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# UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAVEN

ALUMNI MAGAZINE • ISSUE 12 • WINTER 2025

# *Bridging* ACADEMIA — AND — INDUSTRY

*Young Alumni Special Edition*

**PAGE 16** Capitalizing on their investment in a world-class education and molding purpose-driven lives.



# Welcoming the Class of 2028!

1,300

The Class of 2028, which includes nearly 1,300 first-year students, is the second largest class in the University's more than 100-year history, and its largest since 2017.

Students hail from 41 states and 16 countries.



75%

Approximately 75 percent of the incoming class will live in University housing.



The average SAT score is 1154, and the average GPA is 3.27.



40%

More than 40 percent are first-generation students, and nearly 50 percent are students of color.

9,000

Despite nationwide challenges with the new Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), the University received nearly 9,000 FAFSA applications, an all-time high.

24,000+

On the heels of the launch of its new "Power On" branding campaign, the University received more than 24,000 applications for admission to its Class of 2028, leading to one of the most selective classes in University history.





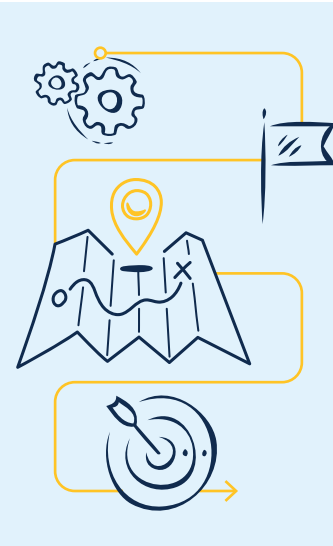
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Listen to the Drumbeat

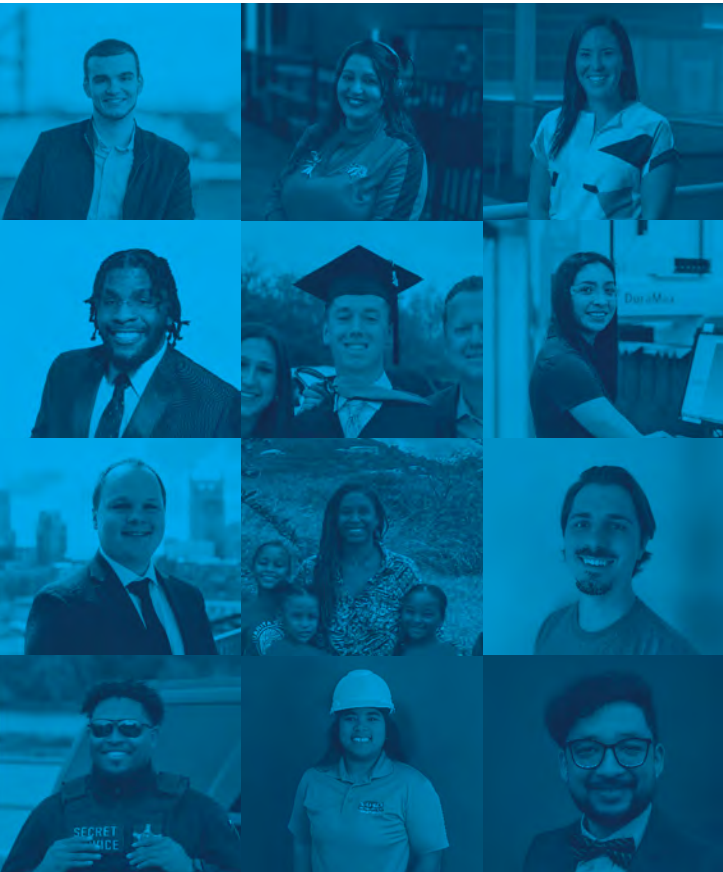
President Jens Frederiksen on his belief in and hopefulness for American higher education in the 21st century.



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Optimize Your Experience and Prepare For Your Future

An integrative approach to career development where future career success is built into the entire academic experience.



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Bridging Academia and Industry

How 12 of the University's more recent graduates are capitalizing on their investment in a world-class education and molding purpose-driven lives.

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**University of New Haven Settlement** If you were a UNH student enrolled in any UNH course as of March 24, 2020 (other than a non-matriculated high school student) and you did not opt out of the Settlement of Krystian Wnorowski, on behalf of himself and others similarly situated v. University of New Haven, Case No. 3:20-cv-1589 (D. Conn.), you will receive the one-time \$200 Non-Cash Tuition Credit described in the Settlement if you enroll or have enrolled in a UNH course commencing in September 2023 or later. Go to [www.unewhavensettlement.com](http://www.unewhavensettlement.com) for more information.

UNIVERSITY OF  
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A Dreamer's Mindset

As Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung once famously stated, "Life really does begin at forty. Up until then, you are just doing research."

Well, no offense to Jung, but in the many months I've spent in production for this special edition of the University of New Haven Alumni Magazine, I have doubled down on my belief that quite a lot of life gets lived in our more formative years.

There is a unique opportunity through this humanistic lens, however, to see the world as our "living laboratory" where we spend the first several decades of our lives studying and optimizing what makes us healthy, whole, and fulfilled as individuals and as a global community, fully immersing ourselves in this crazy experiment called life and exploring our place in the world.

Which begs the age-old, existential question: How do we want to spend the time we've been given? How can we assign meaning to our seemingly chaotic trajectory on this piece of rock hurling around the sun?

Counterterrorism professional turned career coach, Forbes blogger, and international bestselling author Ashley Stahl does a deep dive into this intersection of self-discovery and purpose in her book "You Turn," writing, "Your career should be a vehicle for your self-expression, an art form that helps you be you in the world." And although Stahl advises that sometimes, less is more — "in any given ... exchange, we're either adding value or taking up space" — she leaves intentional room for slipups, reminding us that "failure is simply part of the alchemy we use to create success."

In fact, it isn't so off base to invoke the ancient practice of alchemy in a modern-day discussion of career and life purpose. As writer, medievalist, and actor Sarah Durn explains in her teachings, "The alchemists believed that our great work in life is to better ourselves and the world around us" through learning and action rooted in both magic and science, the unknowable and the knowable, and the spiritual and the practical.

This unbreakable link between individual and community inherent in the process of self-transformation is perhaps best witnessed in the root systems of giant sequoias — the

largest trees in the world.

Although these trees grow hundreds of feet tall, they have relatively shallow root systems. The plot twist occurs when these roots spread wide and intertwine with neighboring trees to form a stable and supportive network, allowing giant sequoias

to grow to their full height and thrive despite environmental challenges.

The reminder from both applied theory and the natural world that we stand strongest when we stand together is a theme you will see reflected in the stories that unfold as part of this young alumni special edition through accounts of individual transformation set against the backdrop of community and connection.

So, at the beginning of another new year, I invite all of us to turn the page and borrow a bit of inspiration by leaning into the power of a dreamer's mindset, exploring our purpose, and imagining what is possible for our individual — and our collective — tomorrows.

Warmly,

*Elizabeth J. Rodgers*

Elizabeth J. Rodgers  
Editor In Chief



# University News

NEW APPOINTMENT

## University Appoints Forward-Looking Leader as Provost

In May 2024, **Nancy Ortins Savage, Ph.D.**, was appointed provost and senior vice president of academic affairs following an extensive national search in which more than 1,200 potential candidates were engaged. Previously, Dr. Savage had served as the University's interim provost and vice president for academic affairs.

Ninety-one individuals submitted formal applications. Eleven semifinalists met virtually with the search committee, and five finalists each spent a day on campus interacting with the University community.

During her interim appointment, Dr. Savage launched the University Interdisciplinary Collaborative to support the development and oversight of cutting-edge and market-responsive cross-college academic programs, implemented policies and processes that support student success, and created the Core Curriculum Innovation Committee. She also launched a new periodic program review process and partnered with the Division of Student Affairs to help enhance the Academic Integrity Policy.

In addition, she has led the executive committee for the University's strategic plan implementation, developed an inclusion advocate program for faculty searches, and overseen the selection of several important positions in academic affairs, including the University librarian, assistant

provost for faculty development and diversity initiatives, director for the Center for Teaching Excellence, and Makerspace coordinator.

Dr. Savage served as deputy provost for six months prior to being appointed interim provost. She was associate dean of the Tagliatela College of Engineering, chair of the Department of Chemistry and Chemical & Biomedical Engineering, and coordinator of the University's chemistry program. She joined the University as an assistant professor in 2005, earning tenure and promotion to associate professor in 2011 and promotion to professor in 2017.

She was awarded a National Research Council postdoctoral fellowship that supported her work studying gas sensors at the National Institute of Standards and Technology. She earned her doctorate in chemistry from The Ohio State University and her B.S. in chemistry from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.



LEADERSHIP HIGHLIGHTS

- Appointed Provost:** May 2024 after national search.
- Key Achievements:** Launched the University Interdisciplinary Collaborative, enhanced the Academic Integrity Policy, and led strategic plan implementation.
- Academic Career:** Joined in 2005, promoted to full professor in 2017.

BOARD LEADERSHIP UPDATES

## Board of Governors Elects New Chair and Vice Chair

The University of New Haven's Board of Governors has elected **Michael H. Ambrose '84, '19 Hon.**, as its chair and **David J. Peterson, Jr. '88, '17 Hon.**, as its vice chair. Each will serve a two-year term.

Ambrose is the principal partner for MH Ambrose Consulting and serves on the RBC Bearing Company board of directors. He had a 38-year career at Sikorsky Aircraft, where he held many executive roles, including chief engineer and vice president of engineering and technology.

He was elected to the University of New Haven's Board of Governors in January 2015 and was vice chair from 2020 to 2024. He served as the president of the University of New Haven's Alumni Association from 2012 to 2014.

Ambrose earned a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering from the University of New Haven in 1984. He was a standout member of the track and field team and still owns seven University track records. He was inducted into the University of New Haven Athletic Hall of Fame in 1991 and the Tagliatela College of Engineering Hall of Fame in 2016. He has a master's degree in engineering management from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the University of New Haven awarded him an honorary Doctor of Engineering in 2019.

Peterson is the founder and CEO of 4Media Central, a full-service marketing agency established in 2003. His portfolio spans various industries, including online payment processing, health and wellness, and marine services. His entrepreneurial spirit has led to several successful ventures, including the Institute of Regenerative Medicine, SD Marine LLC, and Costa Carts LLC.

He earned a bachelor's degree in business administration from the University of New Haven in 1988 and was a powerhouse member of the football team. He received a Distinguished Alumni Award in 2012. In 2017, he was inducted into the University's Athletic Hall of Fame and conferred an honorary Doctor of Business Administration. Peterson's commitment to the University has been evident through his collaboration and philanthropy to create the Peterson Performance Center, a state-of-the-art athletic facility that opened in the spring of 2023.



Michael H. Ambrose '84, '19 Hon.



David J. Peterson, Jr. '88, '17 Hon.



# Princeton Review’s Go-To Guidebook Spotlights U New Haven



For the ninth consecutive year, The Princeton Review has featured the University of New Haven in its annual guidebook spotlighting the country’s best colleges and universities, which serves as a go-to resource for students, families, and high school guidance counselors. Only about 15 percent of the four-year colleges in the U.S. are profiled in The Princeton Review’s 2025 guidebook, The Best 390 Colleges.

As part of the University’s profile, students described the Charger community as “caring and considerate” and said among its signature majors are many “amazing programs you cannot get anywhere else.” The Princeton Review highlighted the University’s focus on interdisciplinary education and project-based learning, enabling students to “build out a practical, personalized degree.” Other pride points included faculty, University facilities, Charger Athletics, and the neighboring city of New Haven.

From The Princeton Review. Used with permission. ©2024 TPR Education IP Holding, LLC. The Princeton Review is not affiliated with Princeton University.



## Economics Professor Recognized Among Top 2% Scientists Worldwide



**Mehmet Balcilar, Ph.D.**, professor of economics, was recognized among the top 2% of scientists worldwide. The prestigious ranking by Stanford University highlights his contributions to economics and finance.

Dr. Balcilar’s name has been included on this list since its inception in 2019, with rankings that reflect both single-year and lifetime career achievements. Also honored are five other University of New Haven scientists, including Ronald S. Harichandran, Ph.D., and Chenglu Wang in the career lifetime ranking and Fazel Mohammadi, Ph.D., Ramesh Sharma, Ph.D., and Dequan Xiao, Ph.D., for a single-year (2023) ranking.



**50 Years of Community Psychology at U New Haven**  
In April 2024, over 100 alumni, faculty, and students from the University of New Haven’s master’s program in community psychology gathered to celebrate the program’s 50th anniversary. The celebration included remarks from the current coordinator, Melissa Whitson, Ph.D., former faculty members, and program alumni.



## Major League Soccer Vice President Named Executive in Residence

Matthew Fealey ’08 M.S., vice president of partnership marketing at Major League Soccer (MLS), is serving as the executive in residence for the Sport Management Department for the 2024–25 academic year. Since joining MLS in 2015 as the manager of partnership marketing, Fealey has been responsible for overseeing client relations, activation planning, and business development initiatives with some of the league’s largest strategic corporate partners. Prior to joining MLS, Fealey held positions with the New York Mets and the NY/NJ Super Bowl Host Committee. Fealey earned a master’s degree in management of sports industries from U New Haven, where he was also a pitcher on the varsity baseball team in 2007, earning a spot on the East Coast Conference’s Third Team.

## Master’s Degree in Sport Management Ranked Best in World

SportBusiness ranked the University’s master’s degree in sport management program number 7 in the U.S. and number 9 in the world. The ranking was supported by the program’s standing as the best in the U.S. and internationally for graduates’ employment outcomes. The program was ranked number 1 in the world for graduates’ employment 12 months after Commencement and number 1 in the world for all program graduates’ current employment. The program was ranked number 4 in the U.S. and number 8 worldwide for career advancement and number 6 in the U.S. and number 7 worldwide for job support provided for students. It also ranked fifth in the country (and sixth in the world) for professional mentorship opportunities and 12th in the country (and 15th in the world) for its alumni network.

# Transformational Donation Supports Female Students From Afghanistan



The University of New Haven announced the establishment of the Afghan Women’s Scholars program. This program, made possible by a generous seven-figure gift from Henrik Nielsen, will provide scholarship and financial assistance to 10 undergraduate and four graduate Afghan women enrolled in any of the University’s five academic colleges/schools. The program support will span the four-year tenure for undergraduate students and the two-year tenure for graduate students. The University is excited to grow its global community by creating the Afghan Women’s Scholars program. The University of New Haven has a longstanding legacy of offering international programming and currently educates students from more than 70 countries.



## Prison Education Program Secures \$1.2 Million Renewal Grant

A degree-granting partnership first established in 2021 between the University of New Haven and the Yale Prison Education Initiative opened new avenues for students to pursue a degree while incarcerated and continue their education after release. This collaboration, originally supported by a \$1.5 million grant from the Mellon Foundation, recently received a new three-year, \$1.2 million renewal grant from the foundation that will help significantly expand the program’s reach.



## U New Haven and Stamford Educational Nonprofit Enhance College Access

The University of New Haven and Future 5, a Stamford-based educational nonprofit, have created a collaboration that will enable Future 5 student members accepted to U New Haven to receive 50 percent tuition scholarships, renewable for up to four years, to pursue a degree at the University. Additionally, Future 5 student members will have the opportunity while high school students to take college courses at a discounted rate.



## \$2.5 Million Grant Funds Cybersecurity and AI Workforce Development Program

The University has received a \$2.5 million grant from the National Security Agency to lead a coalition of five colleges and universities across the U.S. to develop a competency-focused workforce development program that educates and trains the existing and future workforce in four critical infrastructure sectors: energy, government facilities, finance, and telecommunications. The University’s Connecticut Institute of Technology will work with the State of Connecticut, regional and state financial institutions, and local governments to create and offer pathways in AI, cybersecurity, and cyber threat intelligence in the financial sector. As part of the grant, the University will create courses mapped to the Department of Defense’s Cyber Workforce Framework and the NICE Cybersecurity Workforce Framework.

## Engineering Professor Receives Major Grant to Advance Robotics Research

Shayok Mukhopadhyay, Ph.D., an associate professor in the Electrical and Computer Engineering and Computer Science Department, secured a prestigious Major Research Instrumentation grant from the National Science Foundation to acquire

Boston Dynamics’ cutting-edge Spot Robot platform. The primary goal is to push the boundaries of robotic exploration in unknown and hazardous environments. From responding to natural disasters to other high-risk scenarios, robots have the potential to play a vital role in exploring and assessing these environments without putting human lives in jeopardy. While the Spot Robot has been used in limited scenarios, this project aims to elevate its capabilities.



# Fiscal Year Celebration

## CELEBRATING A SUCCESSFUL YEAR

 Reflecting on **Fiscal Year 2024**, we have many achievements to celebrate!

**\$14,159,470**

raised, marking an impressive 18% increase from Fiscal Year 2023



Over \$7.3 million in gifts to new and existing academic programs

**\$7.3M**



\$1.7 million dedicated to scholarships and financial aid

**\$1.7M**



Alumni event registrations increased 41%

**41%+**



\$5.1 million in gifts for future capital projects

**\$5.1M**



\$20.1 million for a new Pompea College of Business building on the main campus

**\$20.1M**



\$4.5 million for athletic facility improvements

**\$4.5M**

**\$7.5M**

\$7.5 million in renovations to a research and innovation facility

**\$5M**

\$5 million for retention and need-based scholarships

**\$1.5M**

\$1.5 million in general operating funds



**\$5M**

\$5 million for community impact programs



\$7.5 million for academic and strategic impact programming

**\$7.5M**

## AND LOOKING AHEAD TO 2025



In the **new year**, we are focused on fulfilling even bolder fundraising goals.



Your generosity empowers us to innovate and invest in our students. Visit [newhaven.edu/give](https://newhaven.edu/give) to make a gift to support Charger Nation today!





BY DOUG WHITING

# *Listen to the* **DRUMBEAT**

Since the earliest days of his nascent presidency, Jens Frederiksen, Ph.D., has sounded a remarkably consistent rallying cry to anyone listening.

The frequent articulation of themes of transformative education, return on investment, and preparation for the elite jobs of the future are central to Frederiksen's fundamental belief in and hopefulness for American higher education in the 21st century.

For the University of New Haven, the themes at once honor the historic, century-old mission of the University while acknowledging the stark realities of higher education today — the heightened expectations of parents and students, the incessant questioning of the value of a college degree, and the burdens of rising costs.

Together, they give clues to the emerging priorities of Frederiksen's presidency and serve as a vision of the University's future that he will ask all Charger audiences and constituencies to embrace and support.

Pay attention, and you will hear the drumbeat.

At a recent Town Hall he told staff, "We are in the business of transforming lives and creating brighter futures. Our emphasis on return on investment is as high as it's ever been, in part due to the inflationary costs of higher education on students and parents. It is incumbent on universities to deliver a comprehensive and relevant experience."

Writing to the University Community in September, he said, "it was quite something seeing this many motivated Chargers begin their

transformative journey. More students than ever are courting the type of return on investment that the University of New Haven delivers. We are deeply and personally dedicated to preparing the next generation of an elite workforce across every sector of society, and we understand the tremendous sacrifice and commitment families are making to help create a brighter future for the next generation."

Writing to alumni, he sounded a similar note: "Our emphasis on career preparation, student outcomes, and return on investment powers all we do. Our vision is to become a global powerhouse for preparing the next generation of elite talent to excel in the workforce of the future."

And speaking to alumni, trustees, and community leaders at a library talk in Stamford, Connecticut, he said, "Institutions like the University of New Haven are closer to the crux of higher education in terms of their deeply transformative impact — academically but even more pressingly socioeconomically, professionally, and culturally. With high percentages of first-generation students, lots of diverse backgrounds, and most from working class families — the demographics at the University are deeply reflective of the vast majority of America and the globe."

Frederiksen's view is that a university is where one is first on their own, experiencing and shaping the rest of their life in a relatively safe space. It is where individuals situate themselves academically, personally, professionally, and culturally for their life's work "guarded from the immediacy of bad bosses,







# OPTIMIZE YOUR EXPERIENCE

AND

# PREPARE FOR YOUR FUTURE

At the University of New Haven, we have reimagined what the concept of career development should look like and created an approach that is integrative instead of merely transactional. That means future career success is built right into your entire academic experience.

Learn more at [newhaven.edu/student-life/career-development-center](https://newhaven.edu/student-life/career-development-center).

Start here



## YEAR 1 MILESTONES

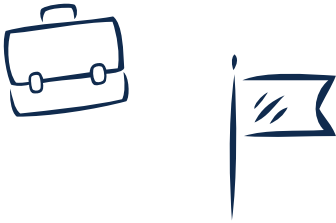
- ✓ Meet with a Career Advisor in the Career Development Center to activate your Handshake account and learn about the resources available.
- ✓ Upload your resume into Handshake to initiate your "Career Learning Record." In four years we'll see how far you've come!
- ✓ Get to know your academic advisor and program requirements for internships, capstones, and other experiential programs.
- ✓ Join a Recognized Student Organization (RSO) related to your personal and/or career interests to get connected on campus, develop new friendships, and build your life and career readiness skills.
- ✓ Start volunteering on and off campus to get engaged with the University of New Haven and the surrounding community.

## YEAR 2 MILESTONES

- ✓ Start planning for your (first) internship experience by updating your resume with your new campus engagement and volunteering skills.
- ✓ Attend annual career fairs and on-campus recruiting events to meet employers, build your professional network, and start applying for internships.
- ✓ Go to a Study Abroad information session to discover options available to you at our campus in Prato and at locations around the world through our study abroad partners.
- ✓ Stay engaged with your RSO and consider taking on a leadership role!
- ✓ Create a LinkedIn profile to start showcasing yourself professionally to the world, and make connections with alumni, employers, organizations, and thought leaders.

## YEAR 3 MILESTONES

- ✓ Update your LinkedIn profile and add new connections, including Charger alumni and (potential future!) employers.
- ✓ Attend University, Handshake, and local employer networking events and career fairs.
- ✓ Practice interviewing skills using Big Interview or reach out to the Career Development Office and request an interview prep or mock interview appointment.
- ✓ Continue applying for internships, part-time jobs, and summer jobs on Handshake.
- ✓ Utilize LinkedIn Learning to gain FREE certifications.
- ✓ Get "application ready" by taking the special Canvas course to perfect your resume, LinkedIn, and interviewing. We'll star you in our system to elevate your resume for openings with our preferred employers.



## YEAR 4 MILESTONES

- ✓ Learn market trends and industry salary ranges.
- ✓ Work with dedicated staff to finalize job application and portfolio materials.
- ✓ Make sure all that prep pays off! Follow up with employers by sending a professional thank you note or email.
- ✓ Start exploring requirements and write a personal statement for graduate school applications.
- ✓ Apply to jobs on Handshake.
- ✓ Stay active on LinkedIn via the University's main account, the International Students and Alumni affinity group, and Career Connect.



## A ROAD MAP



## FOR SUCCESS

YEAR 1

*Upload*

**Upload** your resume into Handshake.  
**Handshake**

YEAR 2

*Upskill*

Start to **upskill** yourself! Get involved with internships, campus organizations, classes, and activities that build your skills and competencies.

YEAR 3

*Update*

Be sure to **update** your resume in Handshake. Employers ask for candidates every day, and we are going to kickstart your internship and job search by pulling your resumes and submitting them for openings! (Don't worry; we'll call you first!)

YEAR 4

*Rinse & Repeat*

Make sure your resume is **uploaded** into Handshake, continue to **upskill** through academic and experiential opportunities, and be sure to keep your resume **updated**! All the hard work is about to pay off!



# *Bridging* ACADEMIA *AND* INDUSTRY *Young Alumni Special Edition*

The following pages contain the stories of 12 of the University of New Haven's more recent graduates, 40 years old or younger. Read on to see how these Chargers are capitalizing on their investment in a world-class education by translating academic lessons into fulfilling careers, molding purpose-driven lives, effecting deeply transformative impact — both personally and professionally, and creating a brighter future for their local and global communities.





BEN HAMMEL '17

# Keeping Things Interesting

BY GEORGE SPENCER

**K**eep Ben Hammel '17 away from the spotlight. He prefers to run the show from behind the camera. At Neuberger Berman, a global financial firm with more than \$500 billion of assets under management, Hammel helps lead a multimedia department that's like an in-house production company.

"We try to do everything visual, as that's what our clients respond to best. We run our own operation and lead the charge on production. We just happen to be in a corporate environment," says Hammel, the associate vice president of Brand Multimedia and Video.

From his office overlooking Rockefeller Center, he oversees the company's main production studio, which produces monthly and quarterly fund video updates, marketing campaign videos, and internal communications for his far-flung company, which has nearly 3,000 employees in 39 cities across 26 nations.

Hammel, 28, likes to keep his head down, a self-effacing trait he inherited from his father, a middle school principal, and mother, a lead pharmacist at a cancer center. He admits it feels great to receive a well-earned compliment but insists "I would rather let the work speak for itself. I am not someone who likes to talk about my accomplishments or boast about those types of things."

In his opinion, people like his parents and his fiancée Breann Johndrow '17, a social worker, are doing life-changing work, and they are the ones whose successes should be celebrated. "You have to put your job in perspective. Breann is helping save lives every day," according to Hammel.

Unsure of his career direction while at U New Haven, Hammel, a communications major and sport

management minor, attended an open house for students interested in TV and video production. "That cemented the path I wanted to go on," he says. Still, he faced the uncertainties that many undergraduates have about the leap into the real world. He credits his mentor Tom Garrett, chair of the Communication, Film, and Media Studies Department, for giving him a positive, low-stress outlook. "Don't necessarily worry so much about what you're doing at this phase in your life and journey," Garrett told him. "Be open to it all, and absorb as much as you can."

He took that advice to heart when he decided to leave his first job out of college, which turned out to be a dead end. "I picked up and left and moved to New York City, and I worked hard at networking there," recalls the Fairfield, Connecticut, resident. While waiting for the right job to come along, he started his video company, Ben Hammel Productions, which he still maintains.

"Do those extra few fun jobs on the side to keep things interesting," advises Hammel, who continues to produce the occasional music video and book trailers for publishers like Harper Collins.

But before Neuberger Berman, he was cautious about his next steps. When Garrett called to say he could help me land a gig working on the set of the 2019 hit movie "Joker," Hammel felt the time wasn't right. But Garrett rang him again a year or so later, offering the possibility of work on "The Sopranos" sequel, "The Many Saints of Newark," which was filming in that city. Hammel couldn't resist.

"It was a great overall experience," he says, notably because he worked under production artist Tim Metzger '85, a fellow Charger alum, who was

in charge of set design. "He took me under his wing and showed me everything. I had a lot of honest talks with him," Hammel recalls.

The two men transported furnishings from warehouses and dressed sets, and it surprised Hammel that the cast and crew, though they were very diverse, worked together like a close-knit family. What really astounded him was when he helped give modern-day Newark streets 1960s-era storefronts. "We took a living, breathing downtown and made it something completely different. We did stuff you can't imagine, like tanks rolling down the street," he says. "It was wonderful."

All along, though, Hammel knew long-term work on movie and TV sets was not for him because it would involve super-late hours and months on location away from family and friends. "I never wanted to be that person who was gone all the time. Family and relationships are very important to me."

Then the Neuberger Berman opportunity arose, as the firm initially needed freelance video help. Soon it invited Hammel to come on board full-time. Today he is especially proud of their ongoing podcast series, "Disruptive Forces in Investing," in which his company's top investors discuss emerging investment trends, as well as their expanding marketing plan, allowing Hammel and his team to be more creative with their outputs. For Hammel, that's ideal — "I'm not a person who can do the same thing every day," he says.

"Put your best foot forward to represent yourself the best way possible, and let the rest happen," he says. ■

*"Put your best foot forward to represent yourself the best way possible, and let the rest happen."*

BEN HAMMEL '17



KATIE O. PHOTOS



## ASHLEY McCLAIN '07

# Trust the Journey



BY TASMIHA KAHN AND SHAIKH RAHMAN

When Ashley McClain '07 first stepped onto the University of New Haven campus as part of the Outstanding High School Senior Program in the early 2000s, she couldn't have predicted that her journey would lead to creating a national program transforming how first responders interact with individuals on the autism spectrum. Yet 20 years later, her connection to U New Haven remains strong as she leads LINKED - Autism Safety Project, coaches the University's dance team, and continues to make a lasting impact on communities across the nation.

The 39 year old's journey after graduation exemplifies the versatility and adaptability that U New Haven instills in its students. "I graduated in 2007 and immediately went to work as a community advocate working for those that were underserved and needed assistance in finding community support," McClain explains. Over the next decade, she built an impressive career in social services, serving as a case manager with the Office of Adult Probation, program coordinator at Court Support Service Division, family support specialist with the Department of Children and Families, and program director at Dress for Success. Her path

then took an unexpected turn when she joined the University of New Haven's Office of Undergraduate Admissions, later transitioning to the Office of Financial Aid, roles that would ultimately provide her with crucial organizational and leadership skills.

McClain's path to founding LINKED in 2023 was shaped by both personal experience and professional evolution. As the daughter of a retired West Haven firefighter and now a special needs parent herself, she identified a crucial gap in first responder training. "When I became a special needs parent, I quickly realized that there was a lack of education in how to connect and interact with those of differing abilities, especially autism," she explains.



"Additionally, I experienced some 'unique' interactions with first responders that proved awareness, education, and knowledge were lacking."

What started as a local initiative has exploded into a national movement. "A year and a half later, we are now a national program, having trained over 500 first responders and created and implemented close to 400 sensory bags — specialized kits containing items like noise-canceling headphones, fidget toys, and visual communication cards designed to help calm and communicate with individuals with autism during emergencies," McClain shares. "I went from a mom who just wanted to notify her local police department about her son to a certified trainer for first responders who is providing resources on a national scale."

Her psychology degree from U New Haven has proven invaluable in her current role. "While a lot of what I share in my work is from a parent's perspective, being able to say that my educational foundation is within psychology carries a lot of weight," she notes. "I can answer their questions and engage in conversation from both the clinical and parental perspectives as I understand it from both sides, which legitimizes everything that I am doing."

McClain's impactful work is reamplified through her success stories. "A firefighter (fellow U New Haven alum) shared that he was able to use our LINKED Picture Exchange Communication tool to interact with a nonspeaking individual on an emergency call," she shares. "Police officers have shared their ability to connect with children and individuals of differing abilities on various calls with our sensory bags and information sharing resources. It is hearing these stories that makes it worth it and proves that just a little bit of awareness can make the world of difference."

"I wear a lot of hats, and I need to be able to organize my time efficiently," McClain explains. "I think back to the time when I was a full-time student at U New Haven while working as a dance instructor five to six days a week. I had to learn how to manage my time, prioritize when needed, and learn to not overload myself and cause burnout. Those skills I learned then are imperative to being successful in the work I am doing now."

Her experience working in various roles at U New Haven also contributed to her current success. "Through my time as an employee at the University, I learned a great deal," she reflects. "I had to learn how to think quickly on my feet during event planning with the Office of Undergraduate Admissions. I had to learn how to maintain thorough

and organized records within the Office of Financial Aid. I had to learn to motivate and keep the morale of a team as the Dance Team coach. Although each of the roles described are different from a nonprofit director, they each prepared me for creating and building my nonprofit."

Looking back over her 20-year connection with U New Haven, McClain sees her evolution as a testament to the University's transformative power. "One of the biggest lessons I learned was not something that came from a textbook. It was part of my life experience and real-world education. I was taught to be versatile, flexible, and open-minded. The relationships built, the collaborations established, and, most important, the friendships made are indescribable and truly have made a lasting impact on me."

McClain offers powerful advice to current students aspiring to make a difference in their communities: "Do it, and do it scared. Not everyone may understand what you're doing or why you're doing it, but it only takes one person to listen to and believe in you. The work that you will be doing will change someone's life and possibly save someone's life."

As she continues to expand LINKED's reach and impact, McClain remains focused on her mission to create meaningful change. "I am eager to connect and collaborate with other organizations to make a meaningful impact. Through advocacy, education,

and the inclusive efforts of Beyond the Horizon Inc., we will continue to provide opportunities for safe and nonjudgmental spaces for individuals and families to be heard, respected, and understood."

Her message to her younger self encapsulates the spirit of her journey: "Believe in yourself. Life is going to take you down some interesting paths. You may not understand it now, but it will all make sense one day. Trust the process. Trust the journey." ■

ON MAKING A DIFFERENCE:

*"The work that you will be doing will change someone's life and possibly save someone's life."*

ASHLEY McCLAIN '07



## NICOLE PACAPELLI '14, '16 MBA

# Going All In

BY TASMIHA KAHN AND SHAIKH RAHMAN

When Nicole Pacapelli '14, '16 MBA first left her hometown of West Haven to attend Stonehill College, she never imagined she'd ultimately find her true calling just eight minutes away. Yet her decision to transfer to the University of New Haven for spring semester of her freshman year would set in motion a transformative journey from student-athlete to Division I head coach, proving that sometimes the best opportunities are right in your backyard.

"Little did I realize how much I missed my family being close by," reflects Pacapelli, now the 32-year-old head women's soccer coach at Marist College. "The next three-and-a-half years at U New Haven proved it was the best decision I ever made."

That decision would lead to multiple transformations for Pacapelli, who started as a biology major before finding her path in nutrition and dietetics, followed by an MBA in Management of Sports Industries. Each step of her academic journey contributed to her evolution as a leader and coach.

"My MBA truly helped me learn how to run a business full circle, which is the best description of what I do as a head coach every day running my own program," says Pacapelli. "We manage, lead, budget, recruit, plan, prepare, fundraise — in the end, it turned out to be incredibly helpful."

During Pacapelli's senior year, her transformation from player to coach began after taking on the challenging role of being a graduate assistant. "I felt as if I lost friends at the moment, but I put my career first," Pacapelli recalls. "Leadership, communication, and holding others accountable were all areas I needed major growth in, but I got to experience trying to excel here at a very young age."

This early leadership experience, though challenging, proved invaluable. After being named

the University's Graduate Assistant of the Year in 2015, Pacapelli began her coaching career as an assistant at U New Haven. Later, networking connections through U New Haven helped her secure the position of head coach at Queens College. In 2018, she moved to the University of Richmond as an assistant coach, further developing her skills at the Division I level. Her journey continued at Binghamton University in 2020-2022, where her team captured a conference championship and she earned staff of the year honors. In 2023, at just 30 years old, she achieved her dream of becoming a Division I head coach when she took the helm at Marist College.

Throughout her career progression, Pacapelli has carried forward the lessons learned at U New Haven, particularly about the power of belief. "Don't Stop Believing — this is not only one of my favorite Journey songs but also something I always used to say," she shares. "I truly think that you could do anything that you believe you can, and New Haven helped me understand that."

This belief has carried her through the challenges of building a coaching career, including a stint as a volunteer assistant and over 100 job applications before landing certain positions. Now, at 32, she's one of the University's top donors under 35 and a member of the Alumni Board of Directors, maintaining deep connections to her alma mater.

Her coaching philosophy, which she calls "A Charged Heart," directly reflects her U New Haven experience. "The term charged heart comes from literally being a U New Haven Charger: that pride, the energy, the enthusiasm to love what we do every day," she explains. Under her leadership, the Marist women's soccer program emphasizes both athletic excellence and community engagement, mirroring the values she learned at the University.

Looking back on her evolution from student-athlete to Division I head coach, Pacapelli sees herself as "version 3.0" of the person who first entered U New Haven. "I feel that for my first few years after graduating and coaching in my early years, I was really just chasing the high of still playing," she reflects. "3.0 me is who I would say I am now, finally feeling more settled and at peace for how far I have come and the success I have had."

Her advice to current U New Haven students reflects the transformative power of fully embracing the university experience: "Go all in, and all that you do, don't hold anything back, and don't take a single day for granted. I truly believe that if you love something and invest in it, you will always get the most out of it, no matter the situation; love is different."

For Pacapelli, the return on investment from her U New Haven education goes far beyond career success. "My U New Haven education ultimately started my entire career and basically changed the course of my entire life," she says. "Without U New Haven, I don't feel I would be a Division I head coach right now, living out my dream."

What's next for this champion? As she looks to the future, recently engaged and planning her wedding to another college soccer coach, Pacapelli continues to exemplify the transformative power of a U New Haven education. Her journey from local student-athlete to successful Division I coach demonstrates how the right educational environment can help someone become the best version of themselves — or, as she puts it, "Life will find ways to make you uncomfortable; those are the moments you need to learn from and grow through!" ■

*"Life will find ways to make you uncomfortable; those are the moments you need to learn from and grow through!"*

NICOLE PACAPELLI '14, '16 MBA





## DEMETRIUS HOLLIMAN '22, '23 MBA

# Be the Driver of Your Own Future

BY STEVE NEUMANN

If you were asked to choose only one word to describe Demetrius Holliman '22, '23 MBA, it's likely you'd land on "unstoppable."

"As a student, I literally took advantage of everything U New Haven had to offer," Holliman said. "I'm 25 now, but I've been working and going to class since I was 18, so I've always been busy. People call me the Energizer Bunny."

During his time at the University, Holliman was involved in a dizzying array of activities and organizations, including the University's National Society of Black Engineers, American Society of Mechanical Engineers, and NAACP chapters. He also served as a leader in the University's Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Inc. — Gamma Alpha Tau chapter. A former Charger Ambassador, he also instructed GroupX fitness classes in the Beckerman Recreation Center.

Holliman — who got his bachelor's in mechanical engineering and his MBA in a STEM-designated concentration of data analytics — brings all of his Charger experience with him to the rewarding career he has today: senior project engineer at Pratt & Whitney, a leader in designing, manufacturing, and servicing aircraft engines and auxiliary power units.

"My brain is kind of split two ways," Holliman said. "I like engineering, but I'm also big on money management and business development. I work on multiple programs within Pratt & Whitney with a combined \$600 million budget, so it definitely helps having that type of a brain."

Holliman says he appreciates the opportunity to work on such a wide variety of innovative projects in his current role. "The blend of engineering rigor and

innovation here has not only deepened my technical expertise but also inspired me to push boundaries in problem-solving, efficiency, and working effectively within teams domestically and internationally."

The University was fertile ground for someone like Holliman to find that sweet spot between nature and nurture, that balance between innate motivation and external encouragement that can propel someone toward their unique vision of their future.

"I have to give a big shout-out to my fraternity brother, Darell Singleterry, who's also the MBA director at the University, because he's the one that pushed me to go get my MBA," Holliman said. "He was an awesome mentor to me. He was constantly asking what my next step was, what can we do to make me a better person."

Before he began the MBA program, Holliman had been thinking about taking a gap year to figure out what he wanted to do personally and professionally.

"Darell encouraged me to just keep it going and that I would thank him later," Holliman said. "And I truly do thank him for pushing me to continue. I went straight from my bachelor's into my master's, and it only took me a year."

Cultivating relationships like the one he had with Singleterry allowed Holliman to not only make the most of his education but also jump-start his career. In that regard, Kathy Forkin, who was an advisor in the Career Development Center at the time, was an instrumental catalyst.

In the summer of 2020, when Holliman was trying to secure an internship to augment his education and bolster his resume, he was discouraged by the

perennial catch-22 of college students entering the workforce: needing work experience to get a job but being unable to get an entry-level job to develop the work experience they need.

One company Holliman was interested in was Brothers' Harley-Davidson in Branford, Connecticut, where he could get hands-on experience in his field of study as a mechanical design technical assistant. But his initial attempts at securing the position were unsuccessful.

"So Kathy said, 'Demetrius, I want you to put a nice suit and tie on and go up to them every day with your resume — and keep going there until they give you an answer,'" Holliman said.

So every day, Monday through Friday, Holliman went to Brothers' Harley-Davidson in Branford, Connecticut, with a suit on and his resume in hand.

And it worked.

"After the third week, the GM came out to me and said they didn't have the funding to do an internship," Holliman said. "But after I told them my Bergami Summer Internship Fellowship program would essentially allow me to work there for free, they agreed to hire me. And that helped me accelerate my career."

The Bergami Summer Internship Program, which began in 2012, is a competitive scholarship awarded to only eight students each year and consists of a \$3,750 stipend to cover living expenses incurred while participating in an unpaid internship. To receive one of these stipends, students prepare applications and are interviewed by the selection committee. Students are then chosen based on academic standing, academic achievement, financial

*"I want to continue being a teacher and educating and helping the next generation succeed."*

DEMETRIUS HOLLIMAN '22, '23 MBA

need, and their ability to be a strong representative of the University.

Reflecting on the important role relationship building has played in his life and career trajectory, Holliman adds, "A special shout-out to my boys! My dogs, Ali and Syrus, who have been the best friends a man could ask for."

Even though Holliman is happily ensconced in his postgraduate career, his Energizer Bunny nature compels him to still be an active member of the Charger community. As an adjunct professor in the University's Industrial and Mechanical Engineering Department, he's excited to help students power their careers.

"My true passion is teaching," Holliman said. "I love everything about it. I love seeing that light bulb go off when something finally clicks. That's like the best dopamine high you can ever get in the world, just seeing somebody understand something."

Holliman's teaching experience helped him understand something about himself, too. His new goal is to get his doctorate to eventually become a full-time college professor.

"I want to continue being a teacher and educating and helping the next generation succeed," Holliman said. "I want to be the change and representation that I wish to see in this world."

In addition to his mentors at the University who helped him become who he is today, Holliman cites that original nexus between nature and nurture that shaped him — the parents who supported him and cared about his education.

But Holliman is quick to point out that his parents didn't hold his hand during college. They didn't call him every morning to make sure he'd got out of bed and got to class.

"My parents always said education is something that nobody could take from you," Holliman said. "Hats off to everybody who has helped me and pushed me to be the person I am today, but I really took the bull by the horns and said, 'I want this, I'm gonna go get it.'"

"You have to be the driver of your own future." ■





## CHRIS O'CONNOR '22, '24 MBA

# Living the Dream

BY GEORGE SPENCER

Ask Chris O'Connor '22, '24 MBA, how he's doing, and right away comes the jaunty reply — "I'm living the dream."

At the age of 22, he commutes into Manhattan's Grand Central Station from his Bethpage, Long Island, home to work as an operations analyst at Nearwater Capital, a specialty finance company.

Nearwater has only 50 employees, and O'Connor is challenged every day. "Everything I do stands out," he says. "There's so much room for growth. The people I meet are the best in the industry. You learn a lot in college, but you learn the most on the job."

But to get where he is today, O'Connor first had to learn a lesson in college that was literally painful — an injury forced the end of his athletic career. A top long-distance runner in high school, U New Haven recruited him. Bigger universities wanted him, but he felt more at home in New Haven.

"I thought I'd have an opportunity at U New Haven to be part of a very competitive team and to make meaningful contributions. I sensed that the University would give me room to grow," he recalls.

During his freshman year and the first half of his sophomore year, he ran cross-country winter track and specialized in the 1,500-meter run during

the spring. (His best time in that event, which was just under a mile, was a respectable 4:31.) Though he won no individual honors, his team placed third in the NE10 Cross Country Championship, a competition for New England schools.

O'Connor thrived on the rigors of training — on and off the track. A business management major and marketing minor, mandatory study hours ruled his evenings. (All team members were required to earn top grades.) Some days he had to turn in twice-a-day runs, while other days he lifted weights. When friends headed out on Saturday evenings, he had to stay in to rise early for races the next day.

Looking back, he says, "Learning how to prioritize was the biggest takeaway." Losing races taught him something, too. "It's always great winning, but you really don't take much away from that. When you lose in life, it's what you do with it that matters so that it doesn't happen again."

The problem was that his training had him pounding out as many as 60 miles a week to build his stamina for the longer 6.2-mile cross-country contests. "It's definitely a nice long race," O'Connor recalls.

Suddenly, he had discomfort in his right knee that wouldn't go away. Soon the joint became

painful because its protective cartilage had been worn away.

Physical therapy had no effect. Wary of more invasive interventions, O'Connor decided to leave the team. "It was heartbreaking," he says. "I had my week of being sad, but I quickly realized I had to figure things out." It dawned on him that he was lucky — after all, he had performed well during his freshman year.

Then came life-altering changes at U New Haven. The injury became "a blessing in disguise," according to O'Connor. First, he won the role of teaching assistant to George King, a practitioner in residence in the Department of Management. King teaches capstone classes that have majors acting as consultants for real-world companies and offering advice and research results as their final project. O'Connor fielded student inquiries, helped them juggle conflicts, and shouldered day-to-day administrative burdens for King that helped the class run smoothly.

Though he had captained his soccer and track teams in high school and enjoyed being a role model, he now found himself tackling a new experience — mentoring students. "For me, it was finding what each student cared about or finding

their strengths to push them along so they could achieve in the class what they wanted to get out of it," he says.

With newfound time free he hadn't had while running track, O'Connor joined the student investment club and became a support analyst for U New Haven's Gaia Initiative, a student-led investment fund. Thanks to a gift from Charger alumnus Frank Martire '77 MBA, the fund then had \$100,000, a sum that has risen to \$250,000. Each year, a portion of its returns fund student scholarships.

"When I got started with Gaia, I wasn't too heavy into finance, but I came out of Gaia prepared to work in finance. It truly prepared me for the role I'm in now," says O'Connor, who became the fund's equities manager. He also became president of the investment club. Under his leadership, its returns nearly matched the S&P's return of 13 percent. Today, O'Connor sits on Gaia's alumni board.

"He came in pretty green," recalls Jared Sheffield, the codirector of the Gaia Initiative. "But he recognized his weaknesses — something many adults don't do — and helped grow this fund. When we look back in 10 years, if there was a Mount Rushmore of students who really helped build Gaia, Chris will have been one of those major players."

*"When I got started with Gaia, I wasn't too heavy into finance, but I came out of Gaia prepared to work in finance. It truly prepared me for the role I'm in now."*

CHRIS O'CONNOR '22, '24 MBA

With running behind him, O'Connor spent more time playing golf. During his last semester as an MBA student, he and other students in association with the Hospitality Department raised \$20,000 from a charity golf outing they created.

"A dream job" is how he describes his position with Nearwater. (He got the job thanks to his own initiative, and Professors King, David Sacco, and Jared Sheffield helped him prep for the interviews.)

"I love getting in early and staying late," he says. "I wake up every day excited to come in."

But as much as O'Connor loves his work, he makes time to hit the fairways to work on his golf game. "Certain days, certain aspects work better than others. I think it's all about putting it all together," he says. "Right now, I'm trying to work on that driver." ■





MONICA YANEZ '14, '21 MBA

# Being Comfortable With Discomfort

BY COURTNEY WESTLAKE

Monica Yanez '14, '21 MBA has never settled for simply meeting expectations. A fiercely competitive individual since she was young, her high standards drive her to excel in every endeavor and inspire others around her to raise the bar too.

Case in point: one of her University of New Haven Track & Field hurdle records was only recently broken, 10 years after she graduated!

"I enjoy pushing myself to become the best version of who I can be," Monica says. "I particularly thrive in situations where I'm out of my comfort zone — being comfortable with discomfort."

With a passion for STEM, it's no surprise that Monica's competitive nature and strong ambition led her to a path in engineering, specifically in the Quality discipline.

Monica developed a passion for math and science early on, with a particular interest in chemistry. Growing up with an engineer father, she excelled in STEM subjects throughout high school, which motivated her to pursue a college major in that field.

Originally from Mexico, Monica moved with her family to West Haven as a child and has lived in the area for over 25 years, crediting the community for "shaping me into who I am today." She attended West Haven High School, where she excelled in soccer and track and field.

Her first exposure to the University of New Haven came from the college's Outstanding High School Senior Program. Spending her spring senior semester enrolled in New Haven courses allowed her to get a glimpse into what college life would be like. Monica was drawn to the university's intimate class sizes and engaged professors.

"I felt like a student, not just a number," she says. "I could stay after class to discuss the material further with my professors. The professors were incredibly passionate about teaching and genuinely cared for their students. That was the kind of learning environment I wanted to be a part of."

Monica decided to pursue a degree from the Tagliatela College of Engineering in chemical engineering with a minor in chemistry, combining her love of chemistry and her desire to follow in her father's footsteps. She also was a decorated athlete, playing on the Chargers women's soccer team and competing in the 100-meter and 400-meter hurdles, and as a member of the 4 × 100-meter and 4 × 400-meter relays for U New Haven women's track and field team.

"Being a three-sport athlete and an engineering major was a lot to juggle," she admits with a smile. "But it forced me to improve my time management skills, which has greatly benefited my career."

After graduating in 2014 with her bachelor's degree, Monica began her career at BIC Corporation. Then, while working full-time, she took virtual and evening classes to earn her MBA from the University of Connecticut in 2021.

Today, Monica is a senior quality engineer at Medtronic, a global leader in medical devices. As part of the surgical operating unit, she works in partnership with external manufacturing suppliers to ensure products contain the highest standard of quality and reliability for patient safety.

She is also an active member of various Medtronic Employee Resource Groups, including the Hispanic/Latino Network and Medtronic Young Professionals, which has given her the opportunity to "share my voice and collaborate with other

professionals and help share the vision for inclusion, diversity, and equity at Medtronic."

"I truly believe that U New Haven has propelled me every step of the way to being the professional I am today," Monica says. "The University has been vital in developing my engineering skills and the critical skills needed to think outside the box and challenge the status quo."

Monica's academic and professional career have also helped her recognize the value of teamwork, a lesson she first learned through athletics. Encountering challenging subjects in engineering, Monica wishes she had taken the initiative earlier in her academic career to create or join a study group.

"You won't know everything, and that's OK," she shares. "Working with others has so much value because everyone has a different understanding and can help provide a unique perspective to navigate those complex assignments. Embracing this early will set you up for success."

This team-oriented mindset continues to serve her well in her intense yet fulfilling career.

"In my day-to-day, I work with individuals from various professional backgrounds and levels of experience, from research and development, sourcing, design, and manufacturing engineers to external suppliers who play a vital role in meeting our customers' needs," she says.

Despite a demanding career, Monica is no stranger to her alma mater, 10 years after graduating. Whenever possible, she visits campus to watch the women's soccer team play home games at Kathy Zolad Stadium or the track team compete at local invitationals. "It's so fun to see the new generation of players. It's nostalgic watching the games from the

*"More and more young girls are joining the STEM field, and I'm excited to see what the future holds for us."*

MONICA YANEZ '14, '21 MBA

bleachers — I definitely miss playing on this field and the memories I made there," she says.

The University of New Haven has become a family tradition, with Monica's two younger sisters following in her footsteps, both in the dental hygiene program — one a 2019 graduate and one in her junior year. "My youngest sister still in school is always looking for a patient to practice on, so I try to make my teeth available for her," Monica laughs.

These days, Monica is learning how to fully channel her intense, competitive nature to better herself — both professionally and personally.

She aspires to continue advancing in the medical device industry, honing her technical skills and climbing the corporate ladder. At the same time, she is dedicated to maintaining a balance between her professional success and personal fulfillment.

"I'm working on becoming the best version of myself overall: investing in my mental health and physical well-being, spending more time with family and friends, enjoying new foods, and traveling," Monica shares.

Monica also hopes to mentor the younger generation, particularly women in STEM. Having benefited from supportive leaders, she aims to help open doors for others.

"Engineering is still a male-dominated field, but it's exciting to see the increasing representation of women, and we're definitely heading in the right direction," she says. "Along the way, I've met incredible people who have supported my career, offering valuable lessons, resources, and opportunities that I intend to pass on. More and more young girls are joining the STEM field, and I'm excited to see what the future holds for us." ■





*"I told myself, 'Once I graduate, I want to be an asset to future students like those folks were to me.' And that's been really rewarding."*

MICHAEL SCHARFENBERG '20



## MICHAEL SCHARFENBERG '20

# Be U Willing

BY COURTNEY WESTLAKE

For Michael Scharfenberg '20, educational and professional success can be distilled down to two words: be willing — willing to make the call, willing to ask questions, and even willing to work unpaid simply for the experience.

When Mike, now 29 years old, came to a cross-roads during his college career, he was willing to make a change, even though he was uncertain about the next step.

Mike, a native of Newtown, Connecticut, was pursuing a physical education degree at Central Connecticut State University when he realized, already three years in, that it wasn't the path he wanted to take. It was a tough decision to pivot so late in the game, so to speak, but he left school to take a job selling memberships at Club 24 Concept Gyms.

A newfound passion for sales took root, and this small step of faith carved a new path for him. As he explored further, Mike discovered a program in sports management at the University of New Haven that fused his love for sports with a business career. Once enrolled, he poured himself into his studies, working to understand the intricacies of the business side of sports.

While still a student, Mike got his break into professional baseball when he landed a coveted internship with the Yankees summer sales program. Then, as he prepared to graduate in 2020, he was offered a full-time job with the Washington Nationals. "But there was a curveball with COVID-19, no pun intended," he laughs.

He didn't let his setback stop him. Since no one was attending ball games that year, Mike took advantage of the extra time to start a podcast, with help in this new endeavor from New Haven alumni advisor Rob Thompson. Mike interviewed managers and directors in sports ticket sales, deepening his knowledge while building invaluable connections along the way.

When a sales role opened with the Tennessee Titans football team in February 2021, Mike was ready, thanks to his constant networking while at New Haven and postgraduation. Since then, he's hit

major sales accomplishments and been promoted to account executive. Moving from baseball to football has certainly been a transition, but he's enjoying the differences too.

"When it comes to the passion of the fan base, the NFL is just a different breed," he smiles. "The Yankees fan base is incredible, of course, but in the NFL, fans live and die with every Sunday game, no matter what team. We have people flying into Nashville for every home game from around the entire country."

Keeping Mike's schedule even more hectic than usual is the construction of a new Titans stadium, set to open for the 2027–2028 season. Mike is currently juggling up to seven meetings a day to fill the new stadium with prospective season ticket holders, walking them through virtual reality tours and helping them find their ideal seats.

"We're asking them for a lot of money, so it's all about getting to know the customer and why they come to games and then finding the right fit for them," he shares. "It's so different than what we were used to, with everything on the phone. It's honestly more of a service role than sales now."

The importance of networking and drive was impressed upon Mike during his time at New Haven. He found that professors were always willing to mentor students if students took the initiative to cultivate the relationship.

"One of my professors gave any student extra credit to meet with our alumni advisor, who has a huge portfolio of knowledge, yet only half the class did," Mike recalls. "My biggest piece of advice to students is to get experience in your field — which will probably be unpaid — and your professors are a helpful resource for those opportunities. The doors my mentors at U New Haven opened for me were critical."

While every field is highly competitive today, the sports industry is even fiercer. The Titans receive thousands of applications for each job opening, and Mike emphasizes that networking can make all the difference.

Because Mike credits much of his success to the connections he formed with University professors and alumni, he is happy to pay it forward, regularly sharing his knowledge with students who reach out to him.

At the 2022 National Collegiate Sports Sales Championship in Atlanta, where college students nationwide showcase their sales skills to land jobs with the nearly 100 professional sports teams and sports entertainment companies who participate in the event, Mike also served as an alumni mentor to help New Haven students prepare for the intense competition.

"As a student, one of my biggest takeaways was recognizing how alumni in the sports industry helped form the foundation of my career — showing me how to network and what to expect when networking," he says. "I told myself, 'Once I graduate, I want to be an asset to future students like those folks were to me.' And that's been really rewarding."

That said, Mike emphasizes the importance of authenticity. "When students call, I want them to be genuinely curious about the team, the culture, what our day looks like — not just about how to get a job," he shares. "I promise, if you ask thoughtful questions, you'll impress the company."

Speaking of questions, Mike got the answer he was hoping for when he asked a very important personal question this year: he and his fiancée are getting married in June 2025! In addition to wedding planning, the couple looks forward to traveling as much as possible. "We're big road trip people, and being in Nashville, we're able to drive to a lot of different cities," he shares.

On the professional side, Mike has his sights focused on the goal of selling out the new Titans stadium by 2027. His sales team was the second fastest team in the country to sell out their club tickets, a success that fuels Mike's motivation.

"Looking long-term, I plan on continuing to grow in my profession and leadership," he says. "And some day, I hope to get into management in sports sales. I'd love to be helping coach entry-level employees and making a positive impact every day on the organization." ■



OLIVIA WALTON '25 M.S.

# A Preoccupation With the Natural World

BY DOUG WHITING

History is filled with examples of individuals — the famous and the everyday — who envisioned the possible and created transformational change. JFK’s “moonshot” speech in 1962 predicted a moon landing. Churchill’s conviction of victory in defying the Nazi blitz early in World War II helped change that war’s course. Mandela’s belief in equality for all ultimately brought about the end of South African apartheid.

On a less grand but still highly impactful scale, the actions of ordinary people doing extraordinary things are breathtaking — Rosa Parks on a Montgomery bus, Todd Beamer on Flight 293, or Pakistani teen Malala Yousafzai fighting for women’s education.

Then there are those who effect dramatic change in their communities. Artists are transforming neighborhoods in Detroit’s beleaguered inner city through the “Little Village” gallery project. A young Massachusetts woman victimized by domestic violence, sexual assault, and chronic trauma is now an acclaimed advocate for survivors.

Enter Olivia Walton ’25 M.S., whose goal is nothing less than giving every child on her native St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands an environmental education experience. “I want to foster an entire generation connected to nature and the environment at home,”

she says. “It’s a realistic goal, and the young people here deserve it.”

It was Walton’s mother who instilled in the four daughters she raised an appreciation for community and strong environmental passions.

Walton says, “Being an island community, we are pretty connected to the land. But there is a disconnect for many when it comes to actual stewardship of the land.” Working with children and their parents, the programs she employs as an environmental educator with the St. Croix Environmental Association, a small nonprofit, are helping bridge that gap.

The path that led Walton back home was irregular, but her preoccupation with the natural world was a through line. She swam, hiked, and went scuba diving in her youth; was a high school 4-H leader; and is a Cornell University honors graduate in natural resources. At Cornell, she satisfied an interest in community outreach by mentoring local children. Australia, Hawaii, Indonesia, and Shoals Marine Lab were among her “study abroad” destinations.

Burned out from academia, she became a nanny and taught at a Montessori school in Ithaca, New York. Even there, her zest for nature led to the creation of outdoor programming and running the school’s outdoor science summer program. “I realized

that [teaching] was where I wanted to be,” she says. “I saw the difference it made for students who have trouble connecting in a traditional classroom setting. They can connect with the content through this outdoor experience, connect to the natural world.”

Walton’s search for environmental sciences graduate programs with a teaching component led her to the University of New Haven. She cites Nature Instructor Clinic Director R. Laurence Davis, Ph.D., and advisor Roman Zajac, Ph.D., for providing a transformative experience “pivotal in giving me the tools and skills to facilitate the quality environmental education initiatives I was interested in.”

In a first for the University, she became a prized Switzer Foundation Fellow, leading to a grant that helped expand her thesis research. She designed and implemented a program at a primary school on San Salvador Island in the Bahamas, assessing the positive behavioral changes that resulted from students’ exposure to environmental learning in the school curriculum. “I discovered the importance of working within communities in a way that’s responsible and respectful, which is especially important in environmental science,” she says.

Today, she is working as an ambassador for Switzer to encourage more applicants from the

University of New Haven. “Students from Yale get this fellowship every year,” she laments. “U New Haven should get more than it’s had.”

Walton, a certified National Geographic Educator, has also been recognized as a North American Association for Environmental Education “30 Under 30” awardee and was one of its inaugural Civics and Environmental Education-Change Fellows.

On St. Croix, Walton coordinates an Eco Fair program at the Botanical Gardens for grades three to six, and organizes field trips, nature walks, and species identification excursions. She launched a summer camp called the Environmental Change Makers Program (“My baby!” she rejoices), introducing young people to topics including marine biology, environmental justice, and leadership education. “It’s so rewarding to see young people pursuing this direction,” she says. “What I really love to see is the connection in my community between the natural environment and our culture. It is important to give kids the skills and tools to protect their environment and for them to be passionate about conserving this place that they love and care for.”

She’s now settled comfortably back home, where she knits, does yoga, and tends to her garden, a passion she discovered while in New Haven. She

also fosters puppies and recently adopted YaYa, her three-year-old rescue. But she remains laser-focused on her mission: “I want to foster a passion for celebrating and protecting the natural world through

interdisciplinary, exploratory, and inspirational opportunities for kids of all ages and backgrounds, particularly the most underrepresented and at-risk members of our global community.” ■

*“I want to foster a passion for celebrating and protecting the natural world through interdisciplinary, exploratory, and inspirational opportunities for kids of all ages and backgrounds, particularly the most underrepresented and at-risk members of our global community.”*

OLIVIA WALTON '25 M.S.





## JUSTIN ORCUTT '12 MBA

# Creating New Pathways

BY COURTNEY WESTLAKE

Justin Orcutt '12 MBA has always approached life with a distinct mindset: "how fast can I hit the next milestone?" While he acknowledges he's missed a few things moving at a quick pace, operating with this mantra has also developed tenacity, courage, and a deep curiosity that sets him apart from the pack.

However, while working toward his MBA, Justin discovered that some problems require more than persistent push; sometimes, the people you surround yourself with make all the difference. It was during a class called Bond Derivatives — focused on developing and applying financial models to give business leaders data points for decision-making — and students were grouped into teams on the first day.

"That one class was the hardest I've ever taken," Justin laughs, "but it taught me how to rely on my team. I realized that it's extremely important as a leader to know when to let others lead. You won't always know how to solve a problem, so you need to know how to pull others in to help solve the problem."

This insight became a cornerstone for Justin, who has been fostering collaboration to strengthen organizational missions ever since.

Today, Justin works in Aerospace and Commercial Defense for Microsoft's Enterprise Cybersecurity Group, where he provides security solutions, expertise, and services to help clients safeguard their data and customers from cybersecurity risks.

When he started his college career, however, computer science wasn't even on his radar.

Growing up in Naugatuck, Connecticut, Justin is a first-generation American. Watching his illiterate

immigrant grandfather make a living maintaining other people's property — and "come home with a stack of money" — sparked a youthful desire in Justin to follow this path of grit working on lawns.

Justin attended a vocational agriculture school to concentrate on landscape and equine management. Taking an advanced track, he was already considered a college sophomore when he graduated high school, so he completed his business administration degree early at Post University.

His journey may have been fast, but his path was anything but clear-cut. Justin had just decided to apply those childhood lessons in entrepreneurship to a venture doing home mortgage inspections when the 2008 financial crisis plagued the economy, so he shifted to working at a call center.

Eventually, he started exploring options to earn his MBA. "I knew about the University of New Haven's good reputation, and the classes for working professionals were convenient with a great curriculum and wide diversity of students," he notes.

Justin earned his MBA with a concentration in human resources, wanting to be able to manage a team well and become a more well-rounded employee. The program expanded his thinking from a tactical perspective to a more strategic approach to problem-solving and organizational direction.

"It equipped me with the right skills and mentorships and helped me realize that the strategy you take as an organization has a massive impact on your employees," he says.

After graduating from U New Haven, having an advanced degree opened new doors for Justin, allowing him to transfer industries and move into the world of cybersecurity. "I worked with a bunch

of consultants and grinded for several years. I got exposure to a lot of different industries, and I was a sponge and absorbed everything anyone would share with me," Justin recalls.

While early exposure to computer science is helpful, the good news is that there are no prerequisites, Justin points out. With the right dedication and focus, anyone can learn.

For those interested in the field, he offers this advice: "Now is the opportunity in school to learn as much as you can about theoretical applications and best business practices and to expand your network and find strong mentors. You might not know where you want to go, but with strong mentors, they'll help you stay on track or find resources when you need them."

Because of his positive mentorships and experiences at U New Haven, Justin is now passionate about creating pathways for students like himself, particularly in connecting those interested in pursuing computer science degrees with employers hiring in the field. "The University has always been on the cutting edge with forensics, and I would love to bring that to cybersecurity," he explains.

U New Haven strengthened crucial skills for him — including effective communication, adaptability, and critical thinking — and Justin hopes to establish more pathways within information science and opportunities for younger students to develop the skills they need to succeed.

In February 2024, he served on a workforce development panel hosted at the University, and he is now working with the university on a unique program funded by the National Security Administration to introduce teachers and students to cybersecurity.

*"I realized that it's extremely important as a leader to know when to let others lead. You won't always know how to solve a problem, so you need to know how to pull others in to help solve the problem."*

JUSTIN ORCUTT '12 MBA

"I was able to help energize and educate teachers on why cybersecurity is important to teach, how to coach students in preparing for these types of roles, how to prepare for interviews, and more. I've had several great opportunities to give back in small ways to the school," Justin says.

Now a father of four children with his wife, Justin is also deeply committed to his family and involved in his community. He has represented Microsoft at ND ISAC and CISC, has served as an advisor to GenCyber Connecticut, and is a founding member of both the Georgia Defense Industrial Base Task Force and the Rocky Hill Greater Together Community Fund.

And he shows no signs of slowing down anytime soon, driven by his relentless passion for connecting people from all walks of life to create meaningful impact.

"U New Haven prepared me to be a future leader and help pull together diverse opinions to help solve problems," Justin says. "You can't insulate yourself with just yes-people; you need a diversity of opinions and people of different backgrounds and ways of life to challenge ideas. The University helped prepare me to be that future leader and supported me in that diversity of thought." ■





JAHIR BLANTON '18, '19 M.S.

# At Home In the Gray Zones

BY STEVE NEUMANN

Working for the U.S. Secret Service is not for the faint of heart.

By its very nature, the job involves ambiguity and complexity, and a “routine” event can sometimes turn into a fluid situation with many moving parts — and even rapidly evolving threats to a protectee.

For someone like Special Agent Jahir Blanton '18, '19 M.S., who began working for the Secret Service in 2020, those things are features, not bugs.

“In law enforcement, nothing is really black and white — and with this job particularly, it’s always in the gray,” Blanton said. “We’re not a typical agency where someone simply tells you to do this or do that. A lot of it depends on what you see and what your experiences are, which is why I like this job.”

As a standout track and field star at his high school in West Orange, New Jersey, Blanton was recruited by U New Haven in 2014 with a scholarship to play both track and football.

However, after some major injuries early on, Blanton began to envision what his life would look like outside of athletics, contemplating his first steps outside the comfort zone of sports that had largely defined his life up to that point.

Those first steps put him back on the path to a career in law enforcement, which he had been enthralled with long before he ever became a Charger.

“I majored in criminal justice, which was something I wanted to do since I was a little kid — I actually

wanted to be a Power Ranger,” Blanton said. “That was just my first introduction, and then I just started watching more and more cop shows, like NCIS and Flashpoint, so I got very interested in it.”

As Blanton got older and realized that the alien sage Zordon wasn’t real and that he wasn’t going to get the call to defend the Earth, he had to find a real career path.

“U New Haven was the perfect school that had everything I needed,” Blanton said. “As I started to do more and more research, I wanted to get into intricate crimes. I wanted to make a big difference.”

New special agent trainees like Blanton undergo months of intensive training at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Glynco, Georgia, both in the classroom and outside, with fitness, firearms, and simulation training.

After his time at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, Blanton began working in the Secret Service’s New York Field Office where, for about their first year, new agents work in protection — which could include the president or vice president, former presidents, or even visiting foreign dignitaries.

After his initial stint in protection, Blanton got a chance to work on some monetary crime investigations as well as protective intelligence, which is the advance work and threat assessments agents do to identify potential risks to their protectees.

“For example, when President Biden first got elected, there was a tweet going around that said ‘86 46,’” Blanton said. “If you’ve ever worked in a

restaurant, you know that when you ‘86’ something, that means you take it out. So that’s a threat we had to investigate.”

Since October 2024, Blanton has been on the protection team for former President Bill Clinton and former First Lady Hillary Clinton.

“After graduation, I considered a few different federal agencies, and the Secret Service seemed to be the one that worked the best for me because it took me out of my comfort zone,” Blanton said. “I had never traveled outside the U.S. before taking this job, and now I’ve been to places like Switzerland, Poland, and Japan.”

Not all of a special agent’s assignments involve the allure of the unfamiliar cultures of foreign countries. In the U.S. alone, they run the gamut from pop culture to high culture.

“One of the coolest things in getting to do protection assignments is where you do something called ‘advances,’ where we scout out a place to make sure it’s safe,” Blanton said. “I’ve been able to do advance work backstage at Hamilton and the Met Gala; some get to work Super Bowls — because wherever our protectee goes, we have to protect them.”

In addition to getting to go to some locales that, by his admission, Blanton likely wouldn’t go to on his own initiative, Blanton thrives on the variety of tasks inherent in the job.

“I have very rarely worked a nine-to-five,” Blanton said. “You work all 24 hours of the day, yes, but you don’t work all 24 hours of the day every day.”

“I also like the fact that you can go from protection to protective intelligence; you can go to investigations; you can go to traveling and doing protection or traveling and doing investigations,” Blanton added. “There are just so many different types of things you could do that you don’t get bored.”

Blanton’s time at the University helped him transform from aspiring Power Ranger to bona fide Secret Service agent, thanks in part to internships with what he calls the “alphabet police.”

“I had an ATF internship, a DEA internship, and even a stint with the New Jersey State Police,” Blanton said. “I was able to do so many different internships to the point where I knew that a federal agency like the Secret Service was what I truly wanted to do.”

Aside from the experiential learning through his many internships, Blanton says one of the biggest things that gave him a leg up on becoming a well-rounded federal agent was learning a different kind of writing at U New Haven.

“In law enforcement, you can’t write in conclusions; you have to write in facts,” Blanton said.

For example, Blanton says that if there’s an investigation into a missing \$70,000 and they find a suspect who has \$70,000 in their bag, they can’t write in the report that the person stole \$70,000. They have to write that the subject is in possession of \$70,000, which matches the \$70,000 that’s missing. The conclusion is that they stole it, but the fact is that they’re in possession of something that matches it.

“Learning the difference between writing in facts and writing in conclusions was really big for me,” Blanton said. “It’s about those little differences that change the meaning of things, and I got better with that skill through my time at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center because I had that head start at U New Haven.”

“And I feel like it’s helped me with life in general,” Blanton added. “Not that you become less judgmental, but you can say, OK, I know what you think happened, but just tell me exactly what happened. Tell me the facts.”

While the facts of Blanton’s case are that his experiences at U New Haven helped turn a childhood dream into a professional reality, his conclusion is that he should help other Chargers envision their lives beyond college.

That’s why he loves returning to campus when he can — like this past June at the Criminal Justice Career Expo, where he can guide students through the many options for law enforcement and share the hard-earned wisdom of both his time at the University and his professional career.

“I have to pass that on,” he said. “I want these students to get jobs that will change their lives, the same way that happened for me.” ■

*“Learning the difference between writing in facts and writing in conclusions was really big for me. It’s about those little differences that change the meaning of things.”*

JAHIR BLANTON '18, '19 M.S.





## HANNAH CATALLO-STOOKS '24 M.S.

# Catch Me If You Can

BY CHRISTINA HERNANDEZ SHERMAN

**H**annah Catallo-Stooks '24 M.S. is one of the few people standing between U.S. Navy ships and cybersecurity threats.

In her role as a cybersecurity engineer for the NAVSEA Warfare Centers, which provide the technology, operations, and services to support the U.S. Navy, Catallo-Stooks, a civilian, helps ensure that some 50 naval ships — and the hundreds of sailors living and working on them — are protected from cyberattacks. Her team of cybersecurity experts must stay ahead of both outdated software and foreign adversaries who are trying to get into newer systems. The stakes are high.

"If you're able to take down the combat system, which includes surveillance, navigation, and defense systems," Catallo-Stooks said, "ships have no defense and are left as targets."

Catallo-Stooks, who was adopted from Cambodia as an infant and grew up in Rochester, New York, wanted to work for the government since her undergraduate years at Canisius University in Buffalo, where she majored in computer science and criminal justice. Less than a year into her current role, Catallo-Stooks is already advising chiefs and senior officials. "I'm making a greater impact than I ever thought I could," she said. "There's a big line of communication there, and it's growing my own network."

Catallo-Stooks knew government work was in her future. She received funding to attend the

University of New Haven from the CyberCorps Scholarship for Service Program (SFS), which trains the next generation of cybersecurity operatives to enter the government workforce. In return for financial support, students funded by the program must complete cybersecurity-related government internships and agree to work for the U.S. government in a cybersecurity-related position after graduation.

Another requirement: participate in cybersecurity research. For that, Catallo-Stooks focused on the field that initially brought her to the University: digital forensics. Digital forensics is an arm of crime scene investigation that involves using digital evidence, such as data from cell phones, computers, hard drives, and even social media. Catallo-Stooks' undergraduate thesis was on the topic of digital forensics and the Fourth Amendment, and she was drawn to the University for its program. "It's a big and upcoming field, especially with how digital everything is becoming," she said. "Alexa is always listening."

Catallo-Stooks spent two years working on a research paper analyzing digital devices and artifacts used in murder cases. Collaborating with former University of New Haven faculty John Jankura and Ibrahim Baggili, she used case law databases and news articles to analyze how murder investigations used digital evidence.

The resulting paper, titled "Catch Me If You Can," found that cell phones were used as digital evidence in more than two-thirds of murder cases. "While cell phones are a large portion of digital evidence, being flexible enough to understand how to examine a smart doorbell or a Nintendo Switch can be just as critical to another case," Catallo-Stooks wrote in the paper's conclusion. "A creative mind is a requirement in forensic work, and the more fluid investigators are in their abilities, the more effective they will be as investigators."

As lead author, Catallo-Stooks was invited to present her research at the International Conference on Digital Forensics and Cyber Crime, which was held in New York City in 2023.

Catallo-Stooks' current role with the Navy — she was offered the job after completing two summer internships during graduate school with the NAVSEA Warfare Centers to fulfill her CyberCorps requirements — doesn't include digital forensics work, but she hopes to pursue that path eventually. "At my job right now, we don't have a digital forensics team," she said. "But they're looking at starting one up where I could be the lead."

At the University, Catallo-Stooks was a member of the golf team and part of Women in Cybersecurity (WiCys), a student chapter of the national group that aims to increase the number of female students pursuing careers related to cybersecurity, computer

*"A creative mind is a requirement in forensic work, and the more fluid investigators are in their abilities, the more effective they will be as investigators."*

HANNAH CATALLO-STOOKS '24 M.S.

science, and related fields. "There aren't many women in our field, so meeting every week with like-minded women to talk, look at resumes, and see where we wanted to go in our future was helpful."

The cohort traveled together to the Women in Cybersecurity conference each year, taking in speeches from female cybersecurity CEOs. "It was really helpful to see that there are other women in our field," Catallo-Stooks said. "Even now, I'll be on a ship, and I'll be one of the only women there." She stays in touch with her connections from the club.

In her current role, Catallo-Stooks is part of a team that builds out software to install on Navy ships. They also patch software every month to remediate cyber threats, which are constantly evolving. "There might not even be people hacking in the future," she said. "You can basically ask ChatGPT to write code for you. We need to protect against these emerging technologies and people with the skills to break into the system and do a lot of damage."

Catallo-Stooks travels frequently for installation and upgrades, both within the United States and internationally, including to Singapore. During these long work trips, she usually gets time to explore, attending sporting events and eating at local restaurants. Her favorite city to travel to is San Diego, where she enjoys Padres baseball games.

Catallo-Stooks' next step: a six-month rotation in California to learn the ins and outs of ships' hardware. "This would be more about physical parts, rather than software," she said. "As I move up in my career, it's good to know how the network is built." ■





## PRADEEP RAJBHANDARI, MBBS, M.S., '24 MPH

# A Sixth Sense

BY CHRISTINA HERNANDEZ SHERMAN

**P**radeep Rajbhandari, MBBS, M.S., '24 MPH, was reaching the apex of his career in 2020, practicing as an ear, nose, and throat surgeon in Kathmandu, Nepal, where he was born and had lived his entire life. Then a global pandemic caused him to rethink everything.

"We were supposed to be performing surgeries on COVID-19-positive patients, but we didn't have any guidelines," Rajbhandari said. "I felt helpless. We had no protocols for pandemics like COVID-19."

The experience made Rajbhandari realize his desire to contribute to public health beyond what his surgical skills could accomplish. He wanted to hone his training in clinical research to make a broader impact. "My sixth sense was telling me, 'You should be doing something different,'" he said. The feeling was so strong that within two years, Rajbhandari, then 32, upended his life in Nepal — a decision that was supported by his wife but otherwise shocked family and friends — to pursue a master's degree in public health in the United States. "I found the University of New Haven," he said, "which aligned with my core understanding of the need for public health." Rajbhandari was drawn to the University's interdisciplinary approach to education, focus on global health, and support of international students.

Today, Rajbhandari's career trajectory looks much different from what it was five years ago. Now a clinical research associate at the Yale University School of Medicine, Rajbhandari is pursuing a career as a physician-scientist. "A medical doctor should have skills in academics, research, and clinical knowledge," he said. "If a doctor falls short of any of these, he might not be a good doctor."

Rajbhandari was chosen for the Dean's Scholarship Program, which provides up to 50 percent

tuition assistance during enrollment at the University of New Haven, and began his studies in January 2022. He felt supported as an international student, getting help with language barriers and unfamiliar software from faculty and staff. "There was a transition phase where I had to adapt to completely different cultural rules," he said, "even driving on the right side."

With an eye on bolstering his clinical research skills, Rajbhandari sought a research assistant position with Karl Minges, Ph.D., MPH, associate dean of research in the Department of Population Health and Leadership in the School of Health Sciences. Though these slots were limited because of funding constraints in the waning days of the pandemic, Rajbhandari secured a paid assistantship. "That was a turning point for me," he said. "It completely changed my perception of research and helped boost my confidence."

Rajbhandari collaborated with Minges on a systematic review paper on developing interventions to reduce hospital admissions in skilled nursing facilities — a health care setting Rajbhandari hadn't heard of before. Rajbhandari said he was in awe of the scale of the research and was thrilled to learn about techniques that could improve it. "Before coming to the United States, most of the research I knew about was performed manually," he said. "Here, the technology is amazing. I learned how different software could enhance the quality and productivity of research."

Working with such a prominent researcher — in 2023, Minges' achievements were recognized by Connecticut Magazine, and he received the University's Research Excellence award — was inspiring for Rajbhandari. "His profile helped me boost my own profile," he said. Rajbhandari gained

confidence when he and Minges presented their work at conferences, including the 2023 meeting of the APHA, an organization of more than 25,000 public health professionals. "This could not have been possible without the guidance or motivation of the professors and from the fertile environment created by the University community," Rajbhandari said. "My experience as a research assistant under Dr. Minges, a fellow of the WeEmbody Lab under Dr. Tran, and a SIMP leader under Dr. Mendez, helped shape me. I'm so grateful to those professors."

At the same meeting, held that year in Atlanta, Rajbhandari was named APHA Campus Liaison of the Year — topping his peers from more than 40 other universities — for his role as a bridge between the association and the cohort of future public health professionals at the University of New Haven.

Rajbhandari was becoming known on the public health conference circuit. A year earlier, he won student scholarships to attend both the 2022 APHA annual meeting and the Society for Public Health Education advocacy summit.

Even before graduating from the University of New Haven, Rajbhandari was invited to interview for his current role at Yale. (Minges helped make the connection.) He was thrilled by the opportunity to work on a large-scale research project funded by the National Institutes of Health. The project is focused on underrepresented students in medical fields — a topic of particular interest to Rajbhandari as an international student — and aims to determine the factors preventing these students from pursuing research in medical school and to identify faculty and mentors who can increase their participation in research.

*"As my professors [at the University of New Haven] used to tell me, you need to grab the opportunities that are available. There is no perfect time."*

PRADEEP RAJBHANDARI, MBBS, M.S., '24 MPH

"This could be a milestone in modifying [medical school] curriculum," Rajbhandari said. "We want to identify the interventions that can help increase the proportion of students who pursue research as a career in medical school, or even in their later life, and develop intentions to be a physician-scientist."

As Rajbhandari continues down his path to becoming a physician-scientist, his next step is to apply for U.S.-based medical residencies in the clinical specialty of his choice. "The United States is the land of opportunities," he said. "As my professors [at the University of New Haven] used to tell me, you need to grab the opportunities that are available. There is no perfect time."

While he continues his training in the U.S., Rajbhandari keeps an eye on giving back. "I am determined to contribute to the field of clinical research and innovative medicine in low- and middle-income countries around the globe, including Nepal," he said. Rajbhandari will likely get to help his peers do the same. Those friends who were skeptical of his choice to leave a thriving career in Nepal? "Some of my colleagues back home are now interested in following in my footsteps," he said.

Rajbhandari keeps in close touch with Minges for guidance and updates. He was also invited by another of his University mentors, Alvin Tran, Sc.D., MPH, assistant professor in the Department of Population Health and Leadership, to give a guest lecture last year. He hopes to return to U New Haven one day. "I remind myself, 'Once a Charger, always a Charger.'" ■



# From the Alumni Association

## The Chance to Pursue Greatness

Hey, Charger Family,

Spring 2024 officially marked a decade since I graduated from the University of New Haven and joined our network of nearly 68,000 proud Charger alumni. In some ways, it honestly does not seem like it's been that long since I was last a student, but I've come a long way since then.

When I reflect on my personal growth — both while a student and after graduation — I am very grateful for the many opportunities I was exposed to at the University. UNew Haven gave me the chance to grow into the fullest expression of who I truly am.

I continued my athletic pursuits while working on campus, served as a resident assistant, participated in student government, and sought mentorship from a wide range of professors with lived industry experience. Each of these opportunities helped shape me into the woman standing on that Commencement stage in May 2014, accepting my diploma.

Most important, the impact of those same lessons has never left me, and I've continued to evolve year after year.

While on campus, juggling multiple activities and responsibilities prepared me for managing competing priorities later in life in my career and as a working parent. My time as a student-athlete on our track and field team taught me the importance of mental fortitude. Participating in student government revealed the power of individuals coming together and taught me how to build and navigate similar governing structures and frameworks successfully — skills I was able to tap into early in my career as I adjusted to the world of consulting and navigating different client organizations. Being an RA harnessed my desire and ability to help others grow and showed me the impact of creating lasting experiences. As I've progressed as a manager in my company, this experience has helped me form and develop strong teams and apply a people-centric approach to the problems I solve for my clients daily. And last, but probably most impactful, was my internship at Sikorsky, where I worked for two years, gaining the experience I needed to secure my job at Accenture.

All this is to say that, even with dedication and hard work, one cannot grow without seeking out and seizing opportunity. That is why I am grateful I chose to attend the University of New Haven, and I am dedicated to ensuring all Chargers have this same chance to pursue greatness and reach their full potential.

Take care, and charge on!






Reece Gleadle '14  
*President, University of New Haven Alumni Board of Directors*



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## Been There, Done That

Members of the Alumni Board of Directors share reflections on personal growth and transformation.

“Don’t corner yourself with only one aspect of your career. Be willing to learn. Don’t be one-dimensional. Become well rounded by stepping outside your comfort zone and trying something different, with a willingness to get uncomfortable in order to grow and develop in an ever-changing environment. Make the person you become your biggest asset.”

CHRISTOPHER  
McWILLIAMS '93

“Stop searching for the ‘perfect’ fill-in-the-blank career, partner, house, etc. — whatever it may be — and focus instead on personal growth. If you focus on self-improvement and becoming the best version of ‘you,’ everything else will fall into place. I truly believe that personal development is available to everyone, and I think this advice can be applied to all aspects of life.”

TYLER D'AMORE '14

“U New Haven provided me with a well-rounded, interdisciplinary education, allowing me to thrive in industry through an emphasis on customer focus and strong technical understanding. My professors were attentive and provided several learning opportunities outside the classroom to build my network.”

ANNA MERCALDI '19

“Life is not over after 25. There's plenty of time and opportunity to grow and patiently prepare for the ‘next big thing.’ And career-wise, you haven’t quite ‘been there, done that’ yet either. The advice I got as an incoming student and echo to this day is get involved in student clubs and activities early! That way you can establish friend groups and networking opportunities outside the classroom.”

LEAH MYERS '18

“As a student, I knew that the faculty genuinely cared about my success. Without their guidance, I wouldn't have even known that my career existed. The curriculum and professors helped to foster my passion and guide me into a career I love.”

ERIC ST. AMAND '15

“The best advice I’ve ever received, and which I always like to pass on, is the “Trilogy of Success”: Be humble, and always aim to exceed expectations. Exploit opportunities to reinvent yourself to stay relevant (future-proof yourself). Learn and adapt to the social mores inherent in an organization’s unique culture.”

FRANK HARPER '79, '85 M.S., '85 MBA

“My time at U New Haven transformed my approach to relationships. Every challenge, roadblock, struggle, or failure was made easier through a relationship I had at the University where someone provided guidance or pointed me in the right direction. People want to help one another. Do what you can, wherever you are, to build meaningful relationships.”

RONALD PIERCE II '16

“Some good advice I was given — follow the sales trail if you want to follow the high earner trail. While not for everyone, it is very true; if you believe in yourself and the product, you can become very successful — both personally and professionally. It is truly an honor to help give back to the University and help guide students. In fact, the more I can give back through sharing my experiences, the more satisfied I feel.”

PASQUALE (PAT)  
CASELLA '94 M.S.



Events

#THEBLUEOUT #THEBLUE  
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WEEKEND 2024 #

*Charger Memories*





Highlights

# Dynamic Administrator To Lead Charger Athletics

In August 2024, Devin Crosby was named the new director of athletics following a comprehensive national search. An influential leader, he has a distinguished track record of cultivating student-athlete success in the classroom, in the community, and on the field.

Crosby comes to the University from Oral Roberts University, where he served as deputy athletics director. He helped launch the campaign for ORU's baseball stadium renovation project following the team's historic 2023 season that saw it advance to the College World Series for the first time in 55 years. He also led all revenue-generating initiatives for the athletics department, major gifts, ticket sales, and fundraising events.

Prior to Oral Roberts, Crosby served as director of athletics for eight years at Lynn University in Boca Raton, Florida. Committed to fostering student-athlete development, he established an athletics care team to support the academic, mental, and physical success of Lynn's

student-athletes. He also launched the Spirit, Service, and Strength Conference, an interactive program for student athletes. Under his leadership the cumulative GPA of the athletics program reached 3.3.

At Lynn, he also negotiated a \$3 million agreement with Adidas — the most lucrative apparel agreement in the history of NCAA Division II — and initiated and completed capital projects at Bobby Campbell Stadium (soccer and lacrosse), de Hoernle Sports Center (basketball and volleyball), and Lynn's baseball complex.

Skilled at building relationships across higher education, business, and sports, he created the South Florida Showdown — a university-wide initiative that invited six NCAA Division I institutions to Lynn's campus while significantly expanding Lynn's national and international profile. Under his leadership, Lynn created a student-athlete leadership program, added five sports programs, and launched a YouTube interview production in which donors, former professional athletes, and current athletes could share their stories of overcoming adversity.

Crosby has held leadership positions in athletics administration at the University of Virginia, Northeastern University, the University of Houston, and the College of the Holy Cross. He earned his master's degree in education from East Stroudsburg and his bachelor's degree in business information systems from Slippery Rock University.





# Charger Roundup

## WOMEN'S TENNIS

Led by Northeast-10 Coach of the Year Chris Raffone, the women's tennis team completed an undefeated regular season en route to capturing the first Northeast-10 Conference Title in the program's history. The women's tennis team defeated Southern New Hampshire in the semifinals and Adelphi in the title match to secure the league championship and the automatic berth to the NCAA Championship, which will take place in the spring. Seven Chargers earned 13 individual postseason conference honors, including having a player earn All-Conference accolades at each of the six singles positions and all three doubles positions.



## CHARGER FOOTBALL

The New Haven football team captured the Northeast-10 title for the second season in a row, becoming the first team since 2012 to repeat as conference champions. Led by NE10 Coach of the Year Chris Pincince, the Chargers finished the regular season with an 8–2 record and earned a fourth straight berth in the NCAA Division II Playoffs, making New Haven one of only five schools in the country — and the only private institution — to be selected in each of the past four years. New Haven had 16 players individually honored by the NE10, including Offensive Lineman of the Year Justin Cesaire and Defensive Lineman of the Year Jack Quander. In addition to the NE10 awards, six players were named All-New England by the New England Football Writers Association, and Coach Pincince was selected as the Division II/III Coach of the Year by the Greater Boston Gridiron Club.



## CROSS COUNTRY

For the first time in 23 years, the Chargers were represented at the Division II Cross Country National Championship. Junior Mohammed Abunar earned an individual bid and competed at the event in Sacramento, California, on Saturday, November 23. Abunar and senior April Mauceri on the women's side each earned Northeast-10 All-Conference Second Team and All-East Region following their finishes at the NE10 Championship and NCAA East Region Championship.



## MEN'S SOCCER

Coming off a 12-win season and the team's first Northeast-10 Conference Championship game appearance in program history, the men's soccer team earned a spot in the NCAA Division II National Championship Tournament for the first time in 40 seasons. Led by head coach Tom Mattera, the Chargers were the No. 8 seed and were eliminated by Concord following a penalty kick shootout. Individually, nine Chargers were honored by the Northeast-10 Conference, led by a trio of First Team selections in Pau Santanach, Sandro Branquinho, and Anthony Denis.



## WOMEN'S VOLLEYBALL

Led by head coach Ana Pego, a two-time graduate of the University, the volleyball team compiled an 18–9 regular season record, including an 8–2 mark in conference play to finish in a three-way tie for second place in the league standings. After falling in the NE10 Championship semifinals, the women's volleyball team earned an at-large berth in the NCAA Division II East Region Championship, which will be hosted by Bentley University in Waltham, Massachusetts, on December 5–7. With this season's selection, New Haven has been to the national tournament 37 times and advanced to the Final Eight 14 times, most recently in 2017.



## COACHING UPDATE

A pair of former Chargers have been named to professional head coaching positions this fall. Former football head coach Darren Rizzi was named the interim head coach for the New Orleans Saints and, in his debut as head coach, earned a 20–17 win over the Atlanta Falcons. In addition to Rizzi, men's basketball Alum DJ Sackmann '09 was selected as one of the six head coaches for the new Professional Women's 3-on-3 basketball league, Unrivaled.





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*Heraclitus once said: ‘You never step into the same river twice.’ That proverbial river is arguably moving faster than ever, so let’s not get swept up in the current. Use your minds, embrace innovation, push boundaries, and explore what makes us better. But don’t ever forget our humanity. And don’t ever give up on the vision of a better, brighter, and more productive tomorrow.*

JENS FREDERIKSEN,  
PH.D., PRESIDENT





University of New Haven

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