15 Hours and 59 Minutes

Story on Page 26
A Growing Knowledge: From Plants to Pollinators

In a cover story titled “A World Without Bees,” Time magazine this past year addressed the troubling disappearance of honeybees — leading to questions of what it may mean to humankind should bees, bats, moths, and other pollinating animals worldwide continue to face such threats as loss of habitat and pesticide usage.

What exactly do we know about the planet’s pollinators? As botanist Krissa Skogen ’08 Ph.D. is quick to point out, “For most, we know next to nothing.”

An alumna of UConn’s ecology and evolutionary biology doctoral program and a conservation scientist at the Chicago Botanic Garden, Skogen (pictured, second from right) has dedicated her research to exploring the vital relationships between numerous forms of plant life and the pollinators on which they depend for survival.

Her research has taken her from the prairies of rural Colorado to the dusky dunes of New Mexico’s White Sands National Monument and has recently received support from the National Science Foundation’s Dimensions of Biodiversity Program. This past year, Skogen was also featured on the YouTube web series “Plants Are Cool, Too!” — an educational botany series created and hosted by fellow UConn alumus Christopher Martine ’06 Ph.D. (far right).

Through her work, Skogen is beginning to gather answers to a variety of questions, including what role pollinators play in the life cycle of certain plant species. In one research project, she is studying evening primroses and sundrops, many of which are night-blooming wildflowers, and their chief pollinators, hawkmoths, which may travel up to an astonishing 20 miles each night on their quest to collect nectar from these fragrant blossoms.

“Projects like this help create a baseline knowledge about pollinators — bees, hawkmoths, bats — and help move the field forward and contribute to a greater understanding about plants and the insects that rely on them,” says Skogen, who also serves as an adjunct biology professor at Northwestern University. “Only through studies like this can we understand how that works and be able to make predictions about the consequences of loss of plants or loss of pollinators.”

Watch Krissa Skogen ‘08 Ph.D. at work at a.uconn.edu/desertblooms on the latest episode of the YouTube web series “Plants Are Cool, Too!” an “adventure botany” series created and hosted by her fellow UConn ecology and evolutionary biology alum, Christopher Martine ’06 Ph.D. (right). Read more about Skogen and Martine at a.uconn.edu/plants.

Botanist Krissa Skogen ’08 Ph.D. (pictured here, center, at White Sands National Monument in Alamogordo, N.M.) conducts research on plants and their pollinators in locations nationwide.

Photo by Patrick Alexander
PORTRAITS OF STRENGTH

In 1933, UConn students designated the husky as the symbol of strength that has come to define the true spirit of the University. Eleven proud alumni speak out about their own enduring spirit, sharing their darkest struggles as well as their greatest triumphs.

BIG IDEA

How might the disappearance of pollinators impact the world as we know it, from plants to humankind? With the help of the National Science Foundation, botanist Krissa Skogen ’08 Ph.D. has begun seeking out the answers.

After battling an eating disorder that nearly took her life, national mountain biking champion Jena Greaser ’10 (CLAS) started over at UConn, where she ultimately found — and followed — her path to healing. See Page 12.

VANTAGE POINT

Stephen Saloom ’90 (CLAS), ’96 JD shares how his work has been critical to turning over hundreds of wrongful convictions through DNA testing — and preventing future injustice for innocent inmates nationwide.

LEADERS OF THE PACK

Surviving against all odds, yet told he would never walk again, UConn student and motivational speaker John Tartaglio ’14 MBA is proving to people across the country that adversity does not define who you are.

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magazine.uconn.edu/app
Why did you decide to study wildlife management? Was that part of you wanting to become a firefighter?

That was definitely part of it. One of the things I learned early on in studying natural resources is that everything's connected. There are so many interrelationships between the disciplines of forestry, wildlife, soils, fisheries — you name it. That ended up becoming the foundation for how I view wildlife and fire ecology now. If you were just a basic firefighter, you wouldn't have the appreciation for, or the ability to really see, how specific tactics affect wildfire suppression.

How do you strike a balance between allowing a fire to run its natural course and preventing it from doing too much damage?

You have the ability to choose the tactics — there are different fire suppression and management styles. But when you're on the ground, and your mission is to protect property or life, you really don't get to have those choices. You have to put the fire out. The fire service has its priorities, and No. 1 is safety.

Why did you choose UConn?

I met somebody who had a significant role in my life, Dr. Tom Abbott (now assistant-professor-in-residence in molecular and cell biology at UConn). He kind of steered me along and influenced me. I ended up going with him to Alaska, to a small village called Kotzebue, and I spent a summer with him up there. He really opened my mind to all the possibilities that a young guy could have working with natural resources. I came to UConn because Tom was finishing his Ph.D. there, and I saw him as a role model.

What is fire ecology?

It’s the science of understanding the role that fire has had in the world’s ecosystems through evolution. Fire has been on this planet since this has been a planet with an atmosphere, and it's the only planet that we know of that has fire. It has shaped many of our ecosystems — our vegetation, our animal species. In the last hundred years, we’ve seen a great influx of fire because of some of the misconceptions we’ve had as human beings about fire’s role in the ecosystem. In modern society, we usually view fire as an enemy — something that should not be allowed to exist freely, something that needs to be completely managed and contained. That was never its role. Some of the severity and size of the wildfires that we’re seeing now on the national news is because of those policies of trying to overmanage fires, and not allowing it to exist in its natural ecosystem.

Nature of the Beast

Why did you first get interested in firefighting?

My grandfather was a volunteer firefighter in upstate New York when I was growing up. Then, in 1988, I was watching on a small black-and-white television set as the Yellowstone fire unfolded on the nightly news. I was hooked from that moment on, fascinated by what the fire was doing, how the wildlife was reacting, and the army of firefighters who were thrown headlong into the fray. I decided it was what I wanted to do.

When did you start fighting fires?

My first wildland fire was in 2000. I had kind of geared myself up by studying natural resources, forestry, and wildlife as a profession.
How do you assess the risks when you’re going in to fight a fire?

It’s definitely a challenge. ... There are moments in this career when you question the sanity of it. But the reward in doing it greatly outweighs some of the risk. The risk is always there.

You’ve fought fires throughout the continental U.S. and Canada. What’s it like traveling far from home to fight a fire?

That’s part of the adventure. You get flown into these beautiful, remote places, and essentially camp and fight fire along the way.

What’s the greatest reward of fighting fires for you?

The real-time problem solving. I honestly love having a situation or an issue in front of me, and having to solve it with what tools I have, in a given amount of time, for a desired outcome. It’s the MacGyver feeling.
The truth is not always what it seems. As senior policy advisor at the Innocence Project in New York City, UConn alum Stephen Saloom ’90 (CLAS), ’96 JD faces this reality on a daily basis. Here, he offers a closer look into his ongoing work to prevent wrongful convictions.

Imagine there has been a shocking murder in your neighborhood. The police question you and others. You tell them all you know, because you want to help them identify whoever did it. You start to realize, however, that the police think you did it. You’re stunned and panicked all at once, trying to reassure yourself. You’re treated like a murderer. You’re incarcerated, with bail set in the pariah, as is your family. You are the perpetrator. You are questioned further, and the police think something you said, or the way you acted, suggests your guilt. Yet you are taken into a lineup. The witness identifies you completely innocent. Surely, they will see that they’re mistaken. Yet you are taken into a crime — even though you are completely innocent.

You are arrested for a heinous crime — even though you have acted, trying to reassure yourself. Your face is plastered in the papers and on TV as the alleged wildfire. Your face is plastered in through your community like an arson fire … It was just a fire.” Willingham was executed nonetheless. But his mother and cousins never stopped seeking to clear his name, to let the world know that he did not kill the daughters he so dearly loved.

For nearly a decade, my career has focused on identifying, preventing, and remedying wrongful convictions like this. I work for the Innocence Project, a legal organization that uses post-conviction DNA testing to prove the innocence of wrongly convicted people. It is a policy reform organization that uses the lessons learned from each of the nation’s DNA exonerations to understand what factors commonly misled the criminal justice system into believing, beyond a reasonable doubt, that an innocent person is guilty of having committed a crime.

To date, 312 individuals nationwide have been exonerated through DNA testing. By examining these cases, the Innocence Project has identified the leading factors that contribute to wrongful convictions, from eyewitness misidentification to invalid or improper forensic evidence. We then advocate for the adoption of solutions proven to minimize these problems.

As policy director, I led the organization’s efforts to work with police, legislators, judges, and other criminal justice policymakers across the nation to implement reforms that will help prevent wrongful convictions — and increase the likelihood that the real perpetrators of crime will be found beyond a reasonable doubt.

While I find policy work satisfying, it can, at times, feel theoretical. It’s not often that I get to see for myself how the reforms we enact actually impact individuals. In one of my most cherished policy achievements, however, I helped a family clear the name of their son, Cameron Todd Willingham, who had been wrongfully accused, convicted, and executed.

Convicted in 1991 for setting the fire that killed his three young daughters, Willingham was executed in 2004 in Texas. Yet his arson/murder conviction was based on flawed forensic evidence — in cases past, present, and future — should be regarded as unreliable. As a result, the Texas Fire Marshal is specifically addressing these problems in past and present Texas arson cases, and new life has been given to exoneration proceedings in similar questionable arson cases across the country.

For me, cases like this will forever serve as a living reminder that policy reform is never simply a theoretical endeavor. It can, in fact, have priceless meaning for real people, in matters of life and death — and even beyond.
LUCAS MASSELLA '13 (CLAS) WAS 10 YEARS OLD when doctors told him that his kidneys were failing. “I physically couldn’t get out of bed to go to school. I had no energy at all. I knew something was wrong,” recalls Massella, who had always loved spending his free time playing basketball and various other sports with his twin brother and their friends. “I remember asking the doctors, ‘What are we going to do?’ And they said, ‘We don’t really know.’”

Massella had already spent more than his fair share of time in the hospital. Born with a birth defect called spina bifida, he had endured more than a dozen surgeries throughout his infancy and childhood. Although he had fared well, disproving doctors’ expectations that he would likely never walk, he now found himself feeling worse than ever before.

A malfunctioning bladder, doctors discovered, was causing Massella’s kidneys to fail. Because a kidney transplant would not resolve the problem, treatment options were few: Massella could either spend the rest of his life on dialysis or try an experimental, unproven surgery offered by Anthony Atala, a new doctor on the team at Boston Children’s Hospital.

Despite the risks, Massella’s parents opted for the latter. That summer, doctors removed a small piece of Massella’s bladder and, over the next two months, used it to grow a new bladder — one made entirely of his own cells. After a 14-hour surgery to implant the new organ, a month spent recovering in the hospital, and another month at home restricted to his bed, 10-year-old Massella finally began to feel better, itching to return to school and see his friends.

Today, Massella is known as nothing short of a medical miracle, an identity he admits he has come to embrace. “There were times when I was frustrated, thinking, ‘Why can’t I be like everyone else and not have to deal with this?’” he says. “But now I feel like it’s made me who I am.”

Gradually regaining his health over the next few years, Massella was able to return to playing sports, making it back out onto the basketball court with his friends, going on to join the baseball and wrestling teams from middle school through high school, and even becoming captain of his high school wrestling team. Eventually, he headed to UConn. A communication major, he studied among classmates who remained largely unaware of his celebrated status in the medical world — until his story began to make headlines following his appearance at a 2011 TED-Talk. There, at the celebrated conference series watched by billions worldwide, he reunited for the first time with the physician who had saved his life 10 years earlier, Dr. Atala.

Now 23, Massella has since been featured on a “National Geographic” special, served as a keynote speaker for the Regenerative Medicine Foundation, and has been written about in such publications as Wired magazine.

“I’ll always have spina bifida, but I’m totally happy with where I am. I’m thankful not only that I’m able to walk, but also play sports. I can now live close to a normal life,” says Massella, who today works as a special education paraprofessional and as a coach for his former high school wrestling team. “No matter what it is that you’re going through, you can always do what you can to fight through it,” he says. “You’ve got to use anything you’ve been through — good or bad — to your advantage, to make yourself the best person you can be.”

—Lucas

You’ve got to use anything you’ve been through — good or bad — to make yourself the best person you can be.

—Lucas

It was 1933 when UConn students so insightfully designated the husky as the symbol of strength, grit, and resolve that has come to define the true spirit of the University. In this special feature, UConn Magazine invited 11 proud UConn alumni to speak out about what defines them, from their darkest struggles to their greatest triumphs. And no matter how different their backgrounds, their hardships, or the mistakes they may have made along the way, that same enduring strength and indomitable spirit remains, living on at the heart of every Husky.
When an American couple began the process of adopting Mikey Chase ‘13 (CANR) and his twin brother from an orphanage in the slums of Honduras, doctors could not guarantee the infants would survive. To read Chase’s story, download UConn Magazine’s free app for your tablet device at magazine.uconn.edu/app or visit s.uconn.edu/spring14.

It doesn’t matter if it is a frigid, 11-below-zero winter morning or the 50th mile of a grueling summertime mountain biking marathon at an unforgiving altitude of 9,000-plus feet. Either way, you will find Jena Greaser ‘10 (CLAS) on a bicycle, putting the pedal to the metal.

“I’ve had races where your hands are so cold you can’t feel them,” Greaser says. “Or you’ve fallen 10 times, or your chain has come off your bike and it’s jammed and you don’t think you’re going to make it to the end, but you just keep going, and you’re cursing and it’s the worst race ever, and then you get to the end and you say, ‘I want to do that again.’”

At 28 years old, Greaser has clearly worked hard to earn her reputation as an elite cyclist. This past summer, she claimed the USA Cycling Marathon Mountain Bike National Championship title for her age category. And if her dozen of other bike racing titles are any indication, it is a sport she lives for every day of the year. But her ride to success was not always smooth. Greaser had long been a talented athlete, competing throughout her youth in numerous sports, including soccer, track, and ski racing, even attending a ski academy in Maine in her early teens. At 18, she entered her very first triathlon and won — not just for her age group, but for women overall. Yet lurking behind her competitive spirit was a gradually worsening eating disorder.

“I’m an athlete and I’m strong, but there was a difference between me and the popular girls at school ... I was a tomboy,” she says. “That was the beginning of it.”

By ninth grade, her fixation on athletic performance was consuming her thoughts. “I had to be perfect. I couldn’t let anything else get in the way,” she says. “I started internalizing that and pulling away — not socializing with friends, and working out all the time.”

Healing through therapy and the support of her family, Greaser thought she was through the worst of it, only to relapse during her first year at Smith College, where she had planned to compete in cross-country, skiing, and lacrosse. “I felt this weird pressure to prove myself all over again,” she says. “I thought I had to train harder than anybody to make an impression, to be accepted ... I started to use food as a way to control that.”

I started to understand the bike as a way to happiness. —Jena

This time, Greaser took an extended break, leaving Smith and working to recover fully through an inpatient program, while reflecting on what she wanted out of life. She arrived at UConn in 2007, eager for a fresh start. “At UConn, I just wanted to be me,” she says. “No titles, no strings attached.”

There, she discovered UConn’s Cycling Club, entering — and winning — races from day one. Excited for the approaching spring bike season, she bought her first high-end road bike, only to end up on crutches for four months after sustaining multiple injuries during a ski competition. “I felt I was thinking that whole time that I wanted to ride my bike,” she says.

When she finally returned to biking, however, her passion for the sport moved far beyond physical fitness. “It became a vehicle for healing, and not just sport or the adrenaline side of me,” Greaser says. “I started to understand the bike as a way to happiness.”

Crediting UConn’s Cycling Club with propelling her into the sport for good, Greaser continues to compete in mountain biking competitions, road bike races, and a hybrid form of bike racing called cyclocross.

Living in Ketchum, Idaho, surrounded by hundreds of miles of biking terrain, Greaser recently landed sponsorships through Scott Sports and the athletics organization Play Hard Give Back, which will help fund her racing endeavors — all while she attends graduate school and works a number of jobs, including as a ski instructor, mountain bike coach, and outdoor educator.

Despite her tough road to recovery, she has no regrets. “The eating disorder was kind of my way of coping with all different issues,” she says. “I feel blessed that I went through it because it made me who I am now,” she says. “Just be who you are and be happy, and if you’re happy doing what you’re doing, then you’re doing it right.”

Cycling has been that transformation for me. It’s helped me to value a holistic approach to what it means to truly live healthfully.”

—Stefanie Dion Jones ’00 (CLAS)
I never wanted to depend on anyone else. —Bessy

Born in Cuba, Bessy Reyna ’72 MA, ’82 JD immigrated with her family to Panama before the revolution. Curious and intellectual, she rebelled against the traditional roles expected of women in Latin American society. Adversity takes many forms, she says. “Sometimes it’s surviving a culture when you don’t want to be part of that culture.”

Her mother’s life served as a warning. “She was so bright, with so much to offer, but all she could do was take care of a husband and children,” Reyna says. “She wasn’t allowed to work, and I knew I couldn’t do that.”

Reyna discovered a love of poetry as a child in Cuba, and soon found that writing helped clarify her feelings. “A teacher selected me to recite ‘Los Zapaticos de Rosa’ by José Martí, the poet and martyr of Cuban independence. It was a long poem and, as I stood in front of the school reciting it, the beauty of the words and the meaning of the poem greatly affected me.”

A few years later, she began writing seriously in response to the death of a school friend.

Today, Reyna is an award-winning, bilingual poet, an activist and opinion columnist who writes on issues of gender, ethnicity, and equality, and a sought-after lecturer and guest artist. She is the author of two bilingual books of poetry: The Battlefield of Your Body (Hill-Stead Museum, 2005) and Memoirs of the Unfaithful Lover/Memorias de la amante infiel (Funtatral, A.C., 2010, Toluca, Mexico). In 2010, she was one of 10 women honored by the Connecticut Women’s Hall of Fame.

Reyna first came to the United States in 1968 on a scholarship to Mount Holyoke College. A first-generation college student, she says her father, who never finished high school, dreamed that both his children would attend university, something she and her brother, now a civil engineer, accomplished.

If there is a thread that weaves through the tapestry of Reyna’s life it is determination. “I saw women in cultural quicksand who couldn’t get out. I didn’t want that. I never wanted to depend on anyone else,” she says.

Graduating magna cum laude from Mount Holyoke, Reyna never did return to Panama to live, in part because of the military dictatorship. Instead, she arrived at UConn, where she earned a master’s in child development and family relations and a law degree.

UConn was also where she found community through activism. Joining students in working to establish the Women’s Center and the gay and women’s movement on campus, Reyna helped create various educational and social programs, including a gay speakers bureau that gave informative talks in classes. “Just being there and for people to see us as human beings was, by itself, an educational experience,” she says.

On her trips to UConn nowadays, she enjoys visiting the Student Union. “I see the Women’s Center and the Rainbow Center and the Cultural Centers, and I feel like a little part of me is there,” she says.

It was also at UConn that Reyna met Susan Holmes, then-manager of von der Mehden Recital Hall. The two, who were both activists in the marriage equality movement, have been together for 35 years, marrying just weeks after same-sex marriage was legalized in Connecticut in 2008.

Now retired, after 16 years at the Reporters of Judicial Decisions office of the Connecticut Supreme Court, Reyna is teaching and lecturing and pens an arts page for Identidad Latina, a Hartford-based newspaper. And there are poems, always poems. “Ever since reciting the poem in fourth grade,” she says, “poetry has integrated my life.” —Mary Howard
“You don’t have to go it alone.” —Khaliyl Lane

Khaliyl Lane

ABANDONED BY HIS MOTHER AT THE AGE OF 14, Khaliyl Lane ’10 (CLAS), ’13 MSW became a ward of the state, with nowhere to call home. Fortunately for Lane, Barbara Allison, the mother of one of his close childhood friends, welcomed him into her home, eventually becoming his foster parent. Allison knew Lane had potential and was impressed by his innate intelligence, his poise, and his grit. She took him into her home on one condition — he had to obey the family rules. He had to stay in school, be respectful, and do what was expected of him. Lane embraced order from his world of chaos. He is an individual of strong character; a young man who, through perseverance, resilience, and consistency, has been able to overcome is always your decision to make.

With Allison’s support, Lane graduated from high school with honors and enrolled at UConn. In 2007, he played cornerback as a walk-on member of UConn’s Big East Champions football team, while majoring in communication sciences with a minor in sociology. He earned his bachelor’s degree in 2010.

Time and again, Allison says, Lane’s inner strength carried him through. “No one is more proud of Khaliyl right now than I am,” says Allison. “He proved himself in the worst of circumstances. He is an individual of strong character, a young man of perseverance, resilience, and consistency. The last thing Khaliyl ever wanted to do was disappoint me, because he saw all that I was doing trying to help him.”

If there is a motto Lane lives by it is that “when life teaches you a lesson, learn from it. I believe everything happens for a reason,” Lane says. “So if my experiences can help others navigate through tough times, then I am making good on all of the help I’ve received along the way.”

After getting his bachelor’s degree, Lane enrolled in the UConn School of Social Work, working on such issues as human trafficking and poverty eradication. He would go on to earn a master’s degree in international social work, specializing in community organization and international policy.

Lane segued from his job at the U.N. to an internship with U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal. As part of his internship this past summer, Lane prepared a formal policy report on foster care and child welfare issues for the senator. “When the internship ended, Blumenthal hired Lane as a full-time assistant. Lane has recently been promoted to legislative correspondent.”

“From his first day here, Khaliyl was a hard worker and demonstrated wisdom beyond his years,” says Blumenthal. “I am proud to count Khaliyl as a member of my staff, and I know he’ll serve the people of Connecticut and the nation well.”

For anyone else who is facing a personal struggle, Lane wants them to know it is OK to look for help. “Even the strongest among us sometimes need a helping hand,” says Lane. “You don’t have to go it alone,” Lane says. “The ability to trust those that are worthy is an incredibly liberating experience.”

“When you’re told you have this chronic illness that could lead to death, you think, ‘OK, I’ve got to get more out of life.’” says Dominique (Soucy) Matteson ’03 (CLAS). To read Matteson’s story and watch her featured video, download UConn Magazine’s free app for your tablet or smartphone at magazine.uconn.edu/app or visit s.uconn.edu/spring14.

“Barbara is the main reason I’m talking to you today,” says Lane. “She’s an amazing person. She encouraged me to play sports, to keep a high GPA, to treat people with respect. I was able to turn my life around at an early age. She kept me from heading down the wrong path.” —Andrew Clark

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The call came from his agent in late 2012. The New York Jets were interested in bringing him in for a tryout.

It had been three years since Danny Lansanah ’08 (CLAS), a former UConn linebacker, had been in the NFL. But the Harrisburg, Pa., native had never given up on his dreams. Giving up was never an option for Lansanah. He was a role model, after all. Having spent the past year counseling at-risk youth in his hometown, Lansanah wanted to show the kids he worked with that there is always light at the end of the tunnel.

“I am able to show the kids that you can come from a rough area and still have a positive outcome in life,” says Lansanah, who ended up spending the majority of the 2013 season on the Jets practice squad. The year before the call from his agent came through, Lansanah had been serving as a counselor at Alternative Rehabilitation Communities in Harrisburg, which puts court-adjudicated youths through structured programs, from one-on-one education to group counseling. With a degree in sociology from UConn, Lansanah was providing support for at-risk teens who came from criminal backgrounds or suffered from drug addictions.

Even though he is now a plane ride away, Lansanah still makes it a point to go back and visit those teens he worked with “every chance he gets.” During the Jets bye week this past season, he went back to Harrisburg and stopped by the center. He says that it makes an impact for the kids to see his face and let them know that they are supported.

“Seeing their faces light up is priceless,” says Lansanah. “These kids are coming from the bottom of the totem pole. To see them working to get their GEDs and going through a transformation, that’s what it’s all about.”

TOUGHING IT OUT

Though the NFL was always his dream, Lansanah never wavered on his goal of counseling those in need.

“A lot of people grow up with struggles,” he says. “I wanted to help kids who grew up without role models. I wanted to show them that someone who came from the same place can do something good.”

Once his football career is over, Lansanah says he wants to get right back into counseling. For the 6’1”, 255-lb. linebacker, there’s something inimitable about having the chance to help others, especially those who have come from a similar background. Like the youths he has counseled, Lansanah grew up in a tough area. But rather than get swallowed by the darkness he saw around him, he chose a different path — and that’s the message he hopes to convey to the youths with whom he has worked.

“Where I came from was one of the worst areas of Harrisburg,” he says. “I saw drugs and violence. Being from the same areas, it helps the kids relate to me. … I’ve seen both sides, and they can see the road that I ended up taking.”
Danny Lansanah ’08 (CLAS), right, now a linebacker for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, was the team’s leading tackler as a sophomore, junior, and senior, playing from 2004 to 2007, he was the team’s defensive MVP and was named to the All-Big East Conference Team as a senior. Lansanah is particularly qualified to teach about perseverance. At UConn, where he wanted to do “it’s what I always wanted to do.”

BACK IN THE GAME

Now back in the NFL, the hard work hasn’t stopped for Lansanah. Each morning, he is up by 5:30 a.m. and ready to start his nearly 12-hour workday. Toward the end of the regular season, he is icing down and then hitting the hot tub, another two-and-a-half hours of practice, he is up by 5:30 a.m. and ready to start his nearly 12-hour workday. Following the field for practice at noon. And following another two-and-a-half hours of practice, he is icing down and then hitting the hot tub, another two-and-a-half hours of practice, he is up by 5:30 a.m. and ready to start his nearly 12-hour workday.

The hard work seems to be paying off. Toward the end of the regular season, Lansanah’s life changed once more — again for the better. Early this past December, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers signed Lansanah from the Jets practice squad, adding him to their active roster and giving him a chance to stand on the sidelines once again.

For Lansanah, this season has brought a feeling like none other. “It’s great to have another chance in the pros, he knows that your dream job,” he says. “It’s what I always wanted to do.”

As he continues to work in getting another chance in the pros, he knows that having the opportunity to put on that pewter No. 51 jersey on Sundays has an impact that gives them a perspective on what you can do with your life.”

The sixth and final book of Game of Thrones by George R.R. Martin.

The Anatomy Coloring Book, for everything that goes wrong as you grow.” —Nancy L. Troop, PhD.

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We asked our UConn Facebook fans, and here are a few of their answers!

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“Into the Wild by Jon Krakauer.” — Jeffrey Alton Jr. '04 (CLAS), '06 MA

“I Am Malala by Malala Yousafzai.” — Julie Nicole Rome '15 (NUR)

“Life of Pi” by Yann Martel. — Victoria Swy '13 (ENG)

“One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest by Ken Kesey!” — Julie Nicole Rome '15 (NUR)

“Easy, the World Almanac and Book of Facts!” — George Samuel Dominguez '85 (CLAS)

“Cybernothicom by Neil Stephenson.” — Aiden Wilens '15 (ENG)

“Hawaii by James Michener.” — Tammy Dorsey '78 (ED)

“The Godfather by Mario Puzo.” — William McGuinness '06 (ENG)

“The Alchemist by Paulo Coelho.” — Christie Silver '14 (ENG)

“Survive Ultimate Edition by Les Stroud.” — Jerry Taylor '06 (CLAS, MA)

“The Wild by Jon Krakauer.” — Lindsey B. Talbot '09 (CLAS)

“Life of Pi” by Yann Martel. — Victoria Swy '13 (ENG)

“Kon-Tiki: Cross-Culture in a Rain by Thor Heyerdahl.” — Michael Schrader '78 (ENG)

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leaders of the pack

One August morning shortly before he was to start his senior year of high school, John Tartaglio ’14 MBA woke up with what he calls “a really alarming pain deep in my legs.” “What he didn’t yet know was that an extremely rare bacterial infection — so uncommon that only 35 other people have ever been diagnosed with it — was raging throughout his body.

Over the next 24 hours, doctors did everything they could to save his life. Tartaglio, 17 years old at the time, returned to consciousness following what he thought would be exploratory surgery to devastating news: He no longer had legs.

The infection — the source of which was never determined — had spread so exceptionally fast that both his legs had to be amputated above the thigh. “A nurse came in and told me,” says Tartaglio, now 26, “I had tears in my eyes, and they were coming down my face, but I was just cold. I didn’t want to deal with it; I didn’t want to respond to it. I didn’t want to acknowledge it.”

That summer, one of his physical therapists suggested Tartaglio take part in a team triathlon. Then his prosthetist offered him the opportunity to try out a prosthetic that would allow him to run.

“I didn’t ever think I’d have the opportunity to run,” says Tartaglio, who laughingly admits he had despised running before his amputation. “That was a big mindset change.” Tartaglio went on not only to complete in a triathlon, but also numerous other endurance races — from a 100-mile cycling race to a half-Ironman. That summer, one of his physical therapists suggested Tartaglio take part in a team triathlon. Then his prosthetist offered him the opportunity to try out a prosthetic that would allow him to run.

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“It starts out as one thing,” he says. “Then I was thinking: How can I step it up? How can I challenge myself even more? For me, it has to do with being able to influence people and interning in business development at Philips in Stamford, Conn. He and his wife have a daughter, Lily, who turns 1 this month.

He also recently co-authored a memoir, From Tragedy to Triumph: The Story of John Tartaglio (No Limits Publishing, 2013), now available on Amazon. And this past October, he spoke at UConn’s first student-organized TEDxUConn (available on YouTube), a conference series that features lectures on technological, sociocultural, and global trends.

One of the main messages he shares with his audiences centers on his own personal mantra: “How far you fall doesn’t determine who you are; it’s how hard you work to get back up.”

“Regardless of who you are, you’re going to have adversity,” he says. “You’re going to face some type of obstacle. How do you quantify that? You don’t. You can’t compare my adversity to your adversity. It’s different. I don’t care who you are, what your demographic is, what your background is, you have it. But it’s not about that. It’s not about what your adversity is compared to other people. It’s what you do to face it, what you do to overcome it. That really defines who you are.”

With his UConn MBA nearly complete, Tartaglio says he will look to get back into road races while continuing with his speaking engagements. At the same time, he has his sights set on pursuing a career in the business world as an internal consultant, using the same talent he has worked so hard to cultivate these past 15 years: reaching new goals.

“For me, it has to do with being able to influence people and leading them to improve their performance,” he says. “I want to be able to help people get there. I like the idea of being able to help drive a strategy and have that bigger impact. That’s really the tie-in. Having the personal connection is what would make it something I’d be happy doing for a career.”
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