UNLV Alumni Awards

DR. ALONA D. ANGOSTA GINA J. BONGIOVI DR. BRANDI N. DUPONT DR. TONIA F. HOLMES-SUTTON
PIOTR S. TOMASIKA SUSH MACHIDA CHRISTINE L. ROBINSON SAGAR R. RAICH MICHAEL F. KAWAZOE
EDWIN SUAREZ MARISA RODRIGUEZ JILL CAMPBELL DR. CYNTHIA A. O’NEAL DR. LISA M. SEGLER
SUSAN M. CORBETT BRUNO MOYA DR. MICHAEL GREEN LARRY RUVO HERB J. SANTOS JR.
Welcome to the 2020 UNLV Annual Alumni Awards

Since 1974, the UNLV Alumni Association has highlighted the impact our alumni make to UNLV and their community. These individuals are recognized for their ideals of higher education and Rebel pride.

Through the awards program, the Alumni Association recognizes alumni and community leaders for their outstanding achievements and leadership at the University, throughout the community, and beyond. The awards program has evolved over the years to honor success, service, and philanthropy. In 2019, the Achievement in Service Award was renamed after influential Association board member and past president Patrick T. Smith ’70, to honor those who demonstrate exceptional leadership and service to the University.

While large galas and inspiring luncheons are being postponed, the Alumni Association did not want to forgo honoring UNLV’s magnificent alumni and friends. These recipients genuinely serve as inspiration for the generations of alumni who will follow.

Thank you for participating virtually to celebrate these nineteen extraordinary Rebels and friends!

With Rebel Pride,

Stacey Purcell ’90
President, UNLV Alumni Association

Blaise Douglas
Interim Associate Vice President, Alumni Engagement & Executive Director, UNLV Alumni Association

A SPECIAL THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT

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T. Smith ’97 ’01, to honor those who demonstrate exceptional leadership and service to the University.

OUTSTANDING FACULTY AWARD
Dr. Alona D. Angosta

LIE BUSINESS SCHOOL
Gina J. Bongiovanni

SCHOOL OF DENTAL MEDICINE
Dr. Brandi N. Dupont

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
Dr. Toni F. Holmes-Sutton

HOWARD H. HUGHES COLLEGE OF ENGINEERING
Piotr S. Tomasik

COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS
Sush Machida

GRADUATE COLLEGE
Christine L. Robinson

HONORS COLLEGE
Sagar K. R. Raich

SCHOOL OF INTEGRATED HEALTH SCIENCES
Edwin Suarez

WILLIAM S. BOYD SCHOOL OF LAW
Marisa Rodriguez

SCHOOL OF NURSING
Dr. Cynthia A. O’Neal

SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH
Lisa M. Segler

SCHOOL OF URBAN AFFAIRS
Bruno Moya

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
Dr. Michael Green

GREENSPUN COLLEGE OF URBAN AFFAIRS
Dr. Michael Green

PATRICK T. SMITH ACHIEVEMENT IN SERVICE AWARD
Dr. Alona D. Angosta

SILVER STATE AWARD
Larry Russo

OUTSTANDING ALUMNUS OF THE YEAR
Herb J. Santos, Jr.
Nurses are the backbone of health care, and our role is now more vital than ever. Your voice will be even more important as you make decisions that will impact patient lives and the health care system.
Dr. Brandi N. Dupont

Unlike a lot of dentists, Dr. Brandi Dupont didn’t follow a family member into the business, nor did she grow up with a particular yearning for a career in oral health. Rather, her pathway to dentistry was simply borne out of a desire to improve the lives of the less fortunate.

“Not long after I started working for a low-income community health center in Reno, I learned there was a huge need for dentists willing to work in public health,” she said. “That’s when I knew I wanted to pursue a career in dentistry and assist patients who might face roadblocks to quality dental services.”

Dupont actually began working for the Community Health Alliance in her native Reno six years before completing her dental medicine degree at UNLV. After completing her degree, she returned and worked for Community Health Alliance for another 13 years. Today, she’s transitioning to working for a pediatric dental office that provides dental services to low-income children.

Dupont’s commitment to bettering her community’s dental health expands beyond the walls of her office, as she also has served on the boards of the Northern Nevada Dental Society and the Governor’s Advisory Council for Oral Health. It’s easy to understand why Dupont would be asked to serve in such prestigious roles, given her slew of professional credentials: She’s a member of the American Dental Association, the Academy of General Dentistry, the Nevada Dental Association and the Northern Nevada Dental Society.

While patient care and serving her community are obviously Dupont’s primary professional goals, a secondary objective involves dispelling a longstanding myth about dentists: that they enjoy inflicting pain.

“Seriously, I’ve heard this at least a dozen times from patients;” she said. “I love to prove to them that a trip to the dentist doesn’t have to hurt.”

What advice do you have for today’s UNLV dental students as they try to navigate our changed world?

“I would say my education in resiliency started the moment I stepped through the doors of the School of Dentistry program. Dentistry is a tough field, and learning it was even tougher. Besides a lot of late-night study sessions that helped build determination, learning to take original impressions — realistically — until you got them right was a great lesson in resilience.

The coronavirus pandemic has reminded all of us about the power and importance of being resilient. Share a moment from your time at UNLV that helped build resilience in you.

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What advice do you have for today’s UNLV dental students as they try to navigate our changed world?

— Fall in love with this profession. If you love what you do, everything tends to fall into place. Make no mistake, those first few years as a dental professional are going to be tough, but you will come out on the other side with immense confidence in what you do and one other thing: Never stop learning.

What’s the one challenge or crisis you’ve faced that you compared thanks to lessons learned during your days at UNLV?

— As an attorney, you must get full on your assignments and unwavering commitment to student success. Just to name a few, I’m grateful to Honors College economics professor Ron Cronovich for taking the time outside of class to frame the material that was sailing over my head in a slightly different way so that I clicked; to Business School leadership Jeff Stempel, whose energy and biding humor made insurance law riveting; and to Honors College Dean Len Zane, whose relentless efforts to talk every freshman into majoring in physics was admirable. The fall goes on.

What advice do you have for today’s UNLV business students as they try to navigate our changed world?

‘07 Doctor of Dental Medicine

Gina J. Bongiovi

‘01 BA Marketing, ‘07 MA Business Administration, ‘07 J.D.

It’s difficult to look at Gina Bongiovi’s personal and professional accomplishments and not come away highly impressed. It’s equally as difficult to determine which of those accomplishments is most impressive of all.

Academically, the Las Vegas native was a high-achieving student at every level, including at UNLV where she graduated magna cum laude from the Honors College with a marketing degree and a minor in business law. Six years later, Bongiovi became one of the first students to earn a dual law degree/MBA from the UNLV William S. Boyd School of Law and Lee Business School.

In the process of earning that dual degree, Bongiovi launched her own successful marketing company. But when she struggled to find a lawyer willing to offer competent and affordable legal advice — and learned of other entrepreneurs dealing with the same issue — she created Bongiovi Law Firm. The goal: Provide startup and small-business clients with legal guidance that addresses all facets of business ownership.

Bongiovi grew both her legal and marketing businesses simultaneously, eventually selling the latter to an individual who is now a Bongiovi Law Firm client.

What’s the one challenge or crisis you’ve faced that you compared thanks to lessons learned during your days at UNLV?

From kindergarten all the way through earning my bachelor’s degree, I was always a straight-A, Dean’s List, valedictorian, graduated with honors student. Those academic achievements represented so much of my identity that one can imagine my horror when I nearly flunked out of law school my first semester. It was a humbling experience for me and a wake-up call because everything I had known or learned up until then didn’t seem to apply anymore. I fell back but continued on with my studies and did the best I could, while knowing I had already blown my shot at law review or graduating with honors.

Though it certainly didn’t feel like it at the time, losing my straight-A streak at the very start of law school was a gift. The lesson I learned then applies even now, nearly two decades later: Practicing law is just that — practicing. The drive to always be right and always get an A-plus simply has no place in the legal profession, because much of the advice you provide is based on information that can change in the blink of an eye.

As an attorney, you must get comfortable doing the best you can with the information at hand and let go of the illusion that there’s a right and wrong answer; that every question can be answered with a “yes” or a “no.”

Finish this sentence: When I look back at my time at UNLV, I’m most grateful for ...

— My pedagogical passion for and unwavering commitment to student success. Just to name a few, I’m thankful to Honors College economics professor Ron Cronovich for taking the time outside of class to frame the material that was sailing over my head in a slightly different way so that I clicked; to Business School leadership Jeff Stempel, whose energy and biding humor made insurance law riveting; and to Honors College Dean Len Zane, whose relentless efforts to talk every freshman into majoring in physics was admirable. The fall goes on.

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Tonia Holmes-Sutton

I
‘04 Master’s of Education, ‘12 Doctorate of Educational Leadership

If you want a glimpse into Tonia Holmes-Sutton’s intense dedication to and enthusiasm for education, you can review her triple-degree academic credentials. Or take note of how education is the tie that binds her impressive work history and deep community involvement.

Or you can just take a short trip back in time to when Holmes-Sutton—already delicately balancing on the family and career high wire—decided to test her mettle by returning to UNLV in pursuit of her doctoral education in educational leadership.

*Challenged by my own ambitions, I was navigating the beautiful chaos of life as I simultaneously pursued National Board certification, worked full time as a Clark County School District educator, and sought to balance my professional endeavors with my personal commitment of building a family with my husband,* she said. “*I was continuously challenged to envision myself as a doctoral student, even as I wrestled with the statistics regarding rates of persistence and achievement within doctoral programs.*

“I recall the late Dr. Teresa Jordan, who at the time was a professor emeritus at UNLV, sharing that only 1 percent of the American population held doctorate degrees. I felt overwhelmed, stressed, and often anxiety-ridden as I committed to becoming part of that 1 percent.*

Despite the added challenge of needing to complete her research before her impressive work history and deep community involvement.

The coronavirus pandemic has reminded all of us about the power and importance of being resilient. Share a moment from your time at UNLV that helped build resiliency in you.

It’s difficult to define any single moment, because in fact my entire experience as a UNLV doctoral student cultivated a resiliency that has propelled me into positions of leadership and service that I never could have imagined I would embrace. Yet, a moment of great significance that compelled me to acknowledge my resiliency occurred on Nov. 9, 2012, the day I successfully defended my dissertation.

That was the first time I was addressed as Dr. Holmes-Sutton, which caused me to pause and recognize all that I had endeavored to arrive at that point in life. That moment would later remind me that I possess great resiliency, and I can and will continue to persevere in all that I do. In fact, we all possess this resiliency.

If someone had told a 19-year-old you, “Today, you’re going to receive an Alumni of the Year honor,” what would your reaction have been? Disbelief. While I persevered and excelled as a student, graduating at the top of my class in high school and later in college, I am certainly reminded with each new adventure endeavored and conquered that I was continuously dissuaded by my high school guidance counselor from going to college.

As I relentlessly pursued an ideal of perfection, I was challenged by what I would come to understand was “imposter syndrome.” Despite realizing great academic successes, the echoed voices of others over the years had convinced me that my achievements were flawed and lacking—that it was only a matter of time before I would be unmasked. So many years later, I am humbly honored and privileged to embrace my perfectly imperfect and beautifully flawed 19-year-old self, and whisper one word to her: believe.

What advice do you have for today’s UNLV engineering students as they try to navigate our changed world?

Challenges yourself by setting both bold career and personal goals, and have the self-confidence that you can achieve them. Also, don’t subscribe to the notion that you must leave Las Vegas to enjoy a prosperous and rewarding career. No matter the profession, Las Vegas needs the great minds UNLV is cultivating to stay here and advance our community.

Piotr S. Tomasik

09 BS Computer Science

Most young people who encounter computer issues solve them in one of two ways: They either drop the glitchy machine in the hands of a savvy computer-repair technician or beg mom and dad to purchase a replacement.

Piotr Tomasik chose a third option, one that was far more complicated but also more rewarding.

“When I started working with computers at a very young age, and by the time I got to seventh grade, I was a computer lab administrator,” he says. “My passion for computer engineering really galvanized in the magical nature of being able to build software to solve my computer problems on my own.”

Tomasik’s interest in computer sciences blossomed in high school, so much so that when he chose to continue his education at UNLV, there was never a doubt about the major he would choose. Since earning his computer science degree, Tomasik has built a successful career that has focused mostly on building startups.

In 2014, Tomasik co-founded Influential, a Las Vegas-based influencer technology platform and social intelligence firm that uses artificial intelligence to optimize creative work, grow audiences and track online and offline attribution. During his six years as Influential’s chief technology officer, Tomasik has helped his company forge partnerships with tech giants IBM Watson, Facebook and Oracle, as well as WME, the prominent talent and media agency formerly known as William Morris Endeavor Entertainment.

A self-proclaimed “serial entrepreneur,” Tomasik’s impressive rise in the computer sciences world hasn’t gone unnoticed. In 2008, he was named to Vegas INC’s annual “40 Under 40” list, and last year he was asked to return to his alma mater to serve on the College of Engineering’s Computer Science Advisory Board.
Atsushi “Sush” Machida

12' MFA Fine Arts

“...it was the first time his mind’s eye witnessed art coming to life."

“When I was 4 years old, and I set out to paint a cruise ship,” recalls Machida, who grew up in Japan before moving to Las Vegas at age 18. “But after I finished the painting, all it looked like was a ship-shaped chunk on the water. Then my father came in the room and helped me add some water ‘splashes’ and such. Suddenly, my painting really was a cruise ship — it started moving, I heard the sound, I smelled the ocean. I felt the breeze. ‘It was a magical moment, one I’ll never forget.’ Machida didn’t know it at the time, but two years later his grandfather took a gander at his burgeoning ‘portfolio’ and offered Machida’s parents some advice: ‘If Sush wants to be an artist, encourage, support and invest in him.’

Thus began Machida’s artistic journey that eventually led him to UNLV, and to college. It proved to be a lesson both in perseverance and the positive role art can have in helping people heal.

Finish this sentence: When I look back at my college years, I believe..."

Those who elect to broaden their education by pursuing a graduate degree do so with the understanding that they’re signing up for two years of intense study in their chosen field. Christine Robinson fully acknowledged this truth when she decided to trek from Chicago to Las Vegas in the early 1990s to obtain her master’s in sociology.

Soon after attending her first class, though, Robinson realized her road to the finish line would be far bumpier than she had anticipated — and not just because of the heavy course load.

"Sociology as a field of study comprises a multitude of different and varying theories," she said. “At the graduate level, the depth of dialogue around these theories is significant. To fully know and understand each of them demanded that I allow tolerance for a reality that any single theory was plausible, at least in the beginning.

"A commitment to hearing varying perspectives before forming my own opinions and drawing conclusions has probably served me greater than any other takeaway from my years at UNLV.

It absolutely has served Robinson well in her role as CEO of The Animal Foundation, where she’s led a complete overhaul of an organization that was in dire straits when she arrived in 2007.

With the nation in mourning, the coronavirus pandemic has reminded us of the importance of being resilient. Share a moment from your time at UNLV that helped build resiliency in you.

The coronavirus pandemic has reminded all of us about the power and importance of being resilient. Share a moment from your time at UNLV that helped build resiliency in you.

I moved to Las Vegas from Chicago to go to graduate school when I was 23 years old. Until that time, I had never west of the Mississippi River. Learning to navigate a new city, building relationships, getting immersed in the graduate program, and all of the very normal trials and tribulations that come with each of these experiences taught me at a remarkably early age that I was capable of successfully confronting challenges and accomplishing goals. Those challenges and goals became increasingly significant and difficult as my life and career evolved, but my early time at UNLV laid a solid foundation at an important time in my life.

What words of advice do you have for today’s students as they try to navigate our changed world?

View change as an opportunity, not as the enemy. Doing so allows you to envision the possibilities instead of being trapped in worry. The changes we are experiencing in this very moment are certainly profound, but change is happening to and around us all the time — it always has been. That’s why each of us has learned throughout our lives to successfully adapt to the constant changes we encounter. So I encourage students to think of all those previous successes as building blocks for when the next change comes along. Because it will come. And it, too, will be an opportunity.

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Sagar R. Raich

What’s the biggest misconception people have about the legal industry and/or attorneys?

That they need a lawyer only when something goes wrong — and that when something does go wrong, it will cost them a fortune to resolve the issue. Our firm represents many clients who come to us before anything happens so that we can make sure nothing goes wrong. So it can be extremely beneficial to seek an attorney’s advice (many offer free consultations) before entering into a contract, deal, transaction, or even a lawsuit. And if something does go wrong, it’s important to find an attorney who understands your position and works with you to resolve the matter at a reasonable cost.

What advice do you have for today’s UNLV students as they try to navigate our changed world?

It’s imperative — now, more than ever — that UNLV students engage their Southern Nevada community after graduation. As alumni, it’s our duty to give back to the community that made our education possible in the first place.

Also, in our ever-changing world, it’s important that we take care of those who aren’t as fortunate as us. From nonprofits to assisting individuals with free/low-cost services, all UNLV students should give their time to support our community. As such, do what you can to help those who can’t navigate our justice system themselves — because we know how valuable your education is.

Michael F. Kawazoe

The coronavirus pandemic has reminded all of us about the power and importance of being resilient. Share a moment from your time at UNLV that helped build resiliency in you.

I was very involved in student government at UNLV and won every election I entered — homecoming king, hotel College senator, etc. So I decided to run for student body president, and after a landslide primary victory, I was heavily favored to win the general election. Feeling I was a shoo-in, I got complacent with my campaigning and paid the price. While losing that election was painful, I learned a great life lesson that has served me well both personally and professionally. Always work hard and stay diligent to the task at hand.

What’s the single most important characteristic a person must possess to have a successful career in hotel administration?

Work hard and stay diligent to the task at hand. It’s important to be focused, energetic, and focused on the present moment, whether that has since served me well both personally and professionally. Always work hard and stay diligent to the task at hand.
When most kids suffer an athletic injury that requires intense physical rehabilitation, their first thought is usually, “There goes my career.” When Edwin Suarez endured such an injury, one of his first thoughts was, “This could be my career.”

“I was in a junior in high school when I threw out my arm playing baseball, resulting in rotator-cuff tendinitis,” Suarez said. “It was during that rehabilitation experience that my interest in physical therapy first began.”

Suarez relocated with his parents from New York to Las Vegas in 1970 and went on to graduate from Las Vegas High School in 1988. He then moved West, eventually earning a degree in kinesiology with an emphasis in exercise science from California State University, Long Beach in 2000. Upon completing his undergraduate degree, Suarez returned to Las Vegas in exercise science from California State University, Long Beach in 2000. Upon completing his undergraduate degree, Suarez returned to Las Vegas and earned his master’s in physical therapy from UNLV.

He then set about serving his hometown community through Suarez Physical Therapy, a practice he founded in 2005 with the goal of treating Southern Nevada’s adult orthopedic and underserved pediatric neurological patients with their physical therapy needs.

Today, Suarez is recognized as three Suarez Physical Therapy “Care.Experience” certified centers located in the southwest, southeast, and northwest part of the valley, with a new northeast location opening soon.

What advice do you have for today’s UNLV students as they try to navigate our changed world? “Take it one day at a time and make the most out of every opportunity afforded to you — and whenever possible, afford similar opportunities to others. Remain open to change and be confident of your best judgment gleaned from your education, family values, and spiritual beliefs.”

During the coronavirus pandemic, we’ve seen numerous examples of teamwork at its finest. In what ways did UNLV teach you about the value of teamwork? “While working toward my master’s at UNLV, our Physical Therapy department facilitated a project with the school’s engineering department that involved myself, a fellow PT student, and two engineering students. Together, we worked to design a portable continuous passive motion machine (CPM) for a rehabilitation patient whose arm was paralyzed after suffering a stroke. The CPM not only helped our patient improve her arm’s stiffness and pain, but it allowed her to simultaneously go about her household chores, a commodity that was not afforded to her by her previous stationary CPM unit. It was an interesting project that allowed all of us to put into practice concepts we learned in our individual UNLV departments. Knowing that we as a team created something that improved the life of the recipient was quite gratifying.”

What does it mean to you to be recognized as Alumnus of the Year? “I feel honored to be selected as this year’s Alumnus of the Year. I feel that I have achieved the recognition that is due me. This is only part of the great experience that I have had at UNLV.”

Suarez received his master’s degree in physical therapy from UNLV in 2005 and was selected as the 2020 UNLV Alumni Awards Alumnus of the Year.

When did you know you wanted to pursue a career in law? Seventh grade. A classmate had been picking fights with students she perceived as weak. One morning she waited for me outside school, and even though I was petrified, I had to defend myself. Luckily, a teacher walked by, stopped the fight, and brought us both to the principal’s office.

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I also learned the importance of participating in discussions, even if you lack confidence. One day in school, I attended a presentation from Boyd alumnus and “Dreaming Big” panelist, Dr. Michelle Brown. Among other pieces of great advice, she told us not to be afraid to speak up during class discussions. Who cares if you get the answer wrong? The worst that can happen is you’l get corrected, which is exactly why we paid tuition — to learn. She said, “Once you enter the legal field, the consequences for not speaking up will be much greater. Use this as practice and get things wrong now so you can be prepared when it matters.” This advice helped me navigate my initial years as a litigator.

I required a massive amount of hard work, perseverance, and intelligence to earn a law degree, let alone ascend to the position of senior deputy city attorney for a major city. Yet even as Marisa Rodriguez lives her dream in real time, part of her can’t believe it became reality.

Although I wanted to be an attorney at a young age, I didn’t know how to pursue a legal career,” Rodriguez said. “As the first one in my family to graduate high school and pursue a college degree, there was nobody in my immediate circle who could help me navigate the path to law school. If it had not been for a colleague’s daughter who was in law school and shared with me her experience, I may have never gone to law school.”

While it took her roughly six years to bridge the gap between finishing her undergraduate degree and starting law school, Rodriguez made the most of her opportunity at the UNLV William S. Boyd School of Law. Besides juggling a grueling course load during her three years at Boyd, Rodriguez was on the most court team, served as managing editor of the UNLV Gaming Law Journal, and worked for the school’s Immigration Clinic and Innocence Clinic.

Upon earning her Juris Doctor, she served as a law clerk for the late Judge Susan W. Scann in the Eighth Judicial District Court, then spent more than five years working in the Las Vegas offices of the nationally recognized litigation firm Weinberg, Wheeler, Hodgins, Gunn & Dial. Earlier this year, Rodriguez assumed her current position as senior deputy city attorney for the City of North Las Vegas.

Even though the new job undoubtedly keeps Rodriguez busy, she insists she’ll always find time to pay it forward to those who want to mimic her journey but don’t know how to take the first steps. “Mentoring is so important to me,” she says. “I know there are so many other first-generation immigrants who have the desire and aptitude to pursue a law degree but may not know they can do it. I feel it’s my duty to help others achieve their dreams, just like my colleague’s daughter helped me.”

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Jill Campbell

Jill Campbell has spent her career climbing the corporate ladder, first with Cox Communications and now Cox Enterprises. As the latter’s executive vice president and chief people and operations officer, Campbell helps oversee a private, family-owned company with more than 50,000 employees and $21 billion in annual revenues.

Given her extensive and quite experience, it comes as no surprise to learn that her education is rooted in business; Campbell earned her MBA from Oklahoma City University in 1990. But it was her first degree — a bachelor’s from the University of Oklahoma — that truly set her up for corporate success.

“Sociology is a great base for any career,” Campbell said. “It’s all about the study of people, and any job you take will involve people and the unique dynamics that come with them. I’ve always felt like my sociology background gave me an advantage over others who were never educated or trained around what it takes to motivate and engage people.

“You can have specific business skills, but if you don’t have a basic understanding of how to communicate with people, you won’t get nearly as far.”

Campbell’s career at Cox began in 1982 as director of communications in Oklahoma City, currently is charged with leading Cox Enterprises’ family office, real estate, aviation, people solutions, facilities, security, and corporate affairs departments. That followed a stint as Cox Communications’ executive vice president and COO, where she oversaw daily operations with the primary goals of enhancing marketplace execution and growing the company’s millions of residential and commercial customers.

Throughout her career, Campbell’s leadership has been recognized with several prestigious awards. In 2000, the Las Vegas Business Journal named her one of Southern Nevada’s most influential women. Then in 2004, she received the Atlanta chapter of Women in Cable Telecommunications’ Woman of the Year Award, and four years later, the national organization named her the overall 2008 Woman of the Year.

Campbell’s professional résumé is complemented by an equally strong commitment to community-based endeavors. She has been a board member for a bevy of nonprofit organizations, including United Way, Boys & Girls Clubs of America, the YMCA, and Atlanta History Center. Additionally, she remains devoted to her alma mater through various charitable channels and as a regular donor.

Dr. Cynthia A. O’Neal

When Cynthia O’Neal was a fourth-grader, she watched as her mother took on the additional chore of returning to college to pursue a nursing degree. Turns out her mom wasn’t charting a career path just for herself.

“I developed a love for learning and a passion for nursing by watching my mom,” O’Neal said. “So much so that in the fourth grade, I wrote a paper that explained why I wanted to become a nurse.”

That goal remained unchanged when O’Neal arrived at UNLV in the late 1980s, already with a bachelor’s degree in hand. She not only completed the additional requirements to earn her nursing degree in two years, she did so while working night shifts in the state’s Las Vegas-based mental-health facility.

O’Neal again juggled coursework and a full-time job when she worked as a psychiatric nurse at Montevista Hospital while pursuing her master’s.

Today, armed with more than a quarter-century of academic and clinical nursing experience, O’Neal is the associate dean for undergraduate studies at University of Texas Health Science Center in San Antonio. Additionally, O’Neal — who earned her doctorate in nursing from Vanderbilt University — is the co-director on a state-funded grant that aims to increase faculty capacity for simulation while enhancing student clinical competency.

Not surprisingly, O’Neal credits her mom for instilling what amounts to a lifelong passion for a most noble profession.

“When I was in the nursing program at UNLV, I moved in with my mom, and the closeness we had always experienced rose to new levels, as I was then an independent adult,” she said. “I worked full-time while balancing a heavy course load, and her emotional support and encouragement gave me strength to excel and be successful. She still inspires me to this day.”
Lisa M. Segler

'11 MPH; '19 Doctorate Public Health

One look at Lisa Segler’s strong résumé reveals considerable achievements in the field of public health. What it doesn’t reveal, however, is Segler’s initial career goal was to be an optometrist.

That all changed with a single public health class she took as a prerequisite to get into optometry school. “As I learned about the power of preventing disease and promoting health, I realized I was on the wrong side of health care,” Segler said. “Most importantly, public health means serving your community, and community means everything to me.”

To the benefit of all Southern Nevadans, Segler has spent the past decade serving this community in a variety of public health roles: instructor, researcher, administrator, and advocate.

Soon after completing her master’s in public health at UNLV in 2011, Segler joined the faculty, teaching Health Across the Lifespan from 2012-16 — ironically, this was the exact same course she took as an undergraduate that steered her toward a career in public health.

Off campus, Segler lent her expertise to several organizations, including the Nevada Public Health Association (where she helped create a mentorship program to develop public health students and professionals across Nevada); 3Square Food Bank (where she directed strategic initiatives); and the Leadership Foundation of Greater Las Vegas, as immediate past president of the Nevada Public Health Association.

What did you learn from your time at UNLV that has helped you prioritize as a public health official facing the challenges of a deadly global pandemic?

“Public health crises, such as hunger relief, don’t take the weekends off. This means working long hours and having really hard days. I’ve learned to be relentless in helping others, quickly recharge my own batteries, and show up again like it’s the first time I have helped someone. My time at UNLV has taught me never to give up and never stop fighting, and that advocating for vulnerable populations is always worth it — everyone deserves health and happiness.”

During the last several months, we’ve seen numerous examples of teamwork at its finest. In what ways did UNLV’s School of Public Health teach you the value of teamwork?

“It taught me that our teams involve the entire community, not just the counselors with whom we work every day. Whether we’re collaborating with a nontraditional organization outside of our sector, other local public health entities, or members of a specific population, teamwork is essential to accomplishing our goals because lives depend on it.

“During the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic, the pandemic. This nontraditional partnership delivered groceries to thousands of seniors in the first two months of the pandemic. Without nontraditional teamwork, this wouldn’t have been possible.”

Susan M. Corbett

‘91 MA Mathematical Science

Susan Corbett arrived in Las Vegas in the late 1980s with a game plan: Enroll at UNLV to pursue a master’s degree in math education so she could go on to teach high-level courses. Immediately, though, Corbett was forced to call a life audible when she learned that the College of Education’s graduate program didn’t offer a math specialty.

Reluctantly, she walked across campus to the College of Sciences to inquire about its mathematics science major’s program. Now, to the layperson, the degree of difficulty involved in earning a master’s in math education versus math science probably seems negligible. Corbett knew otherwise.

“It was a definite change in my mindset, as a graduate degree in math sciences required a much more daunting path filled with additional and much more challenging coursework than a master’s in education,” she said. “But I went to the math department and found professors who were more than happy to guide me through the program.”

Corbett rose to the challenge and has spent the last three decades sharing her math knowledge with thousands of high school and college students, inspiring many of them to push beyond their perceived mathematical limitations. Following stints teaching math at UNLV and the University of Maryland, Corbett transitioned to Rancho High School, where she teaches Advanced Placement Calculus BC, an intense college-level course for which students can earn as many as eight college credits.

Corbett has been recognized with several awards, including the national College Board Siemens Award for AP Math and Science Teachers, designating her one of the nation’s Top 10 AP Math and Science Teachers for the 2004-05 school year. Two years later, the state’s chapter of the Air Force Association named Corbett Nevada’s Teacher of the Year. Also, in 2016, she was a finalist for the Kiwanis Clark County Educator of the Year.

As appreciative as she is for such accolades, Corbett’s satisfaction comes from seeing her students overcome challenges similar to the one she did when she was forced to shift gears in her graduate studies.

“I truly enjoy when, time after time, students come back from their universities and thank me for teaching them how to study at a university level,” said Corbett, who is one of only a handful of Clark County School District teachers with a master’s in mathematical science. “I am a much better teacher because of my training in math at UNLV.”
Service to others has been Bruno Moya’s mission his entire adult life. It started with a seven-year stint in the U.S. Marine Corps (including serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003) and has since continued with both his academic and career pursuits.

Case in point: After completing his psychology degree at UNLV, Moya simultaneously worked toward his master’s in social work while serving as president of what is now known as the Rebel Veterans Organization, a chapter of the national advocacy group Student Veterans of America.

In this role as president, Moya helped author a legislative policy brief aimed at establishing statewide standards for awarding college credit for military education, training, and occupational experience. The policy brief ultimately turned into Senate Bill 457, which was introduced during the 2017 legislative session and passed with unanimous approval.

A year later, after completing his master’s degree, Moya was one of eight mentors chosen to attend the Student Veterans of America Leadership Institute, a three-day leadership forum at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce that brought together 101 of the group’s top chapter leaders.

Today, Moya continues to serve the Las Vegas community as vice president of the Rebel Veterans Alumni Club and as a board member of the United Veterans Legislative Council. He also volunteers his time with multiple nonprofits within the community.

During the coronavirus pandemic, we’ve seen numerous examples of teamwork at its finest. In what ways did UNLV teach you the value of teamwork?

As the old saying goes, “Teamwork makes the dream work,” and while some choose to fight it, others go above and beyond to live by it. While at UNLV, I remember teaming up with fellow students to accomplish very important work, and those experiences have helped me during my time as a social worker. In my field, it’s crucial that individuals come together and exchange resources to achieve the common goal of helping others through difficult chapters in their lives.

What advice do you have for today’s UNLV students as they try to navigate our changed world?

Conflict indeed is good; it’s a teacher, it challenges us with change. And it’s a journey best walked with an open mind, a kind heart, and a consistent stride. How we lead ourselves through conflict will take us down a wonderful path filled with opportunities for immense growth. I often seek inspiring words in history’s most notable people, one of whom is the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, who famously said: “The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way, becomes the way.” Words to live by.

Rebels Forever is an inclusive membership program for alumni, without the membership dues. Every graduate of UNLV is now a Rebels Forever member. The UNLV Alumni Association is happy to welcome each graduate into this new designation as alumni. No matter where you are in the world, you are a Rebel!

This program promotes inclusivity and philanthropy to each and every graduate of the university. Your alumni association is committed to supporting all alumni, and to fostering a vibrant, lasting relationship between you and UNLV for life.
Although nobody has run a statistical analysis, it’s a safe bet that no UNLV faculty member receives the volume of email and voicemail inquiries as Michael Green. That’s the price Green (happily) pays for being the foremost authority of Nevada history. Want to know how Abraham Lincoln played an essential role in Nevada earning statehood? Or how Las Vegas, once nothing more than a desolate parcel of mostly uninhabited desert, became a town in 1905? Or how gaming became the Silver State’s primary industry (and the role politics played and continues to play)? Contact Green — for all of it.

After earning his degrees from UNLV, Green pursued his doctorate from Columbia University. He returned to Las Vegas to complete his dissertation, but soon took a detour, first taking a job as a history professor with the College of Southern Nevada in 1995. He would remain with CSN for nearly two decades — during which time he finished his doctorate in 2000 — until returning to his alma mater in 2014 as an associate professor of history. Besides teaching UNLV students and honors students about Las Vegas, Nevada, and 19th century American history, Green has authored or co-authored several books on topics ranging from the Civil War to Las Vegas’ first 100 years. He also published a college-level textbook Nevada: A History of the Silver State in 2015.

Away from the classroom and his keyboard, Green is a frequent guest speaker when the subject involves Nevada history. He also serves on the board of directors for The Mob Museum and the Nevada Center for Civic Engagement, and as is the director of both Preserve Nevada and the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association.

The coronavirus pandemic has reminded all of us about the power and importance of being resilient. Share an example from your career that showed your resiliency.

It’s something that, frankly, embarrasses and still haunts me: In 1992, after earning my bachelor’s and master’s from UNLV and completing the Ph.D. requirements at Columbia, I returned to Las Vegas figuring that I would finish my dissertation in a couple of years and get a job — a job I was sure would take me somewhere else. But in 1995, I was blessed to be offered the position at CSN, and I took it. But that, along with some professional commitments and personal matters, kept me from finishing the dissertation until 2000. I was resilient in staying with it, but it took far too long and I still regret that I couldn’t finish sooner.

Who is the single most important figure in Nevada history (and why)?

I’m tempted to say Parry Thomas (with due credit to Jerry Mack, whose name also is on our arena), because his impact was so widespread. He lent money to casino operators when few others would, he made known and anonymous charitable contributions that helped start UNLV, and he helped get Steve Wynn going in the casino business, thus contributing to the modern megaresort era. But I’m also tempted to say Abraham Lincoln. If not for the Civil War and his desire to be reelected and pass the Thirteenth Amendment, Nevada probably wouldn’t have become a state in 1864. At the time, Las Vegas was part of Arizona territory and remained so until 1867 — for all we know, we might have been UALV. Also, Congress passed our enabling act with some provisions that Nevadans had to accept for statehood. One was to ban slavery. Another was renouncing any claim to federal land — a reminder that one of the issues in the Civil War was federal supremacy. Come to think of it, that’s still an issue. But that’s how Nevada became one of the states with the most public land, which has shaped us to this day.

What advice do you have for today’s UNLV history students as they try to navigate our changed world?

I suspect they have more advice for me. They are far nimbler than I was at their age, thanks in part to technological advances and additional career paths available through public history and other fields that history students of my generation never considered. Back then, we thought your only career choice was to be an educator or maybe a journalist or lawyer — that was about it. Today, that path looks different to newly minted graduates, but I would say that fits with my advice: Be ready and willing to adapt. We know that the world is always changing; that means history is changing, too.
Larry Ruvo

Those who don’t know Larry Ruvo may take one look at his extraordinarily long list of business and philanthropic accomplishments and ask the same question: “You’ve done so much for so many for so long — why don’t you retire and enjoy some quiet time with your family?”

Of course, anyone who has known Larry Ruvo for any length of time would be able to quickly and succinctly answer that question: “That’s not Larry’s style. Besides, he loves Nevada.”

Indeed, over the past half-century, Ruvo has spent as much time spreading goodwill in his beloved state as he has building his business — Southern Glazer’s Wine & Spirits of Nevada — into Nevada’s largest wholesale liquor, wine, and beer importer and distributor. From supporting children’s causes to investing in education to creating the Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health — a medical facility in downtown Las Vegas that bears his father’s name and strives to eradicate Alzheimer’s and other neurocognitive diseases — Ruvo’s commitment to lifting up Nevada’s community is both unending and unparalleled.

That benevolence, of course, has touched the UNLV campus in numerous ways, most notably through UNLVino, an annual wine event that was slated to be renamed Evolution Food & Wine Experience this year but was postponed because of the coronavirus. Ruvo launched the scholarship fundraiser 47 years ago in partnership with Jerry Vallen, then dean of UNLV’s College of Hotel Administration.

Besides financial support — which includes regular donations to UNLV since 1975 — Ruvo also has lent his time and expertise to the university as a member of the Board of Trustees since 1995, the Palladium Society since 1999, and the President’s Inner Circle since 2019.

Because of his steadfast dedication to UNLV and other education institutions, Ruvo has been honored with numerous awards and distinctions, including the 2005 Education Hero Award from the Public Education Foundation; the 2009 Distinguished Nevadan Award from the Nevada System of Higher Education; and the Atriscel Award from The Meadows School. Ruvo also was inducted into the UNLV Gaming Hall of Fame in 2005 and is a past recipient of the UNLV Man of the Year honor.

“Over the years, I’ve sat back proudly and watched the school that I first knew as NSU — Nevada Southern University — become UNLV and grow into what is now an internationally recognized institution of higher learning. It’s truly a blessing to have it in Las Vegas.”

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The coronavirus pandemic has reminded all of us about the power and importance of being resilient. Share an example from your career that showed your resilience.

When we started our company with just a few employees and very few brands, we had to travel all over the world to try to convince suppliers that an alternative to their present distributor would benefit them. We never took no for an answer. I would repeatedly send letters and make phone calls — at that time, I may have even sent a few telegrams. But the constant exposure to the existence of some young upstart beverage wholesaler in Nevada paid off. Many of those early negative responses turned into positive responses, and many of those people we originally dealt with became good friends and remain so today.

Finish this sentence: if you want to be successful in the hospitality industry, you must...

...innovate, bringing to your customers new experiences. While doing so, make sure you don’t ever forget your employees — they should be part of any innovation. When employees are involved and invested in a new program from its inception and not simply told what to do, they’ll be more likely to buy into it completely. That benefits the entire organization.

What advice do you have for today’s UNLV students who dream of a career in the beverage industry?

Learn everything about the liquids you are serving to your customers — be able to talk about the different types of Scotch, the quality of the whiskies, even the differences in bottled water, wine and beer. And that leads to a broader piece of advice: Remember that knowledge is power. Here’s a story that explains what I mean:

A few years ago, a daughter of a friend who had recently graduated college came to visit me and asked for a job. I looked at her and said, “Tell me what you really want to do for a career.” She responded, “I want to be in the wine business. Unfortunately, I have no knowledge of it, but I’m willing to learn.”

I offered her a position and told her she could start in our training program the next day at a modest hourly wage. But I said if she were to stick with the program, pass mixology, wine, and beer education, and go on to get her sommelier certification, her starting salary would jump many folds. She ended up going to work at a California winery and enjoyed the experience so much that when the winery’s harvest was over, she moved to Australia so she could work a second harvest.

She now passed two of the Court of Master Sommeliers exams, and I’m certain she’s on her way to becoming a very knowledgeable addition to the beverage industry.

Again, knowledge is power.
Herb J. Santos Jr.

‘85 BA Liberal Arts

It’s been 35 years since Herb Santos Jr. last roamed campus as a UNLV student. But neither time nor a successful legal career in a certain northern Nevada city has diminished his affection for his alma mater—particularly how it helped shape his adult life.

“UNLV gave me the confidence to believe in myself, to believe that I could overcome any hurdle,” Santos says. “As a student, I was encouraged to pursue my goal of being a trial lawyer, and I learned how to deal with adversity, make my own decisions, and live independently. Through that process, I became confident in the person that I am today. UNLV has never let me forget that while I don’t live in Las Vegas, I will always be a part of the Rebel family.”

Born and raised in Reno, Santos traveled south to Las Vegas for his undergraduate studies and after graduation, he attempted to remain in his home state to pursue a law degree. But when Nevada’s only law school went out of business, Santos headed to the McGeorge School of Law at the University of the Pacific in Sacramento, California, and earned his Juris Doctor in 1991.

Santos passed both the Nevada and California bars on his first attempt, then launched a career that has focused on personal injury and worker’s compensation. As the owner of his own Reno-based firm, Santos has litigated thousands of worker’s compensation hearings and appeals, arbitration cases, and jury and bench trials. His hard work was recognized in 2018 when the Nevada Justice Association named Santos its trial lawyer of the year. He also was recently selected as the 2020 Litigator of the Year by the American Institute of Trial Lawyers.

Outside of the courtroom, Santos sits on the board of governors for the Nevada Justice Association; is a member of the American Association for Labor-Management Cooperation; and is a recognized in 2018 when the Nevada Justice Association named Santos its trial lawyer of the year. He also was recently selected as the 2020 Litigator of the Year by the American Institute of Trial Lawyers.

Santos Jr.

FRED C. ALBRECHT OUTSTANDING ALUMNUS OF THE YEAR

Fathers envisioned as fundamental to this country’s founding were the makers of a nation’s future. They were the men who established by the profession. So even though the practice of law is adversarial, the most important piece of advice I could pass on to new lawyers is this: Never let a case become about you and the other attorney.”

The coronavirus pandemic has reminded all of us about the power and importance of being resilient. Share an example from your career that showed your resilience. Whenever I think about resilience in the face of adversity, I always recall my law school “curveball.” When I decided to attend Old College School of Law in Reno—which at the time was Nevada’s first and only law school—they were going through the American Bar Association accreditation process. It was important, because to take the Nevada bar exam, you had to graduate from an ABA-accredited law school. After completing my first year, the school announced it was terminating the accreditation process and closing its doors.

Upon receiving the devastating news, I drove to McGeorge School of Law in Sacramento, where I requested, filed out, and submitted an application on the spot. I was admitted with one condition: I had to start all over with no transferred credits. I also had to quit my job as a social worker with a local nonprofit organization, move to a new city with my wife at one year, find a new job, and throw away the nearly $10,000 I had invested with Old College.

While many of my fellow classmates decided not to follow their law school ambitions, I knew my life’s path included a career in law and I wasn’t about to let something out of my control dictate my story. So I started all over, enrolled at McGeorge and secured a job with Sacramento County as a law clerk. After completing law school and passing both the Nevada and California bar exams on my first attempt, I received a job offer that put me on the path to where I am today.

I now look back on that period as a challenge to my character— it was the busiest time of my life, but it helped shape me into the person I am today. And for that, I’m grateful.

What advice do you have for today’s UNLV law students as they try to navigate our changed world? When I was a kid, my dad would drive me to school every morning, and on those days that I was frustrated, he would always say, “It’s almost summer. You are a short timer.” He was right. Before I knew it, that day’s difficulties became faded memories. The same theory applies to law school: It’s difficult, no doubt about it. But if you stick with it, you will get through it and eventually join the ranks of the profession.

When you get there, you’ll have the ability to help people in a way our Founding Fathers envisioned as fundamental to every citizen. You must, however, always follow the ethical guidelines and responsibilities established by the profession. So even though the practice of law is adversarial, the most important piece of advice I could pass on to new lawyers is this: Never let a case become about you and the other attorney. When you develop a relationship of respect with opposing counsel, you place your client in the best possible position for a fair and reasonable resolution of their rights.

When you look ahead to UNLV’s next 20 years, what do you envision? To look ahead, I first must look back in amazement at how far UNLV has come. When I graduated, there was no law school, no medical school, and no dental school. Today, UNLV not only has all three, but it has attained top research status by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. So just as UNLV has exceeded my expectations over the past 35 years, I predict the same thing will happen during the next 20 years. That’s why UNLV is so special. There’s no ceiling to the ambitions and abilities of our students, professors, and administrators. I have no doubt the future will be filled with exciting advances and additional accolades as one of the nation’s best and most respected institutions of higher learning.