '11 Master of Architecture.



Dr. Nadim Guirguis

'11 Doctor of Dental Medicine

Dr. Megan Tufteland

'13 Doctor of Dental Medicine, '22 Advanced Certificate-Pediatric Dentistry

“We were fortunate to learn from many experienced, highly skilled dentists and educators who were not only knowledgeable but also deeply committed to teaching and mentorship. Their dedication helped lay the foundation for both our clinical skills and professional values. For that, we both are eternally grateful.”

In addition to being married dental professionals, the **School of Dental Medicine Alumni of the Year** are part-time faculty at their alma mater. Guirguis is an orthodontist who opened his own Las Vegas-based practice, Mountain View Orthodontics, more than a decade ago, while Tufteland is a pediatric dentist in a community-based clinical practice. Back on the School of Dental Medicine campus, Guirguis oversees and instructs students in the Orthodontic Residency program while Tufteland is the course director for the Pediatric Dental Resident Board Review Course. Additionally, both are committed to offering pro-bono dental services to those in the community who are in need. Although raised in Las Vegas, the couple didn't meet until they were dental medicine students.



Kevin T. Pitt

'95 MS Exercise Physiology, '08 BS Nutrition Sciences

“To me, a Rebel is someone who follows their path despite the influences of conformity. And spirit is about energy. So together, ‘Rebel Spirit’ is listening to your heart and then acting. My wife and I established a new endowment for the UNLV Nutrition Center. Similar to how UNLV provided an assistantship to me many years ago, my goal was to establish a fund that would compensate nutrition students for providing practical services.”

As an exercise physiologist and, later, a registered dietician, Pitt devoted his professional life to helping others improve their lives. The **School of Integrated Health Sciences Alumnus of the Year** began his career as the fitness program manager at Nellis Air Force Base in North Las Vegas before eventually moving to California's Napa Valley, where he worked for the nation's largest veterans home until retiring in 2019. Since then, Pitt and his wife have given back to UNLV in multiple ways. They donated land that was sold to create an endowment that's used to purchase equipment for the Exercise Physiology Lab and also established a new endowment for the UNLV Nutrition Center.



Debbie Palacios

'07 M.Ed Curriculum & Instruction, '18 M.Ed Educational Policy and Leadership

“I received a note from a student in my very first class that stays with me to this day. She had written, ‘You are the best teacher in the whole world,’ and then crossed out ‘world’ and replaced it with ‘school.’ It was such a hysterical, albeit humbling, reminder that there's always room to grow. UNLV reinforced that same lesson: The learning never stops.”

The **College of Education Alumna of the Year** is the former executive director of Communities in Schools of Southern Nevada. During her four years there, the first-generation American led strategic initiatives that resulted in CIS's expansion from 54 to more than 80 schools. She managed an annual operating budget of \$11.5 million and developed partnerships to secure more than \$4 million in state funding and \$12 million in federal funding. Previously, Palacios spent 16 years working in the Clark County School District, beginning as an elementary school teacher in 2005.



Shane Jasmine Young

'04 Juris Doctor

“To receive this honor while my twin daughters are Boyd students is truly a full-circle moment. I remember carrying them, one on each hip, to meet with [former] Associate Dean Christine Smith to check my first-semester grades. I had no idea what the future would hold all those years ago. So to be recognized like this more than two decades later, I'm truly honored and grateful. Because without Boyd, I wouldn't be where I am today.”

The **William S. Boyd School of Law Alumna of the Year** is the founder of Young Law Group, which assists clients with estate planning, business, and personal injury needs. Deeply committed to educating her community about these complex and often-confusing legal areas, Young offers free estate-planning webinars. The Las Vegas native also has donated thousands of hours of legal services through her pro-bono work with Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada. Back at her alma mater, Young is an active member of the Boyd School of Law's Alumni Board, a student mentor, past instructor, and involved parent (her twin daughters, Caira and Shaira, are now third-year students at the law school).

PHOTO: COURTESY (YOUNG, SANDOVAL)



Iñaki Sandoval

'02 MA Music, Jazz Studies and Piano Performance

“My time at UNLV was incredible. In addition to academic opportunities, I had the chance to perform at nearly all the major Las Vegas casinos, an experience that was as meaningful as my studies. Most importantly, I built lifelong friendships with peers and faculty members — friendships that I still cherish today.”

The **College of Fine Arts Alumnus of the Year** is a man of many musical hats. He is an internationally acclaimed pianist, composer, and producer who has recorded — and played — with some of the world's most renowned jazz musicians. The founder of his own label (Bebyne Records), Sandoval has produced 30 albums, including nine under his own name. Perhaps his greatest influence, though, is as an educator: For the past three years, Sandoval has been the dean of The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts' School of Music. It's the latest of several academic positions he's held since completing his UNLV graduate degree.

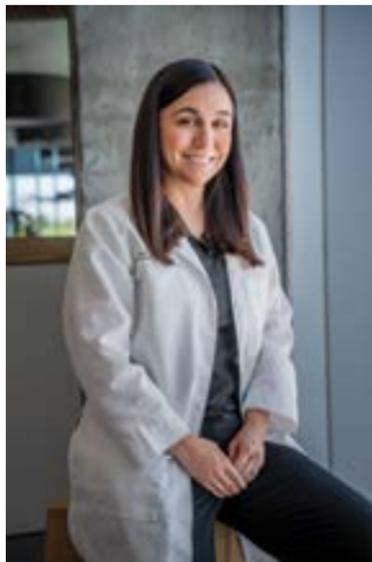
David Swallow

'94 BS Civil Engineering, '04 MS Civil Engineering

“Once I graduated, I began to recognize how important UNLV and its graduates are to our community. Most people who have lived here for a while understand that Las Vegas is a small town where relationships and familiarity — thanks in part to the environment UNLV fosters — enable us to get stuff done. That's why as alumni we should continue to support the university however we can.”



The **Howard R. Hughes College of Engineering Alumnus of the Year** is in his sixth year as the deputy CEO of the Regional Transportation Commission (RTC) of Southern Nevada. Swallow, who started his tenure with the RTC as a senior civil engineer nearly three decades ago, is charged with the overseeing, planning, programming, engineering, and construction of transportation projects. A two-time graduate, Swallow has consistently given back to his alma mater through class presentations, partnerships with engineering faculty on research grants, and serving three terms on the Alumni Association's Board of Directors.



Dr. Faun Powers

'11 BS Comprehensive Medical Imaging,
'21 MD

“My oldest son had to have surgery when he was about 18 months old. I remember being so nervous while waiting for them to take him to the operating room. Then his surgeon came and spoke to me. The way she explained everything put me at such ease. It was then that I decided that I wanted to do that for others — not necessarily as a surgeon, but as a doctor. I wanted to help people through some of the most difficult or scary times in their lives.”

The **Kirk Kerkorian School of Medicine Alumna of the Year** began her career in the medical field as an imaging technician performing high-risk obstetric ultrasounds and fetal echocardiograms. From there, Powers applied to the Kirk Kerkorian School of Medicine and was accepted as part of the school’s charter class. Earlier this summer, Powers rejoined the school as an associate professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Health. As a clinician, Powers splits her time working with children and adolescents at the Grant a Gift Autism Foundation Ackerman Center and seeing patients at University Medical Center and the UNLV Mojave Counseling Clinic.

Dave Valenta

'97 BA Criminal Justice

“I have always said that regardless of your major, completing a college degree requires discipline and dedication. Having to work full time while going to school helped teach me early in life that drive and hard work pays off. That then translated into my career with the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department. Every assignment I received and every promotion I earned required extremely hard work to surpass the competition.”

The **Greenspun College of Urban Affairs Alumnus of the Year** retired from the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department after 27 years as a patrol officer, sergeant, and lieutenant. After departing Metro, Valenta reconnected with the College of Urban Affairs, first serving as a guest speaker. Soon after, he was offered the opportunity to be a part-time instructor, and earlier this year began teaching the criminal justice class Policing in America. He is a longtime alumni donor who has contributed to UNLV Libraries, KUNV, and a criminal justice-specific scholarship.



Scott Wade

'87 BS Chemistry

“Through attending UNLV, I was exposed to so many diverse topics, educational experiences, and activities. This diversity of opportunity even allowed me to perform on the UNLV Judy Bayley Theatre stage. More importantly, it allowed me to develop on-campus connections and make lifelong friends. I’m also deeply appreciative of my many UNLV professors who were always knowledgeable, supportive, and kind. My time at UNLV truly helped shape both my career and life arc.”

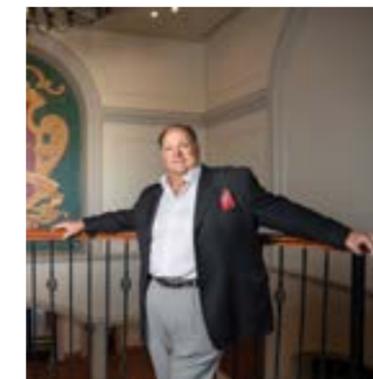
The **College of Sciences Alumnus of the Year** spent the vast majority of his career with the United States Department of Energy, with his work spanning everything from environmental compliance and cleanup to nuclear waste and spent nuclear fuel disposition. Since retiring in 2022, Wade has focused on community engagement, including working with the Atomic Museum to educate the public about nuclear energy and talking to Clark County School District students about creative writing from the perspective of a published author (Wade has written two novels). Back on campus, Wade is a member of the college’s Board of Advisors and supports the Terry Wade Scholarship, which is named in honor of his brother and aids students with disabilities or learning challenges.



Aldo Madrigano

“My wife, Dawn, and I give back because the education that UNLV provides is so important to the long-term health of this great city. Awards like this are great and very humbling, but getting things done is what is truly gratifying. Having an opportunity to play a small part in uplifting others is the biggest reward.”

The 2025 **Silver State Award recipient** is a native of Wisconsin, where he owned a beer distributorship until his retirement. When Madrigano and his wife, Dawn, relocated to Las Vegas in 2012, they immediately wrapped their arms around UNLV, and Rebel Athletics in particular. Among the family’s many difference-making gifts are the Madrigano Family Endowment for Academic Excellence and an endowed fund for the Runnin’ Rebels basketball team. They also were cornerstone donors to the Fertitta Football Complex, which now houses the Madrigano Family Sports Medicine Center. Madrigano has been a member of the UNLV Foundation Board of Trustees since 2020 and serves on the boards of the Las Vegas Bowl and Dignity Health.



Leo Poggione

'92 BS Business Marketing

“I grew up in Reno, and a lot of my high school friends had decided to stay home [for college]. But I felt like I needed some sort of change in my life — a fresh start and an opportunity to develop some new relationships. UNLV really was a perfect school for me in every way. I absolutely credit my time there for helping me grow and flourish into the leader that I am today.”

The **Lee Business School Alumnus of the Year** found his calling in the manufactured home industry, launching Craftsman Homes in his native Reno in the late 1990s. Poggione’s business now has four locations in the Silver State, and his industry leadership positions include a 25-year stint as a member of the Nevada Housing Alliance Board of Directors. Poggione’s support for UNLV includes being a lifetime member of the Alumni Association and serving as a guest speaker. His claim to fame as a student? Being voted 1991 Homecoming king.



Anne Weisman

'02 BA Communications, '11 Master of Public Health, '16 Doctor of Public Health

“UNLV provided me with the opportunity to reinvent myself and pursue my passions. ... After all my body had endured, I felt that I understood pain and suffering in a way I had not before. I thought it would be a good use of my life to try to help others who experience bodily pain or discomfort.”

The **Graduate College Alumna of the Year** is a rare triple graduate, made all the more remarkable by the fact that she overcame severe brain trauma sustained in a near-fatal car accident. After beginning her career in public relations, Weisman quickly found her passion as a licensed massage therapist, which led to an interest in public health, which led her back to UNLV for her final two degrees. Today, Weisman teaches integrative, culinary, and evidence-based medicine to students in the Kirk Kerkorian School of Medicine. She also devotes countless hours to mentoring UNLV students, and supports numerous community organizations and nonprofit causes.

1960s

L. Allen Strate, '64 BA Business Administration, '76 MBA, and '80 JD, published a fourth book in the series of Montana's Bitterroot Valley History, *I Didn't Know That*. An evening with L. Allen Strate was presented by the Ravalli County Museum.

1980s

Francis Joseph Beckwith, '83 BA Philosophy, a professor of philosophy and church-state studies at Baylor University, was appointed by President Donald J. Trump to be a member of the Advisory Board of Legal Experts for the Presidential Religious Liberty Commission.

Shawn Danowski, '83 BS Construction Management, is founder and CEO of DC Building Group and a member of the Junior Achievement of Southern Nevada Board of Directors. He brings more than two decades

of construction leadership, strategic planning, and community engagement experience to the nonprofit organization that empowers young people to own their economic success through programs in financial literacy, work readiness, and entrepreneurship.

Bill Newman, '83 BS Hotel Administration, retired after 22 years working in the Welfare Division and Department of Corrections for the State of Nevada. He is a U.S. Army ASVAB test administrator for Northern Nevada and Lake Tahoe. Newman earned a bachelor's in business administration from UNR in 1987 and went to law school in Los Angeles. He is a genealogist and belongs to the Reno Historical Society, the 709th MP BN alumni association, and the Sons of Union Civil War Veterans.

Dean M. Donohue, '84 BS Business and '89 MBA, is a private wealth advisor with Ameriprise Financial Inc. in Louisville, Kentucky. He was recognized as one of the top "Advisors to Watch under \$1Bil" by AdvisorHub. Donohue

is CEO and lead advisor of Encore Wealth Management Group.

Lisa Griffith Story, '84 BA Communication Studies, authored the book *Better Dead Than Poor: Stories and Letters from Uncle D.B. Cooper*, in which she dives into her uncle's shadowy past, uncovering ties to paramilitary ops and criminal activities.

Thomas Oates, '85 BA Criminal Justice, served with NCIS from 1986-90. He then fulfilled his dream of becoming an FBI agent after joining the organization in 1990 and retiring in 2019. He enjoys traveling, golf, and home maintenance.

Suzette T. Wheeler, '87 BS Business Administration and '90 MBA, is a commercial and residential real estate agent. She wrote *Math Hack Secrets — Level Up to Keep More of Your Money*. Wheeler has been a financial analyst, business innovator, and manager for Clark County, the City of Henderson, and the City of Las Vegas. She has spent 26 years working in local government.

Karen Hall, '88 BA Communication Studies, will be inducted in October 2025 into the Pennsylvania State Hall of Fame for her basketball career.

1990s

Craig Michie, '92 BS Business Administration and '98 MBA, serves as safety ambassador for the freeman/inline production convention rigging department at the Las Vegas Convention Center. He completed state certification as a health and safety practitioner through the Nevada Safety Consultation and Training Section.

Karen Hawkes, Esq., '96 BA Political Science, is the founder of Hawkes Law, A.P.L.C., an intellectual property and business law firm specializing in trademark and copyright in San Diego. Previously, Hawkes was a trademark and copyright litigator for over a decade. She also serves as director and law professor of the California Western School of Law Trademark Clinic.

2000s

Jessie (Hyun Joo) Lee, '03 BA Hotel Administration, is a San Francisco-based real estate professional. She enjoys walks around the city, eating well, and learning French and Japanese. She also loves history, creative thinking, and traveling to Asia and Europe. She's a member of the Foreign Investment Professionals Group and serves as vice president of the Korean American Chamber of Commerce in San Francisco.

Jillian McNiff Villemaire, '04 MS Sport and Leisure Studies, was promoted to full professor, awarded the 2025 North American Society for Sport Management Educator of the Year, and published *Digital Innovations in Sport*.

Sara (Costanza) Sibley, '06 BA Journalism & Media Studies, and her husband, **JC Sibley**, '07 BS Kinesiology and Nutritional Sciences, welcomed a son, Apollo Joaquin, in March. Sara is a former member of the UNLV Cheer & Dance Team. JC is a former UNLV baseball player.

Stephanie Hannum, '07 BSW, works at the Department of Mental Health within the state of Massachusetts' Child,

Youth, and Family Team. She recently graduated from Simmons University with a doctorate in social work.

Adrian H. Huerta, '07 BS Human Services Counseling, earned tenure and promotion to associate professor of education at the University of Southern California.

Yolanda Tuttle, '07 BS Hotel Administration, is a concierge for Suiteness.com. After being away from Las Vegas, she is excited to get reacquainted with Sin City and her Sigma Kappa sisters.

Jeremy Burr, '09 BSBA Finance, was promoted to managing director at Teneo, where he is a financial advisor to companies facing liquidity issues. He supports in-court and out-of-pocket restructurings. He is married to **Stephanie Burr**, '08 BS Economics.

Kendall Fearn, '09 BA Psychology and '11 MS Athletic Administration, was hired in June 2025 as head softball coach at California State University, Long Beach.

Jean Reid Norman, '09 MA English and '14 Ph.D. Public Affairs, was promoted to full professor of journalism and emerging media at Weber State University.

2010s

Megan Bellamy-Lanze, '10 DMA, wrote the textbook *Music and the Human Experience*. The textbook is for use in music appreciation courses with an emphasis on the psychology of music and how our choices reflect our senses of self. Bellamy-Lanze was promoted in 2023 to senior instructor at Colorado State University.

John. J. Starkey, '10 BS Business Administration and '12 M.Ed. Leadership, is associate director of the Kerestesi Center for Insurance and Risk Management at UNLV. He was appointed to the Junior Achievement of Southern Nevada board of directors. Starkey works to support the nonprofit financial literacy organization's mission of preparing young people for economic success.

Lisa Kelleher, '11 Ph.D. Higher Education, was recognized for the Carol C. Harter GIVE Award, garnering her the selection as Honorable Mention. The GIVE award celebrates and encourages diversity initiatives across UNLV. This prestigious award recognizes outstanding efforts in programming outreach.

Tiffany Tyler-Garner, '11, Ph.D. Educational Psychology, published her first book, *The Journey Inward: Four Seasons of Reflection for Deep Healing and Transformation*.

Thomas R. Boswell, '12 BA English, joined the San Diego office of Ogletree Deakins as an associate focusing on employment law. Boswell earned his J.D. from Santa Clara University School of Law and has represented public and private entities



Newman, '83



Hall, '88



Beckwith, '83



Michie, '92



Danowski, '83



Hawkes, '96



Donohue, '84



Lee, '03



Story, '84



Hannum, '07



Wheeler, '87



Tuttle, '07

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Obituaries



Bartlett

Selma Bartlett, a pioneering local businesswoman, longtime supporter of UNLV and the Howard R. Hughes College of Engineering, died Sept. 16, just days short of her 98th birthday. At UNLV, she supported several scholarship programs and donated time mentoring to students. Honored for both her business acumen and her generosity, she was inducted into the Palladium Society for her contributions exceeding \$1 million and the Nevada Business Hall of Fame in 2016.



Burns

Paul Burns, emeritus professor of history, died Sept. 16 in Mankato, Minnesota. He joined UNLV in 1963 and, over the course of 32 years, chaired the history department and the faculty senate and served several administrative roles, including as faculty athletics representative and interim dean of the colleges of Liberal Arts, Fine and Performing Arts, and Arts and Letters. An accomplished teacher and scholar, he specialized in Russian history and culture. In the community, he served in positions with Allied Arts Council of Southern Nevada, Nevada State Board of Museums and History, Lied Discovery Children's Museum, and Western States Arts Federation.



Jorgensen

Ed Jorgensen, '84 BS, '91 MS, and '19 Computer Science, an emeritus associate professor in residence of computer science and the longest-serving faculty member in the computer science department, died Sept. 4. During his 40-year career at UNLV, Jorgensen was a dedicated teacher and served as the department's undergraduate coordinator. He authored a popular book on assembly language programming. In June, he transitioned to emeritus status but continued serving the college in a grant-writing capacity. He is survived by his wife, Dolly Jorgensen, an emeritus lecturer of computer science at UNLV.



Karstenon

Lew Karstenon, professor emeritus of economics, died in July at age 84. He joined UNLV in 1979 and often was seen in his signature bow tie during lectures. He brought personality to the classroom that generations of students fondly remember. He was a prolific scholar and explored a wide range of topics including classical and Keynesian economics, economic perspectives from the medieval period, longevity economics, and the psychology of learning in statistics courses.



Maxson

Robert C. Maxson, president from 1984-94, died Sept. 28 in San Juan Islands, Washington, at age 89. Graduate education expanded under his tenure, and *U.S. News and World Report College Guide* listed UNLV as one of the "up and coming universities in the West." New construction included the Thomas T. Beam Engineering Complex, the Rod Lee Bigelow Health Sciences Building, and the Robert Bigelow Physics Building. After UNLV, he served as president of CSU Long Beach and of Sierra Nevada College (now part of UNR).

Rossi Ralenkotter, '71 MBA, former president and CEO of the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority (LVCVA), died Oct. 10 at age 78. Over his 45-year career at LVCVA, he was part of the team that brought the National Finals Rodeo, International CES, and other major conventions to Las Vegas, making the city the No. 1 trade show destination in North America for 25 years and counting. He also established the Las Vegas Bowl and was an instrumental figure in getting ballparks built for both the Las Vegas Stars/51s and Las Vegas Aviators. His many awards included American Marketing Association Lifetime Achievement Award in 1993; Brand Week's Grand Marketer of the Year in 2004 for the Las Vegas brand campaign, "What Happens Here, Stays Here"; U.S. Travel Association Hall of Leaders; and UNLV's Outstanding Alumnus of the Year. He served on numerous community organization boards, including the Boys and Girls Club, Las Vegas Bowl Committee, Bishop Gorman High School, and Valley Health System.

Sadanand Verma, mathematical sciences professor, died May 21 at age 95. He was the first faculty member in mathematics to hold a Ph.D., and played a crucial role in the creation of the Department of Computer Science and the MS in Mathematics degree. For many years, he held the honor of leading the Commencement procession, carrying the university mace. When he was recognized as UNLV's longest-serving faculty member in 2021, he said his favorite part of working at UNLV was "seeing students from my classes perform outstandingly to move on to other universities or make a positive impact in our Las Vegas community." He retired in 2022 at the age of 92.



Ralenkotter



Verma

as well as nonprofit organizations. Previously, he worked at a large plaintiff-side firm and has experience handling claims with various administrative agencies.

Joshua Chévere Cohen, '12 BA English, '12 BA History, and '25 Nonprofit Management Graduate Certificate, is a marketing and communications manager for UNLV's Black Mountain Institute. He was selected by UNLV's English department as its 2025 Distinguished Alumni and recognized at the College of Liberal Arts Honors Convocation.

Helay Rahimi, '12 MS Management Information Systems, was recognized by Marquis Who's Who for excellence in technology and leadership. She has worked in program management, technology enablement, and strategy. Rahimi is also a certified yoga teacher and practices on a regular basis.

Johnny Dominguez, '13 BA Political Science and '18 M.Ed. Higher Education, was appointed executive director of Improve Your Tomorrow for the Nevada region, a national nonprofit focused on increasing college access for young men of color. He was honored as a 2024 Las Vegas Raiders "Inspire Change Changemaker" and is a proud alumnus of Leadership Las Vegas and Surge Academy Las Vegas. He enjoys exploring new places with his wife, **Celinda (Pena) Dominguez**, '11 BS Human Services and '13 MSW, and two young children; weight training; and rooting for the Dodgers.

John "Jayson" Medema, '15 BS Geology and '17 MS Geoscience, was a technician with Sunrise Engineering and recruited by Southwest Gas Corp. as a senior geographic information system analyst. He's now with Esri (Environmental Systems Research Institute), a multinational geographic information system software company.

George Polyard, '16 BS Hotel Administration, was promoted to chief operating officer at ComOps, a hospitality and gaming company. He's led numerous successful omnichannel CX implementations, including for a 3,600-room luxury integrated resort and the seamless migration from a legacy platform for a 16-property international luxury hotel brand. Polyard and his wife have two children and live in Las Vegas.

Claire Lustumbo, '17 M.Ed. School Counseling, began her career in Clark County in 2013 as an elementary general education teacher. She continued her work in the district by coun-



Norman, '09



Burr, '09



Starkey, '10



Bellamy-Lanze, '10



Kelleher, '11



Tyler-Garner, '11



Rahimi, '12



Cohen, '12



Dominguez, '13



Medema, '15



Polyard, '16



Hayhurst, '19

selling students and mentoring others. Lustumbo is currently the school counselor at Andrew J. Mitchell Elementary School in Boulder City and was chosen as Nevada's School Counselor of the Year for 2025. She enjoys reading and being a mom to her son.

Hayleigh Hayhurst, '19 BA Journalism, moved to Seattle and started Espresso Podcast Production, which will be celebrating five years in business. Hayhurst has worked with entrepreneurs, businesses, and brands from all over the country, helping them launch and grow podcasts that boost their visibility. She enjoys finding new coffee shops; traveling; running; and hanging out with her family, friends, and dog, Captain.

2020s

Janna Bernstein Rogers, '20 Ph.D. Cultural Studies, International Education & Multicultural Education, is a director at the College of Southern Nevada and an adjunct professor for UNLV's Lee Business School. She recently celebrated 11 years with NSHE. Janna married Steven Rogers in August 2025.

Sarah (Adams) Deakins, '22 BS Elementary Education, was hired at the same Clark County elementary school where she did her student teaching at UNLV. She's taught fourth grade, second grade, and is now teaching first grade. She got married in October 2023.

Kristine Jan Cruz Espinoza, '22 Graduate Certificate in Program Evaluation and Assessment and '24 Ph.D. Higher Education, is an assistant professor in the Graduate School of Education at California Lutheran University. She co-authored



Anthony Waddle, '15 BS Biology and '17 MS Biology, was named a finalist for the prestigious 2025 Pritzker Emerging Environmental Genius Award. Waddle will receive a cash prize and travel to Los Angeles for the award ceremony, where the winner will be announced and awarded the Pritzker Prize and \$100,000 cash. The conservation biologist earned a Ph.D. in veterinary science from the University of Melbourne and was a Schmidt Science Fellow at Macquarie University's School of Applied BioSciences. He is spearheading the fight against the world's deadliest invasive disease: chytrid fungus, which has devastated amphibians worldwide. His pioneering strategies — from "frog saunas" to advanced genetic engineering programs — have set new global standards for combating wildlife disease and reversing biodiversity loss.

Oceania in the Desert: A QuantCrit Analysis of the (Under)Counting of Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander Students, which was chosen as the 2025 Association for Institutional Research (AIR) Charles F. Elton Best Paper.

Shreya Joshi, '22 BS Nutrition Sciences, is a registered dietician. She graduated with a certificate of completion for dietetic internship in 2023 from Loyola University Chicago's Parkinson School of Health Sciences.

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THE CANNON CAPER

The heaviest college rivalry trophy — the Fremont Cannon — owes its origin to an explorer, Rebel pranksters, and UNLV's first football coach.

It all started on a chilly December night in 1965. Then-student body president Tom Hribar and a half dozen fellow students concocted a plan to steal one of the WWI cannons that sat on the campus of the University of Nevada, Reno. With a rented trailer and a few tools, Hribar and his accomplices managed to move the cannon 25 feet from its perch before being thwarted by campus security.

Thankfully, UNR kept its sense of humor and the pranksters returned to Las Vegas without a criminal record.

Then Bill Ireland caught wind of the caper.

A legendary figure at both schools and UNLV's first football coach pitched his idea: *Let's create the heaviest, most expensive trophy in college sports.* (It was also the loudest until a mishap in 1999 damaged its firing mechanism.)

Kennecott Copper donated the funds to construct a trophy with special meaning to the state — a replica of the mountain howitzer that explorer John C. Fremont abandoned in the Sierra Nevada Mountains during a snowstorm in 1844.

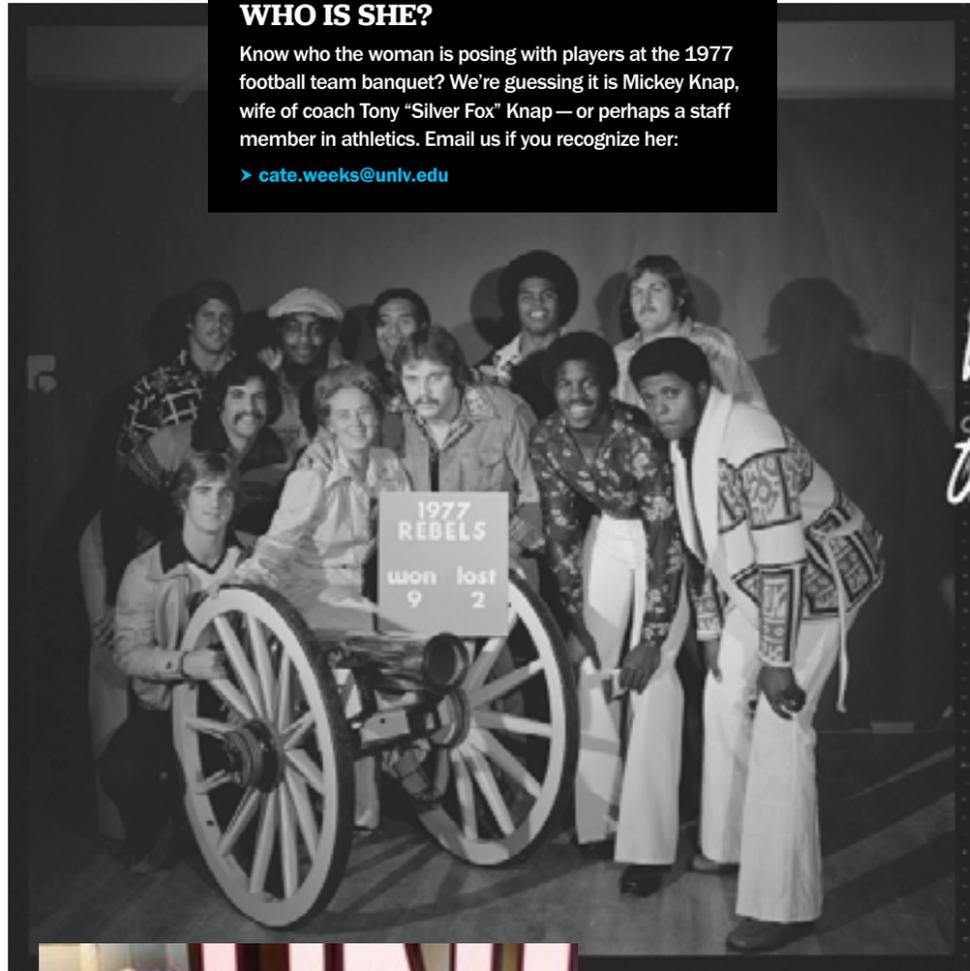
The Fremont Cannon trophy cost \$10,000 and weighs some 545 pounds. It made its "Battle for Nevada" gameday debut in 1970. UNLV prevailed in that game and earned the right to paint it scarlet. We're pretty confident our Rebels are going to keep it that way for another year.

—Cate Weeks

WHO IS SHE?

Know who the woman is posing with players at the 1977 football team banquet? We're guessing it is Mickey Knap, wife of coach Tony "Silver Fox" Knap — or perhaps a staff member in athletics. Email us if you recognize her:

> cate.weeks@unlv.edu



BATTLE IN RENO

Don't miss the next Battle for Nevada rivalry football game Nov. 29 at UNR.

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