

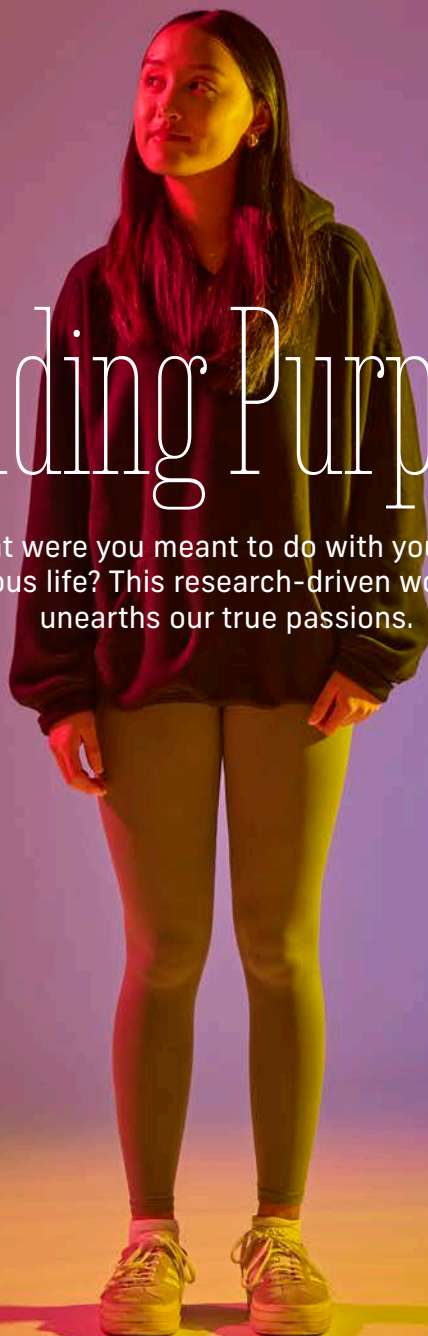
UConn

MAGAZINE

SPRING 2026

Finding Purpose

What were you meant to do with your one precious life? This research-driven workshop unearths our true passions.





SNAP!

SILENT STAMPEDE

Lions and bighorns and bears. Emus and elk and wildebeest. Ptarmigans, gazelles, crocodiles, and hundreds more species crowd a nondescript room on campus, waiting for the new home of the Connecticut State Museum of Natural History to break ground, hopefully before the decade ends. Follow its progress, explore the digital collections, and find info on interim events like a bird exhibit at The Benton in May at csmnh.uconn.edu.

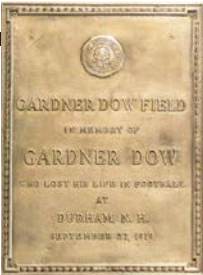


SECTIONS

6

UCONN NOW

UConn’s connection to the candy invention of the century, the places Huskies go, “Survivor UConn,” gas station heroin, a Husky at the gates of Disney’s Animal Kingdom on 9/11, and a piece of University history reclaimed.



36

UCONN NATION

Catch up with alums who are setting skydiving records, huddling up with the girls making flag football a phenomenon, serving moonlit dinners to neighbors, reporting on the private space race, training us to age powerfully, and preparing for work by reciting tongue twisters.

FEATURES

14 DO WHAT MATTERS MOST

In a Life Purpose Lab workshop, a group of student mentors joins the ranks of Huskies who have challenged themselves to embrace a more meaningful future. The workshops take a research-based approach to helping humans discover their true passions and purpose.

22 THE PRINCIPAL FORMERLY KNOWN AS DLEW

The public STEAM academy in Norwalk, Connecticut, helmed by **Damon Lewis ’95 (CLAS)** is such a Cinderella transformation tale that it has garnered the former UConn football captain the title of national middle school principal of the year.

30 YES, AND ...

Accidental actor **Will Hines ’92 (CLAS)** teaches comedy’s golden rule — and lives by it. The improv maestro flies under the radar, but you will likely realize you’ve seen — or heard — him in quite a few somethings.

UConn Magazine
VOL. 27 NO. 1

UConn Magazine is produced three times a year (Spring, Summer, and Fall) by University Communications, University of Connecticut.

Editor Lisa Stiepock

Art Director Christa Yung

Associate Editor Julie (Stagis) Bartucca ’10 (BUS, CLAS), ’19 MBA

Photographer Peter Morenus

Designer Andrew Janavey ’15 (SFA)

Class Notes Siobhan Murray

Copy Editors Greg Lauzon, Jamie Thaman

Web Designer Yesenia Darling

University Communications

VP for Communications
Michael Kirk

Executive Director of Creative Strategy and Brand Management
Tracy Anderson ’09 MA

Share Letters to the Editor:
lisa.stiepock@uconn.edu

Share Class Notes:
alumni-news@uconnalumni.com

Request address changes or cancellations:
biographicalupdatesrequests@foundation.uconn.edu

Additional Photo / Illustration:

Cover Peter Morenus

Snap! Peter Morenus

Page 2 Peter Morenus (2), Christa Yung, Sydney Herdle

Editor’s Note Peter Morenus

Tom’s Trivia Vicky Sanclemente

The University of Connecticut complies with all applicable federal and state laws regarding non-discrimination, equal opportunity and affirmative action and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, disability, sex, age or other legally protected characteristics in all programs and activities and supports all state and federal laws that promote equal opportunity and prohibit discrimination, including the provision of reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities. To request an accommodation or for questions related to the University’s non-discrimination policies, please contact: Title IX Coordinator, Office for Inclusion and Civil Rights; 241 Glenbrook Rd., Unit 4175; Storrs, CT 06269; Phone: (860) 486-2943; equity@uconn.edu (non-discrimination policies); ADA Case Manager, Department of Human Resources; 9 Walters Ave., Unit 5075; Storrs, CT 06269; Phone: (860) 486-3034; hr@uconn.edu (accommodation requests).

FROM THE EDITOR



Lewis tells Vallejo why it’s necessary to have this food pantry in his middle school.

CONNECTED

To all of us former middle school miscreants who work on this magazine, the mere act of surviving life as a middle school principal seems no small feat — to nail the task so completely that you win the title of national middle school principal of the year? Well, we knew we needed to talk with **Damon Lewis ’95 (CLAS)**, English education alum, former captain of the 1994–95 Huskies football team, and the best middle school principal in the country. We knew, too, that there could be no one better to interrogate Lewis about his origin story and middle school magic than our former magazine student worker **Camila Vallejo ’19 (CLAS)**, who’s been winning journalism awards for her stories covering inequity in urban housing since she graduated with degrees in journalism and communications.

What we didn’t know until we called to offer her the assignment was that Lewis’ current Ponus Ridge STEAM Academy had once been Vallejo’s Ponus Ridge Middle School — in her hometown of Norwalk, Connecticut. Serendipity. Our hope was to have Vallejo and Peter Morenus, magazine photographer, spend a full day shadowing Lewis on the job, and hoped his Husky love would help make that happen. This could only sweeten the deal.

Sure enough, Lewis was all in: “I would love to be interviewed by a former Ponus student!” He spent sunup to sundown with our team and revealed to Vallejo more about what drives him than we could have hoped. Turns out, Lewis is one of those human beings we all wish our children could have in their lives. Spend a day with him — and 600 middle school students — by turning to page 22.

Lisa T. Stiepock



FEEDBACK

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

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

The Ortega Effect

➡ Amazing story for an amazing professor. The Ortega Effect is real — and I am happy to say that our family includes one of the many students who have been positively affected by Morty. Thank you, professor Ortega! Mike Widmer '90 (CLAS) Fairfield, Connecticut

➡ Morty! What an incredible piece. It’s wonderful to see you get this beautiful and well-deserved recognition. I am so honored to have had you as my OG mentor and to be a small part of your story. Whenever I am unsure of how to handle a struggling student, I often find myself asking, “What would Morty do/say?” Jesse Senko '06 (CAHNR) Arizona State University

➡ Morty, I’m so glad to read of your amazing stewardship of the students you have influenced and so grateful that we were able to share many adventures in Chile while studying the guanacos. Your dedication and

perseverance have been rewarded and you are passing on that determination to achieve to your students. Well done, Morty. Merry Franklin St. George, Utah

This resonated so deeply with me. I chose to be a UConn clinical professor. Yes, I conduct research and publish, but always on my own time because I want to, not because it’s required. My true calling is being a professor, a teacher, and a deeply passionate OB nurse. If I can continue inspiring students to love this profession as much as I do, then I will leave this world knowing I made a meaningful difference.

Thank you for highlighting an exceptional professor whose path isn’t defined by massive NIH funding or a towering stack of publications. His journey reflects the path I value most, and that is one centered on shaping students’ lives for the better. Carrie Eaton '18 Ph.D. Stafford Springs, Connecticut

Light Show

➡ A terrific idea brought to fruition by outstanding artwork. It makes one recall all past experiences of viewing the Horsebarn Hill area. Scott Rhoades Storrs, Connecticut



➡ Be still my heart opening the fall issue to view the plein air work of Blanche Serban. I had to do a double take: No, not the work of my brother — but those clouds! Randall C. Sexton '80 (SFA) left Connecticut shortly after graduation for California and never looked back. He would become



a true pioneer with Plein Air Painters of America, noted for his reflection of light and celebration of color. His workshops were national and international — he would come to New England during September for a workshop in Vermont and visits with family.

Randall passed Dec. 10, 2023, days before a new studio opening. A tribute from a fellow artist: “Go and paint those clouds.” A master from a UConn education truly missed. Melanie (Sexton) Glynn '82 (PHARM) Milford, Connecticut

Riding the AI Wave

➡ Great article. A possible solution to student submissions would be to have them be handwritten. Back when I was a freshman, submissions for English would be accepted as handwritten since not everyone had a typewriter or access to one. At least by transcribing an AI product, a student would have to read what the AI created, and some learning would take place. James A. Olson '68 (ENG) Lynchburg, Virginia

➡ Very good overall view of the issues in adopting some forms of AI assistance. Henry Jeannin Sr.

Nine Innings With a Baseball Legend

➡ We have known Judy and Peter since the early '80s. She is the definition of a whirling dervish! The Cape Cod Baseball League flourished under her leadership. This article illuminates her dedication to being involved for the common good. So proud of all her achievements and to be counted among her friends! Jim McGonigle and Anne Jacque Harwich Port, Massachusetts

➡ Took the UConn Magazine from the mail and opened right up to the article about Judy Walden Scarafie. Thinking she looked familiar and the timing was right, I read on. OMG, I had just read several of her articles. My boyfriend at the time, Harry Trohalis, shortstop for the baseball team of much success, had just shared with me a scrapbook I had



ON CAMPUS

The windows of our offices look out on Swan Lake, a favorite for pickup hockey games. One day last December we were graced with these figure skaters.

made for him about his playing years at UConn [1970–72]. Most of the articles were written by Judy.

I called Harry and what a great time we had reminiscing about that time in our lives. Such a small world and a reminder that we are all connected — especially if you are part of UConn Nation! And Judy, I too stayed part of the world of baseball, becoming a PT specializing in throwing injuries. Valory Ramsdell Omasta '74 (CAHNR) Danbury, Connecticut

Susan Brown, Inventor of Your Next Favorite Apple

➡ I can give a shout-out on behalf of Sidney Waxman. I worked closely with him on his witches’ broom projects and found him an absolutely wonderful mentor. We spent much time driving in New England seeking to obtain seeds of naturally occurring witches’ brooms. Seeds were planted, and many new and wonderful trade varieties of evergreens

were developed for the nurseryman’s trade. Sid was one fine dude; I can’t say enough about the man and his humanity. His door was always open, and spontaneous discussions often developed as I walked by his office. In a department replete with wonderful faculty, Sidney Waxman stood out as a nonpareil.

Susan Brown noticed these things about Sidney Waxman, and she reinforces my approbations of him. Great times in the “old days.” Michael Janket '65 (CAHNR) Willington, Connecticut

Stowe Aways

➡ What a wonderful surprise when I opened up this month’s issue and saw some of my classmates from Stowe B. It brought back many great memories. Wishing everyone well; I miss seeing them. Neal Moylan '75 (CLAS) Conway, New Hampshire



Unrivaled

➡ I’m so excited for Breanna, Napheesa, and all the professional women athletes who are making this happen. I also applaud Collier for her bravery in standing up for herself and others against the WNBA. Great article! Philip Schneider '73 (BUS), Marina Del Rey, California

➡ This is an amazing story about two amazing young ladies. As a UConn fan, I am happy for them and as a basketball fan, I am happy that women are advancing further into getting the recognition and, most importantly, closer to the pay they deserve. Women’s basketball is an excellent product. The one recommendation I would suggest is that the final one-on-one competition actually be two competitions — one specifically for forward/centers and the other for guards. This would give the guards a better opportunity to partake in that competition. Glenn Ellis, New Haven, Connecticut

CHECKING IN WITH

OUR CANDY CRUSH: GREG GUIDOTTI

The thieves who broke into a Sunoco convenience store in Bristol, Connecticut, on March 13, 2024, at 4:08 a.m. had a plan. Like the criminal masterminds who stole the French crown jewels from the Louvre, the Bristol bandits knew speed was of the essence, executing a smash-and-grab in which they took only the things of greatest value: cigarettes, lottery tickets, and the store’s supply of Nerds Gummy Clusters.

Not exactly the kind of promotional campaign Ferrara Candy Company chief marketing officer **Greg Guidotti** ’99 MBA might have wanted but, nevertheless, a testimony to the remarkable popularity of Ferrara’s newest brand phenomenon.

“The thing got a little bit of press, which was lovely,” says Guidotti, “and hilarious when the television camera panned to the candy shelf and there was a giant hole where the Gummy Clusters used to be.”

Guidotti got his MBA at UConn Stamford, studying and taking classes at night while working for Kraft Foods, handling their Post cereals account, learning the ins and outs on the job, and gaining a foundational understanding of marketing from UConn.

He left Kraft for Gillette (now P&G), moving his family to Singapore to expand the market for Duracell batteries. He traveled to Russia, Venezuela, and across Asia, growing the Duracell business from three to 12 countries before Kraft called to invite him back. He worked with iconic brands like Capri-Sun, Kool-Aid, Shake ’N Bake, and Oscar Mayer — with its Wienermobile.

But Guidotti was reunited with his first love when he moved to Ferrara in 2019. “When I was growing up in Stamford, there was a store called Happy House, and it was 93 seconds away from my house. I know that

because me and my friends would ride our bikes as fast as we could to get Atomic Fireballs. I’m 55, so 48 years later, Atomic Fireballs is one of the brands in our portfolio.”

His mission at Ferrara was to take products that were underappreciated and build value.

“Ferrara had just acquired the legacy Nestlé candy businesses, so Nerds, Sweetarts, Laffy Taffy, Gobstoppers. Great businesses, but the brands were very small, and as part of a giant food company, they didn’t get the attention.

“We at Ferrara are focused solely on growing sugar confections. We have these jewels of brands, and we needed to be able to drive a different relevance to them. Nerds launched in 1983. Everybody knows the shake of that box. Everybody remembers buying them at the community pool or at the baseball field. One of the challenges was, how do we make Nerds more consumable, more poppable? That’s how we conceived of Nerds Gummy Clusters.”

A Nerds Gummy Cluster is a fully sensorial experience. Nerds pebbles are steamed onto a molded gummy matrix, so the flavors explode as the candy percusses between your teeth, and you taste it and feel it and smell it and hear it inside your head, and suddenly “I’ll have three more” becomes 12 or 20 or a whole bag.

“What’s great about this category,” Guidotti says, is “it’s an emotional category. You have memories of the candies that you loved growing up. It gives you a smile or nostalgia when you see it, and maybe you’ll buy it. Everybody has a story when it comes to our brands, whether it’s Jelly Belly or Nerds or Sweetarts or Laffy Taffy.”

One story Guidotti tells is how the company responded to a terrible tragedy in Lewiston, Maine, when, in October 2024, there was a mass

“Everybody knows the shake of that box.”

shooting at a local recreation center. “It happened right before Halloween, and everybody felt unsafe,” Guidotti says. “The president of Bates College [Guidotti’s undergraduate alma mater] wanted to provide a safe place on campus for kids to trick-or-treat. I reached out and said, ‘Listen, I work at a candy company, and I would be happy to donate candy for this event.’

“This year was the third year. It’s gotten bigger and bigger, year after year. It’s just doing the right thing. It’s a way for the school to connect with the community in a way that’s just authentic — and it spreads joy.”

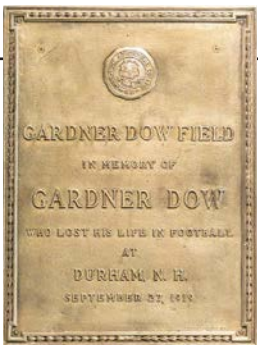
Nice work if you can get it. —PETE NELSON



Taking the candy world by storm: the Nerds Gummy Cluster — and UConn’s Greg Guidotti.



Left: Connecticut Agricultural College President Charles Beach, at right, with a student at the dedication of Gardner Dow Field on Alumni Day, May 22, 1920. Dow Field was home to the football team through 1952.



Right, from left: Sue, Rob, and Paul Dow; former UConn baseball coaches Andy Baylock and Jim E. Penders '66 (ED); and William F. Dow III at the plaque rededication on December 18, 2025.

THEN & NOW

A PIECE OF UCONN HISTORY, REDEDICATED

On a day in late September more than a century ago, not long after the end of World War I, a football player for the school that would later become UConn named Gardner Dow was badly hurt on the field during an away game against what is now the University of New Hampshire. He died hours later, likely due to a traumatic brain injury. Dow's death stunned the then-tiny Storrs campus, and all lighthearted student programming was canceled for the next three days to reflect a period of mourning.

On October 1, 1919, the day of Dow's funeral, the students, faculty, and staff of Connecticut Agricultural College gathered in Hawley Armory in his honor. The president at the time, Charles Beach, described the 20-year-old New Haven native as "a friend, a scholar, and a gentleman." The football team placed flowers on an empty chair noting his absence. The 1920 yearbook would be dedicated to him.

Not long after his death, the college football field, which sat between Hawley Armory and what is today

Hillside Road, was named in his honor: Gardner Dow Field. A plaque noting this was later placed on one of the armory's arches (it had arches then). For the next few decades, our football games continued to be played there, and other sports used the field, too. But eventually that section of core campus was apparently deemed to be valuable real estate, and Homer Babbidge Library was built on the site in the 1970s. Later, so was the old UConn Co-Op, the Information Technologies Engineering Building, the School of Business, and Herbst Hall. After Hawley's arches were taken down, the Gardner Dow plaque was relegated to the rear of the building, where it sat tucked away for years, affixed to the bricks to the left of the back door, above some vents and a utility box. A few years ago, it was moved inside. The event that had jolted the small college in 1919 had over the years not surprisingly dimmed in the collective consciousness of the now enormous, sprawling campus.

One of the great things about a



Above: Gardner Dow, a member of the class of 1921, briefly served in the U.S. Naval Reserve before returning to Storrs to continue his studies after the end of WWI.

place like UConn is its history. But to survive, it has to be preserved by people who care about it. In this case, University Communications editorial associate Mike Enright, who is the curator of the J. Robert Donnelly Husky Heritage Sports Museum in the Alumni House at UConn Storrs, had the 105-year-old, bronze Gardner Dow Field plaque refurbished and planned a rededication. In December, members of the Dow family came to see the plaque take its place in the museum, helping to rescue the artifact and the story behind it from a gradual fade into obscurity. —MICHAEL KIRK



COLLECTIONS

STUDIES ABROAD

Last year, 1,067 students participated in 126 international programs in 36 countries, according to UConn's Office of Experiential Global Learning. Among them, clockwise from top left: Lyric Vargas '27 (CLAS) in Lisbon, Portugal; Komla Casimir Amezuwoe '26 (CLAS) in Seoul, South Korea; Patrick Lonergan '27 (ENG) in Wollongong, Australia; Anduei Xhelaj '28 (CLAS) in Peru; Aquinnah Machesney '28 (CAHNR) in Costa Rica; Daniel Heumann '27 (CLAS) in Edinburgh, Scotland; Agatha Dalton '28 (CLAS) in Florence, Italy; Christian Miller '28 (CLAS) in Ghana; Tahmia Espinal '26 (NUR) in Rwanda, and Katera Prohaski '27 (ACES) in London, England.





TRAJECTORY

OF MICE AND MEN

September 11, 2001. Orlando, Florida. Park duty radios start crackling with urgency all over Disney's Animal Kingdom. It's a little after 9 a.m. and the park has just opened to the public when park duty manager **Peter LaPorta '86 (CLAS)** is called to an emergency conference in the main office.

There's been a terrorist attack. He's told to evacuate the parks — something that has never been done in Walt Disney World's 30-year history.

"We literally had this box in the guest service office covered in dust," LaPorta recalls. "It was an emergency kit. I broke open the seal and inside were thousands of park tickets and a guide for steps about what to do."

Over loudspeakers, guests are instructed to leave the park. LaPorta and other managers line Animal Kingdom's exit gates, handing out tickets to guests as they leave. The American visitors are "bewildered, shocked, a complete and total mess," says LaPorta. But foreign guests, particularly those from Europe and Asia who have lived in war-torn countries, are incredulous. "They were just like, 'What are you guys freaking out about? It's up in New York.' They couldn't understand why we were evacuating the park when all the activity was happening 1,000 miles away."

In that moment of chaos, LaPorta drew on the one leadership principle that had guided him since his days at UConn: "Stay calm in whatever situation you're in," he explains. "I learned that if you become a hot mess, everybody around you is going to be a hot mess." He tried to inject that calm into the tense situation, telling anxious guests, "We're not used to this, I'm sorry, but we're trying to look out for the safety of everybody."

1982. Connecticut. That ability to remain centered while radiating warmth wasn't something LaPorta learned in corporate training. It was forged decades earlier in Storrs, where the Bronx-born, Connecticut-raised student arrived in the early 1980s as a music major, playing trombone in the marching band and joining the co-ed music fraternity Tau Beta Sigma.

Soon, though, professors' harsh reality checks about music careers led him to switch to business, costing him his scholarship. Suddenly responsible for paying his own way through college, LaPorta took a job managing a Burger King. "Everything I learned about leadership, I learned in fast food," he says, remembering navigating grease fires and robberies. "Don't discount those experiences for a minute — it's all trial by fire."

The marching band's influence never left him either. "Whether I'm going back to my Disney/Universal experiences, or speaking to a group of 5,000 people, our band's catchphrase —

'Talent, Unity, Pride' — set the tone for my leadership career. I can still feel that magic before we entered the Yale Bowl tunnel to come out on the field."

1997. Connecticut/Florida. And speaking of magic: "I always wanted to work for the mouse," he says. When Disney recruiters told him he'd have a better chance living in Florida, he sold his Connecticut house and moved south.

He joined the opening team of Animal Kingdom in 1998. Working with legendary Imagineer Joe Rohde, LaPorta helped test the guest experience on the rides. "All that goes into a park opening really ignited my passion."

In 2002, he received Disney's Partners in Excellence Award — the company's highest honor — presented to him by Roy Disney Jr. The award recognized his work across guest satisfaction, cast excellence, and business results. "Out of all my accomplishments in life, I treasure that one the most. When the people that you lead say they would follow you into fire, no matter what,

that means the world."

The award citation notes, "He's built a rapport with many of our cherished friends who keep returning to our resort year after year. Many of these guests come to visit him personally."

LaPorta's career includes working on the launch of Disney's pin-trading program — now a billion-dollar industry — and later managing the chaotic debut of the Wizarding World of Harry Potter at Universal Studios. That opening day saw over 7,000 guests lined up by 8:30 a.m., with some waiting six and a half hours to enter the park. "By 10 o'clock, in June, in the Florida heat, people started dropping like flies because the line's not moving very fast. We're calling in ambulances, taking people out because they're passing out." All the while, LaPorta radiated calm.

Through every crisis — from 9/11 evacuations to overwhelming crowds — LaPorta handled anything the theme park world threw at him. Then came a challenge that would test his resilience in ways he never imagined.

2009. Florida. LaPorta's son was diagnosed with autism at age 2. "I didn't know anything about autism, so I started talking to people who introduced me to that world." He interviewed families worldwide and wrote "Adventures in Autism," in part as a healing process.

During our conversation, that son — now 21 — sits nearby, and LaPorta's face brightens as he occasionally turns to his son with gentle words: "Happy boy!" revealing the same authenticity that made him exceptional even at Disney.

These days, he speaks to corporate audiences about leadership and guest service while continuing his advocacy mission. When not speaking or advocating, he's writing. His most recent book is "Terror Kingdom," about a hostage situation at a fictional theme park.

"Success to me is the freedom to continue doing what I love," he says. "It's not about money — it's about touching lives. When somebody comes up to me and says, 'You changed my life because of your words,' that just means everything." —TOMMI LEWIS TILDEN



IN DEVELOPMENT

C. MICHAEL WHITE IS ON A MISSION

For starters, we should understand that the kratom known as gas station heroin is much different than natural kratom leaf.

The U.S. opioid epidemic is ebbing, thanks in part to the dried leaves of a Southeast Asian tree. A UConn professor is trying to stop unscrupulous companies from sabotaging it. One of the hardest parts of getting off opiates is the persistent craving for the drug. Many former users find that those dried leaves from Southeast Asia, commonly called kratom, tamp down their cravings without producing unwanted side effects or shackling them to a daily appointment at a methadone clinic. But recently, more potent and addictive products labeled as kratom have appeared on the market. Sometimes called gas station heroin,

designer drugs inspired by alkaloids in the kratom leaf have spread through smoke shops and gas stations around the U.S. These “kratom” gummies or candies are often given out as free samples to kratom leaf buyers. The results have been as predictable as they are sad. Some former opioid users who have tried the free samples have seen their addictions reignited; many other people without previous opioid experience begin using the chemically altered kratom recreationally, and addictions, overdoses, and deaths follow. “This summer I decided to go to war against the seven-hydroxy companies,” says C. Michael White, a UConn professor of pharmacy. “Seven-hydroxy”

is how chemists pronounce 7-OH, the modification that turns mitragynine — kratom’s natural opioid-like alkaloid — into an addictive nightmare. White has studied kratom since 2017 as part of his broader research into substances of abuse. “A lot of people use kratom instead of opioids because it allows them to function better in society,” White says. The companies marketing the manipulated 7-OH products as similar to natural-leaf kratom are engaging in deception for profit, White maintains. These 7-OH products are synthetic and concentrated and, taken orally, produce the classic euphoria and sleepiness of opioids. The U.S. market for 7-OH is now larger than the domestic heroin market. White’s research into natural-leaf kratom had convinced him that it was a useful tool for some people with chronic pain or former opioid addiction. But the wave of addictions and deaths attributed to products called “kratom” following the introduction of 7-OH in 2023 was making regulators uneasy. State legislatures began looking at bills to ban kratom, without making a distinction between synthetic chemicals and the natural leaf. It was around this time that the kratom industry reached out to White. They wanted to make a clear distinction between their botanical product, made from dried, crumbled leaves, and the synthetic 7-OH candies peddled by the recreational drug industry. “We need to recognize this gentrified drug trafficking for what it is,” says Matthew Lowe, executive director of the Global Kratom Coalition. The coalition asked White to join the Kratom Consumer Advisory Council, an independent board that sets standards for safe natural-leaf kratom products and advocates for sensible regulation. White agreed, with one stipulation: The Global Kratom Coalition had to post the guidelines developed by the advisory council even if the trade as-

Like many gas station stores, this one near the main UConn campus in Storrs advertises kratom in neon.

sociation’s members didn’t agree with them. There would be no influence by kratom producers over the safety guidelines, and no compromise. “Dr. White has a brilliant mind,” Lowe says. “Not just for chemistry. He has innate empathy for people. He sees the people on both sides of the issue.” There are many people in the U.S. who are staunch advocates for the leaf because it has improved their lives. Other people have lost loved ones to substances labeled as kratom. Those are both real, lived experiences that need to be addressed. White “holds no internal bias; he sees things as they are and puts forth proposals that address the bigger picture: What are the best practices we can follow?” Lowe says that clear-sightedness is why the Global Kratom Coalition sought out White’s counsel. Their advocacy seems to be working. This past summer, the Florida attorney general made an emergency declaration to get 7-OH put on Schedule 1, the list of dangerous drugs with no legal medical use. The rule made a clear distinction between the synthetic drug and the trace amounts naturally found in kratom leaf. And the Kratom Consumer Advisory Council’s position statements have made it into legislation in Nebraska, Colorado, and Utah. Nationally, the FDA has taken notice of 7-OH and recommended scheduling it. The kratom community’s goal is to avoid throwing the baby out with the bathwater: Get 7-OH listed as a Schedule 1 drug, but keep natural leaf kratom legal. The Kratom Consumer Advisory Council recommends that natural-leaf kratom products be registered before sale, with an analysis done by an independent laboratory certifying that the product is natural-leaf kratom and has not been adulterated. “While not risk-free, natural leaf kratom offers an accessible option, and many users report that it helps them regain control of their lives,” White says. “We need a balanced, thoughtful regulatory environment to support people with opioid use disorder and chronic pain.” —KIM KRIEGER

CLUBBING

THE TRIBE HAS SPOKEN

Two evenings a week during the fall and spring semesters, the “cast” of Survivor: UConn meets behind the Homer Babbidge Library for tribal council followed by an elaborate challenge, modeled after the long-running CBS competition show “Survivor.” Except for the weeks on end without showers or real food — and, sure, the competitors are sleeping in residence halls instead of makeshift shelters — it’s all here: immunity necklaces, idols, alliances, blindsides, voting out castmates, tiki torches. They even film and produce a show of the proceedings. “I think of it as one massive brain-numbing puzzle, almost. ... You never really know what’s going on, even if you think you know what’s going on,” says club vice president Sarah Vial ’26 (CLAS), a journalism and sociology double major from Bristol, Connecticut, who, along with current president Charles Langworth ’26 (CLAS), applied, interviewed, and was accepted to play during her first month at UConn. The gameplay gets just as strategic as it does on TV, says Vial. “College students are very perceptive, very competitive, and they understand that this environment is really out of the norm.” How does that work out for a group of mostly first-years looking for friends? “Consistently, after the season’s finished up, people become really close,” says Langworth, a psychological sciences major from Trumbull, Connecticut. “There’s a guy in our season who went on to win, who I voted to oust four times — he’s my roommate now.” —JULIE (STAGIS) BARTUCCA ’10 (BUS, CLAS), ’19 MBA



Eli Susi ’29 (ENG) unsuccessfully makes the case not to be voted “off the island.”

Do What Matters Most

Bradley Wright

Professor of Sociology

Jordan Ochs

FYE Program Director

BY ALEXANDRA KENNEDY • PHOTOS BY PETER MORENUS

In a **Life Purpose Lab workshop**, a group of **student mentors** joins the ranks of Huskies who have challenged themselves to **embrace a more meaningful future.**

On a sunny Friday afternoon in Storrs, just two weeks into the fall semester, a few dozen mentors in the First Year Experience (FYE) program pack into a classroom in the Philip E. Austin Building for a required Life Purpose Lab workshop. They look a little harried, juggling backpacks, checking emails, and scarfing down protein bars as they wait for everyone to arrive. Bradley Wright, a sociology professor at UConn since 1998 and founder of the lab, stands at the front of the room, welcoming each participant and handing them a blank journal. Lean and light on his feet, with a neat salt-and-pepper goatee, Wright is warm but decidedly low-key.

The mentors, mostly sophomores and juniors, are wrapping up a busy week assisting instructors in FYE seminars and meeting one-on-one with their assigned first-years. They work hard to give these incoming students, all arriving with their own unique ambitions and worries, a leg up on college life so that they can adapt and thrive.

This September afternoon, however, will be all about their own futures: What are they going to do with their lives? Are they on autopilot, or have they really considered all the possibilities that lie ahead? The workshop is no small commitment. It's made up of

two intensive sessions, a week apart, each four hours long. Judging by the surrounding chatter, the students are feeling curious and a bit anxious. A few are dreading it. (Eight hours!)

Some 350 students apply for the 170 mentor spots in Storrs each year. Those selected are trained in peer mentoring through a credit-bearing educational psychology course. "We employ a theory-to-practice model where mentors are learning theory and skill sets in the educational psychology classroom and then applying them in their first-year seminars with their mentees," says **Jordan Ochs '17 MA, Cert., '20 Ph.D.**, the FYE program director and a member of Life Purpose Lab's leadership team (along with Emily Pagano and Eran Peterson).

Ochs partnered with Wright to tailor this particular workshop for mentors. "We want them to explore their own purpose," says Ochs. "In addition, we want them to focus on how to make the student leadership experience the most purposeful it can be, giving them some of the perspective and tools to engage their mentees in conversations around their own purpose journeys."

Wright gets the mentors' attention from the get-go. "The goal of this workshop," he tells them in his introduction, "is to move from your projected life to

your purposeful life. How would you use the time, so you have no regrets?" After warm-up activities, he assigns a writing exercise that requires them to envision their lives if they stay on their current trajectory, letting inertia be their guide. That is their baseline, Wright tells them. Now, what would happen if instead they applied purpose to all the decisions ahead?

The mentors dive into each prompt, hardly fidgeting despite the close quarters and the long afternoon ahead. Wright had a feeling this would be a very engaged group. "These are student leaders. They like to help people."

So does Wright. For years, students have flocked to his Social Well-Being course, hoping to unlock the secret to a better life. Many say it was the best class they ever took. So why is Wright, at age 63, accelerating, pushing himself harder than ever before, while many of his peers are downshifting as they head toward retirement? Late in his career, he has discovered his life purpose: to help as many people as possible pursue more meaningful lives.

"Finding purpose is a self-transformation project," Wright says over a seltzer at Dog Lane Café. His own journey began with a crisis of faith in his profession. Like many sociologists,

Kiley Girard '26 (BUS)

Hometown: Storrs, Connecticut

Career Goal: Health Care Management

Something I want to follow through with:

I want to get back into adventuring or traveling, just finding new places, even if it's just a day trip. I love spending time with my family, so I would like to do that with them as well.

An important lesson I took away:

It helped me start thinking about how I might be more purposeful in my everyday actions and just cherish the small things in life, too. Everyone has one big goal, but I think we get so caught up in okay, I got to keep going, I got to keep going. Some of the smaller moments really mean a lot.



he had hoped as a young Ph.D. student that he could bring about societal change by researching and publishing peer-reviewed articles that gave critical insights into the human condition, with the surety that journalists, law-makers, and others would then take up the charge and improve the world. But he didn't see those changes happening fast enough, or at all.

Over his years studying both criminology and well-being, Wright grew increasingly interested in a deceptively simple question: How do people find purpose, and how do people become more purposeful? In 2019, he started the Life Purpose Lab, inviting faculty, staff, and students to join him in his efforts to use applied research to find the answers. The lab, whose motto is "Do what matters most," upends the sociology norm. "We work on promoting good things rather than trying to solve bad things," Wright says.

For the last six years, the lab's staff has used quantitative data, smartphone-based surveys, and feedback from their own pilot workshops to develop and refine their Possibility Management Model. Its goal is to help people determine their own life purpose — what the possibilities are, how to test them, and how to turn them into action. The lab offers more than a dozen workshops a year, taking participants through a meticulous step-by-step process. Nearly 800 students and staff at UConn have now completed it, and the results are impressive. Six months after the workshop, 85% of attendees say they experienced a significant increase in their understanding of their life purpose. Participants also felt happier and more satisfied with their lives.

Finding Purpose Case Study 1

Quan Huynh was a gang member from Los Angeles serving 16 years for murder. In prison, he turned to philosophy and spirituality to find meaning. Once released, he founded Defy Ventures, a California non-profit that helps people with criminal histories get a second chance — a chance to lead a purposeful life, just like he did.

Wright's style is more patient guide than charismatic purpose guru. Leaning on the desk at the front of the Austin classroom, he comes across as introspective and serious. Fittingly, he shares with the students that his personal "big dream" would be to become a monk.

He mixes up his presentation to keep things moving briskly, switching from research to case studies to personal stories, punctuating each with a well-timed joke, often aimed at himself. He gives frequent prompts for journaling, then asks the students to break into small groups to share their responses. Inclusive by nature, they look around as they split off to make sure no one got stranded.

So what, Wright asks, is purpose anyway? It's "future-facing," like goals, aspirations, and dreams, he says, citing research. It feels significant. And it goes "beyond the self." That is, it often involves making others' lives better. When young people, like these students, consider purpose, they tend to feel very hopeful, he explains. The world is at their feet. For older people, it can feel more complex contemplating what's meaningful. Regrets tend to ride along with hope. Wright clicks to a slide with a word cloud that shows the benefits of leading a meaningful life, all

played out in research. Purpose-driven people experience more joy and creativity, greater motivation and ability to make decisions. They're less anxious. Studies even show that, on average, people with purpose live longer.

"[Your calling] is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."
—Frederick Buechner

According to William Damon, a psychologist at Stanford University, people fall into one of four "purposeful" stages. The disengaged (25%) might not care about purpose or prefer to seek fame or money instead. Dreamers (25%) have some idea of what is meaningful to them, but they don't do much about it. Dabblers (30%) know what would be meaningful but don't consistently take action. Purposeful (20%) people know what matters and are committed to doing it. That, of course, is the lab's holy grail. Wright asks the students to take out their journals and "score their purpose." He is certain, he says, as they put down their pens, that no one in the room was "disengaged." They wouldn't be mentors if they were.

As the workshop unfolds, students start to share their dreams with one another, tentatively at first but then eagerly, cheered on by each other's laughter and validations. The exercises are designed to encourage them to explore possibilities from every angle. "Do you want to be wealthy?" asks Wright. "Manage your money. Do you want to be productive? Manage your time. Do you want to have purpose in your life? Manage your possibilities. Manage

“Wright's style is more patient guide than charismatic purpose guru.”

them intentionally and strategically.”

“Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.” —Howard Thurman

It’s a tough job market for college graduates right now and, for many students, a hard time to dream. Some of the FYE mentors have their hopes already pinned on a specific vocation. Their plan might be practical, allowing them to pay off their student loans or enter a field where jobs are easier to come by. That kind of focus is fine, Wright assures them, but he wants them to use this process to confirm those paths and consider other aspects of their lives as well.

Purpose is not just one thing, he explains, in that old-fashioned sense of “you must find your purpose in life.” They will have multiple paths to choose from, and purposes can be small, big, or somewhere in between. A rich life, he contends, will be made up of many meaningful actions running across the years — work, yes, but also relationships, how they care for themselves, their finances, their spiritual pursuits, and what they do with their free time or to help others.

One basic strategy for bringing more meaning into your life, says Wright, is to look closely at what you do every day and try to do “more of those things that matter, and less of the things that don’t.” Wright asks the students to write down 20 activities they regularly

“It’s a tough job market for college graduates right now and, for many students, a hard time to dream.”

do — studying, working out at the gym, playing video games, that kind of thing — then rank them on two axes: pleasure and meaning. Where, he asks the group, are they finding both high meaning and high pleasure? Can they make more time for that? One student notes to her group that she gets a lot of pleasure, but not meaning, from scrolling social media. Maybe she can bring more meaning to it? Another reported that she is a doom scroller, bringing her neither meaning nor pleasure. Can she stop, and use that time for something she cares about?

“How we spend our days, of course, is how we spend our lives.” —Annie Dillard

Incremental gains count. Wright asks the students if they think they could make their lives 1% more purposeful next week. Hands go up. “If you can do that every week for a year, your life will be two-thirds more purposeful. If you do it every week for two years, it’s almost three times more purposeful.”

Wright tells a story about Tristyn

Warren, a nurse at UConn’s health services, who took it further after she attended a Life Purpose Lab workshop in 2023 with the Student Health and Wellness team. At the time, she was working full time and a new mom, coming off multiple years of pandemic chaos. She longed for something to ground her. Inspired by what she learned in the workshop, she and her husband decided to start Warren’s Farm at their home in Hampton, Connecticut, growing cut flowers and offering friends and neighbors a seasonal subscription for bouquets. It’s a small and manageable sideline for them, and it gets her out in the garden, where her children like to join her. It’s creative and joyful for all of them.

For another writing exercise, Wright asks the students to dream big, like his monk example, while keeping their inner skeptics at bay. It doesn’t matter if the dream is feasible, he insists. They surprise one another with their answers. One wants to be a private chef; another an international photographer; another a pop star who makes a difference, like Taylor Swift. He goes on to prompt them with ways to envision other future selves, using different tactics to open their imaginations. By the time the first four-hour session winds down, every student has written up 12 possible future selves.

The journey to purpose is usually nonlinear, full of ambiguity and starts and stops. It almost always takes longer than anyone predicted. That’s in part because it introduces a lot of uncertainty. Evolution has taught us

Finding Purpose Case Study 2

The late Don Ritchie, a Royal Australian Navy vet and life insurance salesman, moved to a house near Sydney, Australia, overlooking The Gap. These beautiful cliffs, it turned out, were a place where desperate people would come to commit suicide. Over the course of 45 years, Ritchie intervened more than 180 times, convincing strangers to come back to his house to talk. In 2006, he was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for his rescues. He didn’t choose his purpose. It chose him, and he accepted it.



Brendan Toon '28 (CLAS)

Hometown: Woodbury, Connecticut

Career Goal: Government Work

Something that stands out from the workshop:

I really enjoyed the no-phones policy, or at least that you had to take your phone outside of the classroom to use it. I took it as a challenge to go all eight hours just because people would say I can’t.

What I found most helpful:

I’m an econ and poli-sci double major, and I always saw myself going into the private sector. Working on those prompts, I think I want to do something more government-related and help other people. I also want to express myself more creatively, doing more writing and playing music. So, they were opposite ends of the spectrum, but two different discoveries.

LJ Aragon '28 (CLAS)

Hometown: Trabuco Canyon, California

Career Goal: Lawyer

How it felt being without my phone:

It was awesome. It felt like we were little kids again, and we were able to just talk.

The one lesson I hope stays with me from the workshop in 10 years:

If you do stuff with love, if you do stuff with intention, even if it doesn't feel like you're making that big of a difference, it will lead to something that will.



“...interview people who are doing what you want to do, prototype the experience.”

the hard way to minimize risk. We're hardwired to avoid it. "Living cautiously is not a recipe for a purposeful life," says Wright.

He tells the students not to make any big changes in their lives for at least four weeks. They need to feel safe, be thoughtful, and let the possibilities sink in. "If I find out next week that you quit your job and are busking with your guitar because you just know that you're supposed to be a musician, I'll come yell at you. If it's a month from now, that's fine." The students laugh.

**"Plans are nothing; planning is everything."
—Dwight D. Eisenhower**

Back in the classroom for the second session, the students are now familiar with the rhythms of the workshop and, just as important, at ease with one another. While the first session was all about widening possibilities, this one will be about narrowing down 12 possible selves to three desired lives so they can start to make plans. Through another series of exercises, they map out how they might successfully approach each of their three favorite journeys over the next 20 years. It's an empowering, if daunting, exercise when you're only 20 to begin with.

"Don't guess about the possibilities," Wright told them. "Learn about them. Research them, interview people who are doing what you want to do, prototype the experience."

The students anticipate obstacles that might be ahead, like obligations to care for family members, struggles to manage their own health or finances, or family or societal

pressures to live a certain kind of life. Together they strategize ways to get around problems or adapt their plans — just like they are asking of their own first-year mentees as they adjust to being on campus. "Life is unpredictable," begins one student wistfully, talking about what is ahead. Others echo the phrase.

"Why have we spent so much time talking about the barriers facing you as you live a purposeful life?" asks Wright. "Knowing what they are will help you. It makes you more resilient and less prone to discouragement. It helps you make better plans."

Wrapping up, Wright asks them to share feedback about the workshop — it is, after all, a virtuous loop, a component itself of the lab's research. He also invites them to do more work with the lab. There is a study abroad opportunity this year. There are internships, podcasts, videos, a book. The students have a lot to think about. The weekend is coming, and their mentees are waiting. Do what matters most.

Ochs was buoyed by the anecdotal feedback she got after the workshop. "In their reflections, many mentors wrote about how excited they were to expand their personal horizons and to

discuss purpose with their mentees." She's relieved, too. It was, after all, an experiment. "We'll have to do some further assessment, but based on initial reports, it was impactful."

She hopes for a ripple effect. "In many ways our student leaders are the culture creators. Over 90% of first-year students are in FYE classes, and the mentors are who they look to for what it means to be a Husky. How powerful is it if their guidance encourages an intentional approach to pursuing a purposeful college path? And it's not just one path. There are multiple fulfilling options."

Meanwhile, Wright has more workshops to prepare for. Next, he'll be running his first designed specifically for staff who are approaching retirement. The lab is also hosting a growing number of workshops outside UConn. A new partnership with an alum looks especially promising. Eileen Crossin '04 (CLAS) was a marketing executive, working in media and tech companies like TikTok, when she decided to strike out. She's now the founder of Quantum Potential, specializing in professional development and performance management for the workplace. Crossin and the Life Purpose Lab staff are developing Quantum Purpose to train corporate leaders to bring more purpose to their companies. If successful, it could go a long way toward amplifying the number of people transformed by the research done by the Life Purpose Lab.

The clock is ticking. "Finding purpose is simple," Wright says, thinking about all that's ahead for the lab. "But it's not easy." ☺

Finding Purpose Case Study 3

When they grew weary of their suburban life in Washington state, Behan and Jamie Gifford decided to pursue their dream of sailing around the world with their kids. They spent five years painstakingly planning how they'd do it. They've now been at sea for 17 years, most recently coming ashore on the southern end of Okinawa Island.



THE PRINCIPAL FORMERLY KNOWN AS DLEW

The public STEAM academy in Norwalk helmed by Damon Lewis is such a Cinderella transformation tale that it has garnered the former UConn football captain state and national principal-of-the-year titles.

As the first yellow school bus rolls up to the curb of Ponus Ridge STEAM Academy on a cold December morning, Damon Lewis '95 (CLAS) eagerly stands outside the vehicle door, waiting for it to slide open and children to pour out.

"Good morning!" "Good morning!" "Good morning!" Lewis calls, each time more intentional than the last as his rich baritone voice bounces off the brick walls of the middle school. Children smile and greet "Dr. Lewis" as they run to catch up with friends before school officially opens for the day.

Lewis does this for each of the 12 buses that arrives packed with students, all while greeting drivers and teachers on their first day back from Thanksgiving break. It's a beloved routine at Ponus Ridge in Norwalk, Connecticut — a pioneering school where by 8th grade over 90% of students are on track to graduate high school, a number that outpaced the state average by about 5 percentage points last school year, despite a third of incoming 6th graders reading below grade level.

Shortly after 8 a.m., Lewis is finally in the building. Instead of beelining to the office for a full day of meetings and paperwork, he heads for the halls. Lewis has asked the school secretaries to knock on his door whenever he spends more than 20 minutes in his office — or what he jokingly calls his storage closet.

Most of the time, with laptop in hand, he's bouncing among

classrooms and hallways, lunchroom, and recess duty. He helps one student unjam a locker, directing hallway traffic, then pauses to give some teachers feedback — what he calls “glows and grows.”

“You cannot find the pulse of your school behind closed doors,” he says. “This is the best part and how I get to know the kids.”

Years ago, parents “were running from Ponus,” says Lewis. Now there’s a waiting list to get into the public magnet school, and everyone wants to know the secret. Last year, Lewis was named both the 2025 Connecticut Middle School Principal of the Year and the 2025–26 Middle Level National Principal of the Year by the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

That secret? He is unabashed about leading with heart. “Some administrators say we can’t take the job personally. I take this personally because every day I come to the building, the kids look like me. And I don’t want them to go through what I went through.”

Eighth-grader Marley Bramble shares her eager take on Lewis while straightening her pile of middle school essentials — pink water bottle, color-coded folders, green pencil box, and computer. “He’s the cool principal that still keeps us in check,” she says. “Whenever I’m called down to [his] office, I’m not scared that I’m gonna get in trouble. And even if I were to get in trouble, he wouldn’t get frustrated with me. He wants to see the best versions of ourselves.”

BEFORE HE WAS DR. LEWIS, HE WAS “DLEW”

In the fall of 1990, when Lewis landed at UConn from a large urban high school, he says he had all the fashion — gold teeth and chains included. Most people knew him as “DLeW.”

“I want to make it. I’m not going to come back home,” he repeated to himself like a mantra on the hour-plus drive from Bridgeport to Storrs. Lewis hailed from Harding High School in Bridgeport, where he recalls his classmates were 100% students of color and everyone was on the free or reduced-price lunch program. Twenty books and desks were often shared among 30 or more students. But Lewis graduated near the top of his class with a full football scholarship to UConn and a clear dream: a business degree, a corner office, solitude, and a million dollars.

“I thought I was the cat’s meow,” he says, laughing. “But I put a lot of pressure at that age on myself, because I wanted to be successful so badly. I wanted to prove to people that good things can come from kids in urban schools.”

And he did. But first, he learned how a ZIP code can determine one’s education and future. At Harding, “I graduated 8th in my class, I was in the National Honor Society, I had the sash and everything onstage.” But at UConn, “I was sitting next to kids from Darien and Greenwich, and they knew all this stuff that I didn’t. I was the walking achievement gap.”

His first semester in Storrs, Lewis had to take a non-credit math course to help bridge that gap. But Harding had imparted some key social lessons. “It taught me at a young age to not make excuses and get it on my own.”

He took advantage of connections and professors’ office hours and found his groove. It wasn’t always easy, he admits, being at a predominantly white institution with students from disparate economic backgrounds. Sometimes, with just a couple of dollars in his pocket, he’d opt out of social gatherings in

From top: With mom, Beverly, after Lewis announced his decision to attend UConn in 1989; an article on Lewis and his father in the Bridgeport Light in 1988; Lewis as Husky football captain during his senior year season, 1994.



“He truly does believe that school leaders and educators are saving kids — kids that may not have opportunities, kids that may not be on the right path.”

Karen Packtor, deputy executive director, Connecticut Association of Schools–Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference





A day spent with Lewis is a day in the halls, classrooms, cafeteria, and recess yard. “You cannot find the pulse of your school behind closed doors,” he says. “This is the best part and how I get to know the kids.”

When we asked some of his students what emoji would represent Lewis, they replied:

“He’s just so happy, like you will never see him sad, and that’s just so amazing. He keeps our mood up.”
—Marley Bramble, 8th grade

“He’s always happy.”
—Olivia Hempstead, 8th grade

“He’s just really like chill and cool and positive and nice.”
—Frankie Christopher, 6th grade

favor of coursework. What felt unfortunate at the time paid off with exemplary grades.

While Lewis was at UConn, his mother would often send him copies of the Connecticut Post, and the news from Bridgeport in one edition in particular resonated with him as he sat in his first-year dorm — McMahon North, room 407. “I remember reading an article about a friend who had gotten arrested, and I turn the page and another friend was dead.

“I thought, ‘How selfish of me to go sit in a corner office and make all this money when kids and families that look like me are falling prey to random acts of violence and drugs.’ I gave up a million dollars before I even had it, and I said, ‘I’m going to be an educator.’”

He switched his major from business to English education.

He still got the office, but one that comes with the dreams and futures of our children. “The best way to change the trajectory of a kid’s life is education,” Lewis says. “You can change years of cycles of poverty, discriminatory practices, and more.”

EVERY DAY COUNTS

Standing by the main stairwell where signs in English and Spanish adorn the walls in the school’s signature blue and yellow, Lewis towers over students of all shapes, sizes, and backgrounds as they move from music technology to Lego robotics to immersive media to broadcast journalism.

“Walk on the right, drive on the right,” he yells as he greets students by name, switching seamlessly between Spanish and English, and gives generous high-fives or what the students call a “dap up.”

It’s 11:26 a.m. and more than 600 children are moving through the hallways. This is the one moment during the day when all three grades move at the same time, and from the outside looking in, it’s perfectly organized chaos. Ponus uses no bells, and students are asked to keep phones in their lockers. Both directives minimize distractions for teachers and students and underscore Lewis’ belief that when students enjoy school, they know where to be and when.

Every morning those buses roll up to the curb is an opportunity for growth, not just for students but for teachers, the environment, and Lewis himself, because, he says, he’s dealing with “human capital,” and that requires the courage to change. “I think being an educator is the best job in the world,” Lewis says, “because you can press the reset button every single day.”

The Lewis reset has transformed Ponus Ridge from a flailing middle school into a STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math) academy with a first-ever waiting list of nearly 40 families and courses and clubs like music technology and robotics that even college students might envy.

“We’ve gone from this place where students repeat the same electives or



“When I nominated Dr. Lewis, I did it because he is the type of leader that I want to see in every school in my district. He has all of the elements that people would die to have in every single principal in their school community. He has heart. He has high expectations with a strong moral compass. He has a clear vision, consistency, and always focuses on great teaching and ensuring that kids are safe, but most importantly, building a really supportive culture. And above all, he’s a community leader. He is a connector who builds trust with families and partners with them. He shows up, and he always follows up.”

Alexandra Estrella, superintendent, Norwalk Public Schools



SOME STUDENT CLUBS:

- Gaming and E-Sports
- Garden
- Lego
- Rock Band
- Crochet
- Table Tennis
- Debate
- Podcasting
- Creative Writing

“I do think that for schools to be successful, they need to engage families in the work. Dr. Lewis has been tremendously successful at bringing families into the fold and empowering them, educating them, giving them a voice and allowing them to be true participants in their children’s education.”

Karen Packtor, deputy executive director, Connecticut Association of Schools–Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference



During the COVID-19 pandemic, Lewis saw real food disparity among students. The food pantry he created then has since expanded.

opportunities every year to having classes students want to take but can’t. And I know that can sound like that stinks, but it’s a good problem to have. That in the midst of budget [cuts], in the midst of the changing landscapes of middle schools, the changing landscapes of education, through all of that, our programming has expanded,” says Ponus’ assistant principal Evan Byron ’12 (CLAS), ’13 M.Ed.

Since Lewis took the reins just over 10 years ago, Ponus has cut chronic absenteeism from consistently over 30% to a low of 7.7% in May 2025 — lower than any other secondary school in the district. Meanwhile, he has boosted the number of Hispanic and Black students in the school’s Gifted and Talented program and increased female student numbers in the school’s Accelerated Math program to be more representative of the school-wide population. To hear him tell it, it’s as simple as noticing a problem and deciding to fix it.

“It’s setting an expectation and not shrinking from that,” Lewis says. “There’s so many negative connotations about Black and brown kids — behaviorally, academically, socially — and we’re just taking it and turning it around.”

Walking through some of these classrooms feels less like passing through a school and more like moving through a series of curated galleries. Self-powered fans, automatic trash cans, alarms, and popsicle-stick bridges line the edges of the computer science classroom, where students sit in a large circle enthusiastically chattering. The teacher explains that they are creating mock business websites using the required coding skills they’ve learned since 6th grade. “We’re preparing students for jobs that haven’t even been created yet,” Lewis says.

Past the classrooms is a teachers’ lounge that, at first look, appears ordinary. But a closet in the back is bursting with boxes of apple juice, cans of green beans, bags of rice, and more. This is Ponus’ food pantry for students and families, open daily from 2 to 5:30 p.m. and visited by nearly 200 families a week. It was created during the pandemic thanks to a partnership with Filling in the Blanks food bank after Lewis saw a disparity: While some students ate all three meals at home, others were going hungry. “Kids need to be fed, they need to be loved, they need to be supported. ... So if I can offer free breakfast to kids and give kids something to take home over the weekend, I’m doing it because they need it and because it’s the right thing to do,” Lewis says.

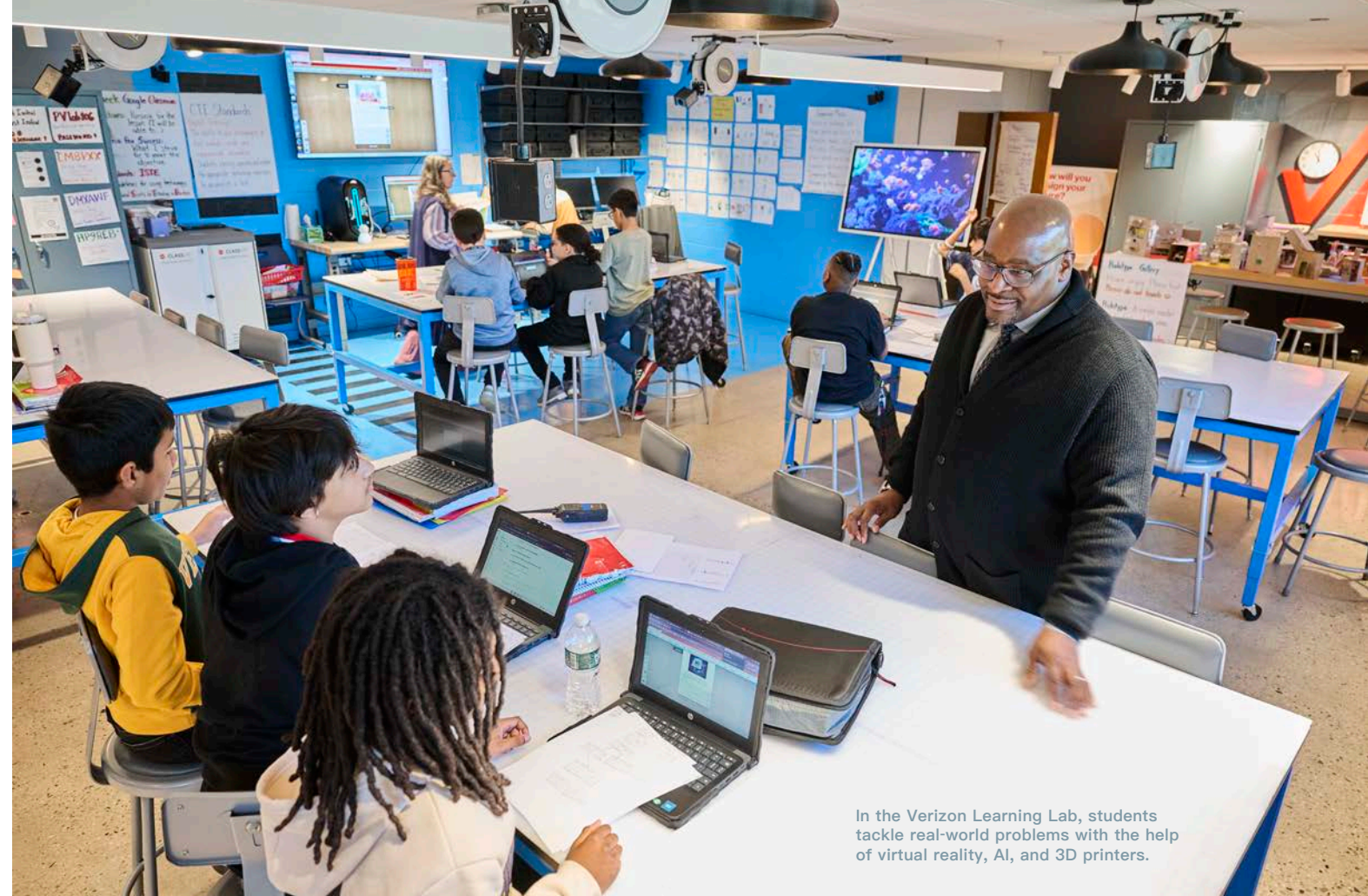
Community partnerships have been key to realizing Lewis’ vision for Ponus. A partnership with telecommunications company Verizon provides students and teachers with Chromebooks, unlimited access to the internet, and a physical lab with VR headsets and 3D printing. Other collaborations have flourished into a school-based health center, a donation closet, and counseling services for multilingual learners new to the country.

All this unfolds with the doors wide open to anyone curious about Ponus. In an attempt to change the narrative about the school and boost transparency, Lewis created monthly Walkthrough Wednesdays, where Ponus welcomes families and community members during school hours. When asked what motivates him to provide so much for his community, he says it’s all rooted in “faith and service,” the two words that guide him as a person.

“Those are his core values,” says Byron. “Service to kids and service to people. And faith in the ability that you can operationalize dreams for kids if you put the right practices and purpose in place.”

Although he is the face of the school, Lewis is quick to acknowledge he wouldn’t be able to do it alone and says he has complete trust in his team.

“I think one of his greatest attributes that has changed Ponus is that he empowers all of us,” says Joseph Giandurco, a science and social studies teacher with the school for over 20 years. With Lewis’ support, he created a school garden during the pandemic, which now helps interested students not only



In the Verizon Learning Lab, students tackle real-world problems with the help of virtual reality, AI, and 3D printers.

learn how to grow their own food but also how to cook with it. Students have even created a business plan to sell compost.

“Dr. Lewis does a great job of finding our staff’s passions and telling us to go do it,” says Giandurco. “I think that sense of empowerment really makes the ownership of a project that much more rich and valid for people.”

DO WHAT’S RIGHT, NOT WHAT’S POPULAR

Limiting barriers, says Lewis, helps his students find stability, even when everything outside the school’s doors can seem out of control. He knows what that feels like — school was once the place where he, too, found stability and belonging.

In 8th grade, Lewis’ parents got divorced. His father, a beloved teacher, coach, and athletic director at Harding High School and Lewis’ football coach there, moved out but remained a constant presence in his life. Then, at the beginning of Lewis’ senior year, his father was murdered. The case was never solved.

In a rare quiet moment in his office at the end of the day, Lewis shares that today would have been his father’s 88th birthday. He reflects on the business and life lessons his father passed down to him that he holds dear: Never be afraid to hire and work with someone who’s smarter than you, trust the people you hire, consistency is the key to greatness, and always seek to be better.

“I bring a lot of baggage, I will say honestly and transparently, with me to work,” he says, not attempting to hold back tears. “But the fire that burned in me was a lot stronger than the fires that burned outside of me, and I’ve learned that being a good principal begins with being a good person.” ☺

“Dr. Lewis is all about community. ... He’s all about building trust with parents, teachers, and staff and [knowing] it takes a village.”

Carly Campbell, senior manager of member engagement, National Association of Secondary School Principals

See Lewis in action at s.uconn.edu/ponus.



AND...

Accidental actor Will Hines teaches comedy’s golden rule — and lives by it.

Will Hines wanted a ham and cheese sandwich from the deli downstairs. It was 2006, and he was a video producer at AOL in New York City, the kind of gig that meant wrangling cables, shooting simple interviews, and shuffling endless digital files.

“There’s some British singer doing an interview on the floor below us,” his boss said. “You might as well film her.”

“I was thinking about the lunch I had to get after,” Hines recalls. “I hit record, and she starts singing, and it was unbelievably good! I was completely stunned.”

Two months later, Amy Winehouse was a global superstar. Hines went back to thinking about lunch.

Two decades later, not much has changed. Hines ’92 (CLAS) is still drifting into surreal moments and reacting with calm curiosity — case in point, crawling across the bathroom floor of a Hollywood improv theater with his friend and business partner Jim Woods, spoofing the horror film “The Substance.” After seeing the movie, they wondered what would happen

if Hines took the drug at the story’s center. Weeks later, they were shooting their own short film.

“Yesterday, I shot a piece on ‘Jimmy Kimmel,’” Hines says. “I was a dentist in some sketch. They called me last minute. ‘Can you be here in an hour?’ That was my day. I canceled everything else.”

At 55, Hines has built something rare in comedy — a career based on adaptability. He’s a reliable character actor and one of improv’s most respected teachers, running what he half-jokingly calls Improv Grad School.

Hines can slip into the absurd with deadpan precision, whether playing a creepy landlord on “Broad City,” an icy district attorney on “Brooklyn Nine-Nine,” or a rich guy who hunts people on TBS’ “Lost” parody “Wrecked.”

The “Broad City” role was especially sweet. Hines had taught Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer at Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre (UCB) and introduced them to Amy Poehler. After Poehler became their champion and producer, “they cast me in their show, partly as a

thank-you, I think.”

That role marked his first time on television and “the first of many creeps that I’ve gotten to play,” he says laughing. Why does he keep getting cast as the creep? “I’m a shy person, so when I’m at rest, I’ll stay very still and try not to betray any feelings out of what I think is politeness, but I think it comes across as, ‘What’s that weirdo thinking?’”

On “Brooklyn Nine-Nine,” Andy Samberg encouraged him to improvise and even directed him to “go smaller, completely dead.” He was right, Hines says. “It was funnier that way.”

His favorite project was “Wrecked,” where he spent 10 weeks in Fiji playing an alpha-bully loudmouth jerk who hunts people for sport. “The showrunners liked having us play against our appearances. I love playing villains,” Hines admits. “It’s no problem for me.

Hines — seen here at Griffith Observatory, Hollywood’s favorite spot for contemplating destiny and stardom — represents a counterintuitive approach to showbiz success: stop striving, start reacting.

I don’t know what that says about my personality, but I love being the bad guy.” The series never found a wide audience, but Hines



3. "Brooklyn Nine-Nine" with Terry Crews and Andy Samberg, 2014.

1. Improv with Jim Woods in Washington, D.C., 2023.
2. "Community" with, from left, Paget Brewster, Danny Pudi, and Joel McHale, 2015.



4. Hines and his mellophone in a promo for UConn pep band, 1990.
5. "Broad City" with Hannibal Buress and Abbi Jacobson, 2014.
6. Recording his "Screw It, We're Just Gonna Talk About the Beatles" podcast with co-hosts, from left, Joel Spence, Brett Morris, and Katie Plattner, 2025.



remembers it fondly: "The cast and crew were so happy to be working that everyone had a great time."

Ian Roberts, co-founder of the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre, calls Hines a "modern-day Bob Newhart," who finds humor in life's absurdities simply by reacting honestly to them. "Not many people realize how valuable that is. If you don't have someone who presents a realistic response to what you're doing, it's like trying to play handball without

a wall," says Roberts. "Will just plays a great guy who reacts truthfully and very realistically to what's presented."

But unlike Newhart, Hines can flip the dynamic when needed. "He could also be doing what I'm doing, you know, be the guy who's acting crazy," says Roberts, referring to their outsized personas on the YouTube series "Getting Coffee with Will Hines and Ian Roberts."

"He's 100% game for anything," agrees Brett Morris, producer of the

popular "Comedy Bang! Bang!" podcast. On the show, Hines has conjured characters like Morpheus the Dream Lord, who once put an entire live audience under a sleep spell. "I love the juxtaposition of these grand character ideas with the mild-mannered reality," Morris says. "It really cracks me up."

Offstage, Hines' mild-mannered reality is front and center. At 5'7" and wearing wire-rimmed glasses, he radiates the amused calm of a suburban dad watching his kids invent a game with rules no adult could follow.

"He looks very shut off, but students find him very approachable," says Jim Woods, who co-owns the World's Greatest Improv School (WGIS) with Hines. "He's way more self-aware onstage than off. It's his mutant power — audiences don't see it coming."

Growing up in Danbury, Connecticut, Hines was the "funny kid" among comedy-nerd friends who obsessed over "Spinal Tap," Eddie Murphy, Robin Williams, and Steve Martin.

At UConn, comedy wasn't a career goal — he changed majors four times before getting an English degree. Still, he kept cracking jokes in marching band. "Marching band, weirdly, was my first comedy school," he says. "It was full of eccentrics trying to make each other laugh during football games and road trips."

His career path was beautifully crooked: small-town journalist ("loved it but left because I was broke"), dot-com programmer ("hated it but it paid well"), and that AOL job. Then, at 30, he wandered into a UCB improv class "just to be around creative people." Classes turned into performing, then teaching. Suddenly he was instructing

“

Roberts ... calls Hines a “modern-day Bob Newhart” who finds humor in life’s absurdities simply by reacting honestly to them.

future stars like Jacobson and Glazer.

By 42, Hines had moved to Los Angeles, was still teaching at UCB, and was writing a Tumblr blog (now a Substack) called “Improv Nonsense” that happened to go global. The blog turned into books — “How to Be the Greatest Improviser on Earth” and “Improv Nonsense: All the Posts” — which spread his improv wisdom worldwide. He flew to Beijing to teach through a translator, and European improv clubs started flying him over for workshops.

“That stuff I didn’t see coming,” he says.

When the pandemic gutted live theater, Hines saw opportunity. In 2022, he, Woods, and Sarah Claspell launched WGIS. By October 2023, they’d opened their permanent space inside a former RadioShack at a Hollywood strip mall, where neighbors

include a pawnshop and a hookah lounge.

Stepping inside the blackout glass doors one Monday in July, this writer finds it packed with students buzzing with the energy of people who just spent hours chasing laughs and making something out of nothing.

“If it’s not funny, you did it wrong,” Hines tells them. His vibe isn’t drill-sergeant harsh but more like an uncle reminding you the grill won’t light if you don’t press the ignition.

He refers to WGIS as grad school for a few reasons: “We have more quality control. We have more oversight. And it’s harder. We actually want it to be hard work to be onstage. Not expensive, not pay-to-play. But if you’re on our stage, it’s mandatory rehearsals, teachers giving you notes.”

It’s working — the school recently sold out three weeks of intensives, drawing students from across the country. “No more amateur dabblers,” he wrote in his Substack. “Only the people who are truly sick for improv show up.”

A hallmark of improv is to find comedy in unusual or foolish premises, then commit fully until the premise feels justified or inevitable. After his students perform a scene about cops with a quota for putting animals out of their misery, Hines tells them: “The more you have to explain the logistics, the funnier it is. Where’s this precinct? What do people say when they call about the animals?”

Comedy has mutated since Hines started. “You don’t just do a rom-com anymore — it’s a rom-com horror meta mockumentary with a surrealist bent. The worst teachers think they have it figured out. You never have it figured out. You have to constantly switch.”

That philosophy extends beyond his comedy. When he was 15, his mother died of cancer at age 39, leaving him wary of long-term plans. “So, when I was 30, I was like, what if I only have nine years left? I’m not gonna stay at some weird office job that I’m not liking.”

Hines sees security as an illusion.

“What’s the point of getting tied down when you’re not really feeling it?”

It explains the zigzag résumé, the cross-country move, the willingness to start a school in his fifties. It also explains the deep bonds he’s forged in a competitive industry. Woods calls him that guy you put down as your emergency contact.

The freelance life isn’t glamorous, but it’s authentic. “You don’t get money; you don’t get financial security,” says Hines, “but you get to give a shit about what you’re doing. That’s the trade-off.”

Hines is the improviser’s improviser, equally at ease anchoring chaos or conjuring lunatic dream spells. “Will has made a name for himself by embracing the format almost like a stunt man,” Morris says, “jumping straight into the deep end with absolutely minimal premise and building a brilliant character on the spot.”

“My day-to-day is watching people onstage get good, going onstage at night with friends, having coffee with people, and talking about scripts,” Hines says. “Every day I’m not in a cubicle giving my life to somebody else’s dream is a victory.”

For Hines, sustainability doesn’t mean locking down the future — it means building systems that can bend with it. Whether it’s a last-minute gig on late-night TV, a spoof filmed in a bathroom, or an improv school in a Hollywood strip mall, the principle

remains the same: Commit completely, and trust that the funny will follow.

In other words, forget about the ham and cheese sandwich, press record, and let the magic happen. Because sometimes the best plan is no plan. ☺

Instant Improv:

Hines suggests that, while waiting for his sandwich at Mustard Seed Cafe in LA’s uber hip Los Feliz neighborhood, he might have been thinking: “I wonder if there are any roles for bald guys on the next season of ‘Pluribus?’” or “How many Beatles references can I force into my improv teaching today?” or “Should I buy a new electric guitar so I can play badly on new equipment?”





Find skydiving record-setter Stevens below the “I” in the “ALUMNI” header, in a purple helmet and blue-soled sneakers.

“I’m Jumping”

➤ **Craig Stevens ’69 (BUS)** set a skydiving world record when he and 34 divers over age 70 jumped in formation over South Florida, beating the previous record of 25 skydivers free-falling together. One by one, they leapt out of an aircraft and plummeted toward earth at 120 mph, maneuvering midair to link arms and form a 35-person configuration before scattering to safely deploy their parachutes. The record-setting group, which hails from across the globe and includes adventurers over 80, are all members of Jumpers Over Seventy (JOS). With 3,500 jumps under his belt, Craig considers himself one of the least experienced members — some have logged more than 20,000 jumps. Ironically, back when Stevens was a springboard diver on the UConn swim team, he says he feared even the three-meter-high diving board jumps. But during his junior year, a conversation with a fellow student who skydived sparked his curiosity. He tried it after college and has been soaring through the skies ever since. Do his doctors warn him against this risky venture? Quite the opposite — they say it motivates him to stay in tip-top shape. “Until I can no longer climb into the airplane, when they open the door at altitude, I’m jumping!” he says. —*SIOBHAN MURRAY*

CLASS NOTES

1940s



➤ **Jeanine Morgia Sanzone ’75 (ED)** writes to say that her father, **James V. Morgia ’46 (ENG)**, was one of 70 World War II veterans honored by Connecticut Lt. Gov. Susan Bysiewicz at the National Guard Armory in Hartford to commemorate the 80th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day (May 8, 1945). Connecticut is home to an estimated 600 WWII vets, and those at the commemoration ranged in age from 97 to 105! Morgia

(one of our top 5 oldest living alumni at 103), set out to graduate from UConn in 1944. But his junior year was interrupted when, as an ROTC member, he was ordered to report to Fort Benning in Georgia for basic training, then officer training. Morgia received the Bronze Star for bravery during the Battle of the Bulge. He also received the Silver Star for commanding 150 troops during the Battle of Beho, Belgium.

1960s



➤ **Brian Flesher ’63 (BUS)** has led a colorful career — make that many careers. He worked as a CFO in the publishing industry

until 1995, taught accounting classes at Sacred Heart and Arizona State University, and became an actor in 1980 after taking acting classes at Fairfield University. He opted for another career change in 1995 and went to beauty school in Boca Raton, Florida. These days you’ll find him producing and appearing in comedy shows in Phoenix, Arizona. ➤ **William “Bill” Nagy ’66 (CAHNR)** reminisces on his UConn days — the poker games, TKE fraternity parties, Hot Nuts concerts in Willimantic, Diana’s Pool visits, 10-cent drafts at Flats, and \$1 drive-in movies that got the better of his schedule and caused him, he jokes, to graduate a year late. On a recent visit to Storrs, he was struck by the transformation of the once 8,000-student campus into an unfamiliar “small city.” While landmarks like the ROTC Barn, where he spent many an hour in dismounted drills, are long gone, the Student Union — still standing — served as his compass. ➤ Congratulations to **George H. Rowe IV ’69 (SFA, ED)**, who has earned a Doctor of Divinity from Calvary International School of Ministry and Theology. He is an elder at the Oasis Christian Church in Windsor, Connecticut.

1970s

➤ **John M. Silva ’73 (ED), ’74 MA** still has his eye on the ball! He’s now a senior advisor for USA Team Handball in preparation for the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics. Involved with team handball in numerous capacities since 1986, Silva founded the Carolina Team Handball Club, which has produced three Olympians. ➤ **Bob Kaufman ’74 (BUS)**, founder of Bob’s Discount Furniture, is pleased to announce a new store in Newington, where the company’s

first store opened in 1991. There are now over 200 Bob’s stores in 26 states, making it the seventh largest furniture chain in the U.S. He remains the smiling face of the famed brand.



➤ **Barbara (Wasko) Fitzgibbons ’76 (CLAS)** writes that her brother, **Steve Wasko ’74 (CLAS)**, retired at the end of 2025 as president and general manager of MaxPak, a division of The Royal Group based in Lakeland, Florida, after a 50-plus-year career in the corrugated packaging industry. He and his high school sweetheart of 53 years, Mary (with Steve above) — parents of three and grandparents of seven — are looking forward to spending more time on the golf course and traveling.



➤ Four UConn friends who still regularly get together recently decided to stage their reunion on the Storrs campus for the first time. From left: **Meg (McGoldrick) Tweedy ’79 (CLAS)**; **Vikki (Susan) Dunn ’79 (BUS)**; **Mary-Caryl (Schiess) Goff ’78 (CLAS)**, ’03 MSW; and **Dee Dice ’80 (CAHNR)**. “We are so amazed at the transformation, but ... where is the Rathskeller?” writes Dice.



MAKING GOOD

“GET STUFF DONE.”

When Jade Strawberry '17 (CLAS) got the news that she'd been promoted to chief of staff of the youth-sports advocacy organization RCX Sports as a 26-year-old with less than three years in the industry, she felt both immense pride and a brief flash of panic: Was she ready for the job? Could she handle the work? Had the team made a mistake?

“I had that one night of impostor syndrome,” Strawberry confesses. So, as she's done countless times before, the former UConn volleyball player stepped into her bathroom, looked herself in the mirror, and gave herself a firm pep talk.

“This is literally what I asked for. We're gonna go do it, and we're gonna go get it,” she remembers telling herself. “You're here for a reason.”

Since then, Strawberry has been named one of the 2024 New Voices Under 30 by Sports Business Journal for her leadership of her organization's Females in Flag initiative, aimed at increasing the number of young women athletes in flag

Former Husky volleyball star, daughter of MLB all-star Darryl Strawberry, and RCX Sports chief of staff Jade Strawberry.

football at every level, from junior varsity to university.

Nearly 70,000 girls competed in high school flag football around the country last year. In 2024, the NFL Flag Championships — for boys and girls — broadcast for the first time on ESPN.

“Teams were buzzing, that's for sure,” Strawberry says of the competition, recalling her own excitement as fireworks whizzed and crackled overhead during the opening night ceremony at the Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio. Onsite with her team were two college women's flag football players, inaugural winners of the International Scholarship sponsored by the RCX Sports Foundation in partnership with the NFL.

“In between meetings, we would walk around the fields together, just sit down and hang out,” says Strawberry. They asked her advice on all manner of things, making Strawberry recall her own time as a young athlete, eager for support from her coach or older teammates.

“I love that you are looking at me in that way, as a mentor,” she told them. “And if you need a resource, I'm here.”

Strawberry's leadership style — nurturing but authoritative — was honed in her days on the volleyball court at UConn, and further sharpened after college when she returned home to Florida to teach elementary school and coach her younger sister's volleyball team.

“I took it as I was coaching any other player. I mean, I was probably a little bit harder on her, just because she's my sister and I want the best for her,” she says, with a laugh. “But being so fresh out of college volleyball, I was taking what I learned from my four years and helping the girls grow their game that way.”

In both the gym and the boardroom, Strawberry describes herself as “a quiet, dominant person, like the

snake effect” — often moving silently, she explains, but always ready to strike.

“I think a lot of it was learned on the volleyball court,” she says. “I learned in college that I'm not going to be the loudest person on the court, and to this day at work I'm not the loudest person in our company, but I do lead by example.”

The results of her leadership at RCX are evident. The explosion of girls' flag football in recent years is due in no small part to the sustained efforts of Strawberry and her team, who have raised funding for the necessary uniforms and equipment for girls around the country to play like the pros, as well as for scholarships for international students who want to compete but struggle to access resources in their home countries.

“Knowing that one day this could be a varsity sport where girls are receiving scholarships truly at all levels, like I did in volleyball, is awesome,” she says of her hopes for the future. [Indeed, days before this issue went to press, the NCAA voted Women's Flag Football into the Emerging

Sports for Women Program.] “It's super exciting to see some of the work we're doing on the back end, or behind closed doors, come to light.”

And when any flashes of impostor syndrome threaten to creep in today, Strawberry reflects on the words of her former volleyball coach, Olympian Rita Crockett.

“I will never forget, she told me: ‘You're not a tipper. You're an outside hitter, so hit the ball,’” Strawberry remembers. “That translates into the work world as: Don't be passive with things. Get stuff done.” —IVY SCOTT

1980s



➔ Don deGraffenried '80 MSW returned from his second visit to war-torn Ukraine in October, where he provided pro bono advanced EMDR (eye movement desensitization and reprocessing) training to therapists in Lviv who treat combat veterans, first responders, and traumatized civilians, navigating the language barrier amid air raids and incoming bombings. “Despite the challenges they face, the participants are eager, engaged students,” deGraffenried says. “Their determination is an inspiration that reminds me to continue to pay it forward.”

A longtime presenter for the UConn School of Social Work, deGraffenried runs a private practice in New Haven, Connecticut.

➔ Late last year, Keith A. Wiemert '83 (BUS) retired as president and CEO of Middletown-based Ellafi Federal Credit Union after 28 years. Wiemert first took the helm in 1997, when the then-named Middlesex

Schools Federal Credit Union managed about \$40 million in assets. Today, Ellafi boasts more than \$175 million in assets. Wiemert has been active in local civic groups, such as the Middlesex County Chamber of Commerce and Rotary Club. Well done!



➔ Five friends who first met at the School of Fine Arts between 1980 and 1984 still get together as often as their busy lives allow — recently for a weekend in East Haven, Connecticut. From left: Jan Schmidt '84 (SFA), Lisa Conti '84 (SFA), Kim (Marotto) Cantin '84 (SFA), Kathy (Begen) Bernardin '85 (SFA), and Maria Guerrere '84 (SFA). ➔ In reflecting on the value of his UConn education, Rui Coelho '84 (ENG) notes that his diverse professional path has included roles with the U.S. nuclear navy, consumer product companies, and original equipment manufacturers (OEMs), in such diverse areas as product development, manufacturing, supply chain management, systems

engineering, and computer science. His path culminated in over two decades of improving public health in the medical device and biopharmaceutical sectors. Coelho remains an active volunteer in retirement, notably serving on the UConn biomedical engineering program's external advisory board.

1990s

➔ Klarn DePalma '92 (BUS) has been inducted into the Connecticut Broadcasters Association's 2025 Hall of Fame. DePalma, a tenured station manager, is senior vice president of sales for Nexstar Media Group — one of the nation's largest owners of television stations nationwide. “My years at UConn provided me with a foundation that has supported every stage of my career in broadcasting and sales,” he writes.

➔ Chun Lai '92 MBA, chief investment officer at The Rockefeller Foundation, received the CIO Leadership Recognition Award. Having joined the foundation as an investment associate in 1996, he rose to deputy CIO in 2010 and assumed his current role in



2019. In his precious spare time, Lai enjoys reading, cycling, and skiing.

➔ Dennis S. Weinstein '92 (CLAS) continues to make waves in Michigan as a doctor of chiropractic medicine serving the Lansing community, a restaurant owner, and a devoted family man to his wife and three children. ➔ Robert M. Nugent '92 (ENG) was promoted to brigadier general in the U.S. Army, a rank that is reached by fewer than 1% of enlistees. The Windsor, Connecticut, VFW has also renamed VFW Post 4740 the Robert M. Nugent VFW Post in recognition of his 40-plus years of service to the state. Nugent met his wife of over 30 years, Cecilia Nugent '91 (CLAS), in Hanks Hall. The couple's two sons also graduated from UConn: Julian Nugent '18 (ENG) is a U.S. Army captain and an engineer at Pratt & Whitney, and Nathan Nugent '20 (ED) is vice president of wealth investment solutions for Citigroup. Thanks



to **Monika Nugent '12 (CLAS), '17 MPA** for the update on Robert! ➤ Congratulations to **Jenny Lezon Norris '93 (BUS)** on being elected president of the Connecticut chapter of the Turnaround Management Association, a net-working organization that promotes corporate renewal and change management, connecting professionals

committed to revitalizing businesses. Norris brings valuable expertise from her career at Allianz Trade, where she provides credit insurance. She's a proud Husky and avid basketball fan. ➤ Congrats to **Jennifer (Donalds) Barahona '96 (CLAS)**, who was sworn in as Connecticut deputy secretary of the state in January. Prior to joining state government, she

had a long career in executive nonprofit management throughout Fairfield County. ➤ After connecting via this magazine ("The Good Neighbor," Summer 2025), **Michelle Puzzo '98 (CAHNR)** and **Suzanne Ondrus '14 (CLAS)** teamed up for a good cause. Ondrus, based in Bogotá, Colombia, gave a remote training on speaking effectively for

those with impaired hearing through Puzzo's Manches-ter, Connecticut-based UR Community Cares organi-zation. ➤ **Darrell Cook-man '99 M.Ed.** was named Teacher of the Year at the Renzulli Academy in Hart-ford. Congratulations!

2000s

➤ **William Vanderrest '00 (ED), '01 M.Ed.** was recently named Boys Track and Field Coach of the Year by the Connecticut High School Coaches Association (CHSCA). In 2017, he received the Girls Coach of the Year award. Each of these awards can only be won once. Vanderrest, who has been head coach of both teams at Coventry High School for 26 years, is president of CHSCA.



➤ After serving 15 years as senior policy advisor and in other positions at the U.S. Food and Drug Administra-tion, **Jennifer Tomasello '02 MPA** has joined the Advanced Medical Technology Association (AdvaMed) as a senior director for federal government affairs. ➤ Former UConn Women's Bas-ketball standout and WNBA veteran **Ashley Battle '04 (BUS), '05 (CLAS)** was named vice president of basketball operations, strat-egy, and innovation for the Portland Fire, a new WNBA team based in Oregon. 2026 is their inaugural season. ➤ **Gregg Schuster '05 MBA** is the new municipal manager for Upper Makefield Township in Pennsylvania after a search by the Board of Supervisors. Schuster has applied his 15 years of expe-rience to membership in the International City/County Management Association, where he has served on sever-

al of its committees. ➤ Con-gratulations to **Vivian Lee '06 (CAHNR)**, owner and chef at Leftie Lee's in Avon-dale Estates, just outside Atlanta, who was featured on the Food Network's "Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives" in July!



➤ **Kristi (Tokarz) Maler '06 (ED), '07 MA** and **Adam Coppola '05 (CLAS)**, friends from their UConn student days, hadn't seen each other in nearly 20 years before finding themselves both working at Seymour High School, where Coppola is a school counselor and Maler teaches English. They frequently wear UConn gear to show their Husky pride! ➤ In June 2025, **John Lentini '07 MBA** delivered a talk called "Three Dials to Lead You: A Control Panel for Life & Leadership" at TEDx Catawba in Hickory, North Carolina. The presentation introduced a powerful, prac-tical framework designed to empower people to trans-form and thrive personally and professionally. TEDx Ca-tawba was founded by fellow alum **Christine D. Gagnon '99 (BUS), '02 MSA, '04 MBA.** ➤ **Angel Moran '07 (CLAS)** has been ap-pointed board chairman of the PFLAG Greater Boston. PFLAG Greater Boston sup-ports LGBTQ+ people, their families, and allies.

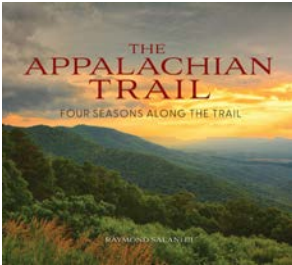


➤ **Andrew Marone '07 (CLAS, ED), '10 MA** received a Fulbright Teacher Exchange award for 2025–26 and

will be a participant in the Fulbright Teachers for Global Classrooms program. Well done, Andrew! ➤ **Colleen Velturo '07 (CLAS, BUS), '12 JD** was promoted to partner at Gerber Ciano Kelly Brady LLP. Velturo defends clients in personal injury matters and insurance coverage disputes.



➤ **Margaret "Maggie" De Vito '08 (CLAS), '16 6th Year** is serving as president of the Ju-nior League of Hartford, a women-led nonprofit that collaborates with partners to give back to the Greater Hart-ford community and empow-ers women leaders since 1921. ➤ Things are adding up for **Casey O'Brien '08 (BUS)**, who has just been promoted to partner at MahoneySabol, a Glastonbury-based certified public accounting firm. He brings nearly two decades of public accounting experience to his new leadership role and is a member of the Amer-ican Institute of Certified Public Accountants.



➤ **Raymond Salani '08 MA** will have four photog-raphy books published by Schiffer Publishing by the spring of 2027. The first, "The Appalachian Trail: Four Seasons Along the Trail," is available now. The second, "Iconic and Hidden Gems of the Appalachian Trail: 20 Un-forgettable Hikes," is slated for publication on March 28. ➤ **Denish Shah '08 Ph.D.** was appointed director of the marketing department at Georgia State University's J. Mack Robinson College



➤ **CEO Nicole Wagner '07 (CLAS), '13 Ph.D.** and her Woodbridge-based biotechnology company Lambda-Vision have raised \$7 million in seed funding, the Hartford Business Journal reported in November. The money will further the UConn-developed company's mission to devel-op a space-manufactured artificial retina that would restore sight to the millions of people worldwide who lose their vision each year to retinal degenerative diseases.

of Business. Shah, who has earned multiple best paper and young scholar awards and been cited more than 5,700 times in top journals, has taught at the undergrad, master's, Ph.D., and executive doctoral levels.



➤ **Joseph Michaels '09 (BUS)**, a partner in the Chica-go office of Sidley Austin LLP, is a 2025 "40 Under 40" in Crain's Chicago Business. Michaels was selected for his work on high-stakes merger and acquisition transactions and corporate governance matters for companies such as General Electric, Wal-greens Boots Alliance, and State Farm.

2010s

➤ **Richie Kremer '10 (CAHNR)**, a member of the Board of Directors at the Connecticut Association of Golf Course Superinten-

dents, earned the Certified Golf Course Superintendent certification. He is currently in his second season at Pequa-buck Golf Club in Terryville, Connecticut.



➤ **Meghan (Kruger) Hopkins '10 (CLAS)**, an associate attorney in Nixon Peabody's Healthcare group, was selected as one of Providence Business News' 2025 "40 Under Forty" honorees for career success and involvement within her community. Hopkins and her fellow honorees were recog-nized in July at the Aldrich Mansion in Warwick, Rhode Island. (continued on p. 45)



➤ When **Rebecca Elman '09 (SFA)** is serving dinner for dozens of rural Pennsylvania residents, the outdoor atmosphere always includes a full moon and a multicourse farm meal, and sometimes a pack of rowdy goats. The personal chef based in Boalsburg, Penn-sylvania, encountered said goats at Nittany Meadow Farm during one of her Full Moon Supper Club dinners. "That was a little distracting, but it was part of the dinner. They entertained," she says, adding that "they did not take over the serving area." Elman hosts the dinners most months at farms throughout Centre County. Attendees dine communally, discussing favorite recipes, catching up with old friends and making new ones. It's about bringing people together and introducing them to the wonderful central Pennsylvania farms they might not know are right there, says Elman, who calls upon her catering background to handle the events in places that don't have a kitchen or the typical equipment. "It's a different style of cooking," she says. The chef recalls one full moon dinner at Blackbranch Farm in Julian, Pennsylvania, as being "as farm to table as you could get. We set up tables right in the middle of the rows of radishes, carrots, and greens perfectly at peak." As always, the food also highlighted the seasonal crops, in this case with dishes like cultured butter on radishes with everything bagel seasoning, and savory zucchini bread with whipped ricotta cheese and squash rib-bons. Another memorable dinner had a Spanish theme, and one of the chefs made paella in a huge 50-serving pan in front of everyone. "It was a real showstopper," says Elman, who claims her UConn theater background helps her put on these dinners in terms of timing and presentation. In addition, she says, "Prepping a tablescap is a lot like scene setting." And then there's that show-must-go-on element as well. Rain, blown fuses, enthusiastic goats — "It's always something exciting and something that involves problem solving. It keeps it fresh!" —*BRIAN HUDGINS*



LIFE LESSONS

AGE WITH POWER AND GRACE

Jeff Cavaliere is jacked, but he’s no gym bro. Nor does he brook “bro science,” a slang term for fitness and nutrition advice that sounds convincing but lacks scientific evidence and ignores individual differences and goals.

Cavaliere ’97 (CLAS), ’07 MS first made a name for himself as head physical therapist and assistant strength coach for the New York Mets during their 2006–2008 National League East Championship seasons, something that wouldn’t have transpired without his older sister and fellow alum Amy (Cavaliere) Falco ’96 (CAHNR).

“My track at UConn was originally pre-med,” he says, “but I saw what my sister was doing in PT, working with people that are athletic, and I thought that might be a little bit more appealing.”

These days, Cavaliere is best known as the founder of Athlean-X, a fitness brand with more than 14 million YouTube subscribers. Cavaliere stands out

amid a vast sea of fitness influencers for his ability to integrate physical therapy principles into strength training — and to make athletic training accessible to a broad audience, particularly men and women who want to stay strong, athletic, and pain-free as they age.

“I have been bitten by the reality of aging,” Cavaliere, 50, says. “Things are starting to fail me.”

One of those things is his right bicep. A few years ago, he was walking his twin boys to school when one of them slipped on ice, and as Cavaliere tried to grab him to break his fall, he “felt a giant pop” in his right elbow.

“That stunned me, because I’ve handled heavier loads than my child my whole life, and that shouldn’t happen. The harsh reality is that despite how prepared you might be, aging is undefeated, and your body can always give out.”

That means your fitness goals, says

Cavaliere, should be more about feeling good, moving well, and staying active, as opposed to just achieving a chiseled physique or chasing a new PR for your one-rep max on the bench press. But even with these modest goals, one thing you shouldn’t sacrifice as you get older is strength.

Age-related sarcopenia, the progressive loss of muscle mass that occurs with aging, poses serious health risks in our later years. Reduced strength makes it harder to perform everyday activities like climbing stairs or even getting up from a chair.

“Those that don’t address it are going to lose a higher percentage of their strength,” Cavaliere says. “Those that do are going to still lose some, but it could be greatly minimized.”

That’s key, because weaker muscles can’t stabilize our joints and limbs as well as they used to, and this increases the risk of losing balance and falling — which in turn leads to an increase in mortality in old age. For example, a broken hip significantly increases mortality in older adults. After a fracture, many people become immobile, which raises the risk of blood clots, pneumonia, pressure ulcers — and further muscle loss.

One of the most important priorities Cavaliere recommends working on is grip strength, which is not only essential for daily activities like opening jars, carrying groceries, and using tools, but can help with balance and reaction time during slips. “Grip strength is not only something that’s going to fortify you and help you to live a longer, healthier life with higher quality, it’s also something that can be an indicator of your overall state of readiness or recovery.”

“What I like to do is a bar hang in the morning,” he says. That’s just hanging on a bar with your arms straight for as long as possible. “You get other benefits of spinal decompression and shoulder mobility, so you’re getting a better overall bang for your buck when it comes to improving your overall health.”

In addition to strength, Cavaliere emphasizes the need to preserve power, which includes both the strength

and the speed with which we can move weight through space. His go-to exercise here is the medicine ball slam, which is just what it sounds like: Raise a medicine ball over your head and slam it to the ground. As a twist, he recommends rotational medicine ball wall slams that are performed by standing perpendicular to a wall, holding the ball at your side (the one farthest from the wall), then slamming the ball into the wall by rotating. In both, the idea is not to merely move the ball but to accelerate it.

“The important thing is not where you start but what you build up to,” Cavaliere says. “For all of us who seem to be getting busier and busier as we get older, we actually still have opportunities to maximize our fitness. Today I think there are ways that you can build muscle with higher focus and less overall time spent in the gym, and see much better results.”

Just don’t skip leg day, bro. —STEVE NEUMANN



Charles William Groce III ’93 (CLAS) has been appointed to the Massachusetts Superior Court by Massachusetts Gov. Maura T. Healey (above right). Groce’s rich legal career includes serving on the Massachusetts District Court and overseeing a drug treatment program through the Springfield District Court that’s become a national model. He currently teaches legal studies at UMass Amherst.



Lois (Greene) Stone ’55 (ED) was the only representative of the 1950s in the Smithsonian exhibit “Girlhood (It’s Complicated),” about how girls shaped culture through fashion. The exhibit, which ran at the National Museum of American History and then toured the country until January 2025, explores how postwar teens, finding few options in stores, turned to DIY fashion and thus launched the era of teen fashion. A life-sized Lois as a teen sitting on her UConn dorm bed in a handmade blouse and skirt smiles from a vintage photo. Next to the photo is the skirt she designed and hand-sewed, a reimagining of the classic poodle skirt that replaced the dog motif with a carousel of horses, complete with wool manes, sequined saddles, and button eyes.

Good thing Stone knew how to make her own skirts — she needed them. At UConn then, girls were required to wear skirts to class, even in freezing temperatures. The incipient clothing designer studied English to prepare for a teaching career, one of the few paths open to women at the time, but she also drove herself to pursue chemistry, physics, and bacteriology, the former of which would later help her understand the synthetic fabrics emerging after WWII. After graduation, Lois continued to make clothing, creating evening gowns with matching capes that were popular in that era, as well as meticulously embellishing bodices one bead at a time. Now, after 69 years of marriage to physician Gerald Stone, Lois is the matriarch of a large and growing family: 15 grandchildren and 15 great-grandchildren (so far). —SIOBHAN MURRAY





REMEMBRANCE

DOMINIQUE MATTESON

“Friends are life’s reward for getting it right.” These words — written, as it happens, by long-beloved UConn professor Gina Barreca — appeared in an article that I’d once emailed to a group of my most cherished ladies, **Dominique (Soucy) Matteson ’03 (CLAS)** among them. I’d wanted to remind these friends, old and new, how much I loved them.

While Dominique and I were both Connecticut natives born in Hartford, UConn grads, and for quite some time unknowingly part of overlapping circles of mutual friends, it wasn’t until about 2012 that our paths truly aligned.

Life had very much rewarded me with this meaningful new friendship, and let me tell you, Dominique proved to be a world-class human more than worth the wait.

Dominique had then been in remission for three years from chronic myelogenous leukemia. Her candor about the reality of this disease in her

day-to-day life impressed me as much as her quick wit and up-for-anything attitude delighted me. From Halloween parties and game nights to brewery outings and book and brunch clubs, we wasted no more time, reveling in each other’s company.

I believe she saw her diagnosis as a purpose — a commitment to making the absolute most of every moment. She volunteered to run fundraising teams that amassed tens of thousands of dollars to support the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society (LLS), now called Blood Cancer United. An eloquent speaker and endlessly generous soul, she shone not only in the spotlight, speaking at LLS fundraising events but also just as brightly in the background, sharing her free time to connect with peers who were just learning how to cope with similar blood cancers.

A professional fundraiser, Dominique was elated when her career trajectory

Dion Jones (left) with Matteson, “a world-class human,” at one of their many brunch club destinations.

returned her in 2021 to the campus she loved, leading charitable-giving efforts at the UConn Foundation. Her colleagues would be the first to gush to you about her talent, magnetism, and sense of humor. It seems no coincidence that many of them still talk about how she once appeared for a friendly workplace competition sporting a superhero’s cape and mask. Among her many superpowers was delivering a sense of joy and fearlessness to any challenge she accepted. You couldn’t help but be charmed.

In everyday life, people from all walks of life gravitated toward her. If you were separated from Dominique for a few moments at a concert, a party, or a restaurant, you could count on finding her soon after in deep conversation with a perfect stranger. She’d be the first person to befriend a tour guide or a fellow traveler on vacations we took together, asking a friendly question or instantly winning them over with a clever remark. The next thing you knew, Dominique would be hosting this newest addition to our friend group at her house for weekend visits.

Dominique lived fully, with a heart that was nothing but honest and bold and, most certainly, true Husky blue. Losing her to a swift and unexpected illness in September 2025 has laid bare how dark and deep a chasm she’s left behind for so many of us.

A few days before writing these words, I stood alongside her loved ones at the annual Blood Cancer United Light the Night Walk. We’d gathered for this same event years earlier to celebrate Dominique as a survivor. Now, each of us held a glowing golden lantern toward the night sky in her memory. I tried to take comfort in the expanse of colorful lights materializing in the crowd around us: We are meant to grieve together.

Dominique’s luminous presence in my life was a privilege, a precious reward. I will keep seeking her light, knowing I’m not alone. —*STEFANIE DION JONES ’00 (CLAS)*

(continued from p. 41)



➔ **Dan Padover ’10 (CLAS)**, general manager of the Atlanta Dream, was named the WNBA’s 2025 Executive of the Year, writes his wife, **Jessica L. Joy ’10 (CLAS)**, becoming the first person in league history to be given the honor three times. Padover started his basketball career as a volunteer student assistant to the UConn women’s basketball team. After graduation, he worked up the ranks of different professional and college teams before becoming general manager of the Dream in 2021 — working with former UConn greats **Tina Charles ’10 (CLAS)**, the Dream’s previous center, and **Renee Montgomery ’09 (CLAS)**, who co-owns the team and serves as vice president. In one of the most high-profile

moves in the franchise’s history, Padover signed Britney Griner, and in 2025 the Dream posted its best season yet, with 30 wins and a .682 winning percentage.

➔ **Rodrick Shiver ’11 MBA** is vice chair of the Board of Trustees at Columbia College, Columbia, South Carolina, for the 2025–2026 term. Rodrick, a certified public accountant, is the managing partner of Shiver Certified Public Accountants. He has served on the boards of several nonprofits in his hometown, including Historic Columbia, Columbia Empowerment Zone, and Tri-City Visionaries.

➔ Following nearly four years as coordinator of competitive sports with his alma mater, **Justin Paluch ’12 (BUS, ED)** has accepted a position as assistant director for intramural sports and outdoor fields at Michigan State University. ➔ Congratulations to **Katherine Patnaude ’12 MS**, who received an Impact Award from the Connecticut Society of Certified Public Accountants in recognition of her exceptional leadership and

dedication. Her efforts have helped improve reporting accuracy and reduce burdens for municipalities, auditors, and school districts across Connecticut. Patnaude is an audit partner at PKF O’Connor Davies.

➔ In 2024, **Mallory Molina ’12 (ED, SFA)** co-founded the nonprofit Pan Global

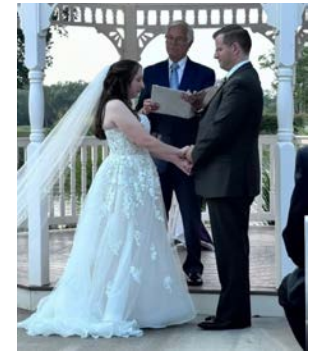
Music Initiative (PGMI), with her husband, Patricio Molina. The PGMI is dedicated to promoting classical music, with a focus on under-represented cultures worldwide, through performance, education, and cultural preservation. Mallory also leads the Pan Asian Music Initiative, which aims to bring art songs by Asian composers to a wider audience. In October 2025, she performed at Carnegie Hall in PGMI’s debut concert, “Cantos de Quisqueya: A Celebration of Dominican Classical Music.”

➔ **Matthew Visconage ’12 (CLAS)** just published his first book, “The Day Job Survival Handbook,” with Humorist Books. It’s a satirical guide to modern cubicle culture that tackles the experiences of passive-aggressive Post-it notes, meetings that should have been emails, the dubiousness of free cake left in the break room, and the quiet horror of suddenly having to sign a birthday card for someone named Dave in sales.



➔ For the past couple years, **Kristy (Rider) Murphy ’13 (CLAS)** has been opening her young son’s eyes to the excitement of UConn basketball games. She tells us that

Husky spirit is taking root in her young family — the UConn chant can be heard (loudly) through her home most mornings. ➔ **Shannon (Thompson) Marrero ’14 (CAHNR)**, a librarian at Greenbrier Library in Chesapeake, Virginia, received a master’s degree in library information and science from the University of Alabama.



➔ All the best to **James Kos ’15 (ENG), ’21 M.Eng.**, who married Jessica Fitch in September in Loveland, Ohio.



➔ **Emilie Burgess ’15 (NUR)** is excited to share that she and her partner **Kyle Horvath ’15 (CAHNR)** were married on June 7 in Mystic, Connecticut. This photo of the happy pair of proud Huskies holding a UConn flag is among their favorites from the wedding! ➔ **Katherine Daily ’18 (NUR)** received a doctor of nursing practice degree, specializing in adult gerontology acute care, from Johns Hopkins University. She works in the Cardiac Intensive Care Unit at Yale New Haven Hospital. ➔ **Avinash Veeraraghav ’18 (BGS)** and twin brother **Anand Veeraraghav ’18 (CLAS)** co-founded a community orchestra in their hometown of Monroe, Connecticut. An inaugural (continued on p. 48)



➔ **Kelly-Anne Moffa ’21 (CLAS)** and **Robert Glassman ’19 (CLAS)** were married in May in West Hartford, Connecticut. They met through Honors Across State Borders, an alternative spring break group. Many UConn alumni were in attendance, as was a very special guest — Jonathan XIV!

CAN WE STOP DEADLY HEAT IN ITS TRACKS WITH ICE AND SCIENCE?

The team at UConn's Korey Stringer Institute is working to do just that — from heat labs in Storrs and Jacksonville to legislative buildings across the country and arenas around the world.



LEARN HOW:

blue.uconn.edu

UConn

(Big ideas come
from out of the blue.)

5-4-3-2-1



INTO THE STRATOSPHERE

Before she reported on the stars of outer space professionally, **Jackie Wattles '14 (CLAS)** spent her UConn journalism days reporting on the stars of student government.

"They were willing to stick around and debate late into the night, so I would rush to meet my deadlines by sprinting from the Student Union to the Daily Campus newspaper building," Wattles recalls. Fortunately, the cross-campus dash didn't take too many strides: Wattles is 6'2".

Indeed, Wattles also played for the women's volleyball team as a middle blocker, the center position in the front row usually held by the tallest person on the roster. Growing up 1,800 miles from Storrs in the small Texas town of Liberty Hill, Wattles was recruited by several DI volleyball squads. "I tell my dad I chose UConn to attend a school where the men's basketball team could beat his University of Arizona."

Wattles, a journalism and political science double major, remembers one particular assignment. Professor Marcel Dufresne tasked his investigative journalism students to find as much information as they could about him (through legal means only). While almost everyone else stuck to the internet for research, Wattles — recognizing that many municipal records hadn't been digitized by then — drove to Dufresne's hometown town hall, where she dug up his voter records and property deeds on paper. "For some

assignments," she admits, "I will go fully mentally deranged."

Today, Wattles covers the private space industry for CNN — a beat she entered accidentally. Spending her first several years at CNN as a breaking news business reporter, she was often assigned nights and weekends, as early-career journalists often are. "A lot of rockets launch on nights and weekends!" she says. CNN eventually promoted her to their website's full-time space reporter.

Her "mentally deranged" commitment to getting the story continued. Assigned to cover the SpaceX Demo-2 launch in 2020 while quarantining with family in Texas, she felt too apprehensive to fly to Florida's Kennedy Space Center during a pandemic. So she drove. Google Maps lists the route at 18 hours.

Today, Wattles lives in New York City, where she's never left since attending Columbia University's graduate journalism school. "I got a full scholarship from UConn for volleyball, so I thought, 'Don't let my college fund go to waste!'"

Asked whether she'd ever want to travel to space herself, Wattles demurs: "I think Earth is more my speed."

FIVE things to know about the booming private space industry:

❶ NASA wants things to go commercial. You might assume private space companies — most famously Elon

Musk's SpaceX and Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin — stand opposed to the publicly funded NASA. But since NASA's final space shuttle launch in 2011, not so much anymore. "This has been a trend for a couple decades, with NASA awarding multibillion-dollar contracts to private companies," Wattles says. "They've embraced this."

❷ Medicines can be developed or improved in space. "The microgravity environment allows crystals to form more perfectly," Wattles explains. Merck's attempts to develop an injectable version of its melanoma drug Keytruda here on Earth had a molasses-like viscosity, but their scientists cracked the code only after conducting International Space Station experiments. (See p. 41 story on Nicole Wagner about an alum using this research opportunity.)

❸ Space actually has an impact on people's everyday lives. "The 'why' can be lost on some of these projects, which seem like vanity or expensive endeavors that don't help humanity, but they can have enormous spillover effects," Wattles explains. "The GPS on your phone or in your car is controlled by satellites in orbit."

❹ This is a pivotal time in space commercialization. In 1963, the U.S., the Soviet Union, and Great Britain signed the Test Ban Treaty agreeing not to test nuclear weapons on the Moon or in space. Similarly, "The limits of what commercial space will be allowed to do are being mapped out in federal and global policy right now," says Wattles. The main such agreement is the Artemis Accords, developed by NASA and the State Department, now signed by 59 countries.

❺ Space commercialization is not just tourism. Headlines often focus on celebrities going to space: Katy Perry, William Shatner, Michael Strahan. But the real money will likely be in natural resources. "There are entire companies centered around mining asteroids or extracting helium-3 from the Moon," Wattles describes. The isotope, rare on Earth but abundant on the lunar surface, could be used to power nuclear reactors. —JESSE RIFKIN '14 (CLAS)

TOM'S TRIVIA ANSWERS

1. B From 1922 to 1994, the alumni publication was The Connecticut Alumnus; from 1994 to 2006, it was known as Traditions and UConn Traditions; UConn from 2007 to 2015, and since 2015 it has been UConn Magazine.

2. D During the South of England Agricultural Show at Ardingly, West Sussex, Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother (not to be confused with her daughter, Queen Elizabeth II) attended a performance by the marching band.

3. A Following a request from what was then called the Connecticut Department of Higher Education, the trustees approved a University Role and Scope Statement that formally recognized UConn as the flagship institution of public higher education, a title that remains in use today.

4. C Although the library had 140 public computers available at the time, students increasingly preferred laptops, so in the spring of 2009, the library began allowing students to borrow and use Apple iBooks laptops for up to three hours within the library itself.

SHARE YOUR NEWS!

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

or write:
Alumni News & Notes
UConn Foundation
2384 Alumni Drive
Unit 3053
Storrs, CT 06269

Submissions may be edited for clarity and/or length.

(continued from p. 45) concert of seven pieces was held on July 27. The orchestra has 41 musician residents, including middle school, high school, and college students, as well as retired and working residents.



➔ **Maya Schlesinger '18 (CAHNR)** married **Will Reid '19 (ENG)** in May, nearly 10 years after they met in Buckley Hall as first-years. ➔ Having completed two UConn medical residencies and worked as a UConn Health hospitalist, **Aziz Khan '19 MED-RES, '25 MED-RES** now leads Dermatology Partners, a privately owned, physician-led group. Khan has worked with Médecins Sans Frontières and Save the Children. He publishes articles in prestigious medical journals and attends global conferences to share insights on innovative treatments and complex cases. He is a member of the American Academy of Dermatology, the American College of Physicians, and the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council.

2020s



➔ UConn admissions officer **Kathleen Stango '20 (CLAS)** married **Samuel Shapiro '21 JD** in May. Other Huskies in this photo include Kathleen's father-in-law, Paul Shapiro, who was senior legal counsel to UConn

for many years and mayor of Mansfield from 2015 to 2019, and Kathleen's father, **Charles Stango '95 JD**, who serves as presiding judge for Bridgeport Superior Court (G.A. 2). A true Husky family!



➔ **William Brisman '22 (CLAS)** and **Randi Burr '22 (BUS), '23 Cert.**, both UConn track stars, were mar-

ried on Aug. 23 at The Estate at Florentine Gardens in River Vale, New Jersey. Brisman graduated from NYU Law School last year and is practicing law while residing in the big city. ➔ **Julian Cote-Dorado '24 (CLAS)** is one of 65 Americans selected by the U.S. Department of State and Cultural Vistas to study and work in Germany as part of the Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange for Young Professionals program. In addition to participating in intensive language study, Cote-Dorado will act as a citizen ambassador of the United States, hoping to promote a positive image of the U.S. abroad and create lifelong friendships and professional connections to enhance German-American relations.



➔ **Tony N. King '23 (SFA)** plays the part of Bird Vendor in Season 5 of "The Chosen." Last summer, he finished filming Season 6 in Italy. "In my first contract, it says in so many words that my role 'may continue.' So, I had an idea that I could be invited back, but I knew I needed to do well for that to happen. Once I wrapped last season, [director Dallas Jenkins] came up to me and in his very soothsayer way said, 'There's more to come.' Sure enough, my character has developed into a spoiler for Season 6. Let's just say, he's a very pivotal character in the crucifixion." Each season of "The Chosen" covers a specific aspect of Jesus' life. Season 5 focused on the Last Supper, while Season 6 centers on the Crucifixion.

—KIMBERLY PHILLIPS

Find Phillips' entire story on King at s.uconn.edu/King.



Peter Morenus

JOB ENVY

DO I HEAR ONE AUCTIONEER?

Most of the auctions **Michael Wolf '23 (CAHNR)** calls are swanky affairs where he might sell two early-1900s cavalry swords for \$11,000 to benefit a fencing group or a Taylor Swift Eras tour experience for more than \$10,000 to benefit an organization that helps the disabled. But the auctions that tug most at his heartstrings are the live cattle and horse auctions he runs to benefit UConn clubs, such as Block and Bridle for students who are — or could become — interested in animal agriculture professions. He also loves calling benefits for 4-H clubs, where he has found himself sweet-talking and guilt-tripping attendees into spending more than \$1,000 for one apple pie. True story. Charming wheedling is more important than expert patter, insists Wolf, but he takes the patter seriously, practicing his chant (the signature "I'm at a one dollar bid, now two, would you give me two," and so on). "Every auctioneer is constantly working on their chant," he says. But there's also this go-to auctioneer tongue-twister practice — try saying this over and over extremely fast: "Betty Botter bought some butter. 'But,' she said, 'the butter's bitter! If I put it in my batter it will make my batter bitter.' So she bought some better butter; better than the bitter butter. And she put it in her batter, and her batter was not bitter. So 'twas better Betty Botter bought a bit of better butter."

Wolf Auction Group is run by Michael and Max, the older brother who convinced him to enroll in the famed Missouri Auction School, which was offering online courses during the COVID-19 pandemic. He got that degree while majoring in applied resource economics with a minor in communications at Storrs. Both degrees also come in handy for his day job for the Connecticut Department of Agriculture, working with farmers, producers, and researchers to help them enhance their specialty (noncommercial) crop businesses. Vineyards fall into his purview there. It's when he's inspecting a vineyard by day, then calling a live animal auction at night, that his equestrian fiancé is particularly jealous. Us, too. —LISA STIEPOCK

Wolf, left, at the podium with Mabel Matheson '27 (CAHNR), takes bids as Block and Bridle member Olivia Casciano '26 (CAHNR) shows a beef cow at auction. Hear Wolf's tongue twisting at s.uconn.edu/auction.

CHALLENGE YOURSELF TO TOM'S TRIVIA!

Go to s.uconn.edu/spring26 or page 48 to see if you know as much as King of UConn Trivia Tom Breen '00 (CLAS).

1. UConn has produced a publication for its alumni since 1922, but that publication has had a number of different names within that timeframe. Which of these was the first title of the alumni publication?

A: The Blue and White
B: The Connecticut Alumnus
C: CAC Old Home Bulletin
D: Seeds From the Charter Oak

2. In the summer of 1970, the UConn Marching Band went on a 24-day tour of Europe that included Great Britain, Belgium, West Germany, and the Netherlands. Which of these dignitaries was in attendance for one of the performances?

A: Willy Brandt, chancellor of West Germany
B: Juliana, queen of the Netherlands
C: Gaston Eyskens, prime minister of Belgium
D: Elizabeth, Queen Mother of the United Kingdom

3. In November 1987, a vote by the Board of Trustees established what formal designation for UConn?

A: Connecticut's flagship public university
B: Division I football school
C: Connecticut's state capital in the event of nuclear war
D: A Level 1A disaster preparedness institution



4. In March 2009, the Homer Babbidge Library allowed students to borrow what for the first time?

A: iPods
B: Musical instruments
C: Laptop computers
D: Phone chargers