

FALL 2025

SDSU

MAGAZINE

AN AZTEC'S HOMECOMING

Star pitcher **Stephen Strasburg** defined an era at SDSU. Now the former MLB ace is back to help shape the future of Aztec baseball.



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ON THE COVER

Stephen Strasburg, a standout Aztec pitcher turned World Series MVP, returns to Tony Gwynn Stadium with purpose. Now retired, he’s making a pivotal gift to elevate the baseball program. Honoring Gwynn’s legacy, he’s determined to help build a championship future with the SDSU community.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
DERRICK TUSKAN

SDSU

MAGAZINE

Rebecca Nordquist
Editor in Chief

Linda Pouder, Merryall Studio
Art Director

Contributing Writers
Ryan Brothers (’14), **Suzanne Finch**,
Taylor Harris (’23), **Michael Klitzing** (’05),
Seth Mallios, **Leslie L.J. Reilly**, **Tobin Vaughn**,
Sarah White

Contributing Photographers
Chynna Bowman (’20, ’23), **Matt Furman**,
Ingrid Niesman, **Derrick Tuskan** (’06),
Mariadelcarmen Zuniga

Multimedia Production Coordinator
Scott Hargrove

Communications Lead **Bryana Quintana**
Multimedia Production Specialist **Kynan Marlin**
Photography Student Assistant **Andre Young**
Editorial Operations **Christian Rogers**
Senior Copy Editor **Kathryn Sherer Brunetto**

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

Adela de la Torre
President

Brittany Santos-Derieg
Chief of Staff

La Monica Everett-Haynes
Associate Vice President of Strategic
Communications and Public Affairs
and Chief Communications Officer

UNIVERSITY RELATIONS AND DEVELOPMENT

Adrienne Vargas
Vice President

Tammy Blackburn (’94)
Senior Director of Marketing and
Communications

CONTACT INFORMATION
SDSU Magazine
Strategic Communications and Public Affairs
5500 Campanile Dr.
San Diego, CA 92182-8080

magazine@sdsu.edu
sdsu.edu/magazine

ADDRESS CHANGES
San Diego State University
5500 Campanile Dr.
San Diego, CA 92182-8045
alumdata@sdsu.edu

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

AS I BEGIN MY EIGHTH YEAR AS PRESIDENT OF SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY, I DO SO WITH A SENSE OF PROFOUND GRATITUDE AND OPTIMISM. The pace of challenges and changes confronting higher education is unlike anything I’ve seen in my career, yet our incredible community of students, faculty, staff, alumni and supporters continues to propel SDSU to new heights.

In August, we welcomed an exceptional incoming class, selected from more than 123,000 applicants, and raised our enrollment to more than 41,000. Both figures are records in SDSU’s 128-year history, and they are not the only records to fall. May marked our largest-ever graduating class, with more than 12,000 students crossing the commencement stage and moving on to advanced studies and careers. And in a testament to the trust of our incredibly generous supporters, we closed our fiscal year with a record-setting \$142 million in contributions that are strengthening our academic programs and facilities and providing essential student financial aid.

Recently, we broke ground on a new STEM laboratory building and two separate projects for student housing in San Diego and Calexico, and we celebrated the opening of the new Sciences and Engineering Laboratories building at SDSU Imperial Valley. We’re honoring our commitment to student access with the announcement of a unique new partnership with the San Diego Community College District to provide more accelerated degree options for transfer students, while continuing to introduce more high-demand programs in areas like nursing and artificial intelligence.

Our students returned this fall to a university that continues to gain momentum. In the last issue of the magazine, I shared my pride in SDSU becoming the first California State University to earn classification from the Carnegie Foundation as an R1 research institution—a core goal in our strategic plan and an honor shared by less than 5% of all U.S. universities. Soon after, Carnegie also named us an Opportunity University, a title reserved for a small subset of institutions that best combine affordability and excellence with successful post-graduation outcomes. And in Aztec athletics, we began last year with the milestone announcement that SDSU would be moving to the Pac-12 Conference in 2026—now just around the corner.

In this issue, you’ll also learn about our commitment to innovation and student success, which is exemplified by our leadership position in the ethical and responsible integration of AI across every SDSU major. Starting this semester, all future SDSU graduates will depart with relevant AI training tailored to their field of study, ensuring they are prepared for and competitive in the rapidly changing workforce.

The future is bright, and, as SDSU continues its rise on the global stage, I invite you to stay engaged and continue sharing your Aztec pride. Go Aztecs!


ADELA DE LA TORRE, PH.D.

SDSU | San Diego State
University

PHOTOGRAPH BY SCOTT HARGROVE

SDSU

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHYNNA BOWMAN, INGRID NIESMAN AND BRYANA QUINTANA

FUELING CHANGE

SDSU researchers are exploring a novel way to combat climate change: methane-eating bacteria.

With global temperatures climbing, seas rising and natural disasters wreaking havoc worldwide, scientists are racing to find solutions. Biology professor Marina Kalyuzhnaya and her team of researchers (see page on right) are testing whether a tiny microbe can take on one of the three major greenhouse gases destabilizing Earth's climate.

The bacterium *Methylovimicrobium alcaliphilum* 20ZR thrives in some of the planet's harshest environments and naturally feeds on methane. In Kalyuzhnaya's lab, it's studied under the microscope—seen here in these magnified images—as researchers analyze the traits that allow it to capture ambient methane. The team then equips other microbes with these abilities, creating a squad of methane-eaters designed to slash greenhouse gas emissions even in regions most battered by climate change.

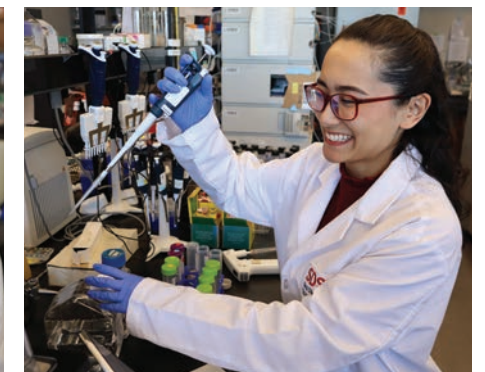
The work doesn't stop here. The researchers are also engineering microbes to convert captured methane into new fuels, chemicals and materials—pointing the way to cleaner ways of lighting cities, heating homes and powering cars.

SDSU's new life sciences building, now under construction, will provide the space and technology to accelerate projects like this, strengthening SDSU's role as a hub for life sciences innovation. —*Bryana Quintana*



Watch a video about the lab's research.

Researchers Nick Griffith (from left), Nathalie A. Delherbe and Chynna Bowman work to engineer microbes that help protect the planet from continued greenhouse gas pollution.



state lately

/SDSU Mission Valley

THE FUTURE TAKES SHAPE

Anchored by Snapdragon Stadium and the river park, SDSU Mission Valley enters its next chapter with vertical development, which will include a research hub, housing, academic facilities and mixed-use spaces to create a vibrant district for living, learning and connection. **By Ryan Brothers**

SAN DIEGO COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT PARTNERSHIP

SDSU and the San Diego Community College District (SDCCD) have launched a new partnership to expand access to higher education and strengthen the region's workforce.

Beginning in fall 2026, eligible SDCCD students—those earning an Associate Degree for Transfer and meeting CSU requirements—will be guaranteed admission to certain SDSU programs.

The agreement creates both a physical and a strategic bridge between SDCCD colleges and SDSU, opening opportunities for transfer students to pursue advanced degrees, research, internships and careers in the innovation economy. By aligning pathways, the partnership ensures a stronger connection between community colleges and the university.

The collaboration also includes plans for a joint STEM-focused academic building in the SDSU Mission Valley Innovation District. The facility will feature classrooms, labs and student services while fostering research and industry partnerships. Leaders say the initiative is among the first of its kind in California.



UPCOMING CHELSEA CONSTRUCTION

In 2026, work will begin on the first affordable housing project at Mission Valley. Developed by Chelsea Investment Corporation, the first phase of units will be for residents earning an average of 50% of the area median income.

At full buildout, SDSU Mission Valley will include about 460 affordable units, supporting regional efforts to expand housing options and address the crisis.

Thanks to a new state law, SDSU and auxiliary staff who meet income qualifications will have priority access to these units. AB 2005—spearheaded by SDSU, the CSU and Assemblymember Chris Ward—was designed to address the growing need for affordable housing among university employees. By granting access to qualified staff, the legislation provides stability and helps SDSU attract and retain employees.

RESIDENTIAL GROUND-BREAKING AND VERTICAL CONSTRUCTION

In August, SDSU Mission Valley celebrated a major milestone with the groundbreaking of its first residential and retail project in partnership with AvalonBay Communities. The Avalon Mission Valley development will transform part of the Orange Lot east of Snapdragon Stadium into a vibrant mixed-use community.

The project will include 621 apartments ranging from studios to three-bedroom homes, designed for students, professionals and families. At street level, nearly 30,000 square feet of retail space will add new amenities to the neighborhood, including a full-service grocery store serving residents and the community.

Construction activity requires temporary road closures along Jacaranda Street just east of Snapdragon Stadium and Innovation Parkway. These closures will continue through the end of the year.

SENIOR HOUSING

SDSU Mission Valley is planning a university-affiliated retirement community located in the vicinity of the other housing projects. It will support intergenerational housing for retired faculty, alumni and others seeking an active lifestyle in a university setting. SDSU is engaging potential developers to create a community that promotes healthy aging with access to life-long learning programs such as the Osher Institute and opportunities to enjoy SDSU's cultural, arts and athletic events.

The community will be rooted in the university's history and ties to the region, expanding SDSU's commitment to healthy aging. As an Age-Friendly University, SDSU advances policies and programs that support older adults, while its Center for Excellence in Aging and Longevity drives research to address challenges across the lifespan. With one in five Americans reaching age 65 by 2030, the project will provide housing and serve as a training ground for students preparing to meet the needs of an aging population.



NEW AI DEGREE IS A FIRST FOR CSU SYSTEM

In 2024, more than 10,000 students participated in the SDSU AI Student Survey. The resulting data showed that nearly 48% of students use artificial intelligence, more than 4,000 are interested in learning more about it through formal training or coursework, and more than 66% are concerned about the ethical use of AI.

In response to the demand for AI education, San Diego State University's College of Arts and Letters developed a bachelor of science degree in Artificial Intelligence and Human Responsibility, for which students may apply this fall. The first of its kind in the California State University system, this academic program enables students to investigate how AI works, integrating technical literacy with insights from the social sciences and humanities.

This degree will also prepare students for an evolving professional landscape: The global AI market is projected to grow at a rate of more than 31% through 2033, according to a report by Grand View Research.

"We want SDSU students to be prepared for future roles that ensure responsible use of AI," says Todd Butler, dean of the College of Arts and Letters. "With grounded research and critical analysis in the sciences and humanities, graduates of this degree will take on the important tasks of tomorrow in the burgeoning field of AI."

Coursework will include the foundational theory and techniques of large language models, data management and visual pattern recognition, alongside a sustained focus on ethical, environmental and policy-related topics.

"This groundbreaking degree positions SDSU at the forefront of AI education, preparing students to meet rising workforce demand for AI literacy while shaping a future where technology advances human well-being, equity and sustainability," says James Frazee ('97, '04), SDSU vice president for information technology and chief information officer. —Leslie L.J. Reilly

Yvonne Besvold ('82) was hired in 1981 as the first woman bartender at Monty's Den, the storied on-campus bar that was located in the original Aztec Student Union from 1978 to 1998. After graduation, she went into finance, working at Neiman Marcus Group and Disney. She recently retired from Patagonia as CFO. In her own words, Besvold reflects on the fun, chaos and happy memories from her days as one of Monty's most memorable faces.

A PIECE OF MONTY'S DEN LORE

BY YVONNE BESVOLD
AS TOLD TO SUZANNE FINCH



ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS I HAD TO LEARN behind the bar at Monty's Den was how to pour a craft beer with a perfect head of foam. I also had to learn how to work under pressure, since I had to pour drinks, wash glasses and take money at the same time.

This was especially true on Fridays. Starting at noon, the place would get packed, and you'd have lines five people deep, yelling your name to get you to fill their pitcher. Things moved a little faster when you got to know your customers and what they drank. In fact, when my husband and I were working as ski instructors in Europe, a regular customer recognized me and called out my name. As soon as I saw him, I remembered him and his beer of choice: Watney's Red.

Lessons I learned while tending bar worked for me in the

A 42-year career in finance wasn't all numbers and spreadsheets for Yvonne Besvold ('82). She found plenty of adventure as the CFO of Patagonia, including jaunts to Alaska and fishing trips to Montana with her husband, Chris Besvold (see two bottom-right photos), whom she met at SDSU and married soon after.

business world as well. For example, I learned how to strike up a conversation with anyone and find common ground. I also learned to follow the rules: My husband, Chris, whom I met at a Lambda Chi Alpha party, still resents that I didn't let him cut in line on Fridays or give him free beer. Best to just follow the rules.

In retrospect, one of the best decisions I've ever made was to come to San Diego State. I had an amazing experience and got a fabulous business education that I was able to use throughout my entire career. And I am proud to be part of the Monty's Den legacy. ●

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF YVONNE BESVOLD



WHEN NEFTALIE WILLIAMS wears his polo shirt emblazoned with the logo for the Center for Skateboarding, Action Sports, and Social Change, he invariably gets a lot of questions. Most people are in awe that San Diego State University offers academic research opportunities related to skateboarding. Through his work, Williams is connecting research with local and international communities and giving students experiential learning opportunities not found at other universities.

Q: How would you describe your research?

A: The focus is to build a more inclusive society by figuring out the issues we face and how we can take what we learn from skateboarding culture—a global community that supports each other—and apply that to other areas of our life. It can be the university, cultural institutions or any way in which what we know about being a global family can be applied to new situations.

How does this research impact students?

We're developing the space and the strategies for students to see how the thing that they love can be incorporated into the global community and their academic and local communities. We want students to say for themselves that research matters.

We also want students to know how to find meaningful work. Sometimes that work



Ask a
Researcher

NEFTALIE WILLIAMS

*Professor and
director of
SDSU's Center for
Skateboarding,
Action Sports, and
Social Change*

BY LESLIE L.J. REILLY

This skateboard was designed specifically for Neftalie Williams by The Cleveland Superboard Factory, his sponsor from the 2000s.

can be doing research to help communities that mean the most to you. We're also totally dialed into the action sports industry, helping students get internships or landing jobs.

How are students taking action in the community?

This fall, the SDSU Skate Club and 25 students from the Residential Learning Community's Skateboarding and Social Change group will work on building skateable sculptures on campus. We want students to see how their designs can impact their local community and how they're

part of a larger effort toward sustainability. Working with our global partners—Malmö University, Sweden, and the city of Bordeaux, France—our students will understand that they're part of a larger ecosystem that isn't just SDSU. They're also part of a world that thinks about creating change through skateboarding and taking action.

How do you bring your expertise to the classroom and community?

I bring a particular expertise in skateboarding's role as a tool for cultural diplomacy. Having

been an ambassador and envoy for skateboarding with the U.S. Department of State working around the world, I've seen how power works and how sport can bring people together through a specific focus on skateboarding and action sports. My role is helping students to understand that they can represent their communities and do great work bringing all of their identities and experiences with them. When they bring their full selves, they can also represent the U.S. and help us have a better relationship with other nations. ●

ARTISTE WINERY

A hopeful filmmaker turned craft winemaker, Bion Rice has built a winery where art is on the label and also reflected in the taste.

By Taylor Harris

BION RICE ('94) GREW UP LISTENING TO STORIES

about generations of grandfathers before him picking grapes under the California sun. Even with wine country in his backyard, the Santa Barbara native didn't envision that life for himself: He had other ambitions.

Rice's parents, however, were still very much carrying on the family tradition. In 1990, when Rice was a first-year student at SDSU, Fred and Linda Rice purchased a 52-acre ranch in Santa Ynez, the heart of Santa Barbara wine country. The 28-acre vineyard would later become Sunstone Winery. While home for Thanksgiving break a couple of years later, Rice helped his father ferment grapes for the family's first vintage. Come summertime, he would work at the vineyard and winery, helping to build the caves and buildings.

But despite the lineage and memorable summers, Rice still wasn't sold. He had dreams of becoming the next Steven Spielberg. After graduating with a liberal studies degree in 1994, he pursued filmmaking in Los Angeles.

With an idea to film a documentary about the winemaking in Santa Barbara, Rice worked with local wineries and volunteer crew members to produce "Vintage Santa Barbara." The goal was to educate viewers about why the region and culture were so unique.

"During the show's production, I got the wine bug," Rice says. "I thought, *Wow, these people really have an amazing lifestyle and are so passionate.* And I just took that as a natural segue."

Inspired and reconnected to his roots, Rice returned to work at his family's winery. In 1997, after Sunstone's head winemaker left in the middle of harvest, Rice jumped in to complete the vintage, one that would become the best of the decade in California. It was then that Rice took over as the family's head winemaker, with guidance from consulting winemaker, Daniel Gehrs.

"He taught me the tricks of the trade, what I call the black magic that you cannot read in books," Rice says.

Through Gehrs' mentorship, the two explored countless tastings, crafted innovative blends and honed the signature character of Sunstone's wines. Now retired, Gehrs still recalls Rice's early ambition for the craft.

"Bion was always listening intently to my advice and our

discussions about how Sunstone's wines were evolving into a distinctive niche and style all its own," Gehrs says. "He was especially interested in the art of blending, and we spent many sessions tasting and composing new blends and assessing their component qualities for future bottlings."

That same year, Rice partnered with renowned Santa Barbara artist James Paul Brown to produce a wine called Eros, featuring Brown's artwork on the label. After Eros sold out quickly, Rice released another art-inspired wine blend called Artiste in 1999. When it sold out just as quickly, it

Artiste Winery

AZTEC OWNER
Bion Rice ('94)
artiste.com
1095A Edison St.
Santa Ynez, CA 93460
805-686-2626



AZTEC-OWNED WINERIES

**Looking for a day of wine tasting?
These wineries are all within driving
distance of SDSU.**

Highland Valley Vineyards

AZTEC OWNER
Jeannine O'Brien ('85)
highlandvalleyvineyards.com
Award-winning boutique winery

15412 Bandy Canyon Road
Escondido, CA 92025
858-531-6589

Julian Winery

AZTEC OWNER
Albert Lewis ('00)
julian-winery.square.site
Organic, native fermentations

Julian by appointment only
760-885-8364

Rustic Ridge Vineyards

AZTEC OWNER
Rusty Beatty ('81)
rusticridgevineyards.com
Boutique winery and tastings

15262 Lyons Valley Road
Jamul, CA 91935
619-251-7115

San Pasqual Winery

AZTEC OWNERS
Mike ('81) and Linda McWilliams
(née Leverenz, '82)
sanpasqualwinery.com
*Family-owned winery
with handcrafted wines*

8364 La Mesa Blvd.
La Mesa, CA 91942
619-462-1797



*Visit the Aztec-Owned Restaurant Guide
or the Aztec Network business directory to
support SDSU business owners.*

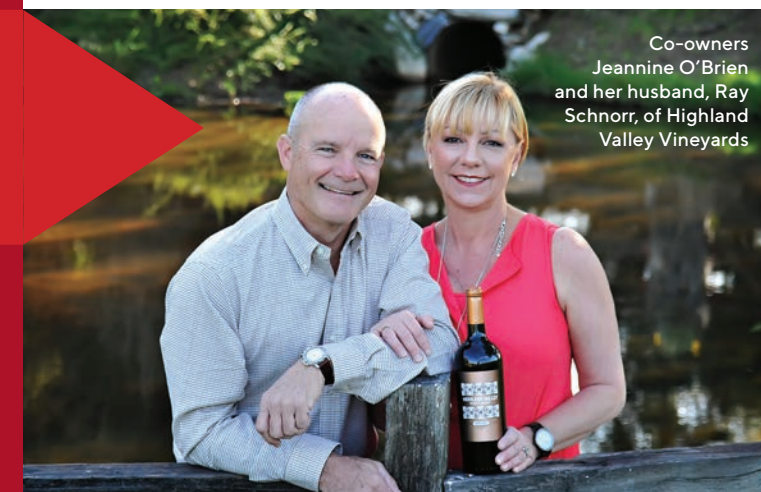
affirmed to Rice that there was something special in this fusion of visual storytelling and sensory experience.

And so in 2002, Artiste Winery was born.

Since, Artiste has collaborated with artists nationwide, curating a rotating collection of artwork every quarter. Each season, four new pieces of art are selected and transformed into limited-edition wine labels. But it's not just about putting art on a bottle, Rice says, it's about letting the art inspire what's inside.

"I look at the art and whatever the story or emotion is that I invoke from the piece, I translate that into aroma, flavor and mouthfeel," Rice says. "The art is the recipe."

Artiste Winery, where Rice's wife, Anna Rice, serves as creative director, has released more than 350 original blends, each one paired with a unique work of art. The wines are crafted in small, high-quality batches, designed to be experienced, savored and shared. Specializing in art-inspired blends, most of the bottles are nonvintage.



Co-owners
Jeannine O'Brien
and her husband, Ray
Schnorr, of Highland
Valley Vineyards

"I believe young wine, when blended with the grace of aged wine, gives you the best of both worlds, vibrant freshness with layers of complexity," Rice says.

When he's not at the winery, Rice is spending time with Anna and their two sons, Miles and Mason, traveling to Europe whenever they can, to appreciate the craft where it came from.

And while there isn't a next winemaker in training for now, Rice has made sure both of his sons' palates are well developed, so they can at least appreciate a good glass of wine. ●

‘THE SKY’S THE LIMIT’

Flamethrowing Aztec pitcher turned MLB star **Stephen Strasburg** sees championship potential in SDSU baseball—and he’s committed to helping make that longtime dream a reality.

STORY BY **MICHAEL KLITZING**
PHOTOGRAPH BY **DERRICK TUSKAN**

LOUNGING INSIDE a Tony Gwynn Stadium suite, Stephen Strasburg has a panoramic view of his old collegiate stomping grounds. Stretched out before him on this too-humid September afternoon is the place where his journey from shy first-year pitcher to MLB All-Star began.

Everywhere Strasburg looks, the memories from his stellar career at SDSU—where he set the college baseball world ablaze from 2007 to 2009—flood back quicker than one of his 102-mph-fastballs.

There’s the bullpen where he honed his craft and shared countless laughs with his teammates. The mound where he once struck out 23 Utah Utes in a single game while recovering from a bout of food poisoning. The third-base line where he led a packed stadium in a rousing rendition of the SDSU “Fight Song” after pitching a no-hitter in his final home start.

But as he gazes out onto the green expanse, he sees something else: limitless potential.

“I’m a firm believer that San Diego State can win a national championship someday,” Strasburg says. “All the ingredients are here in the backyard.”

Strasburg knows what it takes. An ace pitcher with MLB’s Washington Nationals for more than a decade, he earned three All-Star selections and reached the sport’s mountaintop when he was named MVP of the 2019 World Series. He has the ring to prove it.

Now retired from playing and back in San Diego, Strasburg has returned to the fold in a big way. Over the summer, he and his wife,

Rachel Lackey (‘12), made a pivotal gift to support Aztec baseball. Their contribution will go toward enhancing this jewel at the corner of 55th Street and Remington Road. Additional needs for future upgrades include the locker room and playing surface.

“I truly believe that Tony Gwynn Stadium can be like a high-end Double-A ballpark,” Strasburg says. “There’s so much potential in having an on-campus venue for baseball that can really attract the student body. I think that starts with getting this place to be the best facility in Southern California.”

Why now? For one, it’s a transformative moment for the Aztecs as they prepare to enter a Pac-12 Conference that, by spring 2027, will boast baseball powers Oregon State University and Dallas Baptist University.

For another, Strasburg says he’s a believer in new head baseball coach Kevin Vance, a fellow San Diegan who fondly recalls being

My goal is to help build a future where Aztecs baseball competes with confidence, supported by infrastructure that matches their championship ambitions. I invite the SDSU community to join me.

—STEPHEN STRASBURG

in the stands for some of Strasburg’s SDSU starts.

“Stephen is one of the best college players in the history of the game, and his contributions are much larger than his financial support—his presence around our players is priceless,” says Vance, who came to SDSU this year from the University of Arizona. “I’m so grateful that we both made our way back home at the same time and are now teammates in building the program we both care so much about.”

The feeling is mutual for Strasburg.

“We’re kind of cut from the same cloth in terms of being San Diego kids who fell in love with baseball,” he says. “We got our style of play from those Padres teams and from Tony Gwynn.”

Carrying on the legacy of Gwynn—the Hall of Famer and Aztec legend whose name adorns this diamond—is of utmost importance to Strasburg. Graduating from West Hills High School in nearby Santee, Strasburg grew up idolizing the Padres right fielder. Years

As a first-year pitcher at SDSU in 2007, Stephen Strasburg was assigned the smallest locker, shown here. It didn’t faze him—he was playing for Tony Gwynn, his childhood hero, who kept this photo of young Strasburg on his desk during his coaching career. Strasburg went on to pitch for the Washington Nationals from 2010–22, before medically retiring in 2024.



Join Stephen Strasburg in supporting Aztec baseball.



later, it was during Gwynn’s SDSU coaching tenure that Strasburg went from being a kid lacking confidence and conditioning, relegated to the ballpark’s smallest locker, to a hard-throwing phenom who became the first overall pick of the 2009 MLB draft.

It’s a connection Strasburg still treasures. Scrolling through his camera roll, Strasburg pulls up a photo from his third birthday party where he’s smiling big next to a Tony Gwynn poster. His mother gifted Gwynn a print of the photo after he was drafted; the photo stayed on Gwynn’s office desk until his passing in 2014.

“Tony chose to come back to San Diego State because he’s an alum and he wanted to coach and make an impact,” Strasburg says. “I think now, as I look back on my baseball career, it’s really important to me to honor Tony and his legacy in the form of Tony Gwynn Stadium.”

Strasburg has an impressive Aztec legacy of his own, not to mention deep SDSU roots. His parents and aunt are alumni, and he met his wife while both were students. The father of three daughters also mentions with pride that 128 former players showed up to a recent alumni golf tournament.

With support from Strasburg and the Aztec community, one can dream of a bigger alumni gathering sometime soon—when the Aztecs finally reach the College World Series in Omaha, Nebraska.

“Our goal when I was here was to go to Omaha,” he says. “I still want this team to go to Omaha. I’m here to do anything I can to help build this momentum—because I really think the sky’s the limit.” ●



Stephen Strasburg's Perfect Goodbye (Almost)

ON MAY 8, 2009, Stephen Strasburg got a dream farewell in his final baseball game on the Aztecs' mound. The pitching phenom finished off his dominant junior year by no-hitting Air Force in front of a packed house at Tony Gwynn Stadium. What he didn't get, however, was a baseball for his memorabilia case.

After Strasburg polished off the 5-0 win by striking out the side in the ninth inning (he fanned 17 overall), catcher Erik Castro tossed the ball aside in his exuberance as he raced to embrace his pitcher. What happened to the prized souvenir? Well, no one knows. Friends since they were 9 years old, Strasburg and Castro remain close—meaning Strasburg has had ample opportunity to needle him about it.

"I still think about that last pitch and how he just threw the ball away," Strasburg says smiling. "I always give him crap about it. I'm like, 'Erik! That's not what you're supposed to do!'"

GAME-CHANGING MOMENTS THAT DEFINED 25 YEARS *(Cue Debate)*

Some readers might scan this list of iconic SDSU sports moments searching for a certain jump shot in Houston. But with Lamont Butler featured on the cover two years ago, that opened space for another of the many remarkable moments from the past two decades. As SDSU prepares to join the Pac-12 Conference next year, these five moments stand as a reflection of the caliber of athletes who have shaped the program and a celebration of **why it's great to be an Aztec fan.**

STORY BY **MICHAEL KLITZING**

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF SDSU ATHLETICS



Kawhi Leonard on March 12, 2011.

Third Time's a Charm

ON MARCH 12, 2011, the Aztecs headed into the Mountain West Men's Basketball Tournament final with a record of 31-2. Both losses were to bitter rival Brigham Young University. Kawhi Leonard's Aztecs and Jimmer Fredette's Cougars were the talk of college basketball for much of the season, and Fredette seemed to have the upper hand.

"That game had a star next to it," says D.J. Gay ('11), the former SDSU point guard who was captain of the 2010-11 squad. "We wanted the opportunity to get a little bit of revenge."

Make that a lot of revenge. The Aztecs tuned up for a Sweet 16 run by hammering the Cougars 72-54. The difference in the third game, Gay recalls, was the coaching staff opting to guard Fredette with Leonard and forward Billy White rather than smaller guards. Such was the emotional release after the win that even the usually stoic Leonard gave his nemesis Fredette a feisty clap as time expired—still a favorite GIF of SDSU's online faithful.

"Kawhi's the ultimate competitor, no matter what your name is," Gay says. "For him it was like, 'We're not giving this guy 40 points again.'"

A Quiet Force Takes Flight

ON JUNE 7, 2013, Shanieka Ricketts ('14) of the Aztec women's track and field team gave the world a glimpse of what she would one day become. The Jamaican-born triple jumper is now known for winning the silver medal at the 2024 Paris Olympics. More than a decade earlier, Ricketts won her first title at the NCAA Outdoor Track & Field Championships—a stepping stone for her Olympic career. It was part of an incredible run of success by the Aztecs. Discus thrower Whitney Ashley, also an Olympian, won the 2012 NCAA title, and Ricketts won both the NCAA indoor and outdoor titles in 2014 before she graduated.

Aztec head coach Shelia Burrell recalls that as Ricketts entered the program there was something inside her that hinted at future greatness.

“Shani doesn’t talk a lot,” Burrell says. “She’s a quiet force, but she has a not-so-quiet determination and a not-so-quiet sureness about who she is and what she wants to do. That was just the taking off point. From then on, she just blossomed and became more serious as an athlete.”



Kim Villalobos,
a 2025 champ.

Proof Jinxes Don’t Exist

ON MARCH 12, the Aztecs talked the talk, then walked the walk. As the team prepared to face the Wyoming Cowgirls in the 2025 Mountain West Women's Basketball Tournament final, the conversation among a few of the players took a bold turn.

“Everybody started talking about what part of the net they were gonna cut after we won,” says forward Kim Villalobos ('24), a five-year starter who’s finishing up a graduate degree. “I was like, ‘OK, I guess we’re really doing this.’”

And so they did—though securing the program's first bid to the NCAA tournament since 2012 didn't come easy. The Aztecs needed all the swagger they could muster during a triple-overtime marathon. Propelled by Veronica Sheffey's 24 points and Jazlen Green's ('25) vocal leadership in the huddle, SDSU prevailed 72-68. After the victory, Villalobos was the first one up the ladder, snipping the nylon front and center.

“I’ve still got it in my backpack,” she says. ●

Going Out on Top

ON DEC. 17, 2016, the eyes of the college football world were on Donnel Pumphrey ('22). The Aztecs' senior running back entered the Las Vegas Bowl against the Houston Cougars needing 108 yards to break Ron Dayne's NCAA career rushing record. More than 3.7 million viewers tuned in to the game on ABC.

What few people remember now is that SDSU spotted Houston a 10-0 lead. But Pumphrey eventually got going and a swarming Rocky Long defense picked off four passes, leading to 34 unanswered points. The only drama left was the record. Pumphrey secured that on a fourth quarter toss play that he bounced to the outside for a 15-yard gain.

“Everybody was hugging me, from equipment guys to our coaches to all the players,” Pumphrey recalls. “They just kind of surrounded me. Then just seeing my family on the jumbo screen, it was honestly insane to watch.”

Pumphrey's record of 6,405 yards still stands—a challenge waiting for the next great Aztec running back to chase down.



TRUST & WILLPOWER

Glitter around her eyes,
power in her throw and
a coach who believed:
Alicia Guerrero
is redefining Paralympic
potential at SDSU's
Adapted Athletics program.

STORY BY
REBECCA NORDQUIST

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
MATT FURMAN

ALICIA GUERRERO waits in the staging area with her U.S. Paralympic teammates and competitors from Cuba, Mexico and Chile. She is part of the Team USA contingent competing at the 2023 Parapan American Games in Santiago, Chile—and Guerrero, known for her outgoing personality, does what comes naturally to her: She's cracking jokes, giving high-fives and having fun. She's also wearing her now signature glitter around her eyes, a declaration that she's a strong woman and she's ready to show her magic.

Beneath it all, Guerrero is also nervous—and rightfully so. She's competing on the world stage for the first time against the best discus throwers in the combined F44 and F64 division. All the other athletes around her also have lower limb impairments, and some, like her, are competing with a prosthesis.

Once competition starts, her throws coach, Jasmine Burrell ('15), calls her over to the tent area. The two have trained together only once before, at the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Training Site in Chula Vista. The trust between them is still untested.

"I'm glad you're having fun," Burrell says, "but those girls are not your friends. Those are the people you have to beat. You're going to go get their medals."

Guerrero nods, all of her nervous energy quieting.

"When you're throwing," coach says, "if you yell and let out a roar, I promise you nothing but good things are gonna come from it."

The Paralympic hopeful stands in disbelief. How can she yell? Her mom raised her to be humble. Even with her big personality, she doesn't like to draw attention to herself. Still, she wants to listen to her coach and knows leaving her comfort zone is the only way to become the athlete she wants to be. She is going to trust Burrell: She is going to roar.

The result is a personal record of 29.01 meters and a bronze medal around her neck. It's also an act of trust that eventually leads her to the Adapted Athletics program at San Diego State University—where, by no coincidence, Burrell is the throws coach.

TEN YEARS AGO, Ahkeel Whitehead ('17), then a sophomore at SDSU, was well into his Paralympic career. The track and field standout held three American records in sprints and one in long jump in the T37 division, a classification for athletes with moderate coordination impairments.

With the 2016 Rio Paralympic Games in his crosshairs, Whitehead trained six days a week with Team USA in



Chula Vista, his hometown. That meant access to elite coaching and individualized support like strength and conditioning, and nutritional guidance—resources that didn’t yet exist for Aztecs.

Whitehead soon began to wonder, *What if SDSU had a program like this for athletes with disabilities?*

At the same time, a movement was taking shape in the School of Exercise and Nutritional Sciences. Professors Antoinette Domingo and Kae McCarty had just started raising funds to purchase sport wheelchairs to support the start of an adapted sports program. They also became advisers to the student club Aztec Adaptive Sports (AAS). Senior Rachel Schlesinger (‘15, ‘18), now Rachel Cuesta and a lecturer in the College of Education, was one of the club’s first members.

“Our goal at the time was to watch this become a robust program that funnels in local athletes to continue their love for sports in a college setting,” Cuesta says of the club that still runs today.

They couldn’t have imagined then the visionary groundwork they were laying.

Fast-forward to 2016 and Whitehead, fresh from the Rio Games, joined the movement. He soon became the president of AAS and, with the help of many around him, including founding donor Keith Jones and former dean of the College of Health and Human Services Steven Hooker, established Adapted Athletics in 2018 as the program’s first director.

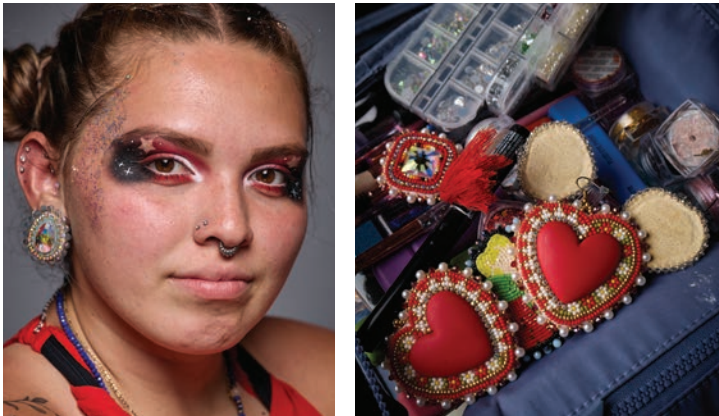
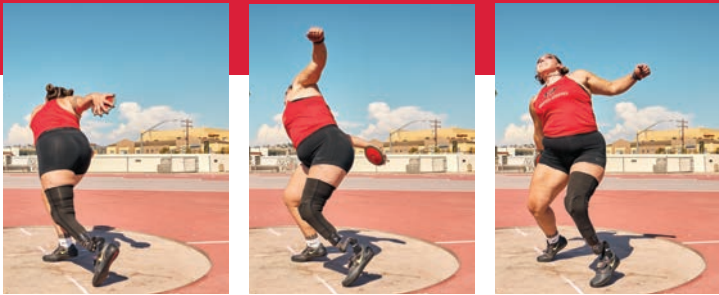
“I was just on an emotional high,” Whitehead says, “so energetically speaking, I thought anything could happen.”

Today, Adapted Athletics, a program of Associated Students, is California’s first—and only—competitive collegiate adapted sports program. Led by director A.J. Munoz-Bond (‘19, ‘21), it has 20 elite student and community athletes competing in wheelchair tennis and para track and field. And for the first time, three athletes—Guerrero, first-year student Chloe Chavez and community athlete Max Rohn—qualified for the 2025 World Para Athletics Championships, the sport’s most prominent event after the Paralympics. In early October, Guerrero stepped onto the podium twice with bronze finishes in discus and shot put. Rohn earned silver in discus—and while Chavez didn’t medal, she wasn’t far behind the competition.

“What makes me most proud is the intentional culture we’ve built, one that values mindset as much as medals,” says Munoz-Bond, a former master’s student of Domingo’s. “Sending athletes like Alicia, Chloe and Max to the World Championships brings visibility to Paralympic sport, but the real impact is building confident leaders who succeed in sport, in the classroom and in life above all.”

Leaders like SDSU team captain Guerrero.

A YOUNG ALICIA GUERRERO had big dreams of being a ballerina. The toddler could imagine herself twirling in ballet slippers and tutus. She took classes to learn, and after a couple of years, her



In Alicia Guerrero’s sport, jewelry is permitted—and she embraces it. She crafted the earrings she’s wearing above, while others in her makeup kit are made by Indigenous women. The bond between athlete and coach is tight (far right): After two years of training together, Jasmine Burrell says Guerrero is like a daughter to her.

dreams changed, and she transitioned to gymnastics. Then she joined a basketball team in the second grade. Then volleyball and fast-pitch softball and soccer.

Guerrero was like any other kid, she says, except she was adjusting to a prosthetic after losing part of her leg in a lawnmower accident at age 2.

“The doctors were very encouraging, saying, ‘No matter if she’s missing her leg or not, we want to make sure she’s staying active,’” Guerrero says.

That wasn’t a problem for Guerrero, the youngest of five with



four older brothers. And as she progressed as a strong athlete through the years, discovering wheelchair basketball and para track and field in high school, she credits her growing list of accomplishments to the way her parents raised her.

“My dad’s an immigrant from Mexico, and my mom is from Wapato on the Yakama Reservation in Washington,” says Guerrero, who grew up in her mom’s hometown, “and they knew in order to succeed and do what they wanted for us ... my dad, as a provider for his family, had to work hard and work up to where he is now.”

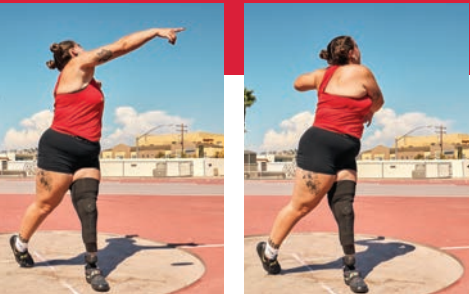
Through the years, Guerrero took notice, and witnessing her parents’ hard work and resolve set her up for a successful future as a student majoring in women’s studies, Indigenous studies and elementary education—and as an elite athlete.

“In a way, this is kind of giving back to them so they know I turned out pretty good and they raised me really well,” she says, emotion rising in her words. “I want people to know that my accident isn’t what defines me. That experience only supports me further—supports my determination in what I want to do.”

It’s a determination that’s served her well.

Guerrero hasn’t let up since that day in Santiago. Now a senior at SDSU, she holds the American record in shot put in her division, and as for world rankings, she’s No. 2 for shot put and No. 3 for discus. Her long-term goal? The LA28 Paralympic Games—and eventually the 2032 Paralympic Games in Australia, a place she’s always wanted to visit. But it’s more than her newfound roaring that has prepared her for the road ahead.

When Guerrero transferred to SDSU from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in 2024, she and Burrell weren’t going



to pick up where they left off the year prior; they were going to start from scratch. Not exactly what elite athletes like to hear, but Burrell had one advantage: She had already earned Guerrero’s trust.

Guerrero didn’t touch a discus for a month. Together, they broke down the mechanics of every throw: the stand throw, the half turn, the South African drill and the full rotational throw. Burrell wanted Guerrero, who had always competed with a full rotational throw, to master the half turn first.

“That fall, I had to break her down to build her back up,” says Burrell, who threw for the Aztecs women’s track and field team from 2011 to 2015.

Though Guerrero had confidence in their work, a half turn challenged her identity as a full thrower—and she pushed back.

“I said, ‘I get that,’” Burrell says, “‘but our long-term goal is LA28. Right now, we break it down so you’re ready for that moment’—and she trusted me.”

Soon, with a half-turn throw and hours of focused training, Guerrero eclipsed her full-turn PR—and within a year, she set another PR of 30.10 meters at the 2025 USATF Outdoor & Para National Championships in Eugene, Oregon. Then came the two bronze medals at the World Para Athletics Championships in India.

Guerrero was one step closer to Los Angeles.

U.S. PARALYMPIC ATHLETES in college have a choice. They can train with Team USA, or they can choose to train at their affiliated university. In 2015, Whitehead didn’t have that option, but with SDSU’s Adapted Athletics program, Guerrero did.

Guerrero chose SDSU, a testament to the excellence of the

Mark the Calendar:
Adapted Athletics at SDSU

RED & BLACK ALL-COMERS MEET
Dec. 6 @ the Aztrack Sports Deck (on top of Parking Lot 7)
5490 Montezuma Road
An intra-squad competition for both the Aztecs adapted and able-bodied track and field teams. The event is also open to all ages and abilities.

SPRING WHEELCHAIR TENNIS TOURNAMENT
February (check arc.sdsu.edu/events for date as it nears)
@ SDSU tennis courts
Hosted by SDSU Adapted Athletics, the event brings competition from other collegiate teams.

ADAPTED SPORTS SHOWCASE
March 6, 2 p.m.-6 p.m. @ the Aztec Recreation Center
5301 55th St.
Stop by for a Paralympic discussion table, an exhibition of wheelchair basketball, resource tables and much more.

AZTEC INVITATIONAL
March 27-28 @ the Aztrack Sports Deck
A track and field meet for both adapted and able-bodied teams. Collegiate teams come from all around the country.



Team members of Adapted Athletics at the 2025 USATF Outdoor & Para National Championships: (from left) Parker Harvey, coach Jasmine Burrell, Alicia Guerrero, Ana Firvida, Michelle Cross ('22, '25), Austin Spalla, Hammoudi Jauda, coach Rolland Slade and director A.J. Munoz-Bond.



Guerrero always dreamed of throwing at the storied Hayward Field at the University of Oregon. This summer, she made the most of the opportunity, breaking the American record in shot put and qualifying for the World Para Athletics Championships in October. At the event, Guerrero (far right) placed third, finishing behind U.S. teammate Jessica Heims (left) and Poland’s Faustyna Kotlowska.



program. It offers her an elite level of coaching with Burrell, strength and conditioning with coach Rodney Fowler, physical therapy with Adapted Sports Physical Therapy—a student-run clinic offered at no cost—nutritional counseling through the SDSU Sports Nutrition Cooperative, and access to the facilities and staffing support through Associated Students.

“Coach Jasmine and coach Rodney are my people,” Guerrero says. “They’re two of the best coaches I’ve ever had. The whole team just does a great job being able to modify these workouts for us to make us successful.

“I didn’t know about San Diego State when I was in high school; otherwise, I would have originally started my path here.”

With high-profile athletes such as Guerrero, Chavez and Rohn, SDSU is gaining national recognition. And with the Paralympics coming to Los Angeles, SDSU’s visibility could open the door to even greater student-athlete recruitment.

The Aztecs compete against the University of Arizona—its closest rival—the University of Alabama, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and the University of Michigan. But there’s one more sport Munoz-Bond, the director of Adapted Athletics, has his eye on.

Wheelchair basketball is the most widely played of the big three adapted sports, next to para track and field and wheelchair tennis. It also has a solid infrastructure with intercollegiate competition and year-end championships—a growth area for the other two sports. With that in mind, Munoz-Bond is working to build a wheelchair basketball team. The obstacle he faces is funding, but Munoz-Bond, like Whitehead, already has a vision for what it would look like.

“Wheelchair basketball has the power to be the gateway sport of our program. It’s fast-paced, physical and one of the most engaging adapted sports for fans,” says Munoz-Bond, who started as a volunteer with Adapted Athletics in 2018. “Adding it at SDSU would

not only align us with the strongest collegiate competition in the country but also create the kind of visibility, community support and school spirit that lifts every part of Adapted Athletics.”

And, Munoz-Bond says, it just might be the step that transforms SDSU Adapted Athletics from excelling in two sports to emerging as a national leader.

GUERRERO HAS A NUMBER in her mind: 45 meters. With a confidence that’s been building, she says she’ll throw that distance in discus at one point in her career. The current world record is 42.49 meters, held by China’s Yue Yang for the combined F64 and F44 division—so she and Burrell have a target.

“I told coach Jasmine, ‘What if I were the first athlete in my division to throw 50 meters?’” Guerrero says, upping the ante.

“We can look into that,” Burrell had answered.

The world, and SDSU fans specifically, will be watching. ●

WHERE SCIENCE MEETS SPORTS

Inside **George Youssef's** SDSU lab, student engineers are developing patented foams to protect athletes, first responders and service members—while learning the business of innovation.

STORY BY **SARAH WHITE**
PHOTOGRAPH BY **KYNAN MARLIN**

WHAT'S THE BEST WAY TO MINIMIZE THE IMPACT OF A FOOTBALL TACKLE and its concussion-inducing shock wave? The answer might lie in a San Diego State University lab determined to bring its innovative materials to market.

George Youssef, an SDSU mechanical engineering professor, and the doctoral,

master's and undergraduate student engineers in his Experimental Mechanics Laboratory have patented nearly a dozen materials and manufacturing techniques designed to protect athletes, first responders and active-duty service members from occupational hazards.

One invention is a foam that can be

customized to provide a cushioned fit inside helmets for football players or packaging for fragile cargo.

"When we made it, we were just making an advanced material," Youssef says.

Youssef and his team set out to prove they could create a foam that no one else could—and they succeeded. Testing

George Youssef, SDSU mechanical engineering professor and 2025 Innovator of the Year, and his students are creating new materials like foams to reduce collision forces in football helmets and other protective gear.

showed the foam could reduce collision forces by 20% and could be produced more sustainably than industry-standard alternatives.

The lab began pursuing commercialization by interviewing potential customers and evaluating the market for applications in insoles, ergonomic mats for workers on their feet and protective gear. An early version of the foam was later featured in an NFL helmet innovation challenge and licensed by Super Foam, a Southern California startup.

"What has been impressive to me about George's success is his fast navigation of the business, technical and corresponding emotional challenges," says Tommy Martindale, who oversees intellectual property and patenting for SDSU. "I have never seen his will to keep moving forward waver.

"His perseverance helped him launch a startup that has raised capital and won numerous awards in pitch competitions, with a second company in development."

Even with early success and endorsement from investors, Youssef is always brainstorming another exciting idea to transform into a business.

"It's easy to have ideas, but it's hard to make a product," he says.

Youssef's entrepreneurial experience bridges that gap and benefits his students in the process. Early in his journey, he sold cellphones while teaching himself English by studying an engineering parts catalog. Years later, after leaving an industry job, he spotted in that same catalog a creation he had designed there—now for sale with no credit to him.

Unable to afford lawyers to articulate the novelty of his first patentable technology, he continued striving for a patent in

his own name—what he calls the pinnacle of an engineer's career.

Now that he has reached that pinnacle many times over, he's focused on passing along lessons learned—running his lab like a small engineering firm, with funding agencies as the C-suite, and papers and patents as the products.

As part of the lab's ethos, Youssef emphasizes both devising materials to solve critical problems and serving future customers throughout the purchasing and deployment of a solution.

Youssef, named SDSU's 2025 Innovator of the Year, is just as likely to be found on the floor repairing equipment as leading a tour of the lab for new investors.

That balance of hands-on work and big-picture vision carries into the lab's culture. Lab meetings cover not only technical troubleshooting but also intellectual property and royalty negotiations, using the same language students will encounter as professionals.

"If you're going to produce good engineers, that's the environment they want to be in," Youssef says. "All my students graduate and know what they're doing on day one."

As evidence, he points to the student co-inventor of the first generation of foams now advancing in the golf industry, along with multiple alumni and current students already credited with papers and patents.

The lab is also developing second-generation foams to better absorb both shrapnel and shock waves from explosions and to self-extinguish rapidly if ignited. And on deck are lightweight, 3D-printed carbon fiber outer shells for helmets—plus more ideas moving through the patent pipeline.

Youssef sees generating patents as his responsibility and the lab as a training ground for business-savvy engineering leaders. So far, his approach has led to a foam no one else could make and many learning opportunities along the way—always with one eye on what's coming next. ●

SDSU Debuts Fund for Pac-12 Future

San Diego State University Athletics has launched the Student-Athlete Recruitment and Retention Fund, an initiative designed to ensure Aztec athletics thrives as the university enters the Pac-12 Conference and a new era of college sports. The tax-deductible fund will strengthen SDSU's ability to recruit, retain and support elite student-athletes while adapting to sweeping national changes.

With the July 1 implementation of the House settlement, universities will be permitted to directly share revenue with student-athletes in exchange for licensing their name, image and likeness (NIL). Revenue sharing nationwide will begin at roughly \$20.5 million for 2025-26 and increase in subsequent years.

"As we prepare for our entry into the Pac-12, this fund is a vital step in ensuring we continue to compete for championships while also aligning SDSU Athletics with the future of college sports," says John David Wicker, SDSU director of athletics. "Our student-athletes deserve the very best, and this initiative allows us to directly invest in their experience while sustaining the proud tradition of Aztec excellence."

Support for the Student-Athlete Recruitment and Retention Fund can take multiple forms: making a donation or pledge, continuing NIL engagement through the MESA Foundation and Aztec Link, and purchasing season tickets to ticketed sports. These efforts collectively ensure a strong future for SDSU student-athletes.

For more information, contact the Aztec Club at 619-594-6444 or aztecclub@sdsu.edu.



THE YEAR IN SPORTS PHOTOS



(In order from top left, clockwise)

Such Great Heights

Outfielder **Jake Jackson** grabbed an out at Tony Gwynn Stadium.

Eyes on the Ball

Keeper **Tiaare Ahovel** made the save against Loyola Marymount University.

The Calm Before the Dive

A sunset dive for **Taylor Konopacke**

Fast Track

Maya Gorman ('25) specialized in the high jump and the long jump.

That's How It's Done

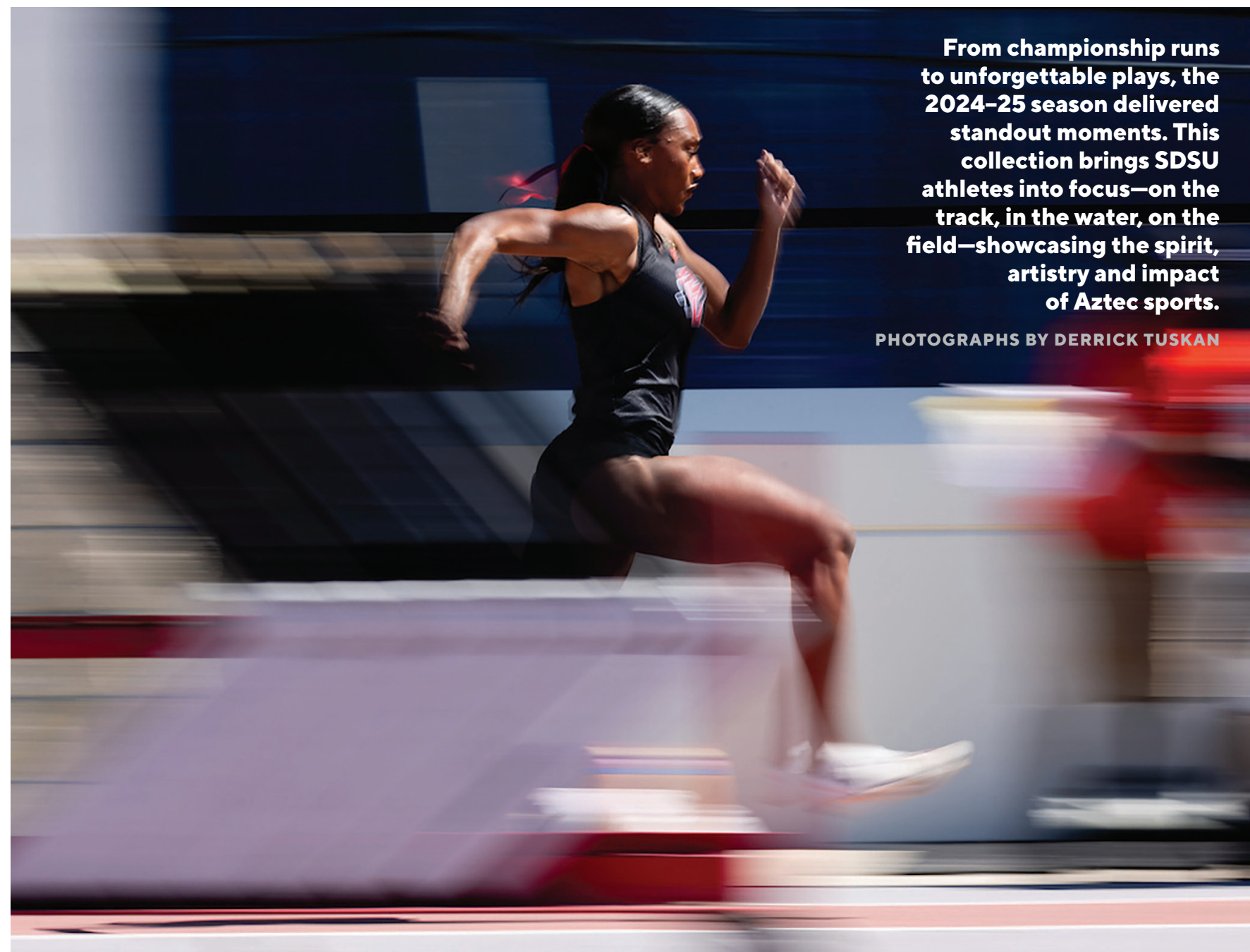
Defender **Jordan Dobin** showed her game-day confidence for the season finale against UC Davis.

Showdown at Sundown

Forward **Rommee Jaridly** assisted twice in this 5-2 win against the University of California, Riverside.

Leaving It All on the Court

Guard **Naomi Panganiban** didn't go down without a fight against the University of Wyoming.



From championship runs to unforgettable plays, the 2024-25 season delivered standout moments. This collection brings SDSU athletes into focus—on the track, in the water, on the field—showcasing the spirit, artistry and impact of Aztec sports.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DERRICK TUSKAN



THE YEAR IN SPORTS PHOTOS

(In order from top left, clockwise)

Not in My House

Defender **Grace Goins** helped her Aztec goalie keep a clean sheet against Cal State Bakersfield.

Ripple Effect

This is what focus looks like in the pool with swimmer **Reka Nyiradi**.

Serve, Set, Spike

No. 9 **Shea Rubright** ('24) and outside hitter **Taylor Underwood** helped get the job done against Air Force.

Power Shot

Adapted Athletics wheelchair tennis player **Khristian Martinez** with a solid backhand.

Photographer:

Mariadelcarmen Zuniga

We Are the Champions

The **women's basketball team**: Here are your 2025 Mountain West champs!

Sand Cloud

Golfer **Dylan Oyama** chipped his way out of a tricky spot.

High Jump

Running back **Marquez Cooper** ('25) hopped right over the New Mexico Lobos.

Pep in Silhouette

The **SDSU Pep Band** and the backdrop of a San Diego sky never disappoint.

Pure Joy

In an exhibition against Cal State San Marcos, forward **Pharaoh Compton** was one of three players to score in double digits.



THE DONORS

Throughout their careers, **Vince** ('64) and **Betsey Biondo** ('67, MPA '72) have dedicated themselves to public education and public service. Their support for San Diego State University students reflects their life's work.

THE GIFT

Established the **Vince and Betsey Biondo Endowed Basketball Scholarship**, the **Vince and Betsey Biondo Endowed Football Scholarship**, the **Betsey Love Biondo Student Teacher Endowed Scholarship** and the **Vincent F. Biondo, Jr. Endowed Scholarship**

VINCE ('64) AND BETSEY BIONDO ('67, MPA '72) have invested in San Diego State University students for years in many ways, including athletics, but they are most inspired by young people committing their careers to their communities. Both have created endowments for such students.

As ambitious young professionals, the couple met in an elevator at San Diego's city hall. Betsey was an intern in the city manager's office working toward a master's degree in public administration at SDSU. Vince, who had earned his BA in political science as an Aztec, was interning with the city attorney's staff, hoping to launch his own career after earning a Stanford law degree.

Among the things they had in common was SDSU, though they had not known each other as students. Inspired by her mother, who was a teacher, Betsey had finished her education degree in three-and-a-half years and, after earning her MPA, went to work for the California State University Office of the Chancellor.

"My mother was a wonderful teacher, and she wanted me to teach," Betsey says.

For 27 years, she taught different subjects at all levels from kindergarten to college, both in the San Diego area and in the Philippines while Vince served in the U.S. Navy.

As a member of the Judge Advocate General's Corps (JAG), Vince was then the youngest military judge in the Navy, presiding over courts-martial

throughout Asia and on ships at sea. After the Navy, he and Betsey returned to San Diego, where she continued teaching and was elected to the Del Mar Union School District governing board of trustees. Vince resumed public service in various roles, including Carlsbad city attorney and general counsel for the San Diego County Water Authority.

"We believe passionately in the benefit of public education and public service," Vince says, explaining the couple's philanthropic choices.

Vince says he and Betsey admire and want to support young public school teachers and others who might choose "to take less money to not only have a meaningful career but to help make the world a little better place."

Betsey trained many student teachers and future school administrators, finding a lot of satisfaction throughout her career.

"I love to teach and watch people grow and learn," she says.

Now retired, the Biondos have traveled the world over the past few decades. They enjoy expanding their knowledge of different cultures and have built a sizable collection of mementos, but supporting SDSU students remains a top priority.

With support from the Biondos, scholarships help SDSU College of Education students during their student-teaching experiences. Vince recognizes how difficult it is for students to work while taking classes and teaching

in the classroom.

Betsey knows from personal experience that it's hard to be a student teacher.

"Many of them need the extra money to get through that semester," she says.

From their own student experiences, the Biondos give SDSU high marks.

"I felt I got a high-quality education at San Diego State from a number of really good professors," Vince says, with Betsey concurring.

There was some room for improvement in one class, however. When Vince struggled with spelling, his challenge went unrecognized. He had to write 500 words with three or fewer spelling errors, and he says he couldn't do it.

Mandatory visits to the campus reading and writing lab changed everything. Vince's assignments were simplified, his skills enhanced, and the course of his education completely altered.

"Thank God I had an enlightened guy who was head of that lab," Vince says. "I got an academic scholarship to Stanford Law School."

SDSU made a difference in the Biondos' lives, and in turn, they make a difference for others through SDSU. When former students recognize Betsey around town, they offer hugs and share stories of how she influenced their education. At campus events, she also meets current recipients of her scholarships and enjoys hearing how the couple's donations are helping them.

"Donations are investments, and the first thing you do in analyzing an investment is make a judgment about the people running the organization because you want your money used in a productive way," Vince says.

"We're pleased with our investments in the students," Betsey says.

"And," Vince adds, "our investments in the university." —*Tobin Vaughn*

To establish an endowment or make a donation to SDSU, contact Mary Darling at mdarling@sdsu.edu.

why we give

"WE ARE DEEPLY GRATEFUL FOR VINCE AND BETSEY'S SUPPORT, AND IT'S ESPECIALLY MEANINGFUL THAT THEY'VE CHOSEN TO INVEST IN INITIATIVES THAT ALIGN SO CLOSELY WITH THEIR PERSONAL PASSIONS."

—ADRIENNE VARGAS

Vice President for University Relations and Development



classnotes

/Alumni Spotlight on Women Entrepreneurs



The idea for Leche, a business that provides breast milk products and services, began at a book club.

Jenney Korasick posed the question: “Why can’t we turn our breast milk into powder just like we can turn milk into powder?” New mom and SDSU alumna **Trisha Clifford** (’12, political science), with experience in nutrition, food science and manufacturing, answered, “We absolutely can!”

Thus began the journey toward solving their own issues of breast milk overproduction and no viable way to store it.

At that time, Clifford and Korasick, who eventually founded Leche in 2023, donated their excess milk to the new mom community, foster parents or moms with twins. “The last thing you want to do is take liquid gold and throw it down the drain,” Clifford says.

Clifford and Korasick discovered many parents need access to breast milk and many moms produce too much of it. It was a business spark for them: They could help fix a widespread problem through technology, accessibility and passion.

Leche has found its niche and continues to grow. Research is underway on using breast milk, what Clifford calls “a super-food,” in a variety of health care settings to support adults. “I get so excited about seeing where that next stage could go,” she says. —*Leslie L.J. Reilly*



It wasn’t just **Wynn Austin**’s love of cooking that prompted her to create her line of Asian sauces.

“I was struggling with health issues that forced me to clean up my diet,” Austin says. “I had to cut out sugar, soy and gluten. I cook with mainly Asian sauces and found there were no existing sauces I could use.”

Tired of eating bland food, Austin (’03, finance) created her own healthy sauce by blending lemongrass, garlic, shallots and peppers in her kitchen, and, voilà, her Saté Asian Chili Sauce was born.

“I literally put it on everything: salmon, steak and even cauliflower rice. After three years, I was heavily encouraged to turn it into a business,” she says.

Austin launched Wynn’s Kitchen in 2019, and her products are available on Amazon, wynnskitchen.com and more than 300 stores nationwide, which are listed on her site. She has also extended her brand as a podcaster and YouTube star and is planning to publish a cookbook featuring healthy Vietnamese recipes.

Austin traces her business success to her lessons as an SDSU finance major. “The fundamentals of any business always go back to finance and numbers,” she says. “You may have the best product ever, but without properly managing the finances and costs, it is very difficult to succeed.” —*Suzanne Finch*



Growing up behind the counter at her mom’s toy store in Turkey, **Zeynep Ilgaz** (’00, MBA) always had the entrepreneurial bug. Seeking new business opportunities, she and her husband, Serhat Pala (’99, MBA), moved to the United States in 1998 to pursue their master’s in business administration at SDSU.

At SDSU, Ilgaz dove into the world of start-ups and venture capital, gaining experience through internships and support from the Lavin Entrepreneurship Center.

“I was especially drawn to companies that built an amazing culture and gave back to the community,” Ilgaz says. “So it was never about just making money but doing it in a very meaningful and impactful way.”

In 2008, Ilgaz and Pala founded Confirm Biosciences, a national provider of diagnostic products for human and wellness testing, which was successfully acquired by Clinical Reference Laboratory in 2021.

The next year, they launched Cross Ocean Ventures, a venture capital firm focused on investing in purpose-driven founders.

“Our goal is to be a resource for these founders and to be there for them,” Ilgaz says. “[My husband and I] have been working together for so many years, and that’s the most rewarding part.” —*Taylor Harris*

1940s

Roberta Billings Eidemiller (B.S., biology) passed away at 101 in April. A San Diego native, she pursued biology at SDSU, raised three children and remained active through travel, classical music and botanical research throughout her life. She stayed connected to her alma mater by playing bridge with SDSU Faculty Dames and swimming at the university’s pool several times a week for decades.

1970s

’74 **George Harrison** (B.S., business administration) is a Savannah-based marketing consultant, fine artist and photojournalist. He serves on the executive board of the Coastal Empire Region’s Porsche Club of America and contributes to “Panorama,” a national publication for Porsche enthusiasts.

’77 **Walt Ekard** (B.A., history), a longtime top executive for San Diego County, passed away in April at age 71. He spent 35 years in public service and was celebrated for his leadership in regional government. Ekard’s legacy lives on through the Walt Ekard Endowed Scholarship, which provides financial support to deserving SDSU students who aspire to follow in his footsteps and champion public service.

1980s

’84 **Clarke Caines** (B.A., public administration) partnered with fellow Aztecs, including Marcus Caines (’19), Kenya Caines (’16) and Ted Tillinghast (’85), to launch a patented foot-operated sanitary door opener called 1Step. The innovation promotes public health and accessibility in door design and has gained local media recognition.

’85 **David Baker** (B.S., business administration) celebrates 20 years as president and CEO of Paratransit Services, a nonprofit transportation provider serving communities across Oregon, Washington and California.

’86 **Mike Heidtbrink** (M.A., education) and his 1984 Lutheran High CIF championship basketball team were inducted into the Victory Hall of Fame in 2025. The team dedicated its season to his late son, Aaron, and reunited for a heartfelt ceremony 40 years later.

’87 **John Flannery** (B.S., business administration) celebrates 20 years of Flannery Sales Systems, a global sales training company. He also volunteers with the Fowler College of Business and frequently guest lectures at SDSU, crediting Aztec connections for his continued success.

1990s

’90 **Leanne Bean** (B.A., theatre arts) teaches theatre, dance and PE and now performs professionally as a member of the Golden State Warriors Hardwood Classics, a senior NBA dance team.

’94 **Mark Lyons** (B.A., English and comparative literature) recently transitioned careers from finance and operations to becoming a vegan chef

and appreciates life away from email-driven workdays.

’95 **Ryan Beardsley** (B.A., liberal studies) has worked in education since earning his SDSU degree. He currently serves as the assistant superintendent of human resources for the Palmdale School District in California.

’95 **Rick Schuiteman** (B.A., theatre) was named one of Fort Wayne’s Persons of the Year for his role as CEO of the Fort Wayne Zoo. He previously spent 34 years at SeaWorld San Diego before relocating to Indiana.

’99 **Jaime Wesley** (B.A., political science) recently began a new position as director of accounting at Vicinity Credit Union in Chicago.

2000s

’02 **Megan Holt Hellner** (B.S., food and nutrition), founder of AthleatMD, launched a digital health program for athletes facing eating disorders. She credits her SDSU education in nutrition and public health with giving her the foundation to support athlete wellness.

’03 **Robert Graff** (B.A., political science) is the newly appointed owner of Venissimo Cheese. As the shop’s cheesemonger for the past 17 years, Graff has been instrumental in helping to create curated tasting sessions and a unique Cheese Travel program.

’09 **Jill Humes Baker** (Ed.D., education) passed away in April at the age of 73. She was part of the inaugural class to earn a doctorate in education with a concentration in community college leadership at SDSU. She is remembered for her contributions to education, including her role as a community college dean.

2010s

’19 **Marcus Caines** (B.A., economics) cofounded Aztech Industrial Devices with fellow SDSU Aztecs, including Clarke Caines (’84), Kenya Caines (’16) and Ted Tillinghast (’85). The company patented 1Step, a foot-operated sanitary door handle that enhances hygiene and accessibility.

2020s

’20 **Bianca Sanchez** (B.A.A.S., english and comparative literature) was recently published in “Chicken Soup for the Soul: What I Learned from My Dog.” The piece marks an important milestone in her ongoing writing journey.

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SDSU ALUMNI

2025–2026 Alumni Board of Advisers

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President-Elect: **Yolanda Apalategui Lugo** (’05, ’15)

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Administrator: **Caitlyn Smiley** (’19)

OTHER ELECTED ADVISERS

Julius Alejandro (’09), **Brian Avera** (’12, ’15), **David Baron** (’87), **Chiloh Baty** (’08), **Whitney Bond** (’05, ’13), **Martin Bridges** (’87), **Kevin Decker** (’00, ’13), **Mark Emch** (’84), **Dirk Epperson** (’06), **Carey Fernandes** (’99), **Richard Gonzalez** (’93), **Keith Harris** (’91), **Christian Holt** (’21), **Maria V. Kachadoorian** (’87, ’97), **Tom Karlo** (’75), **Mark Krasner** (’74), **Martin Lang** (’97, ’09), **Perla Long** (’07), **Victor Alfredo Lopez** (’20), **Paul Miller** (’80), **Brian Moffitt** (’10), **Cesar Padilla** (’95), **Gabriella Penaloza** (’04), **Humberto Peraza** (’97, ’17), **Justin Quis Quis** (’97), **Marlene Ruiz** (’75), **JR Tolver** (’02), **Alberto Velasquez** (’07), **Gerry Widmer** (’90)

PAST PRESIDENTS

First President: 1931

Vesta Muehleisen (1907)

Visit sdsualumni.org/pastpresidents for a full list.

NON-ELECTED ADVISERS

President: **Adela de la Torre**

Vice President, University Relations

and Development: **Adrienne Vargas**

Senate Chair: **Stephen Schellenberg**

Associated Students President:

Kareen Holstrom

SDSU ALUMNI STAFF

Executive Director: **Stephanie Dathe** (’95)

Director, Alumni and Community

Engagement: **Malerie McNeill** (’03, ’07)

Director, Marketing: **Gema Deleon** (’11)

Associate Director, Parma Payne Goodall

Alumni Center: **Marian Lim** (’15)

Assistant Director, Membership

& Alumni Success: **Blaire Chapman**

Assistant Director, Alumni Engagement:

Dustin Adkins (’20, ’25)

Alumni Relations Specialist: **Jen Ranallo**

Alumni Events and Content Specialist:

Caitlyn Smiley (’19)

Communications Specialist: **Taylor Harris** (’23)

Data Control Technician: **Robin Breen Rust**

Parma Payne Goodall Alumni Center Events

Coordinator: **Cierra Ross** (’23)

Parma Payne Goodall Alumni Center Events

Coordinator: **Lily Martinez**

Alumni Engagement Coordinator:

Jacinda Molina (’22, ’23)

throwback

TIME CAPSULE

In SDSU’s 128-year history, more than 550,000 students have walked its halls. That’s a lot of people and experiences. Here are four stories from four eras, starting in 1925 and ending in 2000.

By Seth Mallios



Phantom Football Star Aids State College Team

1925 THE PHANTOM

WHEN THE THEN SAN DIEGO STATE TEACHERS COLLEGE football team annihilated Whittier 24-0 on Oct. 24, 1925, the domination was so thorough that some people believed the Aztecs were aided by supernatural forces. Certain fans insisted that on one play a San Diego State player tackled the Whittier ball carrier and then vanished into thin air. That inspired the

college athletic council to invite local psychics to the next contest against Loyola just in case the football specter reappeared. Legendary Aztecs gridiron coach Charles E. Peterson did nothing to downplay the claims, saying, “The Phantom is welcome to play if he wishes, but I will not depend on him to stop any holes in the line.”



1950 MARION ROSS

LONG BEFORE SHE BECAME THE MOST UBIQUITOUS mother figure in the entertainment world, Marion Ross, now 97 years old, graduated from San Diego State in 1950. She studied theatre arts, and in 1983, she created the Marion Ross Endowed Scholarship to support undergraduate and graduate students who are pursuing professional acting after graduation.

Ross’ talent was undeniably evident in her time at San Diego State: She starred in the senior-alumni play as a first-year student and had the lead in plays at the Old Globe and La Jolla Playhouse even before she left for Hollywood. Her iconic generation-transcending roles included Marion Cunningham on “Happy Days,” Beulah Carey on “The Drew Carey Show,” Bernice Forman on “That ’70s Show,” Trix Gilmore on “Gilmore Girls” and even the voice of Grandma SquarePants on “SpongeBob SquarePants.”

1975 THE BACKDOOR MURAL

IN FALL 1975, ART INSTRUCTOR ARTURO ROMAN GUIDED MEXICAN American studies students Felix Monfare, Henry Pineda, David Salazar, Amber Spincer, Brel Schimедier, Vivian Reyes, Jose Ward and Maria Lopez, among others, in creating a mural 9 feet tall and 14 feet wide that depicts pre-Columbian Indigenous warriors anachronistically performing a rock ‘n’ roll show.

The Backdoor Mural was painted onto a concrete hallway in the original Aztec Center, which was demolished in 2011, that led to The Backdoor, a popular live music venue. Campus tradition held that musicians slapped the center point of the mural for good luck on their way from the green room to backstage. The mural now resides on the third floor of Love Library.



2000 BRING IT ON!

IN 2000, THE TEEN COMEDY “BRING IT ON!” TRANSFORMED San Diego State into the fictitious Rancho Carne High School. The Universal Studios film debuted at No. 1 in the U.S. and earned critical acclaim. Roger Ebert called it “the ‘Citizen Kane’ of cheerleading movies.”

Partially filmed on the SDSU campus, “Bring It On!” starring Kirsten Dunst (center front) and Gabrielle Union (not pictured), prominently showcased Hepner Hall, the Main Quad’s 1930s WPA benches painted red and the Samuel T. Black statue, which commemorates the institution’s first president.

The film’s success paved the way for the UPN/CW series “Veronica Mars” to film at SDSU from 2004 to 2007.

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