

CONNECTIONS

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▶ PAGE 6

**ALBORZ NOORANI '16:
THE LONG ROAD TO
MEDICAL SCHOOL**



**EMPIRE STATE
UNIVERSITY**

CONNECTIONS

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EDITOR
Winnie Yu

DESIGNER
John Coleman

COPY EDITOR
Dan Kittay

PROOFREADER
Stephanie Lamphere

WRITERS
Skylar Eagle
Dan Kittay
Jacqueline Michaels
Kimberly Neher
Stephen Parato
Winnie Yu

PHOTOGRAPHERS
Shlomi Amiga
Joseph O'Dea

PRODUCTION
Progress Printing Plus

CONTACT
ConnectionsMagazine@
sunyempire.edu

ALUMNI WEBSITE
sunyempire.edu/alumni



An estate plan is not only about an orderly and good ending. It's also an opportunity to spell out the values that you cherished during your lifetime, which for me includes higher education and SUNY Empire.

- Hugh Hammett, Ph.D., retired employee

GIVE A GIFT. LEAVE A LEGACY. CHANGE A LIFE.



Consider supporting the future of Empire State University with a gift in your estate plan.

To learn more about planned giving and to explore your options, visit sunyempire.edu/plangifts or email Toby.Tobrocke@sunyempire.edu.



A LETTER FROM PRESIDENT VOLLENDORF



This fall, we welcomed the largest incoming class to Empire State University in our history.

Our students range in age from 15 to 88, reminding me every single day of our proud tradition of serving learners of all ages at our incredible institution.

While Empire State University has evolved with changing times, our mission has remained the same. SUNY's innovative distance education campus in 1971 is SUNY's leading online university today. We are New York's first and only online public institution. Student success has been—and will always be—our North Star.

For many of our students, the journey to degree completion is not straightforward. They often come to us after having attended one, two, three, or more institutions. Where higher education has previously failed them, our faculty and staff help get them back on track to achieving their life and career goals.

I deeply admire our students' perseverance. Look no further than this issue of Connections to read about their journeys and the good work being done every day to drive educational attainment.

One feature story highlights the journey of Alborz Noorani, MD '16, who was prohibited from pursuing a college degree in Iran. He enrolled at SUNY Empire as a refugee in Turkey. Despite all the obstacles he faced, Alborz earned his bachelor's degree in computer science.

But that's not where Alborz's story ends. This past spring, he earned his medical degree and is now on his way to a fulfilling and impactful career of service to others.

You can also read about how Shannon Pritting '22 is repositioning SUNY Empire's

library to close equity gaps among students by expanding open educational resources. He continues to grow our scholarly repository and digitize the university's archives.

I am thrilled to introduce and welcome Rai Kathuria, Ph.D., as provost, who arrived earlier this year. Learn more about his background in science and his vision to elevate our growing university academically.

For movie fans, this edition features a Q&A with Norma Jean McVey '19, who stars in Martin Scorsese's Western crime film "Killers of the Flower Moon" with Leonardo DiCaprio and Lily Gladstone.

You also can read about students' favorite memories of their mentors and learn how our faculty are making a difference in the lives of animals.

Put simply, this issue of Connections is filled with many of the great things happening at SUNY Empire. Our continued success is possible thanks to you and our entire alumni community—which is almost 100,000 strong!

Warmly,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lisa Vollendorf". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Lisa Vollendorf, Ph.D.
President

THE BULLETIN

SUNY EMPIRE'S GLOBAL ALUMNI NETWORK

Empire State University is entering its 54th year, and our alumni network continues to grow.

Our graduates come from all 50 states and 96 countries. You work in diverse industries, ranging from sports to media to labor. You are doctors and lawyers, bankers and businesspeople, artists and actors. You write books, compete in the Olympics, and tackle causes.

Our alumni are among the most determined, dedicated, and hardworking people. Many of

you came back to college to fulfill a lifelong dream to attain a university degree. Even as you took on the challenges of higher ed, you were raising families, working jobs, and managing households. You've overcome hurdles both big and small to cross that stage, diploma in hand.

Whether it's been decades or months since you got your degree, you are forever united by your tenacity and commitment to learning. Wherever you are, we hope you'll find solidarity and support in this vast and growing global network.



LOOKING TO GET INVOLVED WITH SUNY EMPIRE?

Visit: <https://sunyempire.edu/alumni/get-involved/>

NEW MA IN HIGHER ED



Empire State University has a new Master of Arts in higher education degree program. The program prepares students for a range of administrative roles as well as conducting research.

ENROLLMENT AND RETENTION INCREASING

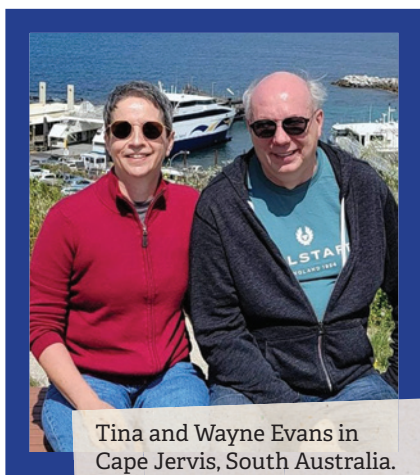


SUNY Empire saw its highest enrollment since 2018 this fall, with 11,139 full- and part-time students enrolled, a 10% increase over last year. Retention rates have also increased and are now at 79%, meaning more than three-quarters of all matriculated undergrads who enrolled in fall 2023 continued their studies at the university last spring or graduated during or prior to spring 2024.

ALUMNA SUPPORTS NEW LECTURE SERIES

Thank you to Empire State University Foundation Board member Tina Evans, Ph.D. '97 and her husband Wayne for underwriting the inaugural lecture in the new series, "A Snapshot in Time: Navigating the Wider World." The series is sponsored by the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and debuted in October.

The fall lecture featured Avriel Epps, a Ph.D. candidate at Harvard's Graduate School of Education, who spoke about how technology serves as both a connector and isolator; the challenges and opportunities technology presents for youth development; and strategies for harnessing technology's connective power while mitigating its isolating effects. The series will feature one lecture each term and be curated by Xiomara Giordano, the university's chief diversity officer.



Tina and Wayne Evans in Cape Jervis, South Australia.



USING GENERATIVE AI TO ANSWER

Blue, SUNY Empire's virtual assistant, is now using ChatGPT. Here's a Q&A with Alison Brust '14, assistant director of 1Stop Student Services, on what this means:

How does Blue work now?

When Blue receives an inquiry, she checks content libraries for an answer. These libraries are provided by Ocelot, our technology partner, and customized by our staff. If Blue doesn't find one, she will search her web knowledge sources, which is information gleaned from the university's web pages. If the question is unclear, she can now suggest other resources such as frequently asked questions, web pages, or knowledge base articles. In the past, she was limited to only the content libraries to answer inquiries.

How do we know responses are accurate?

We rely on human beings to review, correct, and check Blue's responses. Key stakeholders and subject matter experts at SUNY Empire ensure Blue's web knowledge sources are correct.

Does Blue know everything?

No, she learns with every conversation she has. When she doesn't know the answer, she provides an IDK form that goes to 1Stop for follow up.



The Long Road to Medical School

By Winnie Yu



When Dr. Alborz Noorani '16 set out to attend Empire State University's Manhattan commencement in 2017, he came face to face with world politics.

That year, the U.S. had an executive order barring people from Muslim-majority countries from coming into the country. Noorani was from Iran, though he lived in Canada.

Noorani was undeterred. With help from his SUNY Empire mentor Deborah J. Smith, Ed.D., he gathered the documents needed to prove his sole purpose was to attend commencement. He had no plans to stay in the U.S.

After some back and forth, he secured permission and went to the ceremony at Lincoln Center.

"It was a momentous trip for me to be able to come and attend graduation," Noorani says. "I was very, very happy to just be there."

For Noorani, getting to commencement was one of many obstacles he overcame to achieve his academic dream of going to medical school and becoming a doctor. Today, he gives credit to SUNY Empire for putting him on that path. "Everything happened because of Empire State," he says.

But it wasn't easy.

BANNED FROM COLLEGE

Noorani grew up in Iran, where the official religion is Islam. As a member of the Baha'i faith, he belonged to a minority religion and had been ostracized for his faith his entire life.

In elementary school, he was bullied by his peers when they saw he didn't attend prayers. In high school, he was denied access to the gifted and talented program because he was Baha'i. Once, a member of the clergy came to the school and tried to convince him to convert to Islam, telling Noorani he'd be more likely to get to college if he did.

By the time Noorani took the

college entrance exam required of all students in Iran, the country was allowing Baha'i to take the test but found other ways to keep them out of college. Some never received their exam grades. Others were denied entrance when they revealed their religious identity on their college applications.

Still others, like Noorani, were allowed to go — but only for a while. Noorani, who scored in the top 1% of his cohort, was admitted to Sharif University of Technology in Tehran as a computer science major. After two semesters, he was denied access to the portal when he tried to sign up for a third. "I knew this could be a telltale sign of me getting expelled from the university," he says.

Noorani demanded answers. He was referred up the chain until he spoke to the president of the university, who said the order to deny his registration came from Iran's Ministry of Education.

"I got to the individual who makes the decision in charge of registration for every student in the country," Noorani says. "He asked us not to bring any electronic devices to the office. He told us because you are Baha'i, you are not able to register for the next semester. He said 'You know that Baha'i have not had access to higher education. This should not be a surprise to you.'"

The man refused to provide Noorani with any documentation, saying it would be used against Iran in the international community.



Noorani, as a student at Sharif University of Technology in Tehran.

By not registering, Noorani would eventually be expelled.

A STOP IN TURKEY

For Noorani, being denied an education was devastating. Since the revolution in Iran in 1979, the Baha'i have been banned from institutions of higher ed as well as government jobs.

Four generations of Baha'i have gone through similar situations, including Noorani's mother, who was expelled in the final semester of her engineering studies. His father, a doctor, had finished medical school before the revolution and was able to work in low-income communities providing medical services. His older brother Sama was also denied access to college. When he inquired, he was expelled and sentenced to prison for a year.

With no options in Iran, Noorani knew he had to leave. "About a year after I was expelled, I left Iran," he says. "I

had to leave everything behind if I wanted to get an education. So, I left by myself for Turkey."

Once in Turkey, he applied to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees as an asylum seeker. While his papers were being processed, Noorani was assigned to live in the city of Denizli, where he rented a basement apartment. Twice a week, he had to report to the local police. He could not get a job and was forbidden from leaving without permission.

While in Denizli, he met a lot of Afghan refugees — mostly women and girls — who were illiterate. Noorani and some friends decided to organize weekly classes to teach the Afghans to read and write in both English and Farsi, the official language of Iran.

The experience helped Noorani endure his time in Turkey, isolated from his family. "You're serving your community, and that act of service helped me



Noorani at the University of Toronto.

through,” he says. “By the end of the time, when I was leaving, the people were able to read and write and communicate with us in text messages.”

A DREAM FULFILLED

It was also in Turkey that he learned about SUNY Empire. After taking an ESL course, he began working on his bachelor’s degree in computer science. “I am a very lucky person that that happened,” Noorani says. “It gave me hope that things would turn around.”

Smith, Noorani’s mentor and then a professor of community health and human services and now an emeritus professor of

nursing at SUNY Empire, met Noorani while he was still in Turkey. She had been tapped to mentor Noorani and 11 other Iranian students who’d been subjected to religious or political persecution.

Like most international students she knew, she recalls Noorani being highly motivated and industrious. She also remembers him being exceptionally kind. After meeting up with him in Albany in 2017 and going to Manhattan for commencement together, she found out at the last minute that she couldn’t attend because her mother was ill. Noorani walked her to the train station and later

sent flowers when Smith’s mother passed away. “He was always really nice,” she says.

Noorani was finally given permission to move to Toronto, where his aunt lived. While still taking classes at SUNY Empire, he enrolled at the University of Toronto to pursue an honour’s BS (HBSc) in biology. Noorani graduated from SUNY Empire in 2016 and got his HBSc two years later.

Unable to get into medical school, he decided to pursue a master’s degree in neuroimaging at the University of Toronto. He credits his computer science and biology degrees for forming the basis of his

graduate school research, which dealt with topics such as artificial intelligence in image processing and bioinformatics.

Two years later, armed with his master's, he got into medical school at the University of Toronto. During his first two years, he also obtained a Graduate Diploma in Health Research. The program focused on the use of technology for medical education in low-resource communities. Noorani graduated

—

“Everything happened because of Empire State.”

—

in June 2024 and is now doing his residency in general surgery at the University of Toronto.

Today, as a Canadian citizen, Noorani remains active in his Baha'i faith. He dreams

of one day performing and teaching general surgery in countries around the world, including the indigenous regions of northern Canada.

“It was a blessing in disguise for me now that I’m in a good country and a very good university,” Noorani says. “But the journey, if I were to go back in time, I may not choose it. The experience that comes with it will hopefully enrich my career.”



Noorani with his SUNY Empire mentor, Deborah Smith, in Toronto.

NORMA JEAN MCVEY '19

STARRING IN

KILLERS OF THE FLOWER MOON



Photo courtesy of Apple Films

When Norma Jean McVey '19 found out she was cast in a Martin Scorsese film, she started screaming. Her friends thought she was having a nervous breakdown. "I said, 'No I'm fine, it's happy screaming and crying,'" she says. "I'm going to be acting with Leonardo DiCaprio. Their minds were blown."

The film was "Killers of the Flower Moon," the true story of the murders of the Osage in Oklahoma after oil was discovered on their tribal land. McVey portrays Vera, the housekeeper for Mollie Burkhart, an Osage woman played by Lily Gladstone, and her husband, Ernest Burkhart, played by

DiCaprio. The film received 10 Academy Award nominations and seven Golden Globe nominations.

McVey was named after one of her mom's favorite actresses Marilyn Monroe, whose birth name was Norma Jeane Mortenson. Her mom also had a friend named Norma. As a child growing up in Watertown, NY, McVey danced and ice skated, and learned to love the stage. She left in her early 30s and spent a year in Albany, NY, before moving to Texas and then California.

While in southern California, she began performing in local theater and doing background work for shows like "Boston Legal," "Parks and Recreation," and "The Office."



Norma Jean McVey

On weekends, she did standup comedy and drove for Lyft and Uber, while raising her two sons as a single mom.

In 2015, McVey moved to Austin, TX, where she married Vaughn McVey. She graduated from Empire State University in 2019 with a bachelor's in interdisciplinary studies. We asked her about her path to an Academy Award-winning film and what it was like working with Scorsese, DiCaprio, and Gladstone.

How did you land the role of Vera?

I got an email from my agent Lydia Blanco about an audition for "Killers of the Flower Moon," and I said, "What is this, a horror movie?" I scroll down, and I see Martin Scorsese, my favorite director, the god of cinema. Then I see Ellen Lewis, the casting director. For an actor, that's the mothership. To land an audition with her is huge.

My husband set me up in the dining room with the lighting and everything. God bless him, I think he helped me nail this thing. Then, at his suggestion, I went to a costume shop and got a 1920s dress and a hat.

Ellen requested that I audition for three separate roles: Vera, the housekeeper, Robert DeNiro's wife, and his secretary. It was all by Zoom because Ellen is in New York. It wasn't a regular audition. She asked me to tell her about how I began acting. The one line they wanted me to say was "She won't see one." That was it. Ellen tells me, "I think the secretary role is too small and I don't see you as DeNiro's wife, because his character is



kind of a bad guy. I'm really considering you for Vera." You don't usually get that from a casting director. It's usually "We'll be in touch." But they don't call you if you don't get it.

What was it like meeting Scorsese?

I go to the set the first day, and they tell me they'll get me when Marty comes and let me know when he's ready to shoot. I'm on the top floor of the house, and I hear him. Now, I'm shaking in my shoes. It's gotten real now. Not only am I in the same house with the man but I'm going to meet him. And I don't know

what to do with myself. What are you going to say? Don't say anything stupid. I have improv and comedy training, and I don't know what to say or do.

They bring me downstairs, and Marty is standing there, and he says, "Hi Norma Jean, it's a pleasure to meet you." And he puts his hand out. I said, "Oh no, we can't be doing that. The COVID police are right over there. We have to bump elbows."

So COVID was part of your first conversation?

Yes. I have to protect Marty. This man is in his 80s. They told us we can't be shaking

“OF COURSE, EVEN THOUGH THEY’RE JUST PEOPLE, THERE’S A LITTLE BIT OF NERVOUSNESS BECAUSE NOW I’M ON A \$200 MILLION BUDGET FILM.”

hands. Don’t hug people. Not only were we wearing masks, but we were wearing these big face shields while we were on set. When you shoot, you take them off. But then you had to put them right back on again. They had these people I called COVID-19 police all over the set. They were monitoring because if one person got sick, it would have been a disaster. Fun fact: I was tested for COVID-19 54 times during filming.

What was it like working with DiCaprio?

Leo is a very kind human being. We were standing outside, and he had no idea, but I’d been at Planet Fitness and had been doing my arm workouts. I had these bags I had to carry. In between scenes, he said, “Norma Jean, would you like me to hold those bags?” And I said, “Yes, I would. I was at the gym and my arms hurt.” So, he was holding my props.

He was very sweet and approachable. I looked forward every day to watching him work. I never felt like I had a different SAG (Screen Actors Guild) card than he did. The only difference is he’s got an Oscar, and I don’t.

What about Gladstone?

When I first met her, we were in the makeup trailer together.



McVey, right, and Lily Gladstone

She said, “Hi, I’m Lily.” And I said, “Yes, I know. I’ve been following you.” And she said, “You mean like stalking?” We had a great laugh about that. And I said, “No, I mean I’ve been following your career. I watched you in “Little Chief.” And I had to apologize because I hadn’t seen “Certain Women” yet.

Lily was so kind and wonderful. I learned so much watching her, too. We became fast friends. I was lucky enough to watch her walk the red carpet at the Cannes Film Festival. It was amazing.

There were many other big stars in the movie, including Robert DeNiro, Brendan Fraser, Jesse Plemons, Tantoo Cardinal, and John Lithgow. What was that like?

I worked in Hollywood for so many years. They’re just people now. Of course, even though they’re just people, there’s a little

bit of nervousness because now I’m on a \$200 million budget film.

What was your first acting job?

I was renting a basement apartment in Watertown on a little dead-end street. There was a couple upstairs who volunteered at Watertown Little Theater. And they said, “Wow, you’re so naturally talented and you can do all these voices. We could really use you at the theater. The guy who runs it needs someone to play a waitress who can do a New York accent.”

So, I went and read the script and sounded like a “New Yawk” waitress. And he said, “Are you sure you’ve never acted before?” I said, “I’m pretty sure I haven’t. I really don’t know what I’m doing.” And I’ll never forget what he said. He told me, “You don’t know you know what you’re doing but you know what you’re doing.”

How has being in “Flower Moon” changed your life?

Not much (laughter). I’ve had a lot of auditions since we wrapped. I did land a co-starring role on a sci-fi podcast called “Celeritas,” which won Best Fiction Podcast Screenplay at the Austin Film Festival in 2022.

Sometimes it just takes a while. There’s a saying, “Right time, right place, right face.” All these things have to be aligned.

Meet Rai Kathuria, the New Provost

By Dan Kittay

Rai Kathuria, Ph.D. joined Empire State University in April as provost and executive vice president for academic affairs. He previously worked at the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities system and has a Ph.D. in biochemistry and molecular biology.

What are your priorities?

Establishing the College of Education is my first priority. It represents a significant step forward in expanding our academic offerings and impact. Secondly, fiscal responsibility is crucial. The Office of Academic Affairs, being the largest office, must ensure our resources are managed wisely to sustain and enhance our mission.

Lastly, we're creating new degree programs, which will enable us to serve a larger, more diverse student body. Our goal is to increase enrollment to 20,000 students by 2028.

What's your approach to forming the College of Education?

We're adopting a collaborative and transparent approach that engages our faculty, professional employees, and staff who specialize in education. By including these experts, we

ensure the new college is built on shared expertise and insight.

What attracted you to SUNY Empire?

SUNY Empire's reputation as a leader in online education within the SUNY system was a significant draw. My previous experience with online education aligns with SUNY Empire's innovative approach to education.

Additionally, the university's mission to serve a diverse student body resonated deeply. The robust Prior Learning Assessment office, which facilitates the seamless integration of students with varied educational backgrounds, is a remarkable feature. This commitment to accessibility and helping students achieve their goals was a major attraction.

Does a science background inform how you do your job?

Absolutely. Successful

research today often involves partnerships and consortiums, as funding and publication opportunities increasingly favor collaborative efforts over individual contributions. I bring this collaborative mindset to my work here. To move forward as a university, we must engage all stakeholders and harness the collective power of our community.

My scientific background also ingrained a methodical approach in me. Just as in research, where changes are made incrementally and studied before proceeding, I apply a similar strategy to organizational development.

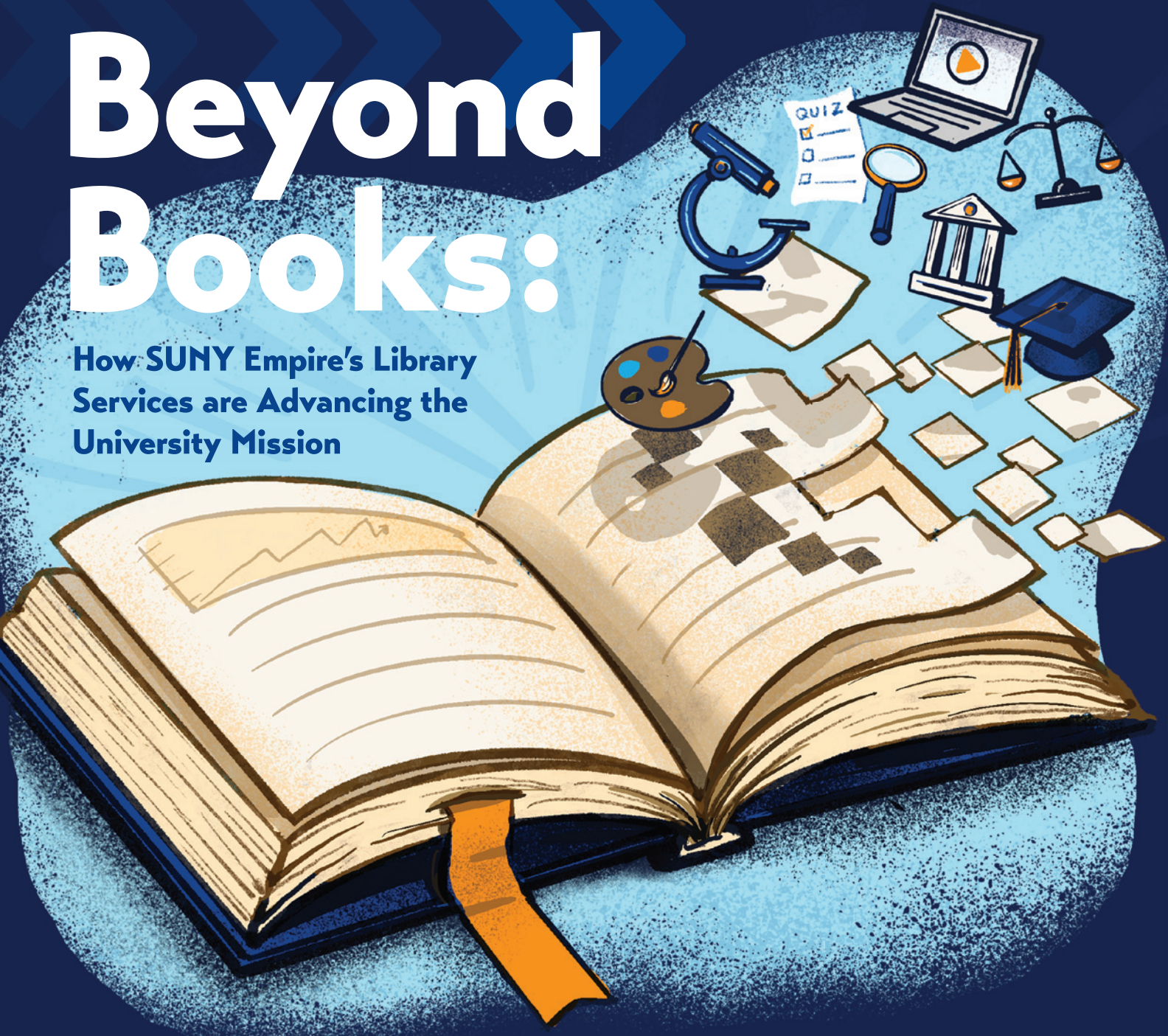
What's a typical Sunday for you?

On Sundays, I love to bike. It's a great way to clear my mind and recharge for the week ahead. Besides that, I enjoy a good book or spending quality time with my family. It's a nice mix of staying active and relaxing.



Beyond Books:

How SUNY Empire's Library Services are Advancing the University Mission



Under Shannon Pritting '22's leadership, the library is more engaged than ever

By Winnie Yu

As the director of library services at Empire State University, Shannon Pritting '22 knows that a library is so much more than a building full of books, especially at SUNY Empire,

where there is no such structure.

Instead, he sees SUNY Empire's online library as a tool for ensuring that all students can access the materials they need for their studies and a resource for enhancing the university's reputation.

"We're working on becoming

very user focused," says Pritting, a former radioman in the U.S. Navy who has a graduate certificate in project management from SUNY Empire. "We want to align ourselves with what SUNY Empire is about: access, quality, affordability, and equity."

A TOOL FOR EQUITY

Among the most effective tools for ensuring equity is OER, or open educational resources, learning, teaching, and research materials that reside in the public domain. Approximately 67% of SUNY Empire courses have adopted free resources, including OER.

OER gives students a less expensive alternative to pricey textbooks, thanks to less restrictive licensing agreements. OER enables students and faculty to use the resource at little or no cost and allows instructors to edit or remix the contents to better suit their students and course goals.

"You can use it multiple times for multiple people," says Jennifer Collins, SUNY Empire's first-ever OER librarian who joined the university this spring. "At its base, it's a more flexible resource for education."

At SUNY Empire, OER is becoming an integral part of the university's ongoing course review process, where Alena Rodick, Empire Online's director of Learning Design and Solutions, has created a team-based approach to the reviews. Several academic support units, including the library, work with faculty to create better, more accessible courses.

Pritting is also using OER to reduce equity gaps in courses where data reveal that students of other races have lower rates of completion than white students. With support from a SUNY OER Impact grant and assistance from instructional designers and faculty, Pritting



Shannon Pritting '22

recently identified seven courses where the data showed at least a 10% discrepancy in the rates of pass/fail, withdrawals, and incompletes among white, Hispanic, and African American students.

The team found that the equity gaps occurred mostly in STEM (science, technology, engineering or math) and language courses but also in other courses such as history and communications. Pritting worked with faculty, academic coordinators, and instructional designers, to find ways to narrow the gap with resources like OER.

Another tool in the library's arsenal: free textbooks. Since 2023, the library has been systematically purchasing as many textbooks as possible. The library now owns about 40% of all assigned textbooks, and approximately half of all course sections now have at least one textbook available for free.

Lowering textbook costs has the potential to benefit many students. "If a textbook costs \$250, which is quite common in 1000 level courses, students just won't buy it," Pritting says. "They say, 'I'm just going to Google things and figure it out.' But we don't want them to do that."

High textbook prices can also force students to change majors or drop out of a class, something Pritting wants to avoid. "We're focusing on how we reduce failure and dropout rates in classes by employing different technologies and different content, and by reducing costs with free textbooks and OER," he adds.

SHOWCASING RESEARCH

In addition to becoming a key partner in access and equity, the library is expanding its support for faculty and student research. Many students complete in-depth research assignments while at Empire, and most faculty are active scholars, publishing books, articles, and reports as well as other scholarly and creative activities.

"Research support is about capturing, distributing, and





archive in Saratoga Springs and overseen by longtime volunteer archivist Richard Bonnabeau, and Anastasia Pratt, SUNY Empire's official archivist.

Digitizing the archives began with a gift from Bonnabeau. The project recently received a NY State Regional Collection Grant to digitize and upload content around the founding of the university. Digitized documents will be featured on New York Heritage, an online digital collection about the history of New York state.

"Our faculty have been leaders in the area around adult education, research, and theory," Pritting says. "The grant will help us to feature some of the innovative ideas surrounding the founding of the institution in 1971, with documents to illuminate the foundation that has built such a unique institution."

With help from Bradley Towle, a graduate student in the master's in public history program, the archives are being catalogued and digitized in SUNY Empire's online library. The goal is to build a robust online encyclopedia that captures the history of SUNY Empire and highlights the university's status as an authority on adult learning, Pritting says.

"We want to be the resource that people consult on how to be creative and innovative in adult teaching and learning, increasing individualized education, and scaling online learning," he says.

analyzing research at all levels of the institution," Collins says. "We have students doing really amazing work. Through scholarly repositories, students and faculty get to permanently store and distribute their scholarly work."

Having a robust scholarly repository elevates the university's reputation. "It shows, 'This is the caliber of work our students are doing,'" Collins says. One student, for example, recently put her thesis in the repository and used a link to it to help secure a grant.

Even alumni can still post work done during their time at SUNY Empire in the repository. More than two decades after she graduated, choreographer and dancer Wendy Perron '01 reached out to Pritting about adding her master's thesis, titled "Imagining Justice: Artists Working for Social Change," in the scholarly

repository. "Looking back, I am still committed to the idea of artist/activists, so I'd like my paper to be available to researchers," she says.

SUNY Empire's repository is indexed by Google scholar every week and open to the public at no cost, giving the work a broader audience." For students and alumni, the repository can be a boon in a competitive job market. "You can say, here are examples of higher-level work that I have done," Collins says. "You can leverage that in many ways."

DIGITIZING THE PAST

The library is also building a digital archive of the university's history, which Pritting hopes will strengthen SUNY Empire's reputation as a leading innovator in adult education and online learning. Most of the university's historic papers are currently stored in an

Rewriting the Book with OER

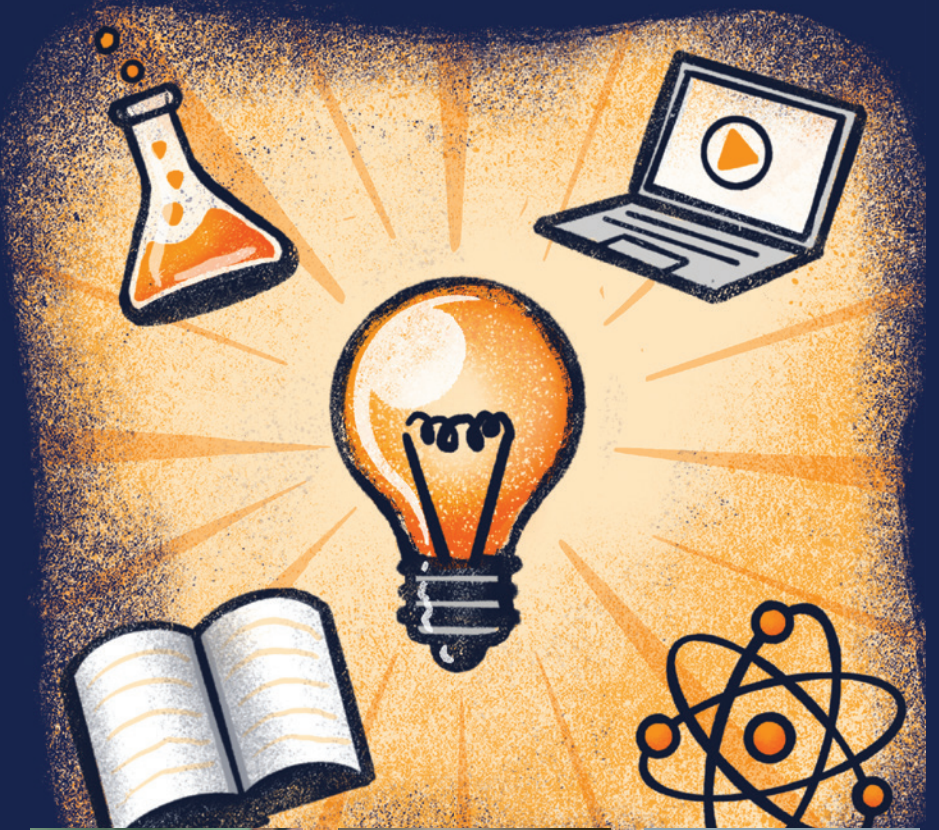
When Kelly Cattron set out to replace the current textbook with OER for her Statistics for the Social Sciences course, she discovered there wasn't a suitable replacement. So Cattron, the academic coordinator for psychology, rewrote the course content.

Her rewritten materials are now contained in Brightspace, the university's digital learning environment. Having the materials in Brightspace eliminated the need for a textbook, saving each student \$50.99 for an e-textbook or \$237.95 for a looseleaf version.

Cattron also used OER in this fall's Abnormal Psychology course using educational software known as courseware. The courseware includes a textbook, videos, self-assessments, and quizzes, and uses evidence-based techniques to reduce the equity gap, all focused on building connections.

"Research shows that students, especially those from underserved populations, are more likely to be successful in a course if they feel connected to their instructor, classmates, and the course material," she says.

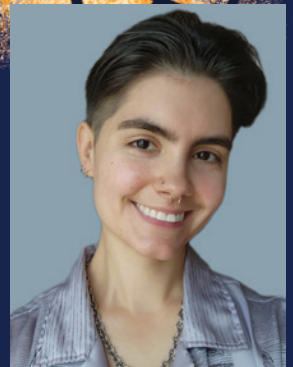
Once OER is in place, the librarians work with faculty to make sure the remixed materials are easy to use. Jennifer Collins, SUNY Empire's OER librarian, says her role is to make sure the new content is accessible to all students and well supported.



Kelly Cattron



Jennifer Collins



Alyx Arslanian

Alyx Arslanian, who is pursuing a bachelor's degree in sociology with a concentration in queer studies, says most of their classes have incorporated some aspect of OER, making an education more affordable and accessible.

OER is also more user-friendly. "It helps me access textbooks and resources online from any device," Arslanian says. "Additionally, OER

materials are often up-to-date and reflect diverse perspectives, which isn't always true about older materials."

Arslanian says they appreciate what OER does for students. "Educational resources can often be very expensive and exclusive," they say. "And resources that are freely accessible online help to democratize education."

Memories OF OUR Mentors

By Stephen Parato

Frodo had Gandalf. Luke Skywalker had Obi-Wan Kenobi. At Empire State University, our students have their mentors to guide them through their own hero's journey of higher education. It's something that sets us apart at SUNY Empire. Some mentors make a profound impact. Here's what some students remember of theirs.

Matt Philie '20 | Orlando, FL | Mentor: Diana Centanni

"Diana's most impactful advice was introducing me to Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) credits, which evaluated my work and life knowledge for academic credit. This not only saved me several terms but also thousands of dollars, making my education at SUNY Empire more accessible and efficient.

"Diana was invaluable in helping me pick courses each semester, ensuring I stayed on track and balanced my workload. Her guidance was crucial in completing my PLA credits, helping me include the right information and maximize my potential credits. She made sure my academic journey was smooth and efficient.

"One email from her stands out: "All mini goals are building to the ULTIMATE," a concept I now use to break larger goals into manageable steps. Diana's encouragement and this practical advice were pivotal during my time at SUNY Empire."



Gina Wierzbowski '24 | Glenville, NY | Mentor: Gennaro Bonfiglio



"I have a background in public service as a first responder, and I've held elected public office. I felt unable to coalesce those experiences and knowledge into a degree and career path. Gennaro was also a first responder for many years and had an excellent understanding of my background. This made it easier for me to communicate with him about my work and life experiences when planning my degree path.

"I thought I wanted to become involved in intelligence and surveillance. Through discussions with my mentor, I came to realize that my true passion is emergency management, that all my experience and knowledge were directed toward this area. Gennaro never pushed me toward this path, but his advice and insight were incredibly helpful in discovering that for myself."

Xavier Mantock '23 | Philadelphia, PA | Mentor: Teal Abel

"My mentor encouraged me to not feel restricted about being in the military and attending school, especially in 2023 when I had to deploy and didn't know if I'd be able to take and finish my courses. Professor Abel enabled me to complete my degree in a shorter period of time.

"She helped me a lot while I was in Syria. There were many occasions when registration or courses had to be altered to accommodate military life. Professor Abel told me she believed in my passions and aspirations, and that she knew I'd do well. It never left my mind."



Have a memory of your mentor that you want to share? Email us at: ConnectionsMagazine@sunyempire.edu



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To the Rescue:

How 3 Faculty Are Making Life Better for Animals

By Skylar Eagle

A young turkey on Nicola Allain's 20-acre sanctuary.

Whether it's creating a wildlife sanctuary in their backyard, or helping animals find new homes, some faculty members at Empire State University are actively working to improve the lives of animals. Meet three who are making a difference.

A BACKYARD REFUGE

Nicola Allain, Ph.D., dean of the School of Arts and Humanities, wildlife rehabilitator

Nicola Allain assists animals by creating and operating a wildlife sanctuary in her backyard and serving as a licensed New York state wildlife rehabilitator.

"As human beings in this world at this time, we have taken so much away from the planet, from

nature, and we've completely encroached by overbuilding and overdeveloping in a number of areas that were once wild and that were once habitats for all of these creatures," Allain says. "I feel a personal responsibility. If I can make a difference in the life of one being, then I've made an impact and started to give back."

All animals have different needs, and Allain cares for multiple species of squirrels and

wild turkeys. When rescued, the animals are released onto the 20-acre property she shares with her husband. The site serves as a nature preserve and "optimal soft release habitat," which allows animals to take the time they need to heal and readjust to their natural environment.

"When they're ready to be released, some of them might take their time to come and go, and then eventually leave,"

Allain says. "It depends on the age of the animal, the condition they came in, and whether they came to us as an infant or juvenile, or an injured adult."

Allain's interest in wildlife rehabilitation stems from her previous experience rescuing domestic animals. As a director for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) in Quebec City, Canada, she trained in animal rescue and rehabilitation.

In New York, most wildlife rehabilitators are home-based volunteers, including Allain. To become licensed, she studied and took an exam offered by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and participated in an interview. After that, Allain went through extensive training with North Country Wild Care and learned how to capture, transport, feed, and care for wild animals.

"We learned what their optimal diet is, proper handling and care, and how to recognize when they're ready for release," Allain says.

Allain says working with various wildlife organizations has enabled her to make a difference in the natural world.

...

RESCUING YORKIES

Julie Gedro, Ph.D., dean of the School of Business, Yorkshire Terrier National Rescue volunteer

Gedro serves as a volunteer with Yorkshire Terrier National Rescue (YTNR), a nonprofit founded in 1997 and



headquartered in Nashville, TN. YTNR is dedicated to rescuing, fostering, and re-homing Yorkies in their "forever" homes, as well as caring for their medical needs.

"When I applied to volunteer with YTNR, I had Yorkies of my own, and I loved them so much I wanted to be part of an organization that had a commitment to the well-being of Yorkies who were in need," Gedro says.

Over the last 20 years, Gedro progressed to state director roles, first in Georgia and then in New York. She serves as the point of contact for New York-based inquiries that come through the YTNR website.

"Situations might include the owner going into assisted living, or an owner passing," Gedro says. "Our rescues live in foster homes, and they are spayed or neutered, and heartworm tested and vaccinated before they are placed. They are also microchipped and medically cleared."

YTNR has helped over 4,000 rescues. Gedro considers this work a calling. "It is profoundly fulfilling, and I have made lasting bonds of shared purpose with people all over the U.S.," she says. "I have had the privilege and joy of being part of helping dogs in difficult situations, to have an opportunity for a renewed life."

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FROM THE HELM

Tom Mackey, Ph.D., professor in the School of Arts and Humanities, chair of the Board of Directors for the Mohawk Hudson Humane Society

Mackey's involvement with the Mohawk Hudson Humane Society board of directors began in 2017. His familiarity with the organization dates back to 1993 when he adopted his cat Jasper and then another cat Alfie in 2008.

"Even though I have contributed a great deal of



“I saw it as a great learning opportunity and a chance to give back to the community.”

— Tom Mackey

Tom Mackey, left, and his partner James Kellerhouse, with their dog Cowboy.

service in my academic career, I had never been a part of a community board,” Mackey says. “I saw it as a great learning opportunity and a chance to give back to the community.”

Mackey says the humane society’s mission statement and education initiatives are centered on protecting and helping animals, as well as the families who care for them. The organization also responds to hoarding cases and provides vaccinations, spay and neuter services, and microchipping services.

“A lot of people know about

adoptions, but there are so many other ways they serve the community, including running a pet food pantry, intervening in animal cruelty cases, providing a behavior helpline, and offering education programs,” Mackey says. “I appreciate that the organization supports the animals, in terms of finding forever homes and connecting them with people and families because I know, from my own experience, the importance of caring for a loving pet.”

Mackey says his current role as chair extends his academic work into the community,

resulting in a rewarding experience that centers on service. He works closely with Ashley Jeffrey Bouck, the president and CEO, and the board to move the organization forward. Together, they have developed a strategic plan and development plan, while reviewing and revising the by-laws and recruiting new board members. “All this work is informed by what I’ve learned in the academic world,” he says.

His two-year term as chair will end in November 2024, and he will serve another two years on the board.



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—**Rafael Roger '15, '21**, president of
The Business Initiative Corporation of New York



ALUMNI NOTES

1980s

TIMOTHY KENNEDY, JR. '83 retired from his job as artistic director of Buffalo Opera Unlimited, the company he founded in 1985.

1990s

WILLIAM G. FORD '92 received the doctor of humane letters from Five Towns College on Long Island, NY, where he earned an associate degree. Ford is an associate justice of the Appellate Division – Second Department of the Supreme Court of the State of New York.

ROBERT ROSETTA '95 was appointed to the board of ApTask Global Workforce, a global staffing firm. He will serve as its strategic advisor.

CHEF ROSSI '97 has written a book titled “The Punk Rock Queen of the Jews: A Memoir” (She Writes Press) about her transformation from a young Jewish girl pressured to conform into a queer punk rock rulebreaker.

2000s



IVAN RUBENSTEIN-GILLIS '05 released a new album of original songs titled “I (Still) Believe in Love,” which is available on all streaming platforms. He also earned a Ph.D. with distinction in sociology from The New School for Social Research, where he received the Alfred Schutz Memorial Award in Philosophy and Sociology.



DAVIDA KILGORE '05 has published a poetry chapbook titled “A Litany of SHE Poems” (Finishing Line Press).

DAVID SCHWED '06 has been appointed chief information security officer of Robinhood, a brokerage firm in Menlo Park, CA.

MILAGROS GUZMAN '07, an executive director at Morgan Stanley, was honored as a Latina of Influence by Hispanic Lifestyles, a digital media and event production company in Menifee, CA.



IVY STEVENS-GUPTA '08, '12 (on left) was invited by Carrie Natalie '23 to exhibit her work “Somewhere WAY Over the Rainbow” at The Community

School of Music and Arts in Ithaca, NY, where Natalie is the director of exhibits and programs.

GREG CHAKO '09 released his 17th CD, Standard Roots, which is a tribute to The Great American Songbook.

CHRIS SAPIENZA '09, commissioner of the Yonkers Police Department, received his Certificate in Public Leadership from the Harvard Kennedy School.



2010s

EHA URBSALU '12, '13 has launched her own certified organic skincare line, Viking Beauty Secrets.

DARLENE CORDERO '13 is the founder of Wellness Culture and has written a new book called "The Healers Playbook."



JOHN MATTHEW DOUGLAS '13 was the keynote speaker at the RISE "DEI in Healthcare" Summit this spring, where he discussed solutions for promoting diversity, equity and inclusion in U.S. healthcare and DEI's impact on the social determinants of health.

JOSEPH NEUMAYER '13 exhibited his images at The Long Island Center of Photography, which is housed at the B.J. Spoke Gallery in Huntington, NY, last July.



ALLISON KRAMPF '14, an associate dean of English at Plaza College in Queens, NY, has enrolled in the Ph.D. program in curriculum and instruction at St. John's University.

LISA ONDRA '14 works as an American Sign Language interpreter in New York's Capital District region and beyond. She is also a parent advocate for Hands & Voices of New York, a national nonprofit that supports parents of deaf and hard of hearing children.

JEREMY SCHIERMEYER '14, '16 of Rensselaer, NY received a Federal Retirement Award, a New York State Conspicuous Service Medal and a New York State Long and Faithful Service Medal. The awards were given by the New York Army National Guard after 24 years of service, most recently as Chief Warrant Officer 4.

MICHAEL COMPTON '16, vice president of information technology solutions for The Summit Federal Credit Union, has published his first book on leadership titled "The Leader, The Follower."

MARY HANCOX '16, '17 was appointed the internal control officer for the New York State Department of Labor.

RAQUEL LOWRY '16, the benefits and wellness program manager for Coordinated Care Services, was honored by the Rochester Business Journal as a "40 Under 40."



TANITA ALLEN '17, '22 was interviewed for the podcast "It Happened to Me," where she discussed her experiences with having Huntington's Disease.

GARY WAGNER '19, '22, director of veterans affairs contracts and public policy at Visually Impaired Advancement in Buffalo, NY, went to Capitol Hill with the National Industries for the Blind as a member of its Advocates for Leadership and Employment. The group was there to urge Congress to grow employment at the Department of Defense for people who are blind or have significant disabilities.



2020s

ROBIN HODGES '22, a graduate student at SUNY Empire, has received the SUNY ACT for Excellence and Student Initiative Scholarship, which recognizes excellence in academic performance and extraordinary commitment to a campus and/or community.

DESIREE LEE '22 recently published three coloring books geared toward promoting diversity, inclusion, and self-care.

Got news to share? Email us at: ConnectionsMagazine@sunyempire.edu

IN MEMORIAM

Wallace Allerdice
Nancy J. Azara '74
Edward L. Barlow '97
Charles Biasiny-Riviera '90
Norman Craig '82
Joan Daugirda '77
Edwin Decker
Janet Dick '94
Matthew K. DuBois '08
Sandra B. DuBois '78
Dorothea A. Flieger '73
Patricia A. Gaetani '90

Edna M. Gansz '72
Linda M. George '94
Margaret Ann Hill '75
Catherine I. Horton '02
Antoinette Laforest '82
Dana Leland
Richard T. Liebert '93
Walter Mainberger
George A. Martin '12, '13
Ralph P. Metzger '10
Ellen T. Mulcahy '99
Eileen O'Connor

Regina C. Parker '02
Treva S. Peavey '93
Richard Pfluger '76
Joel Polinsky '83
Virginia Power '82
Joseph P. Reid '83
Regina L. Rice '05
Kathleen Schlicker '09
Diane J. Snow '80
Sheila Thompson-White '06
David Wild Jr. '23



FROM THE ARCHIVES

PLANT AN URBAN FARM GARDEN

In 2010, Alejandra Delfin '14 won first prize for "Plant an Urban Farm Garden," a poster she submitted for Empire State University's Student Academic Conference. The poster was displayed in several SUNY Empire locations. Here, she reflects on its enduring relevance.

"This print was inspired by my community Hunts Point, in the Bronx, which is made up primarily of people of color who have been experiencing food apartheid for decades. This neighborhood houses the biggest meat market in the country, the Hunts Point Cooperative Market, which is part of the nation's largest food distribution center.

"But the immediate



community doesn't have access to this quality of food. And as a result of the high volume of trucks delivering the food, the air quality is poor, leading to high rates of asthma.

"My intention with this print was to explore the possibilities of having community and rooftop gardens, utilizing any available

space for planting to improve the quality of food and air.

"Unfortunately, Hunts Point's situation has yet to improve.

Prices of fresh food have increased, which only exacerbates the food apartheid issue."

Delfin is a gallery coordinator for the Longwood Art Gallery @ Hostos.



By Jacqueline Michaels

THE HIGH COST OF CAREGIVING

Jacqueline Michaels, Ph.D., RN, CNE is an associate professor in the School of Nursing and Allied Health who researches and writes about family caregiving for older adults.

With an estimated economic value of \$600 billion, family caregiving is one of the biggest businesses in the U.S. Caregivers provide numerous hours of free care to family members and friends and offer tremendous value to the long-term care system and American society. However, despite years of research and policy development in family caregiving, caregivers continue to struggle with visibility and the economic impacts of caregiving.

A recent AARP report estimated that in 2021, there were 38 million family caregivers providing 36 billion hours of unpaid care to adults with healthcare needs. A caregiver's financial security is severely impacted by the combination of caregiving expenditures and lost wages.

Caregivers spend an average of \$7,242 of their own money every year on caregiving expenses such as transportation, household and medical supplies, home modifications, and paid help. Sometimes, personal savings and retirement funds are used to cover caregiving expenses. Those who are

employed often find they need to reduce the hours they work by taking unpaid or family leave time. Some decline promotions or leave the workforce altogether to attend to their caregiving duties, resulting in about \$522 billion in lost wages annually due to caregiving responsibilities.

Current resources for family caregivers are not enough. At an average annual cost of \$24,700 for adult day care, \$75,500 for in-home health care, and \$116,800 for nursing home care, community and private resources are unaffordable for most people. Medicare, the federal health insurance program for older adults and younger people with disabilities, does not cover long-term services or supports, and provides no coverage for the personal care associated with caregiving.

Medicaid provides coverage for long-term care, home care, personal care, and transportation associated with caregiving. But before older adults can qualify for Medicaid, they must deplete their assets and income to a specific amount. The "spend down" rules are complex and vary across

states, making them difficult to understand.

The only federal work-related program to support family caregivers, Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), is not adequate for family caregivers. As an unpaid option, it is not always financially feasible, and covers only 12 weeks of protected leave. FMLA also excludes categories of family members outside of spouse, child, and parent, or a military service member.

Many families have no option but to provide care themselves in the home. As a former family caregiver, I know the financial toll that caregiving takes, not to mention the emotional and social impacts. I bypassed work promotions knowing I didn't have time to invest in new responsibilities.

It is important for us to bring the financial issues associated with caregiving to the forefront so we can understand its harsh economic impacts and provide better financial and workplace supports to the growing invisible workforce of one of America's biggest industries, family caregiving.



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