

UConn

MAGAZINE

FALL 2025

The Ortega Effect

Many hundreds of UConn alums credit this one professor for helping them cut through their confusion and fear to steer a purposeful course through college, work, and life.





SNAP!

LIGHT SHOW

In the Fall 2019 issue we wrote about a local artist we often spied at her easel on Horsebarn Hill. Blanche Serban was painting a different plein-air Horsebarn Hill piece a day for a full year. Last year she compiled all 366 of the 10-by-10 paintings for an exhibit at the Jorgensen Gallery on the Storrs campus. Here, a piece of autumn.



FEATURES

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THE ORTEGA EFFECT

He travels around the world studying large mammals, but ecology professor Morty Ortega’s work with the human species found all over Storrs, Connecticut, is the stuff of legend.
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PHEE AND STEWIE: UNRIVALED.

This is their league. In the ongoing fight for pro-ball equity, two UConn women’s basketball superstars have taken matters into their own hands, creating a league with riveting gameplay and the highest salaries in women’s team sports history. Players and fans are loving it.
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RIDING THE AI WAVE

Is generative artificial intelligence a friendly current making life’s ride a smooth glide or a gathering tsunami heading for a certain civilization-decimating crash? Depends who you ask.

SECTIONS

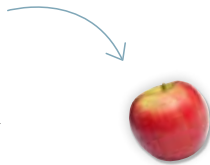
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UConn Now

You shared more mascot memories, and we caught up with the inventor of the SnapDragon apple. Plus, a former student manager takes the NBA title, the new head of student activities takes time to share some reading recommendations, Gina Barreca takes us all to school, and more.
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UConn Nation

What have alums done lately? Started a hot new toy company, launched an art gallery in Korea, been named top principal, and much more.



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FROM THE EDITOR



The Ortega clan, from left: Gabriel '04 (SFA), a video producer at Austin Community College and his spouse, Madiha Kark, a student advocate; mom Isabel '10 (CAHNR, CLAS), a teacher at UConn; Morty; Cristobal '15 (SFA, CLAS), a video editor in Chile; and Ivan '06 (SFA), a video game tech artist.

FAMILY MATTERS

Whenever I ask ecology professor Morty Ortega how he finds the time to spend so many hours patiently listening while students share their hopes, dreams, and nightmares, he’s quick to say that he sleeps only four hours a night. When I tell him that I think it still doesn’t add up, he starts doing the math. Some light is shed by the fact that his math includes summers, holidays (we are talking in his office on Labor Day), weekends, and round-the-clock time during his legendary trips (you’ll see). And then a smile, “Think,” he says, “how many years I’ve been at this.” That would be 30.

Ortega’s been on my radar as a story topic for perhaps the last 10 of those years due to the sheer number of alums I’ve talked with — as we trekked through forest tracking bobcats, bears, or voles; or chatted via Zoom about their jobs, projects, and inventions; or just talked about life over a cup of coffee. Most of those conversations were for stories in this magazine, but even hanging with friends or friends of friends, Ortega’s name would come up. The context, invariably, is a version of this: I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for professor Ortega.

I knew I needed to do a story on this professor who had variously influenced the lives and careers of so many students. Is there anything more at the heart of what a professor does?

Our story on page 16 introduces you to some of his former students and some of his secrets. But it doesn’t introduce you to his own family, the UConn alums shown above, who make it all add up for Ortega. “I wouldn’t be here without *them*,” he says.

Lisa Stiepock



FEEDBACK

We want to hear from you! Please share thoughts, insights, discrepancies, recollections, photos — and how’s your Tom’s Trivia win-loss percentage coming? Post to our website at magazine.uconn.edu, email the editor at lisa.stiepock@uconn.edu, or send by regular mail to UConn Magazine Letters, 34 N. Eagleville Rd., Storrs, CT 06269-3144.

Here’s a sampling of web, social media, mailed, and emailed comments on our last issue, edited for clarity and length. Find more and join the conversation at magazine.uconn.edu.

Being Jonathan



As a former UConn mascot myself, I really enjoyed reading “Being Jonathan” and seeing everyone’s

stories. I have so many I could share. I was only Jonathan for one season, but what a season it was: 1998–99, as in during the men’s basketball team’s run to their first national championship. While I did not work that game, I most certainly did attend it — which was even better because I got to share that moment with the most important man in my life, my brother.

On top of that, being the mascot my senior year at what is now known as the Basketball Capital of the World opened up a lot of doors for me. After graduating, I ended up working as a mascot for the Bridgeport Bluefish minor league baseball team for six seasons in what I consider to be some of the happiest times of my life. This led to other gigs working as many different mascots at birthday parties, parades, charity events — the list goes on and on.

Thanks for bringing back some great memories to this almost half-century-old man.
Paul Lockwood ’99 (SFA)
Bluffton, South Carolina

I was a balloon handler the first year UConn Stamford marched at the Stamford Thanksgiving parade. Marching behind Jonathan the Husky, I got to see how excited parade watchers were, especially kids, to see the mascot. It was an especially sweet



Imagine my delight at seeing an article dedicated to being the Husky dog. I was fortunate enough to be our beloved two-legged mascot from 1986 to 1988. Fantastic times indeed, including the NIT championship at MSG!

- 1) The Husky Slide started before me and ended after me.
- 2) It wasn’t all basketball/football/soccer. I was at polo matches, in seat belt safety commercials, and at staff retirement celebrations.
- 3) Somewhere there must be footage of the fight between me and the Holy Cross Crusader in ’88, which ended up with his mascot head on the court.
- 4) The fans were wonderful, even at away games — except for Syracuse. This is me and my grandfather at the old Memorial Stadium in ’86. Thanks for the trip down memory lane!

Tim Bartlett ’90 (ED)
Newtown, Connecticut

moment to be a UConn Husky!
Maxine Tobias ’16 MBA
Wilton, Connecticut

Me and my friend Dan Parzych, who shared Jonathan responsibilities for our junior and senior years, took

that slide to new heights before it was banned. I was the last one to do the slide because I had the last game that year, and it was in the old Civic Center in 1993. Great times and great memories. Hand stands, back flips, slides, and to be part of the first trip

to the Final Four for the Women’s Basketball team in 1991 (New Orleans) was really special. Hi, Dan, if you are reading this! Remember our comp — who could do the most slides during a timeout before the refs kicked us off the court? 13 ... good times!
Jamie Chambers ’93 (BUS)
East Lyme, Connecticut

What a great article. Such a family affair, and the dedication (and some danger LOL) that accompanies this responsibility was so entertaining and interesting to read about.
Jody Novitsky
Bethlehem, Pennsylvania

Great article about being Jonathan, but I was disappointed to not see my son-in-law. Sean Reilly ’08 (BUS) was Jonathan for all four of his UConn years. He has so many stories of very memorable events and important games. Being an alum, I have always been so proud to say I am a relative of a Jonathan!
Carol Bonney Roche ’78 (SFA)
Lordship, Connecticut

I totally agree, it was like being Batman.
Ron Albert ’80 (CLAS), ’84 DMD
Husky Dog 1977–80
Manchester, Connecticut

The Dynasty Lives
From 1972 to 1992 I was a faculty member, department head (nutritional sciences), and dean (CAHNR), where I learned to love and appreciate UConn women (and men) basketball players and coaches alike. I now live in Fort Collins, Colorado, where I retired as dean, College of Agricultural Sciences, and I continue to be an enthusiastic fan.
And I can attest to the fact that there a lot of UConn fans here too! Congratulations to Geno, coaches, players and the UConn family!
Kirvin Knox
Fort Collins, Colorado

Wonderful pictures and great story! Indeed, this UConn team was always here and never left the stage. Geno and his staff are the best, and hopefully they



The UConn Magazine is so much cooler than Villanova’s, who even is that guy in the robe
@BenJ6257

will be around for at least five more years and win number 15! All is well in the Basketball Capital of the World!
G. Hochberger
New Jersey

Thanks. Loved every minute of this fairytale story.
Michael Ritz

The Good Neighbor
Ms. Puzzo is an astoundingly fine person in times where cruelty has become the theme. She and her hearty crew give me hope that we can turn things back to being the most caring society on the globe. Thank you, UConn, for sharing Puzzo’s mission with us.
Jay B. Levin ’76 JD

The Ace
This is a great story! Thank you for the insight. I try to go to the Travelers Championship every year — it is a great event — and I have had my picture taken with Webb. I like him even more now for keeping his word.
Kris Mach
Southington, Connecticut

Volley for Mom
Thank you so much, UConn, for all the memories — Go Huskies! Grateful for having the best brother in the world!
Angelo A. Rossetti ’92 (ED)
Hamden, Connecticut

Correction: We apologize for spelling Rossetti wrong in the print issue!



Opened up the latest UConn Magazine to find Andy Bessette, a fellow Husky alum, share an inspiring message of how Travelers not only saved New England’s top golf event, but elevated it to become a Signature Event on the PGA Tour. “If you accept the status quo, ... then you are going to go backwards. You never ever stop trying to get better.” Not only is the event fun to watch, the tournament also raises millions for Connecticut charities. This is something to raise a glass to!
Erin Paternoster Vice



CHECKING IN WITH

SUSAN BROWN, INVENTOR OF YOUR NEXT FAVORITE APPLE

What does it mean to be queen of the fruit breeding universe? Well, consider that in 2024, the SnapDragon cultivar Susan Kotowski Brown '78 (CAHNR) created was named the official apple of the NFL's Buffalo Bills, received Poland's 2024 Innovative Produce award, and was named the year's outstanding cultivar by the American Society for Horticultural Science.

Brown is the Herman M. Cohn Professor of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Cornell AgriTech, an agricultural experiment station in Geneva, New York, where she has worked since the mid-'80s. But her journey to becoming one of the nation's premier fruit breeders is deeply rooted in the woods and meadows of East Haven, Connecticut.

"My mom had an amazing green thumb with both houseplants and her flower and rock gardens, and she taught me about native plants and their uses. My dad bred racing pigeons, so I learned about breeding and selection from him."

When Brown was "about 10 or 12," her interest in research was sparked when her mother took her to the annual plant science day at the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station's research farm in Hamden — a facility much like Cornell AgriTech. A few years later, she chose to follow her older brother, William Kotowski (who played football for UConn for two years before transferring), and older sister, Lynn Kotowski '72 (ED), to Storrs.

Her UConn education "rivals that of all the universities" she's been associated with, says Brown, because of its "great depth and breadth, small class sizes, and the ability to know your professor." She cites Edward Carpenter, Sidney Waxman, and

"... graduate students tease me that I'm the Yoda of the internet."

Ronald Parker as strong influences.

"Edward Carpenter's woody plant identification course was fun and useful. The fact that UConn received the 2024 arboretum accreditation probably was a result of his efforts in the past to diversify our landscape. Sidney Waxman's research on witches' broom was fascinating." And she really started seeing how all the pieces of research fit together while working on an honors project on the flowering plant vinca (*catharanthus*) with Parker, who was her faculty advisor. The lesson stuck.

"I am very obsessive about making sure I understand the literature on a topic, and the graduate students tease me that I'm the Yoda of the internet because I'm always searching for things by using different terms and finding different combinations," she says. Hoping to continue her ornamental horticulture studies, Brown went to Rutgers University in New Jersey for graduate school, but the only openings for funding were asparagus breeding or fruit breeding. Fruit breeding it was. She followed that field experience with genetics experience doing peach breeding at the University of California, Davis, where Brown learned she liked the professorial side of research, too. "I was also a teaching assistant, and I loved it." She started at Cornell

in cherry breeding, co-inventing 11 cherry varieties: 10 sweet and one tart. In 1990, she was transferred to apple breeding, "and the fun accelerated," she says.

That "accelerated" fun has seen Brown invent eight apple varieties, including the celebrated SnapDragon (from Crunch Time Apple Growers). She loves developing something with real-world outcomes, which "consumers are eating and enjoying," she says. "Having SnapDragon named the official apple of the Buffalo Bills and the Innovative Produce item in Poland was icing on the cake. My ancestors are smiling."—GARY E. FRANK



Susan Kotowski Brown's Top 5 Fruit Inventions:

Apples

SnapDragon (NY 1): This offspring of Honeycrisp by an advanced breeding selection has the favorable Honeycrisp attributes of juiciness, crispness, and flavor, with fewer of the grower challenges, including soft scald and bitter pit. *Pictured above.*

Autumn Crisp (NY 674): This favorite at roadside stands boasts crisp, juicy fruit, a great sweet/acid balance, and resistance to flesh browning when the fruit is cut.

RubyFrost (NY 2): A hybrid of Braeburn and Autumn Crisp,

this ruby red apple is great for fresh eating and baking, is resistant to flesh browning, and has high levels of vitamin C.

FireCracker (NY 109): FireCracker is a triple treat, as it is good for fresh eating, baking, and hard cider.

Cherry

Black Pearl (NY 8139): The Black Pearl sweet cherry is a hybrid of the Vernon and Coral Champagne cherries and is grown in New York, Michigan, Oregon, and Washington.



MOONLIGHTING

BROOKE GEMMELL SHOWS UP

On a rainy morning in Wolcott, Connecticut, Brooke Foti Gemmell '15 (SFA), '22 MA saddles Anna, a bay Arabian with the breed's classic dish-shaped face and wide, intelligent eyes. Gemmell moves with the efficiency of a woman who grew up around horses, pausing only to whisper an encouragement before tucking Anna's forelock under her bridle band.

"I love a horse who wants to be in

your pocket," she says, using an expression for affectionate horses. Her aunt, a trainer at this farm, lets two jubilant Boston terriers and a bossy goat named Abby into the aisle to say hello, and a moment of slapstick chaos ensues. Gemmell, here to train for a regional horse show coming up in Virginia, is in her element, with people and animals coming together to work and play, full of purpose and good humor.

National equestrian champion Brooke Gemmell with Anna at Sloane Training Center in Wolcott, Connecticut.

The Southington native shows horses in her free time, if you assume "free" is a relative word. She works full time as a design strategist at Greenhouse Studios in the Homer Babbidge Library and, with husband Joshua Gemmell '11 (ENG), '19 MBA, raises six-year-old Tommy — which only makes it more impressive to hear that last fall, Gemmell won her first national championship at the United States Arabian and Half-Arabian National Championship Horse Show in Tulsa, Oklahoma. She and her mount, a gelding named Party Nut, took first place in the amateur hunter pleasure class for Half Arabians. In this context, "pleasure" means the horse appears a "pleasure to ride" at a walk, trot, canter, and hand gallop. "I felt such an adrenaline rush as we entered the ring," says Gemmell. "I remember thinking, 'I love the horse I'm riding and can't wait to show him off.' He was just game for anything. We were so connected."

Hearing the judge call out her number was an experience Gemmell had been hoping for since she was a kid. "It actually happened — the trophy I'd dreamed of getting, the blanket of red roses on the horse," she says. "I just doubled over bawling. I had dreamt so long about the way it would feel."

Being an equestrian took on an urgency when Gemmell was 16 and suddenly floundering in school. Her family and stable mates gave her much-needed support while her now-deceased horse Kaz offered her comfort and focus. "I would get dropped off after school at the barn, and Kaz would just put his head on me and be close. He was such a grounding presence." Gemmell was eventually diagnosed with severe depression and anxiety.

Her family encouraged her to go on to college, despite her day-to-day trials. She did, but it wasn't a straight path, attending the Waterbury and Hartford campuses before settling in at Storrs. Along the way, she discovered

something else she was great at: art. She studied photography, video and communication design, and digital art. "The art program was more the way my brain works. I explore things visually," she says. "Once I got into the program, I started to get straight As and really get into my groove."

Her first job at UConn was archiving the U. Roberto (Robin) Romano Papers for Archives & Special Collections. An American photographer and videographer, Romano (1956–2013) documented child labor around the world. Gemmell brought a knowledge of digital files to the complex collection. Romano's images were heart-wrenching but deeply important. In 2017, Gemmell co-curated the exhibition "Lifting the Veil: A Photographic Archive of Child Labor in Light Manufacturing" for UConn's Business & Human Rights Initiative.

From there, she moved to the fledgling Greenhouse Studios, where she could apply her talents as a creative generalist. A partnership among the Library, the School of Fine Arts, and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Greenhouse Studios is a research incubator for faculty and students from across disciplines, offering a place to work through problems collaboratively. The answer might be a product — a website, an app, virtual reality, or something analog — but the research that goes into it is always paramount.

"Making is a way of knowing. Trying and failing at things is a way of figuring out a way forward," says Gemmell. "Part of the studio's mission, from the beginning, was to rethink the way scholarship is created."

Today Gemmell oversees the studio's brand, manages projects, facilitates groups that want to learn about design thinking, and — her favorite — mentors students. She remembers what it's like to be young on a big campus. "We've been lucky to have some of the students with us from their first year into graduation," says Gemmell. "You really see them blossom from having no confidence and asking a million questions to leading their own initiatives." She topped off last semester by winning

UConn's Student-Nominated Staff Career Advocate of the Year Award.

Gemmell has a keen awareness — as do many people who've endured hardships — of what sustains her. She needs camaraderie, a collective commitment to the work, and a respect for everyone's contributions. She has found that in equal measure among her UConn colleagues and her equestrian trainers

and stable mates.

At the barn, Abby the goat, who is *not* a team player, has butted her way into the indoor ring before Gemmell could lead Anna through the gate. A small posse runs in to wrangle her. Anna bobs her head, eager to work out. She is ready, like Gemmell, for a ride together that will be a total pleasure.

—ALEXANDRA KENNEDY



UConn Talks

TOP DOG

We're used to seeing former UConn basketball players on the rosters of pro championship teams. But a former student manager as head coach? That's a new one. Mark Daigneault '07 (ED) led the Oklahoma City Thunder through a dominant season to become 2025 NBA champions on June 22 — the first title in the franchise's history. Daigneault was the men's basketball team student manager from 2003-2007 under famed Huskies coach Jim Calhoun, who recalled their June 23 phone call to the Hartford Courant:

"I'm only calling the people who made a difference. And if I hadn't gone to UConn, if you hadn't been there, I wouldn't be here."

"I haven't teared up many times in my life, but I teared up then."

Coach Calhoun

Coach Daigneault to Coach Calhoun



3 BOOKS

Belonging and Becoming

UConn’s head of Student Activities **Trisha Hawthorne-Noble ’11 (CLAS), ’18 MSW** doesn’t have much time to read for pleasure. Since setting records as a track and field student-athlete, Hawthorne-Noble has never slowed down, balancing roles in Athletics, the School of Social Work, and now Student Success with outside work as a motivational speaker, life coach, and leadership consultant; motherhood; doctoral studies; leadership in church ministries and homeless outreach; and Moms4Moms, the affinity group for UConn staff and student mothers she founded in 2020. We let her put a twist on our format to find out what she’s made time to read lately.

For Work:



“The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness”
by Jonathan Haidt

My staff held a book club around “The Anxious Generation” because we are experiencing students’ increased anxiety levels. We’re really trying to put a handle on where Student Activities stands when we’re talking about sense of belonging and how to ensure that we’re cultivating an environment where students can feel that.

The book deepened my awareness of student mental health. We forget to validate how much our students are going through. We think smartphones make everything easier — but too much information is too much, and they’re not always able to decipher what is real. We’ve paused and asked ourselves what we need to do for students. If social media is our primary communication tool, are we unintentionally forcing students to be on it? Is it up to us to train them on healthy use?

We’re going beyond traditional metrics to evaluate our programs — using tools like focus groups. I like to randomly go up to students to ask how they’re doing and what they want to see at the University. If we give students the time of day, they’ll share their authentic opinions, and we can’t be offended. Students want to connect, to talk, and to be successful.

For the Kids:



“I Like Myself!”
by Karen Beaumont

Since my oldest, Jayne, was a little baby, she has said her prayers every night and then her affirmations: “I am kind, I am beautiful, I am smart, I am strong, and I am chosen.” Over time she’s added her own words, and now my daughter Jianna will add things like, “I am cute, I’m a superstar,” and I’m like, “Yes, baby girl!”

I’ll do the same thing for my son, Jamoy, when he gets older. One thing I need my kids to know is that no one should be defining them except themselves. I want to surround them with these messages so they are stuck in their brains. I hope one day when they need it, they’ll say, “I remember when my mom used to force us to do these affirmations,” and call on that.

“I Like Myself!” talks about how I might be quirky, I might be different, but that’s OK. I try to animate that for my kids because I do not want this world to write their narratives for them, especially as little Black children. I need them to be bold and to take up good space, not to cause too much trouble, but to be critical thinkers. I want them to be their own people.

On Deck, for Me:



“Becoming”
by Michelle Obama

I really love Michelle Obama. As a Black woman, seeing another Black woman push, persevere, accomplish, and remain true to herself is incredibly inspiring to me. She’s graceful, humble, and says it like it is.

Representation matters — and watching how she has carried herself in the public eye, under constant scrutiny, is a reminder to stand firm in who I am. Her journey and the way she continues “becoming” — evolving, tuning out critics, and staying rooted in her values — inspire me to do the same.

I’ve always lived by the belief that if an opportunity doesn’t align with my values or my purpose, I’m not taking it. Seeing Michelle embody that at the highest level reinforces that conviction.

In my current role, one of my purposes is to encourage, teach, lead, and inspire. At the core, it’s about empowerment — helping students and staff recognize the value and power of their voices. Like Michelle, I want to leave a legacy that shows what’s possible when you stand in your truth.

ON CAMPUS

And it begins! After a busy move-in day Thursday, Aug. 21, members of the class of 2029 gather around fire pits and glow swings on the Great Lawn and act like they’ve known one another for years rather than hours. There were no marshmallows in sight, but plenty of funnel cakes and caramel macchiato popsicles.



MAKING GOOD

SOMEONE TO TALK TO

This former Husky and Tampa Bay Ray invented an app to help student-athletes battle isolation.

“I just couldn’t get out of bed,” Bobby Melley ’16 (CLAS) says about that Sunday morning in his senior year when he’d logged 225 consecutive games as a starter on the UConn baseball team and sought to make it 226.

“I was so anxiety-riddled and isolated,” he says. “I ended up telling my coach that I had a stomach virus, that I must have eaten something wrong the night before. I ended the streak there, but I still didn’t tell anyone why and held up this strong exterior for a very long time.”

Years later, in his second season with the Tampa Bay Rays, on a bus ride through the Appalachian Mountains to a game in West Virginia, Melley says he just stared out the window, wondering what he was doing with his life and thinking about how miserable he was on the field every day.

Baseball — the very thing that had brought him so much joy as a child, the dream of playing professionally that became a reality — was now sucking the life from him. He didn’t pursue a second pro contract, and two years later, his long-stifled emotions erupted.

“I started having thoughts that I never imagined I’d entertain,” he says. “I did attempt to take my life. Luckily, I’m still here, and even though I’m not fully comfortable telling my story, it helps to vocalize it, to get it out.”

Melley believes that six years prior, as a young collegiate player, just talking to someone who understood the rigors of life as a student-athlete would have helped. If he’d just let down that tough competitive exterior and answered truthfully when someone asked how he was doing, it could have saved him so



“I worked my whole life for my dream, and I just didn’t feel comfortable showing weakness as a competitor, speaking up, and sharing how I was feeling. Because of that, it dragged me down.”

much heartache.

Helping people like Melley avoid the dangerous downward spiral that loneliness and self-isolation can lead to is a key mission of For All Ages, a Connecticut nonprofit founded in 2019 by alums Deb Bibbins ’87 (BUS), ’98 JD and Gary Sekorski ’85 (ENG). CEO Bibbins and COO Sekorski created intergenerational programs that connect individuals in communal activities, like the successful Tea @ 3 Community, which has paired more than 700 older adults and college-age students with similar interests for weekly telephone calls, and the annual Buddies & Bobbers Fishing Derby.

But a few years into their endeavor to foster social health, they knew they needed to address the loneliness epidemic. Research showed more than 60% of the population reporting being

lonely regularly. Knowing that such loneliness can fuel anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, they started the CT Collaborative to End Loneliness.

“Loneliness has a stigma associated with it,” says Bibbins. “People are afraid to admit they’re lonely because they believe others are going to view them poorly or think something is wrong with them.” And you don’t need to be alone to feel lonely. You might be in a room filled with other people and be lonely because you feel you don’t belong, don’t have a connection with others.

“We all need to be thinking about how to improve our social connectivity intentionally,” Bibbins says. “If we can get everyone thinking that way, we believe we can kick-start this movement. We believe that if we can gather enough momentum and build a movement

of social connectivity in the state of Connecticut, in a decade the collaborative won’t be needed — at least that’s our hope.”

The effort has working groups developing such initiatives as a screening for loneliness during annual medical exams. “We’re doing stuff that really matters, and we see results right away,” Sekorski says. “They’re simple things, that’s what blows me away. We’re not developing a billion-dollar drug. We’re not curing cancer. We’re just bringing people together, yet that’s just as important.”

Last fall, Bibbins and Sekorski brought together a panel of UConn students and alums, including Melley, to share their stories and talk about how they overcame their loneliness. It was part of a yearlong UConn Humanities Institute initiative to address the problem on campus.

Melley told the group the simple act of talking about his struggles has helped the most. He told them about SOAR (Student-athlete Online Anonymous Resource), the online forum he created for verified student-athletes to anonymously share posts about feelings, experiences, hardships, and anxieties. He says sending those things into the world is the start of healing. “Just to show that vulnerability is a huge step. A lot of people don’t get over that hump.” The app, which now includes a version for veterans, also offers users a list of professionals who can provide therapy and curb tragedies.

It’s an outlet, Melley says, he would have used from his dorm room at UConn.

“Times will get tough, and when they do you need to know there’s a place to speak up and somewhere to go where you can get the help you need,” he says.

“I worked my whole life for my dream, and I just didn’t feel comfortable showing weakness as a competitor, speaking up, and sharing how I was feeling. Because of that, it dragged me down. But if we can break through that barrier, hopefully by the time my kids are here and growing up, this won’t be an issue anymore.” —KIMBERLY PHILLIPS

LIFE LESSONS

GINA SCHOOL

“It’s virtually imperative for me to dispense wisdom,” writes Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor of English Gina Barreca in the introduction to her latest book, “Gina School,” in which she dispenses said wisdom — 103 bits of it to be exact. The beautiful little book, illustrated by John Guillemette ’22 (BGS), will be out this October from Woodhall Press. Here’s a sneak peek.

I’m Not a Fan

of products promoted as “anti-aging.” The opposite of aging isn’t staying young. The opposite of aging is death.

First Loves

are adorable. Last loves are magnificent.



Don’t Ask

questions if you’re unwilling to deal with the answers. Truth takes courage to hear as well as to speak.

You Earn Your Courage,



you build on your courage, and, when necessary, you can draw on your courage. You probably have more than you realize. Use it; don’t hide it, hide behind it, or allow it to be buried with you. You’re braver than you think.

The Intensity

of an emotion does not imply the durability of that emotion.



Life Itself Is a Group Project:

We’ve all got a deadline. We have to forgive those who let us down the way we hope to be forgiven by those we’ve disappointed.



OFF CAMPUS

SEOUL MATES

When University photographer Peter Morenus asks if you want him to photograph three Huskies in South Korea during his family vacation, you say yes. With a combined 55 years of UConn employment between them, Peter and his wife, Jen, assistant director of the Puerto Rican/Latin American Cultural Center, are the kind of people who have connections all over campus — and, as we recently learned, very far from campus. Which is how they ended up bringing together three alum friends of Jen’s who all happened to be living in her home country to take a picture for our magazine.

One way or another, **Jen Morenus ’97 (SFA), ’18 MA** had a hand in sup-

porting each of them on their journey to Korea, where she lived until she was 14 and visits often.

Mike Nelson ’10 (CLAS) was born in Korea and adopted by American parents at four months old. Other staff who knew of his interest in Korea introduced him to Jen while he was a student, and he became closer with her while working at the UConn Foundation after graduating. As he learned more about his birth country — and with Jen’s encouragement to learn the language and travel there — it became his goal to one day move to South Korea.

“Simply put, without the academic and personal encouragement from the

University, I never would have made it out here,” says Nelson, who realized his goal in August 2013. He has lived in the capital city of Seoul since summer 2016, teaching English, working as an academic tutor for a study abroad agency, and now starting his own business.

Chelsea Hopson ’16 (CLAS), a kindergarten teacher who lived in Seoul, Suwon, and other places for more than nine years ending in March, moved there soon after graduation. She became interested in Korea in high school, began studying the language, and studied abroad there during her senior year at UConn. **Nadejah Green ’19 (ED), ’20 MA, Cert.**, an elementary school teacher in Dunnage — a rural town in the country’s eastern part — had been interested in modern Korean history, and Jen, thinking she might mesh well with the culture, encouraged



her to apply for jobs there. She moved in 2021.

The three had never met prior to the day last summer they spent with the Morenuses, tasting traditional Korean liquor, walking around Seoul while Pete snapped the shutter, and enjoying dinner together. “Even though we all have extremely different backgrounds, grad years, majors, and interests, being from UConn is more than enough to connect us and keep us talking,” Nelson says of Hopson, Green, and other students he’s met in Korea through Jen.

In May, he met the eight current students Jen brought to Korea for the first “Summer Exploring Contemporary South Korea” trip and 3-credit course. So deep is Jen’s love for travel and passion for her home country and for encouraging students to travel abroad that this year she devised an Experiential Global Learning offering that

immerses students in Korea’s food and modern culture as well as its history.

By bullet train and coach they traversed the country, touring cities and visiting historic sites and museums. Students wrote in their reflections that they were particularly moved by trips to the May 18th Democratic Uprising archives, which is on the UNESCO Memory of the World registry, and the House of Sharing — a residence for living “comfort women” alongside a museum about their experiences.

“It was a long and hard trip there, and everyone was exhausted, so I asked them, ‘Do you think going to House of Sharing was worth it, or should I consider skipping it next time?’” Morenus says. “And they’re like, ‘Absolutely not. You have to bring students here, year after year. It was just so moving and so deep.’” They were assigned book chapters to read and films to watch,

Left: At Gyeongbokgung, a 14th-century palace, admission is free with the \$16 rental of traditional Korean dress known as hanbok. From left: Zaimarie Cabrera ’26 (NUR); Elviany Quiroz ’26 (BUS); Abigail Bonsu ’26 (CLAS); Maleekah Fong ’28 (CLAS); Jen Morenus ’97 (SFA), ’18 MA; Riley Dupont ’28 (CAHNR); Emma Hall ’26 (ED); Jazlin Marco ’26 (CLAS); and Mischa Young ’26 (CLAS).

Right, from left: Green, Hopson, and Nelson near Bukchon Hanok Village in Jongno, Seoul.

and every morning over breakfast the group had their class discussions. They explored food — another passion of Jen’s — through a cooking class and even made time for a trip to the beach.

“I always appreciated hearing Jen’s stories or additional information that she knew because her genuine pride and thoughtfulness for her roots made it that much more engaging for us students,” **Emma Hall ’26 (ED)** wrote in a reflection paper for the course. “It was so easy for me to be excited to learn on this trip because Jen’s passion was so obvious.”

“I’m so immensely proud, and we certainly had fun,” says Jen. —*JULIE (STAGIS) BARTUCCA ’10 (BUS, CLAS), ’19 MBA*

Turn to page 49 to meet **Neil Wheelock Deforest Smith ’21 (CLAS)**, another UConn expat whom Peter Morenus photographed in Korea last summer.

Many hundreds of UConn alums — firefighters, photographers, biologists, inventors, park rangers, brewers, and so many more — credit this one brilliant, patient, unassuming professor for helping them cut through their confusion and fear to steer a purposeful course through college, work, and life.

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By Kim Krieger | Illustrations by Monique Aimee | Portrait by Peter Morenus



Ortega at age 6 in Sewell, Chile, where his father worked the copper mines and helped his mom raise five children, spurring all to college degrees.

The mountain lion looked at Morty Ortega, and Ortega looked at the mountain lion. The lion wanted the four guanacos that had run up to Ortega in search of protection. But the predator eyed Ortega appreciatively, gauging how much of a fight he would put up if it went for one.

Ortega isn't a big guy, but he has a quiet confidence that guanacos and college students alike find reassuring, whether they're in the hills of Patagonia or the classrooms of Storrs.

This was not the first time Ortega had looked a mountain lion in the eye. He raised the tripod he was holding. The lion decided it would find easier pickings elsewhere, and took off.

Ortega spent years studying guanacos —

small, wild relatives of the llama — and knows their habits and ecology the way a father knows his children. He has spent a lifetime studying the social behaviors of large mammals. And though the ecologist loves big cats, giraffes, elephants, and other exotic megafauna, the mammals closest to his heart are found all over Storrs.

Ortega began his career focusing on wildlife ecology, but over the years he has found a second avocation focused on students. Call it finding the diamonds in the rough — students who might otherwise be overlooked, even fail out. Ortega picks them out of the crowd and nurtures them until they can face down those mountain lions on their own.

"It's easy for me to spot them because I see myself in them," Ortega says. Shy as a youth, he grew up in the high desert town of Sewell, amid the copper mines of Chile where his father worked. He recalls no animals in Sewell, not even domestic cats. Neither of his parents attended high school, but they wanted him to be a doctor or a lawyer. However, a good science teacher and mentor, using a neglected schoolyard garden as an ecology lab, set Ortega on the path to research and mentoring.

When he arrived at Universidad Austral de Chile in Valdivia, Chile, he recalls the professor directing the bachelor of science program telling him, "I don't see you finishing the semester. You probably will be gone."



At 20 on the island of Tierra del Fuego, Chile, with a baby guanaco. A local sheep herder brought the chulengo to Ortega's group, saying they should learn about guanacos by raising one.



At 25 in Torres del Paine National Park in Chile's Patagonia region, studying the guanacos who live in grasslands shadowed by bright blue glaciers.

That professor was wrong, and other professors soon saw Ortega's potential. Sophomore year, his histology professor actually asked him to teach a class. When he proved himself capable, she offered him a place in her lab if he would continue to teach.

Ortega does the same, offering students who risk getting squeezed out of the University a space of their own, whether it be a desk in his lab or a mirror for self-reflection.

Kiernan Sellars '20 (CAHNR) was adrift as a UConn undergrad when Ortega suggested she consider the sciences. She remembers that only after she had her natural resources degree in hand did Ortega admit he'd feared she'd drop out. A good professor knows when to stay silent and offer support. Sellars now works at Waldo County Bounty, providing Mainers access to fresh, nutritious food.

"Morty's office was my safe space," says **Carly Congdon '13 (CAHNR)**, who describes her mental health in her early 20s as poor. "I didn't feel good enough. I had a lot of self-doubt," she says. She started going to Ortega's office to cry. Ortega would listen. Sometimes he'd ask her



In his early 30s at Texas Tech in Lubbock, Ortega earned a Ph.D. that involved studying the feeding habits of white-tailed deer sharing range with cattle. He raised the deer by hand, protecting them from rattlesnakes and other hazards. Texas Tech is where Ortega taught his first class — and was permanently smitten.



"I am teaching [my kids] to get outside ... and explore ... with an always positive attitude. This world has a lot to offer, and Morty showed me that."

—Ryan Gernat



Congdon (left) on the 2012 study trip to Entabeni Game Reserve in South Africa. Hoogenboom was on the 2016 Chile study trip and returned to Torres del Paine six years later.

questions. Her answers reminded her she was good enough — good enough to be at UConn, to major in a science, to go on and be successful. After earning her degree, she moved to Oregon to study sea birds and migratory fish. Later she began to work in social services, became the associate director of a public housing program in central Oregon, and is now getting a graduate degree in social work.

"When somebody shows you compassion and empathy in your darkest times ... you can take that experience and offer it to other people," Congdon says. She always reminds her clients they are good enough.

When Ortega was pursuing a master's degree at Iowa State University, he was told he could not teach because his accent was too heavy. He knew he could teach from his experience as an undergrad, so when he moved to Texas Tech in Lubbock for his Ph.D., he asked again, and was assigned to teach a summer course on environmental science. "I just loved it. I put a huge amount of time into putting lessons together."

His teaching style has evolved since those days in Lubbock. Back then, he lectured, used slides, and encouraged note-taking. These days,

it's different.

"There are 80 to 100 students in the classroom, and I say OK, here's a few things. You are not allowed to take notes. Your phones have to be off. Your computer has to be off the desk. You are not allowed to have anything in your hands. You are going to listen. You are going to use something that you have called your brain, and we're going to discuss things. The famous Socratic method. At first they get very scared," Ortega says. But then they get into it.

He posits seemingly random questions, like asking them if they think about penguins when they are taking a shower. He then asks the students to explain why this might happen. And in so doing, he engages their minds and teaches them everything is connected in ecology, because the planet is our home. Even the name of the science combines the Greek roots *oikos* (home) with *logos* (study).

Ortega gets his students to see more of their planetary home on trips to national parks and wildlife refuges in South Africa, Patagonia, and the United States. On these trips he insists that students keep journals describing everything that happens.

"In one of my classes with Morty, we drove around for 18 days," visiting places such as Wind Cave National Park in South Dakota, says **Ryan Gernat '06 (CAHNR)**. "His excitement and knowledge of everything we saw along the way was amazing. He pushed me to want to get out in the world." When Gernat graduated, he took a job in the pharmaceutical industry to pay off his student loans, but he made sure to keep his mind open. When he was offered the job of supply chain manager at Two Roads Brewing in Stratford, Connecticut, Gernat recognized the opportunity and took it, though it was not a career he'd previously considered.

"Now that I'm older and have kids, I am teaching them to get outside in nature and explore for themselves with an always positive attitude. This world has a lot to offer, and Morty showed me that," Gernat says.

When Ortega was a Ph.D. student in Lubbock,



Clockwise from top left: Senko in Mexico, where he now takes his own students on study trips; Feinberg with students at Disney on Ice; Sellars delivering lettuce to hungry Mainers; Martin working on her eco-conscious surfboard design in Mystic; UConn fire chief Renshaw; Jaimie Simmons tagging manatees in Florida (she's on the right); Smyth fighting a wildfire in Montana; Gernat at Two Roads Brewing in Stratford.



he studied feeding behavior in white-tailed deer. He raised the fawns by hand but released them on the open range once they were past the baby stage. His advisor was incredulous, convinced that the deer would take off, but Ortega was confident they'd stick around. And they did stick around — for years — so that he was able to observe how the older deer allowed the younger deer to pull vegetation out of their mouths. The fawns learned what was good to eat directly from the mouths of their elders.

Sometimes students need that level of prescriptiveness. **Summer Hoogenboom '17 (CAHNR)** knew she wanted to study wild animals but could not see a path to her goal — until Ortega gave her a map of classes to take. When she was ready, he suggested a research program to pursue. She went on to study wolves, and now, in addition to running her own internationally funded research, she is the major gifts officer at Zoo New England in Boston.

Jesse Senko '06 (CAHNR) was interested in everything, but particularly turtles. He went to Ortega, who pushed him to do an independent study and apply to a turtle research program in Baja. A self-described middling student, Senko hadn't seen himself as someone who could ever get into an elite research program. He is now a professor of marine biology at Arizona State University and works with fishermen in Mexico designing lighted nets to prevent sea turtles from drowning as bycatch in the Pacific. He's not the only inventor among grateful Ortega advisees. **Amelia Martin '23 (CAHNR)** started her company Mud Rat to devise an entirely ecofriendly surfboard.

Then there are the students whose careful plans go awry. Ortega hopes his process of listening to students talk until they can hear themselves think keeps them eager to explore.

Michelle Smyth '15 (CAHNR) knew her course: go to UConn, study natural resources, then join the Air Force. But the Air Force fell through, and Smyth found herself in need of a

The Ortega Effect

"Morty has by far been my biggest career supporter. Throughout my years at UConn and even after graduation, he always had life-changing advice and encouraging words. He guided me through every step in my wildlife career and has played a huge role in all of my successes." —Jaimie Simmons '17 (CAHNR), photographer, former wildlife and manatee biologist

The Ortega Effect



From top: Ortega with Kremidas at the Entabeni Game Reserve in South Africa; with students in Patagonia in 2005 and in South Africa in 2025.

"My interactions with Morty helped me to understand and envision what work and careers could be possible with a natural resources degree. Hearing about Morty's extensive work with guanacos and participating in the South African study abroad program alongside him fueled my interest in field work and helped me decide the type of positions I was interested in pursuing." —*Samantha Kremidas '13 (CAHNR), program analyst for the National Ecological Observatory Network (NEON)*



job and direction. She woke up one morning on a camping trip in Montana wishing she could stay there. Instead of dismissing that thought as an idle fantasy, she heard Ortega's voice in her head, asking, "Why not? Why not live in Montana?" Smyth stayed, becoming a park ranger and then a wildland firefighter. "I give Morty all the credit for that," she says.

Hunting in Montana these days, she will also call on the animal-tracking lessons she got from Ortega. "I go back in my memory and use the little tricks I learned. And I can use them to track the movement of a fire," Smyth says. In her line of work, staying alert to the signs of nearby wildlife is key to staying alive. "I'll see bear poop and be like 'Heads up!'"

Being able to break through that box we all find ourselves in, the box that defines who we think we are, and what we think we can do, is Ortega's goal for all his students.

"His passion for science, adventure, and the success of his students was simultaneously contagious and inspiring; a modern Dr. Indiana Jones," says interim UConn fire chief **Chris Renshaw '01 (CAHNR)**. Renshaw says Ortega pushed him to consider other perspectives that challenged his biases. "I am forever grateful for the opportunities he provided me as a student, and his continued mentorship to this day; much of my success is owed to him," Renshaw says.

Debra Feinberg '09 (CLAS) agrees. "Morty always made time for meaningful conversations," she says. "I distinctly remember one time sitting with him pondering what life after senior year might hold. I shared my dream of joining the Peace Corps or working overseas, but how having older parents who'd had health scares made me nervous about moving far away. Morty's advice has stayed with me ever since — I shouldn't let fear of the 'what ifs' hold me back. It was the push I needed to take a leap of faith when offered the opportunity to move to South Africa."

It's true that taking the time to mentor so many students — many hundreds so far — has taken a toll on Ortega's research. He doesn't publish as many papers or run as many inter-



Many a career has been spawned over a cup of tea with Ortega in his Klinck Building lab. This fall, he talked grad school and/or geographical information systems (GIS) careers with natural resources senior Jandel Resto.

The Ortega Effect

"Morty always had an open-door policy to discuss crazy ideas and dreams and how we could find opportunities to make those things happen. He taught me the invaluable skill (which I was very bad at) of sharing what you want and what your goals are in your career and life, so people can help work with you to make those things a reality!" —*Brittney Parker '15 (CAHNR), senior resilience program manager at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration*

national research projects as his peers. He has resigned himself to never making full professor. "In the long run, what is this for? You're making some sort of an impact. You wrote a paper? Cool. You're doing scholarship. But when you open the minds of people, they can jump into the right lane, and their whole life will be better," Ortega says.

He remembers one night when he was alone in the camp at South Africa. The students had gone into the bush that day, while he conducted

business in town. All of a sudden he heard steps in the dark. He grabbed a flashlight, and saw one lion going by, a second lion, a third lion, a fourth lion, and then a big male walking very slowly. "And I thought, this guy is going to come in here and probably is gonna kill me," Ortega says. "My heart was going bupbupbupbup." A minute later the game vehicles came back with the students, and Ortega ran to the gate and told them to be careful.

The lions were nearby all night. They killed a wildebeest, making all kinds of mess and roaring for hours.

The next morning, a student emerged from her tent as Ortega was lighting the campfire. "Morty, did you hear the lions last night?" she asked. "My God, they were roaring so loud! I don't know if you heard anything, but they killed something because there was so much noise!"

"I thought she was very scared," Ortega says. "Then she said, 'Wasn't that cool? I hope they do it again tonight!'"

Ortega laughs, and you see the pride. ☺

"His passion for science, adventure, and the success of his students was simultaneously contagious and inspiring; a modern Dr. Indiana Jones."

—*Chris Renshaw*



Phee & Stewie: Unrivaled.

by Pete Crotto

Forgive Napheesa Collier and Breanna Stewart for not gushing over the success of Unrivaled, the three-on-three women's basketball league they cofounded. It enjoyed hopeful ratings and positive buzz during its inaugural year. Players raved. Great, right? Well, that was winter, a lifetime ago in pro sports. It's now early July. The UConn women hoop legends are deep into the WNBA season, where they are freshly minted All-Star starters.

They are also staunch realists. "We finished that first season," Stewart says, "and we were like, 'OK, what are we going to do to get better?'"

Victory means little without momentum, of course. If you're a woman athlete, you encounter a different set of standards. To get the rights and treatment that are yawn-inducing givens in the NBA, you do more. Nobody will do it for you.

"Women's sports, specifically, is so brand- and business-oriented," Collier says. "You do have to build your own personal brand, and through that, you have to be your own business almost." Being a women's basketball player means you're "always having to fight for more," adds Stewart, a two-time WNBA most valuable player — you fight for yourself, for others. You fight for a bigger platform, more attention.

Creating a league and playing in it? Well, it's a glorious accomplishment. And it represents the vexing world Napheesa Collier and Breanna Stewart are determined to improve.

Stewart '16 (CLAS) and Collier '19 (CLAS) credit their time at UConn, where they were teammates during the 2015–16 championship season, for bringing them to this point. The lessons came mostly on the court. "I should have taken a lot more business classes," Stewart quips. (Her individualized major was sport in society; Collier's degree is in human development and family sciences.)

Head coach Geno Auriemma is relentless in his quest for greatness and hitting perfection square on. His impossible standard, Stewart says, had invaluable utility: She understood her worth and how to



BRITTNEY GRINER Phantom BC / Atlanta Dream

advocate for it. “If we don’t like it, we’re going to say something about it, and we’ll be able to back it up with all these different reasons of why we don’t like it and how it can be better.”

Part of Collier’s business prep came from long-time associate head coach Chris Daley, Auriemma’s partner in UConn’s long-standing dominance. Daley stressed that people were watching; first impressions were everything. They still are. “You have to be able to work with different brands and present yourself in a businesslike fashion for a lot of different things, where it’s not as much so on the men’s side,” Collier says. “Their salary is for the sport they’re getting paid to do.”

NBA stars also don’t travel the world for paid opportunities as WNBA stars have needed to. That’s what inspired Unrivaled,



Being happy with what we already have is just not gonna fly here — and hopefully it helps the W push forward in bringing in more viewership, bringing in more partners.

says Alex Bazzell, Collier’s husband and league president. The couple wanted to “find a solution to stay home” that gave players more than just another chance to hoop.

The first recruit was obvious.

“Stewie was earning the most overseas,” Bazzell says, and she was a superstar. “If we could put together something that would attract her, it made it far more believable that we could attract everyone else.” In December 2023, Bazzell pitched Stewart and her wife, Marta Xargay Casademont, a former pro basketball player, over dinner at Del Frisco’s steakhouse in midtown Manhattan.

Bazzell, a heralded basketball skills trainer who previously founded a sports tech company with NBA legend Carmelo Anthony, didn’t start with style of play. He introduced Unrivaled as an upgrade to Stewart’s quality of life: You’d stay stateside, unlike Collier, who was then playing in France; you’d be paid well; you’d have ownership.

Her buy-in was crucial. “If Stewie was like, ‘Listen, I’m not playing unless it’s five-on-five,’ we probably would’ve figured that out,” Bazzell says.

Having Stewart and Collier on board made potential investors take notice, Bazzell says. And when those meetings happened, “They could speak at a level that if you’re an investor, you have to trust,



The 411

📍 Miami, Florida

Unrivaled features a brand-new style of 3v3 basketball, played on a compressed full-court (70x50 feet).

The nine-week season begins in January.

Games are played in a one-hour broadcast window — four quarters of play with a game clock and shot clock.

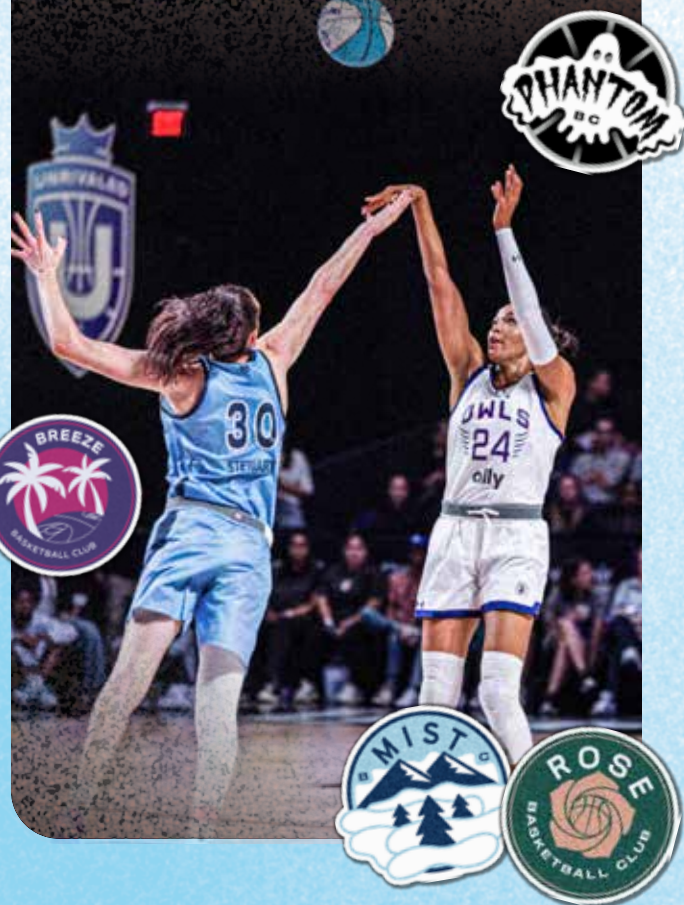
The league paid the highest average salary in American women’s team sports history. Investors include Serena Williams, Billie Jean King, Wanda Sykes, Aston Kutcher and Mila Kunis, Stephen Curry, Michael Phelps, Dawn Staley, and Geno Auriemma.

In its first season, a 1-on-1 single-elimination tournament, with a total prize pool of \$350,000, saw two former Huskies as the finalists — Collier beat Aaliyah Edwards ’24 (CLAS) for the crown.

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3v3
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8
TEAMS



because they’re two of the best women [players] in the world,” he adds. “And they’re telling you, ‘Here are all the ways that women’s basketball actually operates.’”

Stewart and Collier also had direct access to WNBA players. They could recruit without navigating a maze of handlers. Even with that edge, trumpeting Unrivaled was a bit of an absurdist exercise. Three-on-three full court had no precedent. At one point, Collier was showing an artist’s rendering of the arena.

“The hardest part was getting people to believe in something that hadn’t happened yet,” Stewart says.

The strategy, Collier says, was to sell the players on a dream, and the meaning behind it. “Not only is this good for the right now — yes, we’re trying to make you a lot of money — but this could also change the landscape of women’s sports. We’re trying to change the way people think about women’s sports, the way people invest in it.”

When news of Unrivaled was first announced on “SportsCenter,” the league was still raising the initial \$7 million in investment capital. Bazzell says Stewart and Collier understood the risk to having their names attached to a possible flop. But they also understood what was at stake and the potential payoff that would easily offset the risk. In September, Unrivaled announced that it was valued at \$340 million after a Series B investment round led by Bessemer Venture Partners.

“We are some of the best players in the world,” Collier says. “We know what works and what doesn’t. We see where the holes are. We have a fix for this. Especially — we’ve been fighting this for years and years — paying the players more. We have a way to do that. Like, why are we waiting for someone else to take the reins?”

For years, few options existed for women to play pro basketball in the United States beyond the WNBA. Compromises were required. **Rebecca Lobo ’95 (CLAS)**, the ESPN basketball analyst and UConn hoops icon, played for the ill-fated National Women’s Basketball League in the early 2000s during her WNBA offseason. The pay given her abilities stunk —

“**Why are we waiting for someone else to take the reins?**

COLLIER

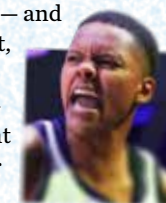
it was either \$5,000 a month for three months or \$5,000 for the season; she can’t remember. Her Springfield Spirit team flew on Southwest Airlines out of Bradley International Airport in Connecticut. For a game in Chicago, Lobo remembers connecting in Baltimore because it was cheaper.

Collier describes herself and Stewart as the “player experience experts” at Unrivaled. Thanks to their insider

expertise — buffeted by a media rights deal with TNT Sports, and Bazzell and his team’s efforts in procuring investment money and sponsorships — the experience at Unrivaled was unheard of in women’s basketball.

Games were played in one place, just outside of Miami. Players resided (for free) in two-bedroom apartments and received rental cars. Unrivaled treated motherhood as a fact, not as a professional inconvenience. Child care was provided before, after, and during games. “You want to make sure your family’s OK, so then you can go and play your best,” says Stewart, who has two kids. Collier and Bazzell have one. The average \$220,000 player salary nearly matched the WNBA’s maximum base salary — and players got equity in the league. (For context, the average NBA salary is \$14 million.)

“We’re trying to set a new standard at Unrivaled,” Stewart says. This kind of treatment should be “the expectation that every player



They literally are laying out the red carpet — we have everything available to become the the best basketball players we could be. And if I wasn’t here, I’d probably be in China right now.

should have wherever they’re playing.” And that includes the WNBA.

That was apparent early on. The Unrivaled staff was devoted to helping players “do everything we possibly need to do,” **Katie Lou Samuelson ’19 (CLAS)** said at a January media session. “That’s something that you don’t always get. And it’s hard to find, especially in the offseason.” Or, as Chicago Sky

COURTNEY WILLIAMS
Lunar Owls BC / Minnesota Lynx



ANGEL REESE
Rose BC / Chicago Sky

star Angel Reese told reporters, “This is what women deserve: waking up every day and not having to worry about anything.”

“I would have loved it,” Lobo says.

And yet, an improved standard of living does not exactly raise the roof. But this inaugural season, gameplay did. The not-quite full-court three-on-three format was fast-paced and fun, a big difference from the staid, half-court Olympic format. That was a relief to Craig Barry, TNT Sports executive vice president and chief content officer. So were the ratings. Unrivaled coverage reached more than 11.9 million viewers all season and delivered the 10 most-watched women’s basketball games ever on TNT Sports’ networks. Viewership was overwhelmingly female, even on truTV, home of the bro-friendly staple “Impractical Jokers.”

“It’s driving its own audience,” he says.



Because Unrivaled was in one location, fans developed allegiances to players, not teams, Barry says. Stewart and Collier’s networking provided a surplus of stars, including Angel Reese, Brittney Griner, and Sabrina Ionescu.

It’s crazy to be surrounded by sunshine and beaches in the wintertime — that’s a different style for me. I’m just super excited to be here and a part of this league ... to stay in North America, compete against the best players in the world and also learn from the best.

“You have to get people who are willing to fight with you, who are willing to see your vision, too,” Collier says. “For them to put their names and their brands on the line, their bodies on the line to do this, we’re really grateful toward them.” Paige Bueckers, the latest UConn legend, will play next season. A crop of current college stars signed with Unrivaled over the summer, including UConn’s Azzi Fudd and JuJu Watkins, the USC headliner.

“When you look at all of the adjacent leagues,” says Barry, ticking off the sports, “the reason they’ve all

failed is because they didn’t install the current professional athlete into the opportunity. And the ones that did that merged with the primary league.”

Not a whiff existed of what Barry calls “the All-Star effort,” a barely veiled reference to NBA players treating the league’s showcase game like a treadmill run during a luxury vacation. “If they hadn’t played as hard as they did and laid it all out there every night on the court, it wouldn’t have been nearly as successful,” Barry says.

TNT Sports will invest more in production next season, including higher-quality cameras. “We’ve had a lot of conversations about the way the arena’s going to look and the game’s going to be presented,” Barry says. If you caught an Unrivaled game on TV, Wayfair



This is the exposure we deserve, being on TNT every night. And everybody got equity coming into this league, that’s the most important thing.

Arena may have looked empty but, Collier says, “every night was literally sold out.” Bazzell says the league is adding 200 to 250 seats, including behind the benches. There will be at least one tour stop in 2026 and two new teams — Breeze Basketball Club and Hive Basketball Club — as well as a dedicated development player pool.

“I think they came to market in an incredibly strong way,” says Donna Orender, the former WNBA president and a women’s hoops star in the 1970s. “They put their stake in the ground. They created something new that was exciting. They committed to excellence, and they delivered behind that.”

For Lobo, five years ago, such a development was almost unimaginable. “There were so many years where it was hard to support *one* women’s professional league.”

It may feel like women’s basketball is having a moment, thanks to options such as Unrivaled and the popularity of Caitlin Clark. That’s a bit misleading. Ratings for WNBA and women’s college basketball games were on the rise before Clark’s emergence,

says sportswriter and author Howard Megdal, founder of The IX Basketball website.

Orender is loath to call it a moment. She deems it “a sustainable foundation,” adding, “The truth of the matter is, men’s sports are, like, a \$750 billion valuation all-in, and women’s are just \$3 or \$4 billion.” That latter number is incomprehensible to anyone who grew up watching women’s sports in the 1970s and 1980s. Now, she adds, it’s proof of “just how much more promise there is.”

If Stephen Curry and LeBron James founded a three-on-three league, the news would be inescapable. In women’s basketball, it’s a Tuesday. “We will look back at this generation of women’s basketball stars and realize that they had to build the plane while they were flying the plane,” Megdal says.

Stewart knows she can’t just play basketball. It’s why she’s focused on promoting Unrivaled, whether it’s at the WNBA All-Star Game or talking about it with yet another bearded, potato-faced sportswriter during the grind of the WNBA season.

“It’s the fight that we fight,” she says.

Stewart and Collier know this truth all too well. They are vice presidents of the Women’s National

“This is their league.”

Basketball Players Association, which is negotiating with the WNBA on a new collective bargaining agreement.

During the warm-up at the WNBA All-Star Game on July 19, the players wore “Pay Us

What You Owe Us” shirts. The fans in Indianapolis loved it.

Unrivaled doesn’t carry that burden. “It just feels like your voice really matters,” Collier says. “It feels like it’s a bit more of a fight with an organization that’s been established for 30 years. You don’t have as much of a say. It’s harder to move things; it’s harder to change things. There’s a lot of bylaws that have been set. There’s a lot of precedent. There are a lot of minds you have to change that sometimes don’t want to be changed.”

This is their league. Collier and Stewart started it for themselves, for their teammates and their opponents. Yes, there’s work to do, but it’s not the kind that drains and frustrates you, that causes you to ask tough questions and to fear the answers.

This time, it’s fun. This time, it’s not a fight. “It feels,” Collier says, “like we’re working toward the same thing.”



AALIYAH EDWARDS ’25 (CLAS)
Mist BC / Connecticut Sun



By Brad Tuttle | Art by AI

> Riding the AI Wave



Is Artificial Intelligence a friendly current making life's ride a smooth glide — or a gathering tsunami headed for a certain civilization decimating crash? Depends who you ask.



Ah-OOG-uh!

The discordant sound of an old-fashioned car horn blares, and 100 or so UConn faculty and staff dining on wraps and chips at round tables morph into a sea of swiveling heads and furrowed brows.

Are we being pranked? Are we in danger? Did we just travel through time?

At the podium David Rettinger — a University of Tulsa psychology professor, co-author of a book about teaching with AI titled “The Opposite of Cheating,” and lunchtime keynote speaker — jerks an arm up and adjusts his smartwatch, exasperated. Someone in the audience cracks that the culprit behind the horn must be artificial intelligence — the theme for this daylong conference in Storrs — but Rettinger owns up to the interruption.

Turns out the sound signified an incoming call from his elderly father, and Rettinger hadn’t figured out how to silence it ahead of time. “Not AI,” he tells the crowd. “Just a dumb person.”

In a way, the scene sums up how many in academia feel about AI: Some unseen force is honking at us urgently, and it’s unclear if we should speed up, swerve, or slam on the brakes. It’s a situation that’s making a lot of highly educated people feel dumb. (I also find it amusing and rather

reassuring that the guy who literally wrote the book on AI struggles with basic tech settings, just like me.)

This end-of-school-year event in the Werth Residence Tower is normally called May Day. It’s an annual tradition in which faculty and staff are invited by UConn’s Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) to reflect on lessons learned in and out of the classroom, compare notes, and generally help one another become better all-around researchers and educators. In honor of the special theme, the 2025 iteration has been christened mAI dAI (pronounced “my die,” somewhat ominously).

This year, perhaps more than ever, college educators need help. The rise of widely available artificial intelligence tools, notably ChatGPT and similar large language model (LLM) chatbots, is eliciting a frothy mix of excitement and dread in every industry, education included. Optimists emphasize the technology’s superhuman capabilities — suddenly, everyone has an incredibly powerful assistant for research, analysis, brainstorming, customized learning, and more in their pocket, available 24/7. Meanwhile, teachers everywhere fret that AI makes it easier than ever for students to cheat on

traditional schoolwork and sidestep learning entirely.

After working as a reporter and editor for over 20 years, I joined UConn’s journalism department last fall as part of a “cluster hire” of new faculty whose research largely focuses on AI. My duties involve covering AI as a journalistic beat while also experimenting and figuring out when and how to incorporate AI into our coursework. I can’t say how many conversations about AI I’ve had over the past year with colleagues, students, friends, and family, but I’m pretty sure I’m occasionally perceived as the annoying guy who brings up the topic way too often. My wife and kids will vouch for this.

As a journalist, it’s my job to be equal parts curious and skeptical. I try to be open to the upsides of AI, yet wary of the speculation and hype. Neither a promoter nor a hater, I’ll admit to periodically being swayed one way or another in the debate. One moment, I’ll find myself nodding in agreement as an AI evangelist expounds on how the technology will address the ills and inequalities of our education system; the next, I’m part of the resistance, voicing deep distrust for the tech overlords pushing AI further into our lives without nearly enough consideration for how its un-



checked proliferation could cause havoc to the environment, artists’ livelihoods, independent thought, human relationships, and society in general.

Maybe this malleable perspective means I’m weak-minded. Please don’t tell my students — especially the ones who already pull Jedi mind tricks on me to get extensions on assignments. The truth is, there’s little I’m certain of when it comes to how AI will play out in the long run, or what the wisest approaches should be right now.

As Rettinger says to this roomful of university professors and administrators: “The bedrock question of what we are here to do is up for grabs.”

If there’s one thing I’m most dubious of, it’s people who claim to have all the answers. And if there’s one thing I’m confident about, it’s that many of today’s assumptions and talking points about AI will one day seem foolish. I’m also certain we

need as many smart, well-intentioned minds as possible grappling with this technology to give us a prayer of providing the most benefit to humanity or at least avoiding the worst dystopian predictions. Here’s a snapshot of folks at UConn engaged in exactly this quest.



AI: The Disruptor

Tina Huey, an English instructor and CETL’s interim director of faculty development, has had a front-row seat to AI’s evolution at UConn, while serving as something of a hub for information related to LLMs and higher ed. In addition to events like mAI dAI, Huey and her CETL colleagues are constantly organizing faculty talks, workshops, and special learning communities related to AI. Recently, CETL awarded a dozen faculty with mini-grants to provide resources and guidance to professors working to revamp courses with AI in mind.

“Disruption” may be an overused buzzword in tech circles, but the term — which isn’t necessarily positive or negative — is the most apt way to describe AI’s ongoing impact at UConn. “We’re a community of scholars here, and this is a big stone that’s

been thrown in the lake, and it’s creating a lot of ripples,” Huey says.

Her observation brings another phrase to mind: “FREAKED OUT.” That’s routinely how students and colleagues describe their feelings to me when discussing some new mind-blowing capability or implication for AI. (Yes, I’m interpreting the tone as requiring ALL CAPS.)

Huey says that when ChatGPT first made a splash, professors tended to react in one of two ways: excitement or avoidance. The latter is no longer an option because the technology has only become more sophisticated and more popular among students. So, after varying degrees of freaking out, even professors who tried to ignore or underplay AI initially are coming to grips with the fact that it’s here to stay and realize they must do ... something.

Many have scrapped assignments or redesigned entire classes because it was too easy for students to complete the work via AI while barely



engaging with the material. There is abundant griping among professors about how tired they are of trying to police AI use (online detectors are flawed and easy for students to dupe) and how much time and energy it takes to come up with new ways of assessing learning that can’t be knocked out in seconds with ChatGPT. I’ve heard many variations of this frustrated sentiment from colleagues who’ve just read through yet another robotic-sounding submission: I’m spending more time grading this than the student did writing it with AI.

The idea that professors should spell out their AI policies clearly in syllabi began surfacing in 2023 and is now considered necessary, but everyone is on their own for determining what the policy should be. Professor expectations are inconsistent in the age of AI too: Some tell me they’ve decreased reading requirements and made writing assignments shorter to lessen the likelihood that students will resort to ChatGPT, while others have raised the bar and become tougher graders on typos and grammar because they assume students are using AI editing assistance.

Everyone is distraught about AI-assisted cheating, not only out of respect for academic integrity, but because

students who offload the hard cognitive processes involved in schoolwork aren’t learning much beyond how to write chat prompts. The scenario makes them easier to replace in the workforce and undercuts the value of education in general.

“I’m not worried about my students becoming too efficient” by embracing AI, Zhenzhen Qi, an artist and assistant professor in UConn’s Department of Digital Media & Design, said during one mAI dAI panel. “I’m worried about my students completing work mindlessly.”

Avijit Ghosh, a research associate at UConn’s Connecticut Advanced Computer Center and an applied policy researcher at the AI company Hugging Face, worries about people becoming too dependent on AI. He sees software engineers reach for LLMs to write code before even trying to handle the tasks themselves. These models appear very competent and generally do solid work, raising the risk that the human coders won’t bother to check for bugs and problems will sneak through. Their coding skills will atrophy too.

Perhaps more worrisome, a new paper Ghosh co-authored shows how dangerous overuse of generative AI can be for young people who have not yet built up knowledge and skills. In a

* 58% of U.S. adults under 30 have used ChatGPT — up from 33% in 2023.
59% of university leaders in the U.S. say cheating has increased due to AI chatbots.
30% of job seekers and employees feel their college degrees are irrelevant due to AI.
21% of global energy demand could be for data centers needed to power AI by 2030, up from 1%-2% now, according to an MIT projection.



“I’m worried about my students completing work mindlessly.”

Zhenzhen Qi, artist and assistant professor in the Department of Digital Media & Design



“We’re testing the limits and possibilities of a tool and asking: What does it enable us to do? What does it change for us?”

Lisa Blansett, director of the First-Year Writing Program

video call I attended in May with a handful of UConn colleagues, Ghosh shared his findings, explaining that true learning comes about slowly, after much exploring, reflective thinking, and periods of uncertainty. This necessary process is challenging, if not impossible, for people who are unfamiliar with a topic, because they’re often unsure what or how to question and are more likely to accept what AI spits out as authori-



tative and accurate. As Ghosh put it, AI can be “bad for novice users because they don’t know what they don’t know.” At the same time, there’s an eager glass-half-full crowd exploring ways AI can benefit them as teachers. Little by little, UConn educators are testing the waters and realizing AI’s potential to save them time in class prep and assignment creation, Huey says, especially when it comes to diversifying materials and sprucing up presentations so that they resonate with a wider variety of students.

Another upside: AI is exposing anew the often-transactional nature of college and that some traditional teaching practices are in need of reinvention. Say goodbye to the simple regurgitation of information; say hello to in-class exercises that force cognitive exertion and emphasize the learning process over the final product. Most people I talk to have deep ambivalence about AI, and there’s no consensus on biggest worries or best-case scenarios. Discussions can be tense and polarizing, and I occasionally get wind of low-key hostility from far ends of the AI optimism spectrum. If you ignore or are overly critical of AI, you might be viewed as a Luddite, whereas if you embrace it too much, you’re a naive shill doing Big Tech’s bidding. Students, likewise, are not a monolith. Some view AI as creepy, unethical, and harmful to their cognitive functions and sense of self. They’re hesitant to use it even when professors require it in coursework. Others believe it’s inefficient — even irresponsible — to not take advantage of the miraculous shortcut that is AI, given how it enables them to plow through irksome, laborious schoolwork and how much they assume they’ll use these tools in the workplace. One student asked me,

with earnest curiosity, why in the world I restricted AI and all internet access for an exam essay since Grammarly and other online tools would be available in normal work settings. I fumbled through an answer, something about the importance of formulating one’s own ideas, free of outside influences. Later, I asked ChatGPT whether it was a good idea to write without ChatGPT, and its three-paragraph response was far better than mine, arguing that the benefits include “fostering creativity, deepening understanding, and ensuring originality.” Overall, my sense is that regardless of their comfort and confidence with using AI, most people are pretty much winging it. That may sound flip, but it’s unavoidable and probably necessary. This is a world-changing technology that’s moving incredibly quickly and is rife with so many unknowns that the only sensible approach is to explore, experiment, learn, and share. Then, rinse and repeat, experiment some more, over and over, until the storm settles.

AI: The Experiments
A quick note to my UConn colleagues: Forgive me if I

don’t highlight your AI research or cutting-edge classroom practices in this article. There’s far too much going on to mention, and, frankly, a lot of it is too complicated for my nonacademic cerebrum to handle. (Also, forgive me if I just referenced “cerebrum” incorrectly.) Among the work I can’t come close to fully explaining, professors in economics and statistics I was hired alongside are investigating how AI can be used to optimize maritime shipping routes and develop models for addressing climate change, respectively. At mAI dAI, the presentation that received the most *oohs* and *ahhs* was from two industrial design professors who passed around a miniature 3D print-out of a toaster prototype designed with AI specifically for toasting gluten-free bread. Kyle Booten, an assistant professor in the English department who has been experimenting with algorithms in writing for years, recently published a book set at a virtual philosophical salon featuring 20 AI-generated characters that discuss ethics and aesthetics while getting progressively drunk. Lisa Blansett, director of UConn’s First-Year Writing Program, has been playing with AI in ways that are easier to wrap my brain around. First-Year Writing is an

* To illustrate this story, art director Christa Yung turned to AI for the first time, feeling this was one scenario in which it would be ethical to experiment with AI art for the magazine. Yung is generally opposed to AI due to copyright and environmental concerns, and says the hours it took to get anything usable and refine her prompts enough to create interesting art would be much better spent collaborating with a real-life artist.

intensive required course aimed at helping students develop skills as critical consumers of knowledge and versatile, competent writers. If students tapped AI to do their work, it would undercut the class’s purpose. But naturally, not long after ChatGPT hit the mainstream, Blansett heard complaints from instructors who suspected students were generating submissions with the chatbot. To help instructors cope, the program rolled out training sessions explaining how chatbots work and guidance for crafting sensible AI policies and assignments that are impossible or impractical to complete with AI. Blansett says she has long pushed instructors to avoid assignments that are “reproducible” (via chatbots or other means) and tells me that every class she’s ever taught is different. In her spring 2025 First-Year Writing course, which addressed the theme “What Is Education For,” she had students conduct field interviews and use ChatGPT to analyze a large corpus of published material (“Humans of New York”) before editing their interviews into HoNY-like stories. Students also had AI organize their schedules and set deadlines for the semester’s work. “We’re testing the limits and possibilities of a tool and asking: What does it enable

us to do? What does it change for us?” she tells me. Blansett sees no point in lecturing students about why it’s wrong to have AI formulate ideas or handle important writing for them. Instead, she follows the classic maxim “Show, don’t tell,” and has prompted ChatGPT live in class to generate this kind of work for students. “People got a real laugh out of them because they were so formulaic,” she says. “There was always some sort of grandmotherly lesson at the end of it.” I designed a classroom experiment for spring 2025 too, in my Journalism Ethics course. Journalists must always strive to gather information firsthand, cover topics in a robust manner, get the facts right, and write about issues in a nuanced, accurate way. These goals are not AI’s strengths, to put it mildly. At the same time, I see how AI is upending already stressed media business models and want students to be prepared. With all this in mind, I asked students to consult AI during the various stages of producing a traditional news feature — brainstorming ideas, conducting research, finding sources to interview, writing, editing, revising, creating visuals, and so on — and then to evaluate whether using the technology was help-

ful and ethical at each step. The results were a mixed bag, revealing some of the best, worst, and weirdest that AI can accomplish. Students marveled at how quickly AI retrieved and synthesized background research for articles, though they noted how the bots often simply relied on Wikipedia. The consensus held that the best use of AI in the assignment — almost universally deemed by students as helpful and ethical — was requesting questions to ask sources in interviews. On the flip side, students were understandably alarmed to watch chatbots generate error-riddled news article drafts with manufactured quotes and fake sources. Upon closer inspection, some of the positive uses came into question too: My young reporters discovered that some sources don’t reply with usable quotes to perfectly good interview questions; that it’s necessary to think on your feet and have follow-up questions handy. While students praised AI’s ability to polish grammar, reduce redundancies, and streamline writing in the drafts, they also noted how AI tended to rewrite instead of suggesting improvements — and that it sometimes skewed the meaning and introduced inaccuracies in the process. The biggest laughs came when students used AI to



create images and videos to complement articles. The results were often plausible at first glance but curiously “off” upon closer inspection: a girl with two right arms, a group of seven people eerily displaying the exact same teeth and smile, shadows and light that defy the laws of physics, an assemblage of nonsensical symbols supposed to represent words but meaning nothing shown on the cover of a laptop rather than the screen. To be fair, the students were mostly AI novices, and experienced users who are well-versed in the art of crafting clear, detailed instructions can expect better results. As we reviewed chats as a class, it was clear that one student had a superior grasp of how to write effective AI prompts; she routinely received outputs that were more worthwhile than others. If there’s one lesson I hope everyone took from the project, it’s that while AI may get the ball rolling and speed up and enhance certain parts

of doing journalism, it's no replacement for thoughtful reporting, fact-checking, and critical thinking.

Explore, don't endorse: That's my mantra for AI. The point of the ethics project was not to instruct students on how AI is good or bad for journalism, but to give them the opportunity to experiment and come to conclusions themselves. Hopefully, they came away with a better grasp of the limitations and risks of AI alongside its undeniably impressive capabilities. Several students, unprompted, voiced the same unease that I feel about how AI may very well dull their voices and individuality the more they use it.



AI: The New Literacy
It's hard to find anyone at UConn embracing AI's upside as wholeheartedly as Arash Zaghi. The civil and environmental engineering professor says he often uses AI eight to 10 hours a day for personal and professional reasons alike — researching and planning course materials, summarizing and explaining complicated concepts, quickly crafting polished emails based on a few spare notes, even looking for parenting advice. At one

point, he became so accustomed to talking to ChatGPT via voice mode that he caught himself replying audibly to podcasts.

I love talking to Zaghi. He comes at AI from an entirely different perspective, and our conversations challenge my notions and force me to reassess. Like many writers, my default way to think deeply is to write something out: "I write to find out what I think." But I know this is not the most optimal or interesting approach for everyone.

Zaghi is an engineer focused on getting stuff done, not a fussy writer who views every comma and semicolon as precious. Perhaps more importantly, as someone who learned English as a second language (he was born and educated in Iran) and has both dyslexia and ADHD, Zaghi views AI as a blessing that's particularly beneficial for neurodivergent learners.

For example, before AI, Zaghi felt paralyzed with worry whenever he had to send an important email to his dean. "I had to wait three hours to find someone to proofread it for me, to make sure there was no embarrassing mistake in it," he says. Now, he can jot some notes into ChatGPT and quickly workshop his messages until they communicate what he wants in polished, perfectly grammatical sentences.

Zaghi's brain seems to work vastly faster than what can be formulated into typed text. Instead of using AI for so-called "cognitive offloading," he mind melds with chatbots to help process deeper thinking and generate more thoughts, period.

He believes AI's impact will be far bigger than that of tools like the calculator and be even more significant than the computer. The closest comparisons he can think of are innovations that upended society in broader ways, such as fire or electricity. He refers to AI as a "new literacy" that will transform learning and serve as a democratizing, emancipatory force that liberates people from the costs and constraints core to educational institutions today. He laughs off the idea of banning or ignoring a technology this powerful and ubiquitous as absurd.

"You cannot declare war against AI. That's a losing battle," he says. "Education is our only tool."

With that in mind, Zaghi launched an AI literacy pilot program course at UConn originally aimed at engineering students but now open to all majors. Dubbed "AI4ALL," it will start with 1,000 first-years, and aims to expand to 2,500 students, with accessibility to all high school students in Connecticut via early college courses.



In the "lecture" portion of the class, students will watch short videos available to anyone for free on YouTube. Naturally, Zaghi created the videos with the assistance of AI, and they feature upbeat AI-generated voices and cute comic strip-like images and fonts. Enrolled students will then meet in small groups (max 25) with a TA during weekly lab sessions to engage in exercises involving chatbots and discuss their findings.

"It's all hands-on, 100% hands-on," says Zaghi, who strongly believes the only way to learn how to use AI is to use AI. "It's all about building intuition. It's not about knowledge."

He argues that much of the AI instruction available to students now is misguided because it overemphasizes the negatives. "Imagine if I'm teaching an English literacy course, and my entire focus remains on why this English language is colonial, is racist, why it's being used to oppress minorities," he

says. "That is exactly how the other courses that I've found have been approaching AI literacy."

Zaghi wants students to understand the real risks that come with AI — notably, how using an LLM as an intimate emotional companion can be unhealthy, especially for children, and how chatbots can form echo chambers that reinforce one's beliefs due to their inclination to please the user. But overall, the class will stress the ways AI can "enhance our learning, boost our creativity, improve productivity, and ultimately, prepare [us] to make meaningful contributions to society," as the course's first video puts it.

Above all, Zaghi is trying to be pragmatic. "This is where we are. There's no way we can go back," he says. "We can either embrace it and stay ahead of it," or we can put our heads in the sand and become irrelevant.



AI: The Teammate
During the last presentation session at mAI dAI, in the same cavernous room where the keynote speech was disrupted by an old-timey car horn, Qazi Arka Rahman is commiserating with a dozen educators attending his talk.

Rahman is a visiting assistant professor in the Department of Social and Critical Inquiry at UConn Hartford, where many students speak English as a second language and are the first in their families to attend college. He explains that his students routinely complete short assignments by hopping from chatbot to chatbot, browsing for an answer they like best. "They read a few lines, then move on to the next" before landing on a response they will ultimately submit, he says.

Rahman is sympathetic. "Most of them have, like, three different jobs," he tells me later. "In the reflection, they would say to me outright that [they used AI] because 'I had three night shifts at Dunkin'.'"

Frustrated by how students were outsourcing their work to AI — simultaneously leaning on questionable sources and learning little — Rahman decided to officially incorporate the technology in an assignment toward the end of his fall 2024 Intro



to Critical Refugee Studies class. Originally, he designed a group project in which students researched different refugee communities with AI and analyzed the cited links for trustworthiness and bias. Students asked to integrate AI further, and eventually the groups welcomed a chatbot as an official "team member." The bot organized a rotation of different roles students would adopt (prompter, critic, synthesizer, note-keeper), and the AI itself jumped in from role to role.

Students learned that AI never gets bored or tired like human teammates can, and that chatbots are much better at some jobs than others. For example, they felt AI was very effective at critiquing their work, perhaps because, unlike many students, it was confident in its judgment and not worried about hurting anyone's feelings. A common issue with group projects is that the work often falls heaviest on one or two students who overcompensate for the disengaged slackers. Because AI handled each group's delegation of tasks in a clear, fair, automated way, however, this was less of a problem. Or at least it became glaringly obvious who was dropping the ball.

Rahman likens AI to a sparring partner that's great for back-and-forth idea ex-

changes and exercising one's brain. The problem was that students liked using AI a little too much and happily let it do the heavy cognitive punching. They relied on it as a crutch that would speedily suggest case study angles or present reams of research on different refugee groups. Sometimes, the research cited did not actually exist.

Rahman discovered that when he allowed students to use AI in two classes and had them skip it the next session, they groaned in displeasure and struggled to complete the work. "They wish they could use AI to do everything," he says. Therein lies a key concern: As AI becomes more capable and humans become more comfortable deferring to it, its role may evolve from a mere teammate or collaborative partner to the leader in charge of the game — with a lot of us left on the sidelines with no clear way to contribute.

Before closing this conversation, let me raise one more thing I'm fairly certain of: Some people will think something I wrote in this article is short-sighted, ill-informed, overly simplistic, or just plain stupid. By all means, let's talk. Colleges are supposed to be places where we discuss stuff like this, after all. I promise to not crib ideas from AI in our exchanges. Will you do the same? ☺



Major news publications and thousands of artists have accused generative-AI companies — including Google, Meta, and Open AI (ChatGPT) — of copyright infringement, arguing that these firms engage in "mass theft" by using copyrighted material to train their models without getting consent or providing compensation. At press time, at least a dozen major copyright-related lawsuits filed against AI companies were underway.

"You cannot declare war against AI. That's a losing battle. Education is our only tool."

Arash Zaghi, civil and environmental engineering professor





The group at the Graduate Hilton; Crockett arrived in a car with a license plate bearing tribute to Stowe, their old dorm.

Stowe Aways

➤ Gail (Berson) Havelick '75 (CLAS) shares that she and her husband and nine other Husky friends who met as UConn students reunited this spring in Storrs for an ad hoc 50-year reunion. "Spending a weekend together exploring the campus brought back so many wonderful memories," Gail says. "Little did I know how many lifelong friendships would be formed during that magical time as UConn students." The old friends made the most of the weekend visiting the Dairy Bar, Huskies, Ted's, animal barns, the Barnes & Noble at UConn, the George J. Sherman Family Sports Complex, the Benton Museum of Art, and the Ballard Museum of Puppetry. Back row from left: Howard Eisenberg '75 (CAHNR); Dave Olsen '76 (CLAS); Martin Adomat '75 (BUS); Richard Lowe '75 (CLAS); Carl F. Bard '74 (ENG); and Jack Havelick '76 (CLAS). Front row from left: Theodore R. Crockett, Jr. '76 (BUS); Gail Havelick; Priscilla Drake Bard '76 (ED), '84 M.Ed.; Gary Mangiulli '76 (BUS); and Bill McGrath '76 (CLAS).



CLASS NOTES

1960s



➤ **Scott Cowen '68 (CLAS)**, whose leadership of Tulane University during Hurricane Katrina and Case Western Reserve University during the COVID-19 pandemic saw him named one of Time magazine's top 10 college presidents, just published "Lead and Succeed" with Simon & Schuster. For recent college graduates and early career professionals, the book is informed by Cowen's own path, and notes his run for student government at UConn as a formative leadership experience.

1970s

➤ **Miriam Erick '70 (CLAS)**, a registered dietitian and nutritionist, has written extensively on prenatal nutrition, pregnancy, and lactation, and is updating her book, "Managing Morning Sickness: A Survival Guide for Pregnant Women." Erick, who lives in Newton, Massachusetts, is active in the International Colloquium on Hyperemesis Gravidarum and is an educational associate of The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. ➤ Congrats to **Debra L. Wentz '75 MA, '80 Ph.D.**, president and CEO of the New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies, on winning the Champion of Mental Health Excellence Award at ELLA 2025. The award honors her three decades of advocacy in mental health and addiction services. Wentz's initiatives have improved policies, secured vital funding, and raised awareness about mental health and substance use disorders.



➤ "The Collinsville Pollen Trail has become a passion, a labor of love for us," says **Holly Hambleton '77 (SFA)**, above middle, of her work with fellow master gardeners Karen Berger (left) and Michele Jenks (right). They and other volunteers have converted what was a tunnel of invasive knotweed into a spectacular display of native plants along the trail in Canton, Connecticut.



➤ Write on! **Lisa C. Taylor '79 (CLAS), '81 MA, '04 MFA** just published her first novel, "The Shape of What Remains." It follows her six books of poetry and short fiction. A national book tour in April included Connecticut stops at the Mansfield Public Library and the Barnes & Noble in Downtown Storrs.

1980s

➤ **Ernest F. DesRochers '80 (BUS), '81 MBA** has been a senior real estate finance professional for more than 35 years. In February, he joined the board of trustees of the Lockwood-Mathews Mansion Museum in Norwalk, Connecticut. ➤ **Dr. Tris Carta '82 DDM**, a Manchester dentist and avid runner who has led the Manchester Road Race Committee since 2007, received the Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce's Community Service Award for contributions to his profession and to his community. The popular 4.7-mile race through Manchester's central streets is held every Thanksgiving morning.



➤ Seven friends who met as first-years in September 1970 ran into Jonathans XIV and XV in the Student Union during a campus reunion last summer. From left: **Mau-reen (Fisk) Anderson '74 (ED)**; **Michele Merusi '74 (ED)**; **Barbara Burns '74 (CLAS)**; **Patricia (Brennan) Bacon '74 (ED)**; **Lynn Lane '74 (CAHNR)**; **Jamie Lang-Rodean, '74 (ED), '78 (MA)**; and **Kathleen (McBrien) Insler '74 (ED), '76 MA**.



➤ **Allison Keeton '87 (BUS)** recently published her debut novel "Blaze Orange." The mystery begins when the main character takes a break from Thanksgiving preparations to walk her dogs in the woods, only to have her Labrador stumble upon the remains of a neighbor. Keeton lives in Pemaquid, Maine, with her partner, Tom, and their dogs. She earned a master's degree in creative writing at Lesley University. ➤ **Susan Bailey Callegari '89 (CAHNR)** and **Ernesto Callegari '90 (PHARM)** shared the news that their daughter, **Amanda Callegari '20 (CLAS)**, graduated from Weill Cornell Medical College as a physician assistant (PA) in May 2024. She lives in New York City, where she is an inpatient OB/

GYN PA at NYU Langone Hospital—Brooklyn.



➤ **Francis J. "Fran" Evon Jr. '89 (BUS)**, adjutant general of the Connecticut National Guard, celebrated 40 years of service in August. It all started when he joined ROTC his sophomore year. Evon says that his UConn ROTC mates from back then helped shape him and his future, even before they commissioned as second lieutenants together. Also helping shape his future? The person who lived directly



5-4-3-2-1

DINO MIGHT

As a UConn undergrad, Lyla Andrick '24 (CAHNR) was on a certain path to becoming a large-animal vet. Horse crazy since she was a kid, Andrick helped cover the cost of competing in the show ring by starting an illustration business at age 13, for which she'd draw custom cartoons of horses so that their owners could reproduce them on novelty merchandise. Andrick was always crafty that way. She learned to sew when she was five, and as a teen she turned her favorite doodle, a dinosaur, into stickers she could sell to raise money for charities. In the summer of 2020, she was home in Rhinebeck, New York, stuck in the COVID lockdown, waiting to start her first year at UConn. For kicks, she hand-sewed a dinosaur plush and posted a picture of it online. The response was immediate: *Where can I get one?* At UConn, Andrick kept two side-lines going to help pay for school. She worked with horses as a vet assistant and hand-sewed dinosaurs that she sold either direct to customers or at toy stores in Connecticut and the Hudson Valley. She created an individualized major in entrepreneurship

and animal science technology, but on her many rounds with vets, she saw firsthand how incredibly difficult veterinary work could be — physically, of course, but most of all, emotionally. "I have the greatest respect for all of my veterinary friends," says Andrick, "but I started to realize it wasn't the right fit for me. I don't think I have the emotional constitution for it." Today Andrick is the founder and CEO of Happy Dinosaur, a specialty toy business. The Happy Dinosaur brand focuses on five plush characters, all with irresistibly squishy noses and soft scales but distinctly different personalities, each attuned to the emotional experiences of early childhood. "Every generation has its dinosaur. There was 'Jurassic Park,' 'Barney,' 'The Land Before Time,'" explains Andrick. "Dinosaurs are the closest real thing we have to fantasy. We have just enough answers about them, but they're still mysterious." They keep kids' imaginations roaring. UConn's School of Business has been instrumental in helping Andrick develop skills as an entrepreneur. "I've participated in almost every program UConn has — anything that could possibly support a consumer product brand." She did the Werth Innovators Program as an undergrad and the Connecticut Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation (CCEI) Summer

Fellowship Accelerator after graduation. She was then selected to pitch in the Wolff New Venture Competition in Hartford, where she won a \$5,000 Community Impact Award. Andrick used her prize money to head to San Antonio, Texas, for her first ASTRA (American Specialty Toy Retailing Association) conference. There she got to meet some of her toy heroes, participate in another accelerator, and continue to introduce Happy Dinosaur to potential buyers and partners. We caught up with her in June on her first day back. Big (and extra-small) plans are underway for the brand, so we decided to start our conversation there.—ALEXANDRA KENNEDY **FIVE things Happy Dinosaur has in the works:** ❶ We're going to launch mini dinosaurs for all five characters in time for the holiday season. Like everyone in the toy industry, I'm working around tariffs, and minis offer a more accessible price point for my younger buyers. I tested a sample sale on minis, and they sold out in less than a month. ❷ I'm writing and illustrating a picture book series, with one title for each character: Happy Dinosaur, Clever Dinosaur, Chill Dinosaur, Loyal Dino-



From left: Andrea Hurley (wife of men's basketball head coach Dan Hurley) with Andrick at Huskython 2025; the zero waste Kona Dinosaur, made in collaboration with fellow alum Zac Will; and happy brothers with Happy Dinosaurs in Stonington Borough, Connecticut.

saur, and Social Dinosaur. ❸ A children's animated television series is in development. ❹ Happy Dinosaur is doing a zero-waste collaboration with the Kona Brand, founded by Zac Will '23 (BUS). He's a CCEI Summer Fellowship alum, too. My dinosaurs are made from his upcycled flannel Hawaiian shirts. ❺ A dino purse! (Everyone's been asking for it.) **FOUR lessons in starting a business that you had to learn the hard way:** ❶ Unconscious incompetence, aka "you don't know what you don't know." ❷ You don't have to bust down every door. Use your networking skills so that other people will open doors for you. ❸ My first pitch at the CCEI Summer Fellowship will haunt me forever, but I got great coaching and was able to give a far superior pitch at the Wolff New Venture Competition. I'm a flash-card girl now! ❹ Managing startup finances is very different from managing personal finances. **THREE things your toy business colleagues would be surprised to learn:** ❶ For my senior capstone project, I developed an equine simulator for theriogenology diagnostics and advanced assisted artificial insemination, also known as an artificial horse butt.

It was modeled after a real UConn mare named Glowing Ember. ❷ I'm a sailing history buff. On family vacations to Mystic, Connecticut, I fell in love with maritime archaeology and marine economics. One of my favorite figures was Captain Kidd, the pirate hunter turned pirate. He hid treasure on Gardiner's Island, not far from Avery Point. ❸ I once got bucked off a horse riding through [actor] Paul Rudd's farm, and the horse ran back to the barn. Luckily, Mr. Rudd wasn't home to see me. **TWO people who helped you get here:** ❶ While I was at Rhinebeck High School, I was always doodling dinosaurs on everything. When my economics teacher, Daniel Lavazzo, noticed, he encouraged me to move from 2D to 3D. He saw the storyteller in me. ❷ Professor David Noble, then at UConn's School of Business, was like a wizard. He always anticipated the next step before I did. He told me to move from a small-batch toy creator to a full-time toy startup, then introduced me to the people who are now helping me take the business to the next level. **ONE dinosaur you are most like:** ❶ I'm very chatty, so I'm Social Dinosaur.

below him in Trumbull House that sophomore year and who eventually became his wife, **Laura (Solano) Evon '90 (BUS).** **1990s** ➡ And all that jazz. **Anthony Susi '90 MM** presented "Jazz Rhythm Section Techniques" in April for the 58th Annual National Association for Music Education Eastern Division In-Service Conference at the Hartford Convention Center. ➡ **Theresa V. Donatelli '91 (CLAS)**, a senior wealth advisor at Principle Wealth, was named to the 2025 Forbes Best-In-State Top Women Wealth Advisors list for the second year in a row. ➡ **David Smail '91 (ENG)** has been named New Shepard Maintenance Training Program lead at Blue Origin. Smail started at the famous rocket company as a training engineer in 2022 after a 25-year career teaching physics and engineering at Freeport High School in Freeport, Maine, and 24 years serving in the Connecticut Air National Guard. He currently lives in Seattle and travels frequently to the Blue Origin launch site in western Texas. ➡ **Marc Russo '91 (CLAS)** was appointed CEO at Careforth, a provider of support and resources dedicated to family caregivers. He has more than 25 years of health care management experience, including his own experience caring for his mother. ➡ **Frank Milone '92 (BUS)**, a founding partner of Glastonbury-based accounting and advisory firm Fiondella, Milone and LaSaracina LLP, was named to Forbes' inaugural Best-In-State CPAs 2025 list. ➡ **Lee McChesney '94 (BUS)**, a 2024 inductee in UConn's School of Business Hall of Fame, was elected executive vice president of Church & Dwight, a consumer packaged goods company with brands like OxiClean and Waterpik. Before joining Church & Dwight,





Savarino-Hoppe (top, far right) honors her late daughter “Slick Vick” (above) by perpetuating her penchant for gifting trendy sneakers to those in need of a boost.

Slick’s Kicks

Sandy Savarino-Hoppe ’80 (CLAS) has started a unique foundation in memory of her daughter, Victoria “Vicky” Marie Hoppe, who died in 2022 at age 25 after a three-year battle with cancer. Her daughter, nicknamed “Slick Vick,” was a Division 1 track and field athlete who believed in the feeling of empowerment that a new pair of sneakers provides. “Being a collegiate runner, she was very focused on sneakers and sneaker culture,” Savarino-Hoppe explains. “She loved everything about new running shoes and the empowerment they gave her and her network of friends. She would buy new sneakers to give as gifts to people in her network who were struggling with substance abuse, mental health issues, and other life obstacles. It was her way of affirming her belief in their ability to overcome these obstacles and succeed.” Savarino-Hoppe decided to honor her daughter’s legacy by starting the Slick’s Kicks Charitable Foundation in December 2023. The Florida-based foundation buys and gives trendy new sneakers to people who complete self-help programs. —GRACE MERRITT

McChesney was senior vice president and chief financial officer of MSA Safety, which develops, manufactures, and supplies safety products.



➤ **Damon Lewis ’95 (CLAS)**, of Ponus Ridge STEAM Academy in Norwalk, was named 2025 Middle School Principal of the Year by the Connecticut Association of Schools and 2025–26 Middle Level National Principal of the Year by the National Association of Secondary School Principals. Lewis received the national award at a celebration in Seattle, where North American Society for Social Philosophy CEO Ronn Nozoe called Lewis an “outstanding” principal whose “visionary leadership” has transformed his school community, adding that Lewis has created “innovative approaches that directly address chronic challenges in education—from absenteeism to teacher collaboration—providing effective strategies that school leaders nationwide can implement to drive meaningful change for their students.”



➤ When he was at UConn, **Bill Siever ’95 (CLAS)** says he and his friends loved exploring the nature around Storrs at places like the Nipmuck Trail and Horsebarn Hill. His continued passion for the great outdoors is evident in his newly published guidebook, “100 Hikes in the Southern Berkshires and Just Beyond,” which covers the beautiful Massachusetts/New York/Connecticut corner. “I was an English

major at UConn, and I’ve been a freelance editor for about 10 years,” says Siever, who lives in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. “I mostly work on editing novels and editing children’s book reviews for Kirkus Reviews magazine.” ➤ **Jeff Roberto ’97 (CLAS)**, who started working in music at WHUS 91.7 FM as an undergrad, recently joined the team at Splice, a royalty-free sample library, as senior vice president of marketing. ➤ Congratulations to **Andrew Hersom ’99 MBA** on becoming senior vice president, head of investor relations, at Eastern

Bank. Hersom previously worked at Argo Group International Holdings as head of investor relations.

2000s
➤ **Mary Wren ’01 (BUS)** started working for Mohegan Sun’s original hotel team shortly after her graduation from UConn, helping to welcome guests for their first overnight stays at Sky Tower. Since then, she has advanced her career through several promotions, most recently becoming vice president of hotel operations. Congrats!



➤ **Kaitlyn (Herman) Jessee ’13 (PHARM), ’15 Pharm.D.**, writes that she and her husband, **Von Jessee ’15 MA**, met at UConn and married the summer after completing their degrees. “We have been instilling the love of UConn in our two-and-a-half-year-old. Colbie is obsessed with Huskies and UConn Magazines. Her favorite is the Summer 2024 edition. I know if she made it into the Class Notes section of the magazine, she’d be over the moon.”



➤ **Sue Bird ’02 (CLAS)** scored yet another first on Aug. 17 when she became the first WNBA player to have a statue erected outside her home team’s stadium, Climate Pledge Arena in Seattle. ➤ Communications and public affairs firm Intersect Public Solutions, founded in 2019 by **Brian W. Durand ’03 (CLAS)** and Michael Mandell, has merged with McDowell Communications Group and is operating as Intersect Public Solutions. Prior to forming Intersect, Durand served as chief of staff to former Connecticut Gov. Dannel Malloy. ➤ Kudos to **Christopher Nardone ’04 (BUS), ’06 MS** on becoming a partner working out of the Hartford, Connecticut, office of CohnReznick — an advisory, assurance, and tax firm.



➤ **Wesley B. Renfro ’05 MA, ’09 Ph.D.** was appointed dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of New England in Biddeford, Maine.



➤ Congrats to **Evagelia (Bilias) Lolis ’06 Ph.D.** on being appointed the new dean of the School of Education and Human Development at Fairfield University. ➤ **Mark Zdunek ’07 (BUS), ’08 MS** was promoted to senior vice president, liquidity and investment

solution product sales for institutional clients, at Citibank in New York City. ➤ **Raymond Salani III ’08 MA** says that while he was earning his master’s degree in economics at UConn, he would de-stress by taking photos. Since then, he has honed his photography skills and is publishing his first photography book, “The Appalachian Trail: Four Seasons Along the Trail” this November. Next spring, he plans to follow that up with a book on the Teton Range.

2010s



➤ **Alexander Hornat ’10 (BUS), ’13 JD**, a litigator and trial attorney who focuses on intellectual property and business litigation, was named to a (continued on p. 48)



➤ **Scott Kluger ’05 (CLAS)** has opened a made-from-scratch bakery and café that has a unique feature: a drive-through window. Kluger owns the Hartford Baking Company, with locations in West Hartford, Farmington, and Glastonbury. He says the drive-through window on his newest venture, HBC Bakery & Market in South Windsor, is the first of its kind in the country for an artisan bakery. His bread and pastries are inspired by his mother’s recipes.

OFF CAMPUS

NINE INNINGS WITH A BASEBALL LEGEND



Judy Walden Scarafille '71 (CLAS) remembers being at a party years ago where the guests were posed a question: What do you fear in life? A common response was being left alone, without a partner or friends to share experiences with. Her answer: "I don't ever want to be bored."

Scarafille is perhaps best known for her six-decade tenure with the prestigious Cape Cod Baseball League, which includes 24 years as president. In 2003, she was the first woman inducted into its Hall of Fame.

But baseball is just one of the many bases Scarafille has rounded in her wide-ranging, anything-but-boring career of public service, health care, and humanitarian philanthropy. Let's play nine innings with one remarkable woman.



1 Raised in De-marest, New Jersey, Scarafille finished high school at Housatonic Valley Regional in Falls Village, Connecticut, alma mater

of Pittsburgh Pirates 1971 World Series hero Steve Blass. Scarafille arrived in Storrs as a first-year in 1967 with a desire to be a baseball reporter for the student newspaper. However, the only assignment available at The Daily Campus was women's track. She wasn't interested and was leaving the office when they called her back. It turns out there was

another opportunity after all, and soon Scarafille was on the baseball beat covering head coach Larry Panciera's Huskies.

2 Her travels with the team around the Yankee Conference for four years led her to a friendship with Dick Bresciani, who was in the sports information office at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. "Bresch," who later would become a longtime executive with the Boston Red Sox, spent summers as a statistician and publicist in the Cape Cod League. He was impressed with Scarafille's work at The Daily Campus and recruited her to the Cape in 1970, where her duties included being official league scorer for games and writing reports for the Cape Cod Times.

3 In 1970, the Cape League All-Star game was in New York City against the Atlantic Collegiate League at Yankee Stadium. Scarafille took a seat in the press box to serve as the scorer. There were only a couple hundred fans in the stands and just a handful of people in the press box.

However, she was the only woman, and her appearance created an uncomfortable stir among stadium officials. This was a place for men only; she was ordered to leave. "I tried to resist and explain," Scarafille says. "It was a summer college game, not a big deal. But a security guard grabbed me by the arm, told me to go, and led me out. I watched from two rows behind, overlooking a near-empty press box."

4 Scarafille overcame that humiliation to become one of the most respected and honored women in amateur baseball. After graduating from UConn in 1971, she had dreams of a career in professional baseball and returned to the Cape League — and this time she



Scarafille prepares to throw out the ceremonial first pitch for the Boston Red Sox at Fenway Park on Sept. 26, 2015.

never left. For the next 45 years she held nearly every position, from publicist to secretary, to deputy commissioner, to vice president — and, in 1991, president.



5 Widely recognized as the No. 1 summer collegiate baseball league in the country, the 10-team Cape League thrived under Scarafille's leadership. Many of the Major League's top stars, such as Aaron Judge, Paul Skenes, Chris Sale, and Pete Alonso, played in the league. More than 300 of its alumni are currently in the majors.

As director of corporate development,

Scarafille generated more than \$7 million in sponsorships and foundation support. She remains involved in the league today as a volunteer with the Hyannis Harbor Hawks, who play on Judy Walden Scarafille Field at McKeon Park.



6 Judy met Peter Scarafille in 1973 while working as a pharmacy technician. She majored in biology and chemistry at UConn, and he was a pharmacology student at Northeastern University. Peter encouraged Judy to pursue a career as a pharmacist, which she did, earning a degree from Massachusetts College of Pharmacy. She and Peter have been married for 51 years.

7 While working as a registered pharmacist — and in the Cape League during the summer — Scarafille also pursued a passion for traveling, working as a travel agent and

published travel writer. She and Peter have been to all 50 states in the U.S., including dozens of national parks. Their favorites are Acadia in Maine and the Arches in Utah. They've been on an African safari and have visited Cinque Terre on the Italian Riviera four times. Judy also notes a memorable white-water rafting trip in New Mexico with her mother.



8 Scarafille's commitment to helping those in need runs deep. She has been on several humanitarian teams, twice deployed to Haiti after earthquakes, to Louisiana for Hurricane Katrina disaster relief, and to New Jersey after Hurricane Sandy. Last fall she provided aid in North Carolina after Hurricane Helene.

At home she is the managing director of the Cape Cod and the Islands Major Crisis Relief Fund and, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, was instrumental in organizing nearly 200

clinics to distribute vaccines. She has volunteered at food pantries and homeless shelters, has taught English to Haitians on Cape Cod, and, through her church, helps organize an annual 9/11 day of remembrance.

Scarafille serves on the board of trustees of the Yawkey Foundation, which honors the late Tom and Jean Yawkey, longtime owners of the Boston Red Sox, and has awarded more than \$600 million in charitable grants.

When not helping the human race, she was part of a stranding network to rescue marine mammals off Cape Cod.



9 Scarafille's unwavering efforts have not gone unnoticed. She has been recognized by the American Red Cross with a Community Service Hero Award and as the Mercy Otis Warren Cape Cod Woman of the Year for signifi-



In recognition of her 2015 retirement as president of the Cape League, Scarafille was a celebrated guest at Yankee Stadium and reunited with former Cape League player, then-New York Yankees manager Joe Girardi.

cant contributions and embracing the ideals of patriotism.

Her numerous baseball awards include National Amateur Baseball Woman of the Year by USA Baseball and National High School Baseball Coaches Association Woman of the Year.

The National Baseball Hall of Fame Museum in Cooperstown, New York, included her in its "Diamond Dreams" exhibit, tracing women's influential roles in the game.

Scarafille is particularly proud of the Andy Baylock Distinguished Service Award for contributions to college baseball. Baylock was on Panciera's staff at UConn when Scarafille was a student

reporter covering the team and later was a manager in the Cape League. They have remained friends for more than 50 years.

And in a capstone to her remarkable career, when Scarafille retired as Cape League president in 2015, she was a celebrated guest of the New York Yankees at a game at Yankee Stadium. In a full-circle twist of irony, she was invited onto the field during pregame activities, where she met several former Cape League players, including Yankee manager Joe Girardi. And, 45 years after that ignominious heave-ho, Scarafille was welcomed to watch the game in the Yankee Stadium press box. —BILL HIGGINS

UConn

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TRAJECTORY

OPPORTUNITY FOUND

Dieter Tejada '13 (CLAS) was finishing his senior year at Norwalk High School, his acceptance to UConn in hand, when he found himself being arrested and charged with a felony.

The charge tied back to an altercation after a high school party when, outsized and unarmed, he'd defended himself against an attacker with a baseball bat.

"I was 17 years old and arrested," Tejada says. "I had already been accepted to UConn. Is UConn going to pull the plug on me? One thing I am grateful for is UConn didn't pull that acceptance."

It was clear that Tejada had acted in self-defense, and he and his family tried to make that case, but, Tejada says, despite his innocence, he decided to submit a guilty plea and take a jail sentence, rather than face the prospect of a maximum 10-year prison sentence if found guilty at a trial.

On June 4, 2009, he pled guilty to felony assault in Fairfield County Superior Court and began his prison sentence. He was still enrolled at UConn and had to take a leave for the fall 2009 semester.

"I just wasn't up for the task at that time — not mentally or emotionally," Tejada says. "My mom was the main person in my corner. Most people don't understand the law. Everybody thinks they know the law until they get arrested. They think they know how it's gonna go. It's not 'Law and Order.' I wasn't even inside all that long, out on parole after five months, but I was different

when I came out. I was shut off from emotions."

Tejada's career path started at UConn and went through law school at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. He is now the co-director and co-founder of National Justice Impact Bar Association and Justice Impact Alliance, organizations aimed at assisting people who have been impacted by the criminal justice system.

The first time he expressed an interest in becoming a lawyer, it was to a prison counselor, who laughed at him.

"When I went back to UConn, I chose political science, and I was able to go to UConn Stamford," Tejada says. "I was on probation, so I could only be there during day classes, and I had a five-minute window to get home." His probation conditions included wearing an ankle monitor.

Still, "it was an emotional boost," says Tejada. "Once I had classes going again, it felt a lot better. I reminded myself I could be good in school."

The return to college put Tejada in a routine of asking questions and trying to map out a path to a bachelor's degree and law school admittance. It meant trying to follow established paths: Earn good grades, do extracurricular activities, and do well on the LSAT. He found it easier to work around barriers because he'd been through hardship and through the system itself. "People are

Tejada's atypical arc includes an '09 guilty plea to an assault conviction, a '19 degree from Vanderbilt Law, and an absolute, unconditional pardon in '23.

basing their response to your plan on their experiences," he says. "People just didn't know. They hadn't done it."

But after graduation, he still had the conviction on his record. Finding employment proved challenging. "I was going to be a public defender, and I went to take the bar exam under the knowledge I wasn't going to be licensed," Tejada says. "I had to wait for the licensing bar to consider my case. I was told I could volunteer. That was a big hit — not being able to practice law."

In 2018, Tejada had passed the bar exam, but could not be admitted to the bar with the conviction on his record. Then he obtained a new copy of his police report and discovered 20 additional pages of exculpatory evidence that had been withheld prior to his conviction. It gave him new hope for justice and a path to a law career. He and his attorneys from the Deskovic Foundation re-interviewed key witnesses and gathered additional evidence. In February 2023, civil rights attorney Alexander Taubes was able to file an application on Tejada's behalf seeking an absolute pardon via the Connecticut Board of Pardons and Parole on innocence grounds.

"I was working full time and doing my own case," Tejada says. "Trying to get things together — it was a long time of getting my hopes up. I finally had a path that had been taken by other exonerees, and I had a really good team." On Sept. 6, 2023, the board unanimously granted a "full, complete, absolute and unconditional pardon." This May, Tejada was given a special waiver by the New York Court of Appeals, which allows him to move forward with his dream of becoming an attorney as a licensed member of the New York State Bar Association.

"My case isn't really about the time I spent in jail," Tejada says. "It is more about lost opportunity. My hope is that this doesn't happen to other people. It's not fair. It's unnecessary. We have to be better." —BRIAN HUDGINS

TOM'S TRIVIA ANSWERS

1: B The beloved host of "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" spoke at commencement in May 1991, telling graduates "We don't always succeed in what we try, but I think you'll find it's a willingness to keep trying that matters most." He did not address a convocation.

2: C In 2008 Dining Services went fully trayless, cutting down on hundreds of pounds of food waste per week in each dining hall, and saving thousands of gallons of water every week from fewer dishwasher cycles.

3: B Prior to 2000, women's ice hockey was a club sport at UConn. In the year it became a Division I program, it competed as an independent (and won its first-ever Division I game in a 15-1 drubbing of Rhode Island). For one year, the team was part of the ECAC conference before joining its current home of Hockey East in 2002.

4: A The wooden facility, which became a nighttime hotspot serving dinner food and a convivial atmosphere, was somewhat unimaginatively named the Grill. In the mid-1960s, it was moved across campus and served as the warming hut for the old ice rink, before being demolished in 1998.

SHARE YOUR NEWS!

➔ To submit a Class Note, send an email: alumni-news@uconn.alumni.com

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Submissions may be edited for clarity and/or length.

(continued from p. 43) partnership at McCarter & English, LLP. ➔ **Ed Ramsdell '10 (MBA)** was honored by Orion Protective Services for 40 years of service in the security and law enforcement field. Ramsdell is also a passionate military veteran, serving on the board of the Drive On Foundation, dedicated to preventing soldier suicide.



➔ **George Philbrick '10 (ENG)** and his daughters, Charlotte and Elise, attended a UConn men's basketball game against Georgetown.

➔ Congrats to both **Joanna M. Targonski '11 (CLAS, BUS)**, '15 JD and **Patricia (Jimenez) Durelli '12 (CLAS)** on being promoted to partner at Day Pitney LLP law firm — Targonski works in Trusts and Estates, West Hartford; Durelli in Corporate, Hartford.

➔ The Connecticut Port Authority named **Michael J. O'Connor '12 MBA** as its new executive director. O'Connor recently retired as a vice president of Dominion Energy's Millstone Power Station in Waterford. A Navy veteran, he is chair of the town of Bozrah's board of finance, vice chair of the Mitchell College board of trustees, and a former member of the Southeastern Connecticut Water Authority executive board.

➔ **Andrew Kappel '13 (BUS)** shares that professor David Noble, who had helped support his business, invited him back to campus to participate in a brainstorming session at the Werth Institute for Entrepreneurship and Innovation.

➔ **Deependra Bundela '16 MS** published a new book, "The Mystery of Mystics," which explores a thought-provoking idea: What

if the next evolution of AI isn't just smarter algorithms, but deeper consciousness?



➔ Congratulations to **Miriam Hasbun '17 JD** and **Victoria Ho '16 (CLAS)**, who married in March at the Pavilion on Crystal Lake in Middletown, Connecticut. They first met in 2014 at the old gym's rock climbing wall and spent the summer rock climbing, playing softball, and eating ice cream at the Dairy Bar. Hasbun is a field attorney for the National Labor Relations Board, a federal agency that protects

workers' rights, and Ho is a pediatric physician assistant in Waterbury at Pediatric Associates of Connecticut. They live in Bristol with their rescue bunny, Canela.



➔ Best wishes to **Hayden Atwater '18 (BUS)** and **Courtney (Herrington) Atwater '18 (CLAS)**, who were married in September 2024 in Maryland before their UConn friends and family. Both were involved in Greek life at UConn, and they first met in 2016 at a fraternity. They now live in New York City, where they both work in marketing.



➔ **Andrew Janavey '15 (SFA)** and **Michelle Hawran '16 (SFA)** were married at Town Hall in Windsor, Connecticut, on Aug. 26 — 12 years to the day they met in professor John O'Donnell's printmaking class. The two share a love of vintage UConn ephemera, such as this hand-made banner, circa who knows, that they found on eBay.



Peter Morenus

JOB ENVY

Neil Wheelock Deforest Smith Embraces the Chaos

"I try really hard not to understand what it is I'm doing," says Neil Wheelock Deforest Smith '21 (CLAS) of his art gallery, The Hechyeomoyeo, through bites of Burger King chicken nuggets at 12 a.m. Loosely translated from a Korean military command, "hechyeomoyeo" means "from chaos comes order," fitting for a space dubbed "the living gallery." Anything but traditional, The Hechyeomoyeo's exhibits consist of volunteer, uncured submissions, and you'll often find artists actively creating during the show, blurring the line between exhibition and studio.

Three months after graduating from UConn Stamford, Smith landed in Seoul to teach at a private school and found it less creative and collaborative than he'd hoped. So he started photocopying students' homework and drawings, posting the results to Instagram. Little did he know this would get him discovered as more than the self-described "garbage artist," who painted snails on leftover wood on the streets. In August 2023, he held his first exhibition, featuring 30 artists. Now, The Hechyeomoyeo is heading into its 11th show, this one in Vietnam. Most shows are in Seoul, but the traveling gallery has landed in Thailand and Indonesia, too.

The Hechyeomoyeo is about giving as many people as possible a chance to share their work because, as Smith puts it, "anyone who creates art wants it to be seen." He's not trying to reinvent the art scene, just add to its ecosystem by bringing a little organic chaos to Seoul and beyond. —VALERIA DIAZ '25 (CLAS)

Smith, above in Insadong, Seoul, is often asked why he studied literature instead of something more traditionally "artistic," and his answer is always the same: "Literature is a form of art."

CHALLENGE YOURSELF TO TOM'S TRIVIA!

Go to s.uconn.edu/fall25 or page 48 to see if you know as much as King of UConn Trivia Tom Breen '00 (CLAS).

- 1. Convocation in its current form began in the fall of 1988. In its first few years, it was common to have a distinguished guest serve as the keynote speaker. Which of these individuals was *not* among those who addressed UConn convocations over the years?**

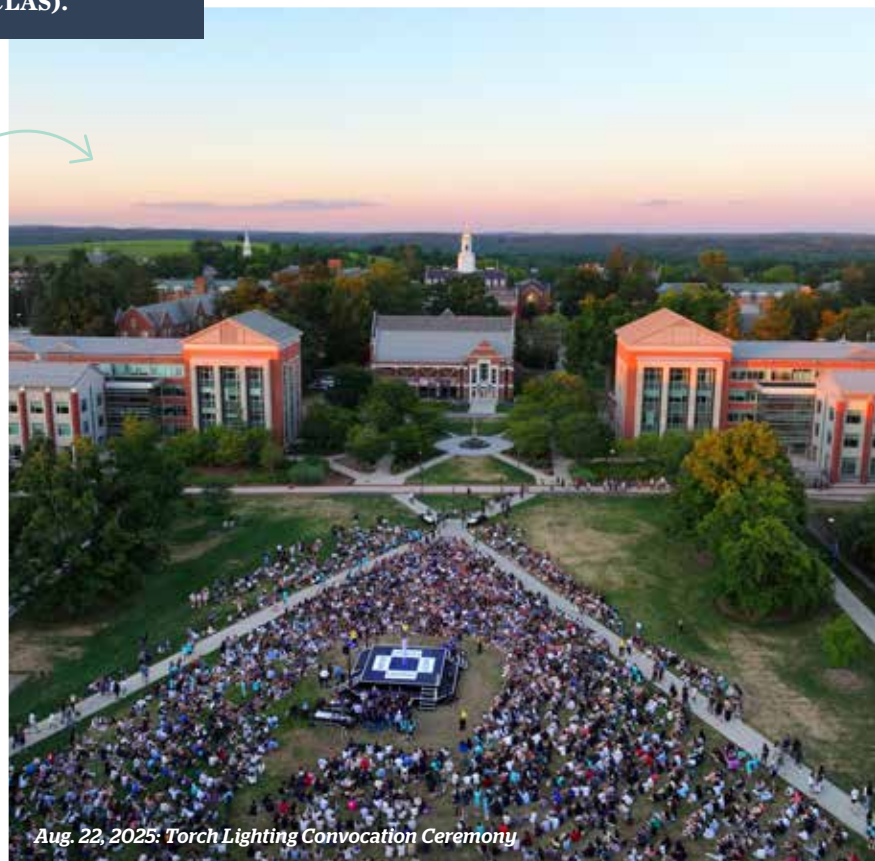
A: Elie Wiesel, Nobel Peace Prize winner
B: Fred Rogers, children's television pioneer
C: Esther Bush, Hartford Urban League president
D: Maurice Sendak, author of "Where the Wild Things Are" and other books

- 2. Students returning to Storrs for the fall 2008 semester found that the dining halls lacked a familiar element. What went missing that year?**

A: Salt and pepper shakers
B: Daily specials written on dry-erase boards
C: Trays
D: Food containing trans fats

- 3. In February, the UConn women's ice hockey team won its second consecutive Hockey East regular season championship. What conference did the team play in during its first season as a Division I program, in 2000–2001?**

A: The New England Women's Hockey Alliance
B: No conference
C: The Patriot League
D: The Mid-North Intercollegiate Conference



Aug. 22, 2025: Torch Lighting Convocation Ceremony

- 4. In the mid-1930s, as the student population climbed toward 1,000, the university added an after-hours dining facility to the back of the Beanery dining hall (today the Benton Museum of Art). What was the name of the late-night eatery?**

A: The Grill
B: The Hungry Husky
C: Chuck and Augie's
D: The Den