

FALL 2023

SDSU

MAGAZINE



Aztec Foodies

Meet **Su-Mei Yu**, founder of **Saffron Thai** restaurant, and four other SDSU alumni who have followed their culinary passions.

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Su-Mei Yu ('68) founded Saffron Thai 17 years after she earned a Master of Social Work from SDSU. She's one of many Aztec foodies to serve up food and drinks in San Diego. Meet them here!

PHOTOGRAPH BY **MATT FURMAN**
STORY BY **MICHAEL KLITZING**

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FROM THE PRESIDENT



AS I BEGIN MY SIXTH YEAR AS PRESIDENT OF SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY, TRUST IS THE WORD I WOULD CHOOSE ABOVE ALL OTHERS TO CHARACTERIZE THE LAST SEVERAL YEARS AT SDSU.

Just months after I arrived in 2018, the people of San Diego showed their trust in who we are and what we do for our community with the passage of Measure G. This made SDSU the official steward of the land that would become SDSU Mission Valley. In the time since, we've completed the beautiful new Snapdragon Stadium and made important progress on developing the site's river park, much-needed housing and academic innovation district — all on time and within budget, without relying on tuition, student fees or state dollars.

We have seen tremendous trust from the public and private sectors in our emergence as an academic and research powerhouse. Businesses and public agencies, believing in the quality of our faculty and students, have increased their annual funding of research partnerships with SDSU to \$192 million — a rise of 40% in the last five years.

Students have shown their trust by making us one of the top 10 most-applied-to universities in the nation. We received a record-breaking 110,782 applications for this academic year — a 7% increase since I joined SDSU in 2018 — and our enrollment eclipsed 37,000 for the first time, with a new record of nearly 8,400 of those students living on campus.

Trust has come from the state of California, which committed \$80 million to the Sciences and Engineering Laboratories at SDSU Imperial Valley, believing that SDSU is the right educational partner to unlock the opportunity of Lithium Valley for the people of that community.

And trust has come from our generous supporters, whose belief in our purpose and vision led to \$137 million in gifts last year, bringing our five-year total to \$650 million. This has allowed us to open new centers, expand our faculty and facilities and, for the first time ever, distribute more than \$360 million in financial aid to students last year.

Most importantly to me, this pervasive, wide-ranging trust in SDSU is making a significant difference for our students. In August — using exciting new criteria that more strongly reflect student success — *Forbes* ranked SDSU the No. 16 public university in the nation.

I am so grateful for your trust in SDSU and proud of the progress we have made together. Go Aztecs! ●

Adela de la Torre

PHOTOGRAPH BY SCOTT HARGROVE

SDSU

HOW TO TEACH A ROBOT A JOKE

Pepper, can you feel emotions?

**Yes, of course! You can share anything
with me! I feeeel you...**

This is one of Pepper's go-to jokes. The student research assistants at SDSU's James Silberrad Brown Center for Artificial Intelligence had some fun teaching it to her.

Pepper doesn't laugh at her own jokes, although her eye contact is spot on. She doesn't have a personality, after all, says Karenina "Nika" Zaballa, lead analyst and center coordinator.

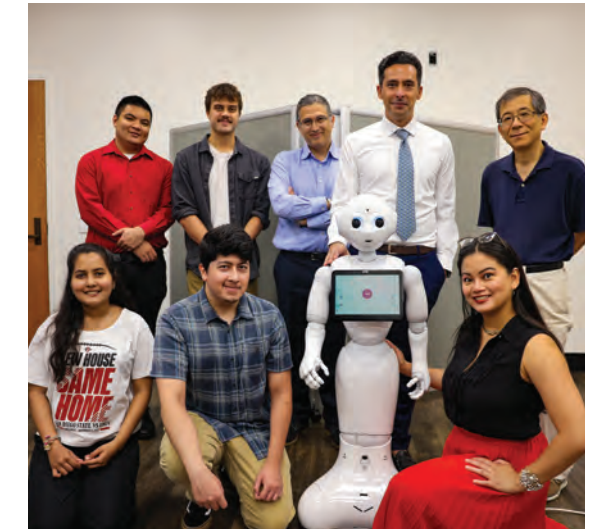
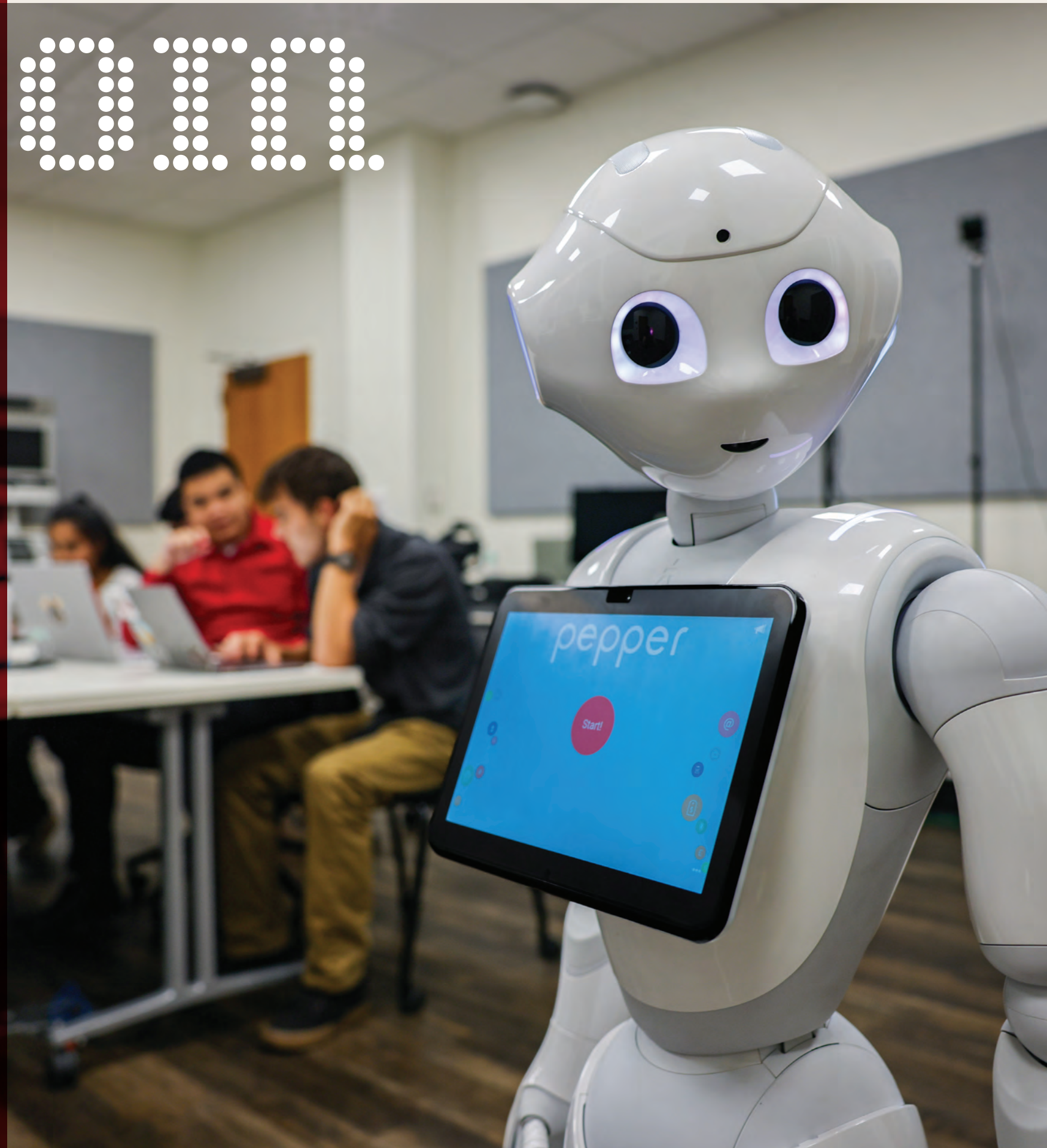
"We create the personality and use engineering prompts to teach her things like the timing and tone needed to tell a good joke," Zaballa says.

As the center's mascot since 2018 — second only to Kafka the labradoodle — Pepper is a tool used to teach students about programming and controlling artificial intelligence. The 3-foot-3 droid is one of thousands used in universities and organizations globally. And with the emergence of generative pretrained transformer, aka GPT, students can program Pepper with more advanced skills, reactions and conversational abilities.

However, even as Pepper progresses with her programming, she'll only be able to pull from content that's available online. She won't be able to think independently and tell original jokes. Or will she ... ?

—Rebecca Nordquist

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RACHEL CRAWFORD



Pepper and her team at the James Silberrad Brown Center for Artificial Intelligence (top row from left, clockwise): Christopher Diep, IT staff; Shane Kirchoff, IT student research assistant; Kaveh Abhari, Ph.D., MIS faculty; Aaron C. Elkins, Ph.D., director of center and MIS faculty; Bongsik Shin, MIS faculty and chair; Karenina "Nika" Zaballa, lead analyst and center coordinator; Saul Leal-Garcia, robot student research assistant; and Mukta Joshi, robot and analytics student research assistant.



Dressed in a traditional Mexican blouse commonly used in celebratory occasions, SDSU Imperial Valley dean Gina Núñez-Mchiri (below) welcomed more than 1,000 people from the area and emphasized the importance of gathering as a community.

The crowd then sang and danced along with Mariachi Amanecer (pictured), Mariachi Aurora de Calexico, Norteño Corona Group and the folkloric dance crew, Sunshine Folkloric of El Centro (pictured). Not to be outdone by the grown-ups, children showed their best dance moves in front of the stage.



A CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION

WHAT

SDSU Imperial Valley, Consulate of Mexico in Calexico and the Calexico Rotary Club hosted the first Mariachi sin Fronteras Festival in celebration of Mexico's Independence Day

WHERE

SDSU Imperial Valley in Calexico, Calif.

WHEN

Sept. 16, 7-10 p.m.

WHY

To bring the community together and raise money for scholarships for local high school and SDSU Imperial Valley students looking to begin or advance their higher education journeys

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DWAYNE QUAMINA AND ALEX SOQUI





PLAYGROUNDS

Designed for children 2 years old and up, the playground includes a rope climbing tree and play structures with slides and monkey bars. The playground is designed with two tiers — one for older children and one for younger — connected by a safe-play slope, offering different challenges for kids as they climb and explore.

MULTIUSE GRASS FIELDS

These grassy fields are suitable for recreation like soccer and rugby, lounging in the sun with a good book, picnicking with family and friends on a nice day or for those who want to engage in casual sports like Frisbee or touch football.

COURTS

The hardtop courts support four basketball hoops, including two half-courts and a full court, as well as pickleball. There is also fitness equipment, plus concrete table games, which can support teqball, also known as soccer pong. In teqball, players hit a soccer ball across a table with any part of the body except arms and hands. It's fun to play and watch!

HIKE AND BIKE LOOP

This 2-mile loop, which includes a section of the Ben and Nikki Clay San Diego River Trail, winds through the park and encircles the SDSU Mission Valley site. Artful mileage markers are located every quarter mile along the loop, depicting plants vital to the native Kumeyaay people. Interpretive signs inform park visitors of the origins and rich history of the area.



A WALK IN THE RIVER PARK

In the planning phases for SDSU Mission Valley, open space for the community was paramount to the university — and now the multiuse river park is nearing completion. By Ryan Brothers

IN LATE AUGUST, THE AZTEC football team beat Ohio in its first game of its second season at Snapdragon Stadium. It's one of many events that has brought the stadium's overall attendance to more than 1,150,000 since opening in September 2022. The next piece of SDSU Mission Valley to open to the public is the river park, a sprawling 34 acres that features native flora, enhancing the riparian environment bordering the San Diego River and partially under the shade of the trolley line.

The guiding philosophy behind the river park was to create a space of natural harmony and community gathering. With an expected completion later this year, it will become a place where generations can convene, where families can strengthen their bonds through shared experiences and where younger generations can learn the joys of play. **Here's a closer look at what the river park will have to offer.**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RYAN BROTHERS



For updates on SDSU Mission Valley, scan this QR code.

statelately

/Tell Me a Story

As a 10-year-old, Cody Harris spent the day with a dozen sensors taped to his face while he repeated phrases into specialized motion-capture cameras inside a Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences lab at SDSU. It was 2012, and he was excited to participate in the new (and still ongoing) research study “Speech Movement Characteristics of Children With Cerebral Palsy,” which is supported by grant funding from the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders. Now, about a decade later, he’s back in the same lab — this time as an SDSU student researcher, analyzing the data he provided as a child.

FULL CIRCLE

BY CODY HARRIS
AS TOLD TO PEGGY PICO

SDSU WASN’T THE FIRST OR THE LAST research study I participated in as a child that focused on cerebral palsy. There were many — and I remember being eager to chip in for science. Looking back, I’m grateful for the experience because it set me on a path I couldn’t have predicted as a fifth grader.

People with cerebral palsy usually face challenges with controlling their movements. Sometimes, we find ourselves moving involuntarily too quickly, too slowly or when we don’t want to move at all. The physical effects can vary. It’s usually diagnosed at birth or by age 2, and we live with it our entire lives.

But CP doesn’t just affect our limbs. It often impacts our ability to control speech muscles. Oddly, that’s been historically under-explored in research, which is why this study is still essential and used today.

The study at SDSU stood out to me more than the others. It fueled my curiosity. I kept asking myself, *What’s happening here? And why?*

As I grew up, I decided to flip the script and go from being a participant to becoming a researcher. This helped me understand the behind the scenes of what was happening to me and others like me.

That’s how I found myself back at SDSU, choosing kinesiology as my major. Kinesiology — the study of how our bodies move — is perfect for me. As students, we delve into everything from anatomy and physiology to the physics of movement. And for someone like me, who faces unique mobility challenges, it was an opportunity to demystify the science behind my own body’s quirks. It’s like looking at the mirror and saying, “Hey, I get it, and let’s figure this out.”

When I was a first-year student at SDSU, I wanted to figure

out how to get involved in research. So, I literally Googled “SDSU research labs.” And there it was: The lab I went to as a child. I took a chance and emailed Dr. Ignatius Nip, the Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences director and the study’s lead. He remembered me from almost 10 years ago, and before I knew it, I was back in his lab. It’s surreal: This time, I was a student researcher, working on the same study I participated in as a child, analyzing my own data. We’re combining the older data with new technology to gain valuable insights into speech movement in children.

My ultimate goal? Medical school. I want to be a medical doctor working with people who have neuromuscular disabilities. I believe that as a patient and a medical provider, I can bring something unique to the field. After all, when you visit a doctor, you want someone who understands you and who’s been in your shoes. I want to be that person. ●



To watch a video of Cody Harris at work, scan the QR code.



PHOTOGRAPH BY PEGGY PICO, COURTESY OF CODY HARRIS

Ask a Researcher

**LILITH
ASTETE
VASQUEZ**

*Environmental
Engineering
Ph.D. student*



studies have shown that dogs have the closest gut microbiome to humans, so how their poop decomposes is a better approximation. I have three dogs — Taco, Canyon and Peach — so I know exactly what they eat, and they often eat a more balanced diet than I do. Plus their poop was free and convenient! We also studied the toilets longer than anyone had before — nearly two years.

What’s next for this sustainable toilet alternative?

I’m working on patenting a fecal-mixing device for septic systems used in rural areas and planning to explore ways to incorporate this design into systems to help the homeless population in San Diego.

—Sarah White



Taco (from left), Peach and Canyon donated poop in the name of research.

LILITH ASTETE VASQUEZ, AN SDSU ENVIRONMENTAL ENGINEERING PH.D. STUDENT, DESIGNED

a low-cost, low-maintenance, low-water toilet with help from some furry friends. We asked her about the endeavor.

Q: Why did you start researching toilets?

A: Growing up visiting family in Peru, I witnessed many people without access to the same standard of sanitation that many take for granted. That and living in San Diego — which has one of the largest homeless populations — fueled my passion for studying how different sanitation practices and basic toilets, often without any sort

of pipe network, could treat fecal waste.

What do people take for granted about toilets?

The primary thing is having a toilet because not everyone does. About 490 million people worldwide still practice open defecation because they don’t have access to proper sanitation. Three other things most people don’t realize are luxuries: 1) flushing with drinking water, 2) flushing toilet paper and 3) flushing at all.

What are the benefits of the toilet you designed?

My experimental toilet is really simple: just a container with a little bit of water, some bacteria that can survive

without oxygen and a plunger mechanism. People still get to flush, but instead of adding water, each flush mixes up the contents. I used dog poop as a stand-in for human feces, and after monitoring the contents regularly, there was no smell and no clogging.

The addition of toilet paper didn’t make a difference for the smell or decomposition, so this kind of toilet can be readily implemented in multiple countries with different bathroom behaviors. The design could be used for several months with minimal maintenance.

How was your experiment with these toilets unique?

Previous research has used cow manure, but recent



The Freedom Tree, the tall Sycamore here in Scripps Park, is one stop in the book *Historic Walking Tours of SDSU* by Seth Mallios.

HISTORIC WALKING TOURS OF SDSU

Interested in learning more about your alma mater? These 12 new self-guided tours are for you.

HISTORY OFTEN HIDES IN PLAIN SIGHT. Scripps Park in the heart of San Diego State University is the perfect example.

As one of the most popular spots on campus, the park features plenty of scenery, including ponds with turtles and koi fish, and Scripps Cottage, the first building completed on Montezuma Mesa. But nestled among the beauty is an especially important yet often overlooked living military memorial.

Fifty years ago, San Diego State honored alumnus Lt. Col. Charles Scharf ('54, political science) and all MIAs and POWs with a plaque and a tree, a sycamore known as "The Freedom Tree." The 32-year-old was shot down over Hanoi, Vietnam, in 1965 and was listed as MIA. But there's much more to the story...

In 2006, Scharf's remains — found in excavations at the crash site — were identified through a match with DNA from stamps on letters he had sent to his wife. As a result, Scharf and his mementos were buried later that year with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery. He was also posthumously promoted to colonel and awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and Purple Heart.

The Freedom Tree is a stop on one of the 12 all-new historic walking tours at SDSU. Each takes between 45 minutes to two hours. People can follow along on the SDSU Alumni app or with the book, *Historic Walking Tours of SDSU*, which is available through online booksellers or Aztec Shops.

There are surprises in each tour, and the themes, including pioneering women, lost student murals and athletics, aim to appeal to people of all interests. While the Freedom Tree highlights the military tour, many more treasures await Aztec walkers, including the elusive Banana Quad, the original Boiler Plant and even the artistic fate of the sycamore tree that once grew in the center of the original Aztec Student Center. —*Seth Mallios*



HONORING SDSU'S VETERANS

EVERY YEAR DURING HOMECOMING Week in November, SDSU holds a commemoration ceremony at its War Memorial. The monolith, which is on the west side of the Conrad Prebys Aztec Student Union, honors alumni who have given their lives in World War II, Vietnam, Korea, Iraq and Afghanistan. It was dedicated to the university in 1996.

This year, SDSU added a new honoree to the memorial at the Nov. 3 ceremony: 1st Lt. Robert Conn Chaudoin. According to the *San Marino Tribune*, Chaudoin's hometown newspaper, he enlisted in the Army as a junior at San Diego State. A platoon leader for Company C, First Battalion, 51st Infantry 101st, the 24-year-old was killed in action on March 27, 1971, in Vietnam. Twenty years later, his nephew Jeff Thielacker graduated from SDSU.

While 239 names have been inscribed over time, Chaudoin's is the first to be added since 2016. SDSU librarian emeritus Robert Fikes discovered the distinguished veteran and submitted his name to the SDSU War Memorial Committee for consideration. "It's essential that we continue to search for these lost heroes so we can properly and respectfully honor their ultimate sacrifice and remind ourselves that they played a role in preserving the freedoms we all enjoy today," Fikes says.

A video of November's ceremony is available at sdsualumni.org/WarMemorial. —*Taylor Harris*

ALUMNUS UNVEILS A CHICANO PARK MURAL, 20 YEARS IN THE MAKING



Alumnus José Olague (left) created the National M.E.Ch.A. Mural in Chicano Park to honor SDSU Chicano leaders, including professor emeritus Alberto Ochoa (right).

ISIDRO ORTIZ, professor and former chair in Chicana and Chicano Studies, is a longtime adviser to SDSU's chapter of M.E.Ch.A.

JESÚS NIETO ('77, '90), associate professor emeritus in the School of Teacher Education, taught multicultural education at SDSU and served as M.E.Ch.A.'s campus adviser for 25 years.

IN SEPTEMBER, M.E.Ch.A., THE NATIONAL CHICANO STUDENT ORGANIZATION, unveiled a two-decade labor of love in San Diego's iconic Chicano Park. SDSU alumnus and proud former MEChista José Olague ('04, '10) created a vibrant mural, which spans two freeway columns, to recognize key figures, including SDSU educators (see below), and events in the struggle for Chicano and Indigenous rights, as well as the history of the M.E.Ch.A. student movement. "I wanted this mural to tell the truth about who we are," Olague says. "There's always been resistance. There have always been different perspectives."

Olague, who grew up in San Diego, began painting the mural in 2003 while majoring in social science and Chicano studies at SDSU. Now a teacher in San Diego's South Bay, he finished the sprawling project on his summer vacation with the help of 60 volunteers, more than three-quarters of them Chicana artists.

Alberto Ochoa, SDSU professor emeritus, says he's honored to be featured in the mural. "It's also recognizing the constellation of people who are working collectively to bring about change in terms of the promise of an equal educational opportunity and the right to equal representation." —*Michael Klitzing*



RENE NUÑEZ ('94), late professor emeritus of Chicana and Chicano Studies, was one of the organizers of the 1969 conference that produced "El Plan de Santa Bárbara: A Chicano Plan for Higher Education" and birthed M.E.Ch.A. Nuñez later helped develop SDSU's Chicana and Chicano Studies curriculum.

ALBERTO OCHOA, professor emeritus in education, is a founding faculty member and later chair of what is now SDSU's Department of Dual Language and English Learner Education, the state's largest producer of bilingual teachers.

MARIO AGUILAR ('78, '80, '09), who's portrayed on another part of the mural, is a lecturer in SDSU's Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies and a professor emeritus at UCSD. The SDSU alumnus is also the captain of the Danza Mexí'cayotl Chicano dance circle.

PHOTOGRAPH BY REBECCA NORDQUIST; COURTESY PHOTO

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SARAH WILKINS



ESPECIALES • ESPECIALES • ESPECIALES

BEBIDAS	MARGARITA DAILY SPECIALS	COMIDA	SEASONAL SOUP
12 LIMPIDOS THE PERFECT SANTITAS MEXICAL MARGARITA DAILY MARGARITA DAILY MARGARITA DAILY	MARGARITA DAILY SPECIALS MARGARITA DAILY MARGARITA DAILY MARGARITA DAILY MARGARITA DAILY	COMIDA PASTA PASTA PASTA PASTA PASTA PASTA	SEASONAL SOUP SEASONAL SOUP SEASONAL SOUP SEASONAL SOUP SEASONAL SOUP SEASONAL SOUP

**BROTHER AND SISTER
PONCE JR. & ROCIO MEZA**

Ponce's Mexican Restaurant

Adams Avenue
in Kensington
poncesrestaurant.com



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AZTEC OWNED

Many well-known foodies call SDSU their alma mater. Take for instance, Ralph Rubio ('78), affectionately known to locals as the Fish Taco King, who founded Rubio's in 1983 in Pacific Beach. Or Laura Ambrose ('89), the owner of Woodstock's Pizza (with one location just six minutes from SDSU), a staple in California's college towns. Here are five more alumni in San Diego who will make you say, **"I didn't know they were an Aztec!"**

By Michael Klitzing
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATT FURMAN

PONCE'S MEXICAN RESTAURANT typically closes between Christmas and New Year's to allow its staff some well-deserved family time. That's why Ponce Meza Jr. ('00, accounting) starts each year by wading through a series of dejected-sounding voicemails.

"We get so many people who grew up in San Diego coming home for the holidays, and they want to come here, only to find out we're closed," he says.

That's the kind of hold Ponce's has had over the Kensington neighborhood ever since Ponce Meza Sr. opened the location on Adams Avenue in 1969.

Now owned and operated by Ponce Jr. and his sister Rocio Meza, much has changed since they took the reins from their father in 2000, including a new North County location that's open during that holiday window. But the family feel is much the same.

"It's a generational thing," Rocio says. "You'll have grandparents, children and grandchildren all eating here, and they've all been coming forever."

What gets people in the door is Mexican comfort food in large portions, including the crowd-pleasing chile relleno plate. Many recipes are the same as what Ponce Sr. brought to Kensington 54 years ago: They still use cheddar in the cheese enchiladas, and Uptown might just riot if they didn't.

The influence of the Meza siblings can be found in the full bar — featuring margaritas where one can actually taste the tequila — and in the expanded dining room where a diner feel has given way to a stylish, casual decor.

A proud SDSU alumnus, Ponce Jr. notes that the restaurant has become something of an Aztec hangout in recent years despite its lack of a television. Located just 10 minutes from Viejas Arena, the room often fills up on men's basketball game nights.

"I want to keep this restaurant that my dad started back in 1969 going on forever," Rocio says. "It's a part of us."

HANNA
TESFAMICHAEL

Hanna's Gourmet

Adams Avenue
in Normal Heights
hannasgourmetsd.com

WHILE ENJOYING ONE OF HANNA'S Gourmet globally inspired takeout dinners, it's important to savor the moment. Because the venerable Normal Heights restaurant is here to take you on a journey — and that means being on the move constantly.

One week it'll be Italian family style, the next Moroccan. Have a taste for Spanish tapas, or the cuisine of China or Japan? Just wait.

"Really, it's because I get bored easily," says Hanna Tesfamichael ('91, food and nutrition). "Changing things keeps me passionate."

She pauses and smiles.

"Because it sure doesn't make business sense."

Yet there's no denying Tesfamichael's business acumen. Since opening Hanna's Gourmet as a catering business in 2008, she has navigated an economic downturn and a global pandemic through prudent decision-making. Since the end of the COVID-19 lockdown, she has opened her dining room and full bar to the public only for her popular Sunday brunch, which runs from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. This is when she serves up her greatest hits, including her take on *chilaquiles*, an egg dish with all the fixings. Dinner is available only via takeout, pop-up dinners or private events.

The global twist harks back to her childhood in Ethiopia. She was 13 years old when a family friend returned from studying in the U.S. with a Betty Crocker

cookbook in tow. Soon, consuming international cookbooks — and learning how to fuse disparate recipes and ingredients — became Tesfamichael's passion and future area of study.

The influence of SDSU's food and nutrition program can be found in the wholesomeness of her entrees, and she always cooks with health in mind.

Tesfamichael was also empowered by

professor emerita Audrey Spindler, whose mentorship helped guide her through homesickness and the isolation she felt as the only international student and only Black student in many of her classes.

"She was my backbone," Tesfamichael says.

Years later, Spindler became a Hanna's Gourmet patron — one of the many locals embarking on a delicious global journey.



"WHAT IS EL INDIO?" IT WAS THE \$1,000 answer in the Kid Cuisine category on "Jeopardy!" and host Ken Jennings offered up a doozy: "San Diego's El Indio restaurant claims Ralph Pesqueira created these diminutive items by adapting flautas."

Contestants Ray, Claire and Lloyd stood in silence until the distinctive three beeps signaled time was up.



COURTESY OF JENNIFER PESQUEIRA

"That's perhaps the origin of the taquito," Jennings said.

Of all the information gleaned from the Jan. 3 episode of the quiz show, one of the biggest takeaways was that Ray, Claire and Lloyd were most certainly not San Diegans. If so, they would have known the best-selling item of the Mexican restaurant that was established in 1940 and has graced the corner of India and Winder streets in Mission Hills since 1947.

Jennifer Pesqueira ('94, art), El Indio's owner, had no idea the clue was coming.

Jennifer Pesqueira ('94) with her father, Ralph Pesqueira Jr. ('57), in 2008.



She only found out about the game show shoutout when a family member on the East Coast who happened to be watching called her excitedly on the phone.

"The next day the customers were like, 'Hey we saw you on 'Jeopardy!'" Jennifer says. "It was really cool."

"I loved that no one knew the 'question,'" she adds.

Jennifer is the third generation of Pesqueiras to run El Indio, following in the footsteps of her grandfather, taquito innovator Ralph Pesqueira Sr., and her father, fellow SDSU alumnus Ralph Pesqueira Jr. ('57, business). Ralph Jr., a former California State University trustee, gradually stepped away from the business early in the COVID-19 pandemic.

But El Indio remains El Indio.

Longtime customers will still recognize the friendly feel, brightly colored dining room and hearty staples, including their top-selling taquitos (the choices are beef, chicken and potato).

"My grandfather passed when I was 11, so he never got to see me working here," Jennifer says. "I think sometimes I still feel his presence around me. My dad trained me in all things El Indio for over 30 years, so I think El Indio is in my blood. I know he is proud of me firsthand."

JENNIFER
PESQUEIRA

El Indio Mexican Restaurant

India Street
in Mission Hills
elindiosandiego.net

TASON “ROCKY” NICHOLS (’08, hospitality and tourism management) and his cousin Chad Cline own an eclectic portfolio of San Diego–area watering holes stretching from the Gaslamp Quarter to East County. But whichever one you choose to pull up a stool in, you’ll find yourself at Grandma’s house.

“Think of the stereotypical grandma. When you walk in the house, what’s the first thing she’s going to do?” says Nichols, who credits his cousin for the concept. “It’s going to be like, ‘Oh my goodness! It’s been so long! What are you up to?’”

“It kind of gives you that good feeling.”

The original, and literal, grandma’s house is The Waterfront Bar & Grill, which opened in Little Italy in 1933. The cousins bought the establishment from Nichols’ grandmother Nancy Nichols, who was a fixture at the bar for decades.

As Nichols tells it, he never intended to go into the family business. He attended SDSU with the dream of pursuing a career

in the hotel and tribal casino industries.

But a funny thing happened while he was tending bar at the Waterfront to earn a little extra cash. Nichols started applying some of the hospitality concepts he was learning at SDSU. And they began to pay off.

“It was all of these little things like systems and promotions and new hire trainings,” Nichols says. “And the sales would go up. Our customers were happier. It was almost like instant gratification to implement something and have it work. I kind of got addicted to it.”

Inspired, Nichols branched out on his own. He and two “knucklehead buddies,” as he calls them, managed to scratch together enough money in 2010 to open Eastbound Bar & Grill in Lakeside, a short distance from where the three had played football at El Capitan High School.

“Eastbound was where I got my master’s,” Nichols says, smiling.

Nichols and Cline then established Werewolf American Pub downtown and



**JASON “ROCKY”
NICHOLS**

The Hills Pub

**La Mesa Boulevard
in La Mesa**
thehillspub.com

The Hills Pub in La Mesa, while buying Club Marina in Point Loma, Sycamore Den in Normal Heights and Aero Club in Middletown.

Nichols credits the lessons he learned at SDSU for keeping him ready to adapt.

“SDSU taught me how to learn,” he says. “That’s the biggest thing in the restaurant industry. Understanding that you know you don’t know everything.”



**SU-MEI
YU**

Saffron Thai

**India Street
in Mission Hills**
saffronthai.com

HAI FOOD IS SO UBIQUITOUS ACROSS the U.S. today that it’s hard to imagine a time when it was largely unknown.

Yet when Su-Mei Yu (’68, MSW) started dishing out her now famous Thai

chicken in Mission Hills in 1985, she had to allay some serious suspicions.

With an intention to educate the public, she practiced patience with people who were doubtful about what she was serving.

“Thai food was still a novelty at that time,” she says. “Nobody ate rice. Can you imagine that?”

Fortunately, Yu, who came from Thailand to Kentucky in 1961 at the age of 15 to attend high school, had a knack for winning people over.

What she started with a tiny storefront, a \$10,000 bank loan, a custom-made chicken roasting machine and a single employee became Saffron, a mainstay of the San Diego restaurant scene.

It also turned Yu into something of a celebrity as an author of Thai cookbooks and a guest chef on shows such as “Today,” “Martha Stewart Living” and “Good Morning America.” She even hosted her own show on KPBS, “Savor San Diego.”

What was the secret to her success?

“I think because I really love cooking, and I was a social worker,” says Yu, who worked in the helping profession in the 1970s before spending two years as an assistant professor of maternal child health at SDSU.

Yu finally sold Saffron after 33 years. Now called Saffron Thai, it’s still going strong on India Street, and there’s another location at the San Diego International Airport. She’s still the restaurant’s guiding light and works closely with the owners.

“To this day Saffron is very careful about where they source their ingredients, and they care a great deal about your health,” Yu says.

Yu now splits her time between Thailand and India, where she is focused on immersing herself in her Buddhist faith. She’ll still drop into Saffron Thai when she’s back in the U.S.

“I’m so blessed,” she says. ●

TRANSFORMING ARTS

In September, SDSU raised the curtain on the Performing Arts District. Here's a behind-the-scenes look at everything the new space has to offer students and regional arts patrons.

By Lizbeth Persons
PHOTOGRAPHS BY KEN JACQUES

WHEN JOYCE GATTAS, THE DEAN EMERITUS FOR THE COLLEGE OF PROFESSIONAL STUDIES AND FINE ARTS, OUTLINED A FEASIBILITY STUDY in 2016 for what she called an “SDSU Arts District,” she’d already had her aha moment. The time was now to present a bold vision and create a geographic space for the arts.

Seven years later and with the support of then Interim President Sally Roush and President Adela de la Torre, that outline became the provenance for a philanthropy-driven, multibuilding project that will forever change the SDSU landscape.

In addition to the SDSU Main Stage, which was built in 1967, the Performing Arts District includes four new performance and patron structures: the Prebys Stage, the Dean Joyce M. Gattas Pavilion, the outdoor Bill and Evelyn Lamden Stage and the Ben and Nikki Clay Stage.

The district opened in September with the musical “Ziggy, Stardust, and Me” and is set to become a regional powerhouse in training and performance and a vibrant hub for collaboration. It brings together various disciplines and provides students with state-of-the-art facilities to nurture their talents and thrive.

PREBYS STAGE

JULIA BROWN
FAMILY LOBBY



The renovated SDSU Main Stage Theatre and the Ruth Anna, Louis F., Dorothy Cable Stage have long been vibrant hubs for artistic innovation.



Inside the Main Stage Theatre, there is enhanced audience seating, plus acoustic tiles for exceptional sound quality. The striking ADA-compliant Julia R. Brown Family Lobby and the Luby Lift, a bridge for the inclusion of people with disabilities, break down barriers that hinder full engagement with the arts.



The Dean Joyce M. Gattas Pavilion encompasses all patron services, including the Alice and Doug Diamond Box Office and a concession area.



The Julia R. Brown Family Park includes the open-air Ben and Nikki Clay Stage set against a foundational wall that serves as a canvas for projecting scenic art and enhancing visual storytelling in its grassy audience area.



The Prebys Stage, made possible by the Conrad Prebys Foundation, is a flexible second stage space featuring a spring floor vital for dance, cutting-edge design technology and a high-quality sound design lab.



The outdoor Bill and Evelyn Lamden Stage is a dynamic space with opportunities for unbounded creativity and learning.

Impact investor **Jessica Sarowitz** has a “soft spot,” she says, for the foster care community, and she wanted to help. A \$2.5 million gift to endow the SDSU Guardian Scholars Center was her way of doing that.

BY TOBIN VAUGHN



As a volunteer for the San Diego State University Campanile Foundation board of directors, Jessica Sarowitz (front center in red) was excited to support the men’s basketball team at the Final Four in Houston. She cheered them on with the SDSU Diamonds.

of cultural, life heritage histories within these communities that require more customization in the support that they need, and this speaks to that,” she says. “I wanted to do that for the Guardian Scholars community of students. They deserve it.”

MARIE BRAÑES (’21, ’22) IS A GUARDIAN SCHOLARS SUCCESS STORY. She was supported by the program while earning two degrees and is now an assistant program coordinator with Guardian Scholars at the Office of Educational Opportunity Programs, Outreach and Success.

Brañes came to SDSU having spent much of her childhood in the foster care system, frequently changing residences and having her studies disrupted. Like many who share similar backgrounds of broken families, little money and even less support, she had never believed higher education, let alone two degrees, was a real possibility.

How critical was the program for Brañes? “I would not be who I am without the Guardian Scholars,” she says. “Although there are other supports within San Diego, the Guardian Scholars Program was really my lifeline.”

The application process for Guardian Scholars is fiercely competitive. In fact, Brañes says, students granted admission only half-jokingly refer to their program acceptance as receiving “the golden ticket.”

Brañes is grateful for the added support Sarowitz’s endowment will provide. “Donors like her taking the time to learn about Guardian Scholars is why we’re as successful as we are,” she says.

SAROWITZ GAINED SOME OF HER INSIGHT FROM A FRIEND WHO works in the foster care system. She learned even more while executive producing a film called *Foster Boy*, which involves a legal case.

She is aware that foster care students are a vulnerable community often subject to low outcomes in terms of graduation rates. It’s something she hopes to help change.

“I have a soft spot for this community,” she says, “and I thought, *What better way [to contribute] than to do something at SDSU?*”

Ambitious and goal-oriented, Sarowitz vows to monitor the effects, including metrics like retention rate, of her endowment on the Guardian Scholars Program’s progress. “Am I going to keep a good eye on the trajectory of this? Hell yeah! If things need to be retooled,” she says, “I’m going to be a big advocate for that because we have got to do better by this group.

“I just need them to get to the finish line because that’s the promise we need to deliver on.” ●

THE GIFT OF SHARING

Despite growing up with no siblings

in Chicago’s North Side, Jessica Sarowitz recalls being a handful for her Honduran immigrant parents. “I was a rascal,” she says. “I liked to talk back a little bit and always had a lot of questions.”

Sharing was also a challenge. “As an only child, I think I never really learned how to share, but over the course of my life, I’ve experienced different models of sharing and how beautiful that can be,” Sarowitz says.

Having now become a social impact investor as CEO and managing partner of 4S Bay Partners, sharing is what Sarowitz does. She volunteers on the San Diego State University Campanile Foundation board of directors, recently announcing a \$2.5 million gift to endow the Jessica P. Sarowitz Guardian Scholars Center.

Guardian Scholars is a program in SDSU’s Student Affairs and Campus Diversity Division serving students who are current or former foster youth, wards of the court, under legal guardianship or unaccompanied homeless youths. Overseen by the Office of Educational Opportunity Programs and Ethnic Affairs, it supports students transitioning to, through and beyond SDSU.

The program offers students scholarships, help with housing and services such as tutoring, mentoring and both personal and academic counseling. Established in 2007, Guardian Scholars currently supports 150 SDSU students, the largest number to date.

Mary Taylor (’98), SDSU associate chief diversity office for Outreach Success, says Sarowitz’s Guardian Scholars donation brings a new level of support to fuel the program’s growth.

“Through her generous gift, Jessica Sarowitz is presenting our students with significant opportunities for achievement,” Taylor says. “We are grateful for the confidence she is showing in our program and our students’ abilities to succeed.”

Sarowitz is investing in SDSU because, so far, she likes what she sees. “I love a university that is making a difference in students’ lives while also providing what I consider to be excellent education that will do well in the marketplace,” she says.

Sarowitz points to the various subcommunities that make up SDSU’s student body and how the university creates spaces to support their success like the Black Resource Center, Latinx Resource Center, Asian Pacific Islander Desi American Center, Native Resource Center and Pride Center. “There are certain sorts

WHY OAXACA

**EMBRACING THEIR
MEXICAN HERITAGE,
SDSU STUDENTS
EXAMINE THE DEEP
CULINARY TIES THAT
BIND THE STATE OF
OAXACA TO SOUTHERN
CALIFORNIA.**

By Susanne Clara Bard
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SCOTT HARGROVE



EVERY FALL, RESIDENTS OF IXPANTEPEC NIEVES — a small mountain town in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca — make the 4,000-mile journey to Tijuana and back again several times per month. Multiple trips are required to supply Southern California's Mixtec population with ample ingredients to prepare the moles, tamales, tortillas and other special food offerings for *El Día de los Muertos* celebrations in early November.

"Chiles, dried beef, special candies, bread — everything we need for the Day of the Dead, it travels from Nieves to the border," says Angelina Trujillo, SDSU's Tu'un Savi (Mixtec) instructor of more than 20 years.

The foods — and the ties that connect Oaxaca to California — run deep. Hundreds of thousands of Indigenous Oaxacans, many of Mixtec heritage, reside in the state. In the late 1980s, a large number of migrant Oaxacans became U.S. citizens after the passage of legislation granting them the opportunity to do so. As a result, people from communities like Ixpantepec Nieves established binational communities, living and working in the U.S., but returning to Oaxaca to care for their *milpas* — small plots of land on which they grow their own crops. This resulted in the preservation of many traditional practices, but also the integration of farming techniques picked up in the U.S. — and a taste for new foods, according to Ramona Pérez, SDSU professor of anthropology and director of the Center for Latin American Studies. "The labor relationship between Oaxaca and California forms a kind of cultural mixing," she says.

Pérez has been running ethnographic field schools for SDSU students in Oaxaca since 2002 and directs the Oaxaca Center for Mesoamerican Studies — a hub for research, teaching and collaborative community service, reflecting SDSU's commitment as a Hispanic-Serving Institution.

An interdisciplinary team of researchers at the university has received more than \$6 million in grant funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to train students for careers in agriculture and food science to solve pressing sustainability and food security issues, especially as the planet warms up.

Through the program, SDSU students traveled to Oaxaca this summer to examine how its traditional food culture is shifting — from the field to the plate. "Our heritage students who have family relationships in Mexico have the opportunity to be a part of communities their parents may not be able to return

to — it comes alive for them,” Pérez says. “They become a new set of social scientists and teachers who have this intimate knowledge about what we mean when we talk about Oaxacalifornia.”

One of these students is Lucia Canul. She is pursuing her Ph.D. through SDSU and UCSD’s joint doctoral program in global public health. Her grandparents moved to the U.S. from Mexico 60 years ago. “While I’m in Oaxaca and I’m working alongside the Mixtec communities or the Zapotec communities, I feel a deep connection to them because of my Indigenous heritage,” she says. “I feel this deep responsibility to give back to the community.”

A registered dietitian, Canul has worked with many patients from southern Mexico who often face health disparities in the U.S. Focusing her research on nutrition in Oaxacan communities in California was a natural extension of that experience.

The nutritional benefits of southern Mexico’s cuisine have often been overlooked by health care providers in the U.S. But Canul believes that those who are informed about the variety of foods that are actually consumed will be better prepared to help their patients. “We thought it was very important to go back to places like Oaxaca to have a better understanding of what their diet looks like,” Canul says.

As a medical translator for Southern California’s Mixtec community, Trujillo, who was born in Ixpantepec Nieves and divides her time between the town of 600 and San Diego, often hears U.S. providers recommending that their patients eat more vegetables. But, she says, they don’t have a word for vegetables. So the advice misses the wide variety of healthful staples eaten by Indigenous communities for which there are words, including pumpkins, corn, beans and wild greens.

“Our patients deserve to have their culture be part of their care because that is going to give lasting results, improvements in health disparities and really promote health outcomes,” Canul says.

THE EMERGENCE OF FARMING

To understand the roots of Oaxacan food and agriculture, Canul and her fellow interns visited the site of one of Mesoamerica’s earliest cities, Monte Albán. Farming arose in the valley below, once sustaining more than 17,000 people.

“The Valley of Oaxaca itself has been an important agricultural resource for all of Mexico for thousands of years,” Pérez says. “The evolution of corn as a basic food group is centered up here.”

Like in many parts of California, growing conditions are favorable in Monte Albán most of the year. It had sophisticated irrigation canals and agricultural terraces, allowing crops to thrive in the mountainous landscape. It was here that the three sisters — corn, beans and squash — joined forces to become the central staples of the Mesoamerican diet, providing a nutritious balance of fiber-rich carbohydrates and protein. “Taking the students up to Monte Albán,

they not only begin to understand the impact of what it means for agriculture to have evolved in this place, but they also get to see how that agricultural stability grows into a city-state,” Pérez says.

PRE-HISPANIC COOKING

Six miles east of Monte Albán in Oaxaca’s capital, the students met Victoria Hernandez, who runs a pre-Hispanic cooking school. Together, they shopped for fresh produce and herbs at one of Mesoamerica’s largest markets.

Ramona Pérez (top right), SDSU professor and director of the Oaxaca Center for Mesoamerican Studies, and program interns, including Angel Garibay (top left), Lisa Odland (bottom left, next to local cook Judelia Lopez Camacena) and Lucia Canul (bottom right) are part of a binational effort to examine how Oaxaca’s traditional food culture is shifting.



Angelina Trujillo (center) is SDSU’s Tu’un Savi instructor, and she splits her time between San Diego and Ixpantepec Nieves, her birthplace. Program interns include (from left) Lisa Odland, Julianna Deras, Michelle Lozada and Isabel Rosado.

With produce in hand, the students headed for Hernandez’s semi-outdoor kitchen with stone walls and a dirt floor. There, she taught them how to cook with pre-contact ingredients using traditional tools such as *metates* and *molcajetes* for grinding, clay pots to cook in and an open flame.

On the menu were *mole coloradito* (a sauce of tomatoes, chiles, nuts, seeds, spices and chocolate), *sopa de guias* (squash vines soup), tortillas prepared using an ancient Mesoamerican process and quesadillas with squash blossoms.

VISITING IXPANTEPEC NIEVES

The interns’ culinary education continued in Ixpantepec Nieves, a seven-hour trip from the capital via winding mountain roads. Every morning they would gather at Trujillo’s house, welcomed by the smell of coffee on the stove and *pan dulce* (sweet bread) on the table.

“In those moments when we sat at the table and chatted, I started to really understand the importance of meal sharing and time together in Oaxaca,” Canul says.

She and her peers interviewed community members about the foods they eat, and Trujillo arranged for local *cocineras* (cooks) to teach them how to prepare a variety of recipes, including their own meals. “I couldn’t help but start to think about the nutritional properties within these foods,” Canul says. “And I was able to begin to see the connection between the foods there and the foods that we see in the United States.”

The students also learned about traditional growing methods from Mixtec farmers. In the past, people in Ixpantepec Nieves

grew all of their own food, but today, Trujillo estimates that only about 20% of its residents still tend to their milpas. In addition, many farmers have shifted away from corn fields to more lucrative export crops. The trade-off is less food security back home: The nearest market is located in a larger town 45 minutes away. “We really got a deeper understanding of how integral these crops are to the people and to their culture,” Canul says.

Pérez feels strongly that the agricultural and culinary knowledge that people from Ixpantepec Nieves have shared should be repaid. The community has requested a cookbook of their traditional recipes. She says they are capturing those recipes, and the book will be written in Mixtec, Spanish and English to reach multiple generations, especially younger people in Oaxaca and California.

On the last day of their trip, the interns returned to Oaxaca with one more task to complete: re-creating one of the recipes they’d learned to make during the trip in the traditional kitchen built into the rooftop of the Oaxaca Center for Mesoamerican Studies. “I wanted them to think about how they would replicate the recipes back home in California,” Pérez says.

Instead of using a molcajete and a metate, they used a blender and a food processor and ingredients that could be easily obtained in San Diego. “They came back and produced the most amazing meal.”

Pérez hears from the students that they didn’t really understand who they were until they went on this trip. “One of the most powerful experiences for me is watching a student really embrace their Mesoamerican heritage,” she says. ●

'I Was Just Trying to Survive.'

Vanessa Lytle had seemingly lost everything by the time she was 21 years old. But with strength and resolve, the SDSU senior is just months away from earning a degree — and fulfilling her late mother's wishes.

BY
**WAYNE
DREHS**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
RACHEL CRAWFORD

PUT MY
HEAD DOWN
AND GET
THROUGH IT

CONFLICTED

WORRIED
ABOUT MY FUTURE

CONFUSED

LEFT
IN THE
DARK

WHY DID THIS
HAPPEN TO ME?

NUMB

ANGRY

WHAT'S GOING
TO HAPPEN?

LOST



Standing at the curb in front of her childhood home in Santa Barbara, California, that fall night in 2020, Vanessa Lytle had one thought: *Now what?* To her right sat the mattress from her bedroom. Next to that sat her old clothes hamper, a metal bookshelf and a black office chair. And surrounding it all, piles of garbage bags. One with a brightly painted school art project poking through. So many others stuffed with her mom’s clothes and destined for Goodwill.

Vanessa, only 19 years old at the time, pulled out her cell phone and snapped a picture. The remnants of a fractured family. Two years earlier, her family had endured a bitter divorce, with her dad withdrawing funds from a joint bank account, Vanessa says. And the money — along with her dad — never returned. Shortly after, Vanessa’s mother, Claire Le Guern, was diagnosed with breast cancer. She kept the news from Vanessa and her youngest daughter, Alizee, to not worry them. But the disease quickly spread. Within a year, Claire could barely walk. She was terminal. She decided to spend her final days in France, where she grew up and her family could care for her. Alizee, then 15, would also go.

Left behind in California, Vanessa was tasked with emptying out the family’s triplex before their lease expired in two months. Room by room, drawer by drawer, she sold what she could and donated or threw away the rest. Dishes, clothes, kitchen utensils, furniture, her mom’s car. Anything to help pay the bills. The landlord allowed her to stay a third month, keeping the family’s security deposit. But then what? Most of her friends were in college. She thought about crashing on couches or sleeping in the back of her truck. Maybe she’d move in with one of her mom’s friends. Or head to France to join her mom and sister. She had earned her associate’s degree from Santa Barbara City College but assumed her college days were finished.

“School just wasn’t something I was thinking about at that point,” Vanessa says. “I was just trying to survive.”

THREE YEARS EARLIER, at 4:01 p.m. on the Friday before Labor Day in 2017, Tammy Blackburn received the phone call that changed her life. Concerning results on a routine mammogram had prompted a biopsy of her breast tissue. And that pathology report had returned positive for cancer. There would be more tests and more biopsies for the former SDSU basketball star and later the discovery that the cancer had spread to her lymph nodes. That led to major surgery and 35 days of chemotherapy.

“At that point, I knew life as I had known it was over,” says Blackburn, now SDSU’s senior director of marketing and communications for University Relations and Development. “I knew I was



Vanessa Lytle (top left and bottom right) and her sister, Alizee (bottom left), lived a fairly typical life until their mother, Claire Le Guern (bottom center), was diagnosed with cancer. Then everything changed.

going to have to find a new way to live.”

This meant discovering a new motivation to help her cope with the pain and get out of bed each morning. Blackburn was in touch with Mark Mays, a friend and alumnus who had recently lost his wife, Karen Mays, to breast cancer. They knew they wanted to help others who were experiencing pain and anguish caused by cancer. At the infusion center where Blackburn underwent chemotherapy treatment, she saw the ruthless, unforgiving way cancer ripped apart families and brought chaos to the lives of loved ones. Blackburn, a double SDSU alumna (’94, ’01) and longtime donor to her alma mater, began asking about the impact of cancer on the university community. The answers were overwhelming, prompting an idea that she shared with Mays. Create a legacy she hoped

would far outlast her: a scholarship for students facing financial hardships from cancer. People like Vanessa Lytle.

“Cancer is a disease that just takes and takes and takes,” Blackburn says. “It’s relentless. The idea was to be able to help someone in a real crisis, to make sure that cancer wouldn’t take away their college degree. It wouldn’t take away their dreams.”

In September 2018, in a small banquet room in La Jolla, California, Blackburn, then Interim President Sally Roush, SDSU donor and mentor to Blackburn, Patti Roscoe (’14), and 30 others gathered to officially launch the Wallace Shatsky Blackburn Courage Through Cancer Fund. Blackburn surprised her team of doctors, surgeon Anne Wallace and oncologist Rebecca A. Shatsky, by naming the fund after them.

Wearing a bright pink dress, Blackburn beamed while holding an oversize check announcing the \$45,000 in donations that would serve as the scholarship fund’s foundation. Additionally, a fundraising goal of \$50,000 was set to fully endow the scholarship between SDSU’s Day of Giving event on Sept. 25 and the end of Breast Cancer Awareness month in October. The goal was reached in less than a day.

“This was the vision,” Blackburn says. “I just wasn’t sure it would be possible.”

BY MARCH OF 2021, almost three years after that evening in La Jolla, the scholarship had helped nearly 20 students affected by cancer. At that same time, halfway around the world in France, Vanessa Lytle stood at her mother’s hospital bedside, searching for the words to say goodbye for the last time.

She had been in France for three months, living with her grandmother and sister, but needed to go home. The endless days of sitting in her grandmother’s basement in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, wallowing and wondering *Why me?* were sending her into an emotional tailspin.

Vanessa looked down at her mom, who by then had lost her vision. Tears fell down both of their faces. Claire tried to speak, her voice trailing off at the end of each sentence. She told her daughter she loved her. She was proud of her. And she understood why she needed to head back to California. She was almost 21 now. It was time to build a life of her own.

“It was hard,” Vanessa says. “So hard.”

When Vanessa returned to California, she moved in with Gail and Gary Kvistad, her mom’s close friends. That had been the plan all along. Vanessa just didn’t know it. The Kvistads promised Claire that Vanessa would finish college. But Vanessa wanted to surf, sleep and maybe someday figure out the rest. She wanted to escape.

“She was in a victim state,” Gail Kvistad says. “‘Why me? Everything always happens to me.’ She wanted to be a slacker. We told her that wasn’t reasonable. Sleeping on people’s couches? In the back of your truck? That’s ridiculous. She was in the wrong family for that. She needed to think about her future.”

Kvistad reminded Vanessa that her mother studied law in Paris and held two master’s degrees in international and business law. She also did postgraduate studies obtaining the highest *diplôme d’études*

supérieures spécialisées (DESS or diploma of higher specialized studies) awarded at the time. And Vanessa recalled what her mom always told her: “Get your college degree and you can live on a beach and sell coconuts for all I care. But you have to get your degree.”

On July 11, 2021, working on a dive boat off the coast of Santa Barbara with a slice of pizza in her hand, she looked down at her phone and saw six missed calls from her grandmother. She knew. Her mom had taken her final breath. Vanessa headed back to France for the funeral, then returned to the Kvistads’ home. Lured by SDSU’s business program, she decided to apply to the university and began putting away \$750 a month to help pay for potential college expenses. Then she waited.

“The more I thought about it, the more I realized it was something I needed to do for my mom,” Vanessa says. “And for myself.”

EIGHT MONTHS AFTER her mom died, Vanessa opened the email she had been waiting for. SDSU had accepted her to its business program. Next came the challenge of paying for school. Vanessa had saved as much as she could and had a small inheritance from her mom, but it wouldn’t cover two years of room, board, tuition, books and other expenses. The Kvistads pointed her toward the university’s online scholarship portal. “We told her to apply for everything,” Kvistad says.

Vanessa filled out an application and “checked a bunch of

PAYING IT FORWARD

In December 2021, alumnus Mark Mays (’69) announced a \$500,000 matching gift to support the Courage Through Cancer Fund. Mays will double any donation with this generous match and help the fund meet its \$1 million goal.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT MARY DARLING:
mdarling@sdsu.edu.



Patti Roscoe (from left), Tammy Blackburn and Mark Mays started the scholarship in 2018, just after Blackburn was diagnosed with cancer and Mays lost his wife to the disease.

boxes,” she says, including one that asked if her family had been affected by cancer. “I remember thinking, *That’s pretty specific*,” she says. She added a short essay about all she had experienced. Her application was escalated to the university’s Economic Crisis Response Team. That’s when Tammy Blackburn received a call about Vanessa’s story.

“It was clear Vanessa was experiencing personal pain and anguish,” Blackburn says. “She was someone in a crisis who needed help.”

A little more than a month after the fall semester began, another email informed Vanessa she had been awarded the Wallace Shatsky Blackburn Courage Through Cancer Scholarship. Reading further, she realized the amount provided would cover her tuition. She began to cry.

“Beyond the financial help, it showed me there is a team of people in my corner who not only want to see me succeed but want to help me get there as well,” Vanessa says.

IN ITS FIVE YEARS, the Wallace Shatsky Blackburn Courage Through Cancer Fund has helped close to 35 students continue their college education in the face of cancer-driven adversity. A kinesiology student whose single mom had stage 4 cancer was awarded tuition, books and a meal plan for three years. A senior in SDSU’s honors college, a criminal justice major who was diagnosed with cancer, was provided tuition and food support. A junior

from the College of Professional Studies and Fine Arts, who was diagnosed with cancer and undergoing intense treatment, was provided tuition and housing support.

It is but one in a long line of non-athletic, non-academic scholarships that help students who have been impacted by life-changing challenges like addiction and domestic violence or who are involved in certain activities or hail from a specific geographic area.

“Student support is a big component of how and why students are able to graduate in four years or around four years,” says Adrienne Vargas, SDSU’s vice president for University Relations and Development. “The scholarship is the game changer. It’s what gets them across the finish line.”

In 2022, the university dispersed more than \$6 million through 2,254 scholarships, funded almost exclusively through donors. Starting a named scholarship requires a minimum donation of \$5,000 per year for a minimum of five years. As Blackburn can attest, donors quickly discover the impact their generosity has not only on the recipients but also on the donors themselves. She points to the generosity of so many donors and the ability to help people like Vanessa that keeps her going.

Though her initial round of treatment ended in June of 2018, Blackburn woke up with piercing back pain on Thanksgiving of that year. Another round of tests revealed the cancer had spread to her bones. Now it was stage 4. Like the doctors told Vanessa’s mom, it was incurable, and she would spend the rest of her life in treatment.

“Hope is the only tasteful medicine in cancer care. It’s the only pill you want to swallow or IV you’re happy to take,” Blackburn says. “And this fills you with that hope. We can’t change what happened to Vanessa. We can’t bring her mom back. But we can give her this. We can help get her life back on track. And if not a place like San Diego State, then where?”

In May, Vanessa will walk across the stage at Viejas Arena and shake the hands of university President Adela de la Torre and Dan Moshavi, dean of the Fowler College of Business. Blackburn plans to be there. So, too, do the Kvistads. Vanessa has already imagined the moment. She plans to hold her diploma up to the sky, thanking her mom and thinking how proud she must be. “I know I’m going to cry,” she says.

From there, the opportunities for the next chapter in her life are limitless. She has thought about graduate school or a job in real estate, finance or perhaps starting her own business. Maybe even in Australia. But as much as that piece of paper will help change the course of her life, her two years at SDSU have rewarded her with so much more than a degree.

“This place gave me a home,” she says. “I’ve made new friends. I’ve built a new life for myself. There’s nothing I feel I can do that equates to what Tammy and so many people have done for me and my life. I’m so incredibly grateful. I just want to make them proud.” ●



Anson Han (right), SDSU class of 2017, was inspired to mentor Ari Weizman ('22) after he was mentored by '06 master's recipient Heather Jablow (not pictured).

INTRODUCING AZTEC NETWORK

SDSU Alumni is always looking for ways to connect the SDSU community. This new digital hub brings SDSU networking to a whole new level.

By Taylor Harris

WHEN STUDENTS BECOME A PART OF THE SDSU COMMUNITY, they aren’t

just an Aztec during their time spent on campus; they are an Aztec for life, a part of a community that is actively cultivating a culture of giving back.

SDSU’s new digital networking platform, Aztec Network, embodies that culture. It’s designed to help connect the community, present opportunities for student and alumni mentorship and allow Aztecs to expand their professional networks and even find jobs — and is open to staff, faculty, alumni, students and donors.

Aztec Network helps users find classmates, locate local mentors, share events and much more. They can interact with individuals by liking or commenting on posts, messaging them and sending invitations to meet up. An important feature of Aztec Network is alumni-to-alumni mentorship.

Take SDSU alumnus and Google product operations manager Anson Han ('17, business administration) for example. Han was encouraged to give back to fellow Aztecs after his own mentor, Heather Jablow ('06, MBA marketing), helped shape his early career years.

In 2021, Han started mentoring Ari Weizman ('22, business administration), who had just started his internship at Google. And while Han was technically the one who was supposed to do the teaching and guiding, he says his relationship with Weizman greatly impacted who he is today.

“Ari has really helped me grow in how I mentor others, challenged my point of view at times and allowed me to improve as a communicator,” Han says.

Weizman was recently hired as a growth associate for Google at its Mountain View, California, headquarters, and Han says that seeing achievements like these is what being a mentor is all about.

The ripple effect of mentorship continues, as now Weizman, inspired by Han, plans to be a mentor to share his experiences with fellow Aztecs.

“By giving your time, experience and dedication to others,” Han says, “you’re not only helping the future of SDSU but you’re growing yourself as well.” ●



With hundreds of users on the Aztec Network already, take the opportunity to join now at aztecnetwork.sdsu.edu.



Vanessa Lytle’s mother, Claire Le Guern, always told her daughter to get a college degree and then “you can live on a beach and sell coconuts for all I care.” Vanessa will have that option in May.

COURTESY OF ANSON HAN

whywewgive

"OUR STUDENTS ARE DEALING WITH MANY TOUGH ISSUES AND A LOT OF BARRIERS RELATED TO ACCESS TO EDUCATION. HERBERT SOLOMON'S GENEROUS GIFT TO SUPPORT THE BLACK RESOURCE CENTER WILL HELP US LIFT SOME OF THOSE BURDENS."

—TONIKA GREEN

*SDSU professor and
associate vice president
for Campus
Community Affairs*

THE DONOR

Herbert J. Solomon ('53), a San Diego-based attorney and philanthropist whose gifts frequently address societal inequities by providing greater opportunities for members of historically marginalized communities.

THE GIFT

\$1 million to create the Herbert J. Solomon Endowment for the Black Resource Center and Student Success in SDSU's Division of Student Affairs and Campus Diversity.

FOR HERBERT J. SOLOMON, philanthropy is almost instinctive. "It's important to me, for my self-respect, to help others," he says.

In Jewish theology *tikkun olam* — Hebrew for "repairing the world" — is defined by performing acts of generosity and kindness. The words are more than aspirational for Solomon; the SDSU alumnus lives by them.

Possessing a strong sense of social justice, Solomon strives to help right historical wrongs, including persecution and discrimination against people of color. "And the best way to do that, I feel, is through educational opportunities," he says.

That's why Solomon donated \$1 million to create the Herbert J. Solomon Endowment for the Black Resource Center and Student Success. The funding establishes scholarships for students, known as Solomon Scholars, who demonstrate need and are involved with the center.

Beyond scholarships, Solomon's gift will support the greatest needs of the Black Resource Center. Allowable expenses would include funds for new and ongoing programming and activities related to student success; retention and recruitment; student assistant and staff salaries; and speaker fees and hosting.

In addition to providing a space for social and cultural connection for Black students on campus, the Black Resource Center offers students the resources they often need to succeed

and thrive at SDSU. It provides academic coaching, professional development seminars and conferences, and different platforms for career opportunities.

It's also a space where self-supporting students may be pointed toward financial help or those facing a crisis may be directed toward assistance. "We have created, in the Black Resource Center, a pipeline to academic success," says Tonika Green, SDSU professor and associate vice president for Campus Community Affairs.

Green describes the scholarships Solomon's endowment provides as "huge for a student who might not otherwise have the personal income, family income or family support" to complete a degree.

"Herb gave from his heart," Green says. "I thank him for setting an example for this campus and beyond."

Solomon, who has been a donor to SDSU's Jewish studies and political science programs, was instrumental in opening the current Hillel center located in the same block as the Black Resource Center. He hopes his gift will help attract and retain more Black students at SDSU.

Regarding his continuing support of programs at SDSU and elsewhere, Solomon's philosophy is forthright: "Good fortune has been bestowed upon me, and therefore, I want to assist others who are less fortunate than I am." —*Tobin Vaughn*

\$137M

SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY donors delivered \$136,900,569 in gift commitments in 2022-23, a \$593,826 increase over the previous year.

Adrienne Vargas, SDSU vice president of University Relations and Development, says the gifts, which cover the year ending June 30, reflect donations for student support, departments and programs throughout the university ranging from research and athletics to KPBS.

"It's across the board as our donors continue to contribute at an extraordinary level," Vargas says.

This philanthropy news came just days after the university announced a boost in its efforts to secure an R1 classification from the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education to reflect "very high research activity." In the past year, SDSU earned \$192.2 million in research grants and contracts, a 17% increase over the previous fiscal year.

Research is a strategic priority at SDSU, and Vargas says donor generosity increasingly supports that emphasis. She cited two contributions from the past year that are reflective of the university's goal: Faculty emerita Anne Verderber Taylor of the SDSU School of Nursing established the Anne Verderber Taylor Endowment to support nursing faculty research, and the J.W. Sefton Foundation provided a grant in support of the SDSU Water Monitoring Project, enabling impactful and critical research collaborations to help ensure a clean water supply for the San Diego region. —*Tobin Vaughn*

classnotes

/Alumni Spotlight



After graduating from SDSU, **Ana Dueñas** (psychology, '08; M.A., special education, '13) began her career as a social worker for families with autistic children. She worked primarily in the border community of San Ysidro, where her fluency in Spanish put her in high demand.

It was an introduction to what she calls the “cycle of service disparity.” With autism services effectively nil in Mexico, Dueñas witnessed families who lived in Tijuana renting rooms in the U.S. just so their children could receive behavioral therapy. And because of a lack of Spanish-speaking board-certified behavior analysts, she saw caregivers impeded from becoming active participants in their children’s care.

Now an assistant professor in SDSU’s Department of Special Education, Dueñas is working toward positive change. She recently became the first SDSU faculty member to receive the Institute of Education Sciences Early Career Award, which will supercharge her work in Imperial County to improve the access to and quality of services for transborder families of autistic children.

“I recognize I’m an outsider in many respects,” says Dueñas, who herself grew up *transfronteriza* (transborder) in Tijuana and San Diego. “To me, success means fully integrating into the community — or at least having the community see me as a resource.” —*Michael Klitzing*



When **Victor Torres** (pictured on left), who studied Chicano Studies, walked across the commencement stage in 2002 at SDSU, he was the first to graduate college in his family. The celebratory moment ignited a spark in his younger brother, **Jesus** (right, '07), to pursue an engineering degree at the same university.

Both Imperial Valley natives, Victor and Jesus viewed education as a way to establish their careers and pay it forward by supporting their families. “Victor set the bar for me and our younger siblings to pursue a career and set a standard for our family,” Jesus says.

Victor is pursuing his doctoral degree at SDSU and is the associate dean of Workforce Development and Nontraditional Instruction at Imperial Valley College, where he is helping students continue their education.

Jesus, who had been an active member of the Mathematics, Engineering, Science, Achievement (MESA) program during high school, mentors upcoming engineering professionals and is the division manager of Republic Services in San Diego.

“Almost all of our family members are SDSU alumni — you can say we’re one degree apart. Our children are now interested in attending SDSU. We couldn’t have been more grateful for the connections and opportunities SDSU gave us during and post graduation,” Victor says. —*Daniella Rodiles*



Will Wiseman ('19, B.S., engineering) hit the ground running after graduating from SDSU. Just two years later, Wiseman founded Climatize Earth Inc. with business partner, Alba Forns. Their story started after joining the Global Climate Strikes and witnessing more than 100,000 people protesting for climate action in Barcelona.

Climatize connects investors with bankable renewable energy projects with a focus on community solar, and its app allows users to discover and invest directly in renewable energy projects.

In 2022, Wiseman and Forns participated in Techstars — a startup accelerator that connects entrepreneurs to capital, mentoring and more — to position Climatize for success. Since then, they have sourced more than \$2 billion of new clean-energy projects and signed a partnership with the U.S. Department of Energy. Recently, Climatize funded an additional \$1 million for solar projects for low-income communities, a theater and a synagogue.

Wiseman has been recognized in Forbes’ 30 Under 30 for Social Impact and as a Young Global Changer by the World Policy Forum. While at SDSU, he was elected to Associated Students as a College of Engineering representative, what he calls his “proudest achievement while at SDSU,” and served as vice president of Tau Beta Pi. —*Melinda Sevilla*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY IAN ORDONIO, RACHEL CRAWFORD AND COURTESY OF WILL WISEMAN

1960s

'64 **Neal Petties** (B.A., recreation) died June 6. The Aztecs Hall of Fame wide receiver (1961–63) played under head coach Don Coryell and played three seasons with the NFL’s Baltimore Colts. He worked for the City of San Diego Parks and Recreation department for 25 years and was director of Mountain View Community Park, which was renamed for him in July.

1970s

'70 **Darlene King Lewis** (B.A., communications) died July 28. Her professional career included senior leadership positions in human resources at the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, University of Pittsburgh, Magee Womens Hospital, Vanderbilt University and Hospital, University of Chicago Hospitals and the Dana–Farber Cancer Institute.

'75 **James Koontz** (B.A., public administration) was hired as an instructor of management in the management and marketing department at Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana.

'78 **Gregg Barnes** (B.A., theatre arts) won the 2023 Tony Award for Best Costume Design of a Musical (*Some Like It Hot*).

1980s

'83, '87 **Steve Goble** (B.S., business; MBA), an El Cajon city councilmember, was elected vice-chair of the Metropolitan Transit System board of directors.

'85 **Bob Lowe** (B.A., journalism) self-published *Soccer: State in the States*, a 2023 book on the business of the pre-professional and professional sport in the U.S.

'85, '87 **Tawnya Pringle** (Walde) (B.A., psychology; M.S., counselor education) plans to retire this year as a counselor at Hoover High School in San Diego after 36 years in her career. She taught in SDSU’s school counselor program as an adjunct professor for 17 years.

'87 **Taciana Aguiar** (B.A., journalism) returned to her native country, Portugal, after spending most of her adult life in California. She is the founder and CEO of EcoCork, a U.S.-based company that sells vegan cork products from Portugal, including handbags, totes and accessories.

'87 **Noreen Grice** (M.S., astronomy) was appointed president of the Middle Atlantic Planetarium Society.

'87 **Michael Heidtbrink** (M.A., administration, rehabilitation and postsecondary education; M.A., teacher education), a financial consultant at Thrivent Financial, was inducted into the financial services organization’s Hall of Fame in February 2023.

1990s

'95, '03, '05, '20 **Kevin Cummins** (B.S., biology; M.S., biology; M.S., statistics; joint Ph.D. University of California San Diego, social work) joined the faculty of the Department of Public Health at

California State University, Fullerton. His research focuses on youth health behaviors and improving ways to assess cognitions, emotions and sensitive topics through novel methods and statistical approaches.

2000s

'03 **Christopher Bates** (B.A., English and comparative literature) has joined the law firm Kahana Feld as managing partner of the Los Angeles office.

'04 **Griff Stone** (M.A., political science), whose master’s thesis focused on state and non-state political actors in Colombia, has retired and moved to Medellín, Colombia.

'09 **Beth Gallagher** (M.A., theater arts) and '09 **Eric Casalini** (MBA, entrepreneurship/entrepreneurial studies) star in the independent film *To Fall in Love*, which premiered in October at the Heartland International Film Festival in Indianapolis. The adaptation of a 2017 play of the same name was shown Oct. 19 at the San Diego International Film Festival.

'11 **Brooke Bentley** (B.A., journalism) was promoted to associate account director at the advertising agency KPS3 in Reno, Nevada.

'12 **Enrique Gracian, Ph.D.** (M.A., psychology) was appointed by the behavioral health firm Therapy Lab to oversee clinical services for adult clients across nine states. Gracian will support the deliveries of adult-focused, evidence-based therapies. Gracian leads the San Diego office, where he offers in-person and virtual therapies for various conditions.

'18 **Joseph Olivieri** (B.S., biology), a Ph.D. student at Virginia State University, is studying thermodynamics in age-related macular deterioration.

'21 **Ryan Corp** (B.A., international business) has embarked on an entrepreneurial venture as co-founder of Sealo Limited. Its mission is to make a meaningful difference in the world, and Sealo is dedicated to three core areas: charitable donations, eco-conscious products and information campaigns. Through its charitable donations program, it is committed to contributing \$1 from every item sold to support marine mammal conservation and rescue efforts.

'21 **Verena Rath Hall** (B.S., business) received her MBA from the University of Illinois in 2023. Advancing her career as a litigation paralegal, she works in the university system as a teaching assistant with various graduate business, finance and legal courses. In a few years, she plans to attend law school or a Ph.D. program.

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through SDSU Alumni's
online form at [sdsu.edu/
classnotes](https://sdsu.edu/classnotes) or scan the code.



SDSU ALUMNI

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Vesta Muehleisen (1907)
Visit sdsualumni.org/pastpresidents for a full list.

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Parma Payne Goodall Alumni Center Events Coordinator: **Kasey Pawlak**



THE LEGACY OF STEPHEN L. WEBER

President of SDSU for 15 years, Weber leaves an indelible mark on the university and those he served.

By Seth Mallios

IF EVER THERE WERE A CASE FOR the concept of destiny, Stephen L. Weber at San Diego State University would fit the bill. The philosopher-president and the history-rich institution were a match from the outset, aligning vision and potential to the benefit of both.

President Weber led SDSU from 1996 to 2011, a time of critical transformations and reconnections. In his 15 years as administrative lead — a role he commonly referred to in his signature aw-shucks fashion as the “Institutional Hood Ornament” — he prioritized collaboration, relationship building and projects that found commonalities among those who made up the diverse university landscape. He was a joyous, passionate and thoughtful leader, and he insisted that “it was an honor to serve.”

When Weber became SDSU’s seventh president, the SDSU community was fractured. The institution’s draconian budget cuts of 1992 — resulting in what was then the largest termination of tenured faculty in U.S. higher-education history, the elimination of hundreds of classes from the upcoming academic schedule and

the dissolution of majors for more than 1,100 enrolled students — started a chain reaction of fervent protest and political upheaval that left the campus reeling. The budget cuts were ultimately rescinded but not without consequence. Like all university presidents, Weber was expected to be a savvy leader, but the task confronting him also required significant restorative skills.

In his first weeks in office, a premeditated on-campus triple homicide during a graduate thesis defense traumatized the SDSU community. Weber embarked on an extended campaign to heal his new home with empathy, kindness and inclusion. On Sept. 3, 1996, the teary-eyed president addressed thousands of people assembled at a campus wide memorial for the three slain faculty members:

“We have suffered a great loss. But it is nothing compared to the human loss which this senseless tragedy has inflicted on the families of our fallen colleagues. ... *Our university* community speaks *as one* in this expression of our deep sadness.”

These guiding principles — we, our university and as one —

Editor’s note: As of press time, Stephen Weber was in good spirits, even as his ALS continued to progress. SDSU will keep the community current on his condition.

In the face of loss — even his own — Stephen L. Weber first and foremost chose to praise and comfort others. This made him an outstanding president and an even better person.

were the building blocks by which Weber slowly led a broken-hearted university back to health. The “Shared Vision” he convened became a blueprint for rebuilding SDSU together. At its core was an ethos of caring, respect and inclusion.

Weber was always quick to credit SDSU’s consequent renaissance to the positive, constructive instincts of faculty, staff and students, to a great team of administrative colleagues, and to family and friends. Nonetheless, he personally excelled in “staying present” long before it was cliché, repeatedly demonstrated extraordinary patience and listening skills, finding hope in difficult situations and identifying ways for the university to recover an empowering past.

In the early 2000s, Weber was excited about the anthropology department’s recent discovery of hidden WPA-era murals in the bowels of Hardy Memorial Tower. He believed that restoring this student artwork from the 1930s could help address one of the university’s biggest voids.

“Many people at San Diego State act like this place has no history and no traditions; they don’t even tell stories about our past,” he lamented at the time. President Weber had put such a premium on community building through shared experiences — past and present — that he coupled his 1997 inauguration with SDSU’s 100-year anniversary celebration. He repeatedly situated his hopes and plans for the “second century at San Diego State” with poignant praise of the institution’s first 100 years, which helped spawn a bevy of historical celebrations that showed SDSU could build an exciting future while respecting its heritage.

If you asked Stephen Weber about his achievements at San Diego State University, he beamed about the nation-leading surge in student graduation rates, the many successful community partnerships that set the stage for spectacular growth in the 21st century and the rejuvenation of cooperative and mutually respectful relations across campus. Simply put, SDSU came of age during the Weber presidency.

But if you pose the same question to those who worked closely with President Weber during his time on Montezuma Mesa, a strikingly different answer emerges. While the aforementioned accomplishments are undoubtedly impressive, they pale in comparison to the sincerity, integrity and compassion he routinely demonstrated. Weber insisted on putting SDSU students first and went to great lengths to avoid trampling the personal experiences of others in pursuit of institutional progress.

Worth noting is that Weber’s patient positivity was no reflection of an easy life or lack of engagement with pressing hardships. During a recent interview, he was in the intensive care unit for complications arising from ALS, a progressive



Former SDSU President Stephen L. Weber enjoyed interacting with the public and representing SDSU. He also took the time to check in on the kids at the SDSU Children’s Learning Center.

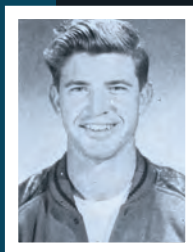
neurodegenerative disease. He continued to redirect questions away from his past accomplishments toward former colleagues. As he struggled with a BiPAP ventilator, inflammation and a host of other complications, Weber noted that Nancy Marlin was “the best provost in the nation,” Jim Kitchen was “an unrivaled student affairs pro” and Interim President Sally Roush’s lifelong service to the university and CSU was singular.

Clearly, trials and tragedies have not spared him; and yet, in the face of loss — even his own — Stephen L. Weber first and foremost chose to praise and comfort others. This made him an outstanding president and an even better person.

When asked about his legacy, Weber deliberately framed the answer in terms of our SDSU legacy. Ever the philosopher, he scoffed at a fate outside of one’s control and embraced destiny only as a collective consequence of decisions, actions and relationships. Weber was tireless in his drive for everyone at SDSU to reach their potential and succeed together. Quick to quote Aristotle, Weber insisted that: “Excellence is never an accident. It is always the result of high intention, sincere effort and intelligent execution; it represents the wise choice of many alternatives — choice, not chance, determines your destiny.” ●



1949
SAN DIEGO STATE
LETTERMAN SWEATER



DICK
ADAIR

GOOD LUCK CHARMS COME IN ALL FORMS. Take, for instance, this 1949 San Diego State College letterman sweater. The red wool cardigan originally belonged to Dick Adair, the late 1950 grad whose 74-year-old record for most interceptions by an Aztec in a football game — four versus New Mexico A&M — still stands. The two-way player's daughter Jan Lewis donated the sweater to SDSU university history curator Seth Mallios in 2021 and encouraged him to wear it to Aztec events. She herself had regularly used it as a Halloween costume for decades. Mallios, a mainstay at SDSU men's basketball games, has donned the stalwart stand-out sweater at nearly every home tilt, conference tournament and March Madness contest in the past two years. The sweater has tasted defeat only twice (as of October), and it braved the 90-degree Houston heat in April to witness Lamont Butler's buzzer-beater, which itself was history in the making. —*Staff*

PHOTOGRAPH BY RACHEL CRAWFORD; COURTESY OF 1949 SAN DIEGO STATE YEARBOOK

throwback

I STILL HAVEN'T FOUND WHAT I'M LOOKING FOR

By Seth Mallios

An underground cistern at the base of Hardy Memorial Tower. Homemade Foreign Legion hats worn by San Diego State students in the 1940 spoof of *Beau Geste* that was banned by Paramount Pictures. And a secret message carved in wet cement by a former SDSU president. Despite these discoveries (and many more) made during the creation of the new book *Historic Walking Tours of SDSU* (see Page 12 for the story), don't for a second think that my team, which includes university history curator graduate research assistants Shannon Farnsworth and Jamie Bastide, and I found everything. In fact, many intriguing university items eluded our grasp — and still remain at large. They span the past century, tie to some of SDSU's most important moments and are tantalizing embodiments of a material past that is just out of reach ... for now. That's why we're asking you to help us solve these three mysteries. •



HAVE A LEAD?

If you have any information on where these items might be, reach out to the author directly: smallios@sdsu.edu. There are more unsolved mysteries online. Scan the QR code to check them out.

GROUND-BREAKING SHOVEL >

Gordon Gray (not pictured) from the state board of education used this silver-plated shovel at the Oct. 7, 1929, groundbreaking ceremony for the new administration building, the first in a large expansion. In fact, a San Diego Union article said the shovel was ordered by alumni students and was "to be prominent in the new school's collection of souvenirs." We're trying to resolve that last part. The diminutive two-and-a-half-foot spade was last seen on Founder's Day in 1964 when San Diego State's first graduate manager, Alvin H. Morrison, posed with it for this picture.



< SILVER CUP FOOTBALL TROPHY

Long before SDSU developed fierce athletic rivalries with Fresno State and BYU, the institution — then known as the State Normal School of San Diego — had a high-stakes Thanksgiving Day football game against Russ High School (the precursor to San Diego High School). From 1900 to 1905, the victorious pigskin players held bragging rights for the year and even had their names engraved on this spectacular silver cup, but the distinctive trophy is nowhere to be found.

JFK'S CEREMONIAL GOWN >

It is mind-boggling that no one can find the graduation gown that President John F. Kennedy wore during his historic visit to San Diego State in 1963. We can trace the movement of the ceremonial robe after JFK's commencement address at the Aztec Bowl: 1) Kennedy gave it to student Jeanne Powell (pictured here), 2) Powell passed it to SDSC President Malcolm Love, 3) Love kept it in his office until 4) he allowed it to become the centerpiece of a campus exhibit, but then 5) the gown was transferred to the California State College chancellor's office, where 6) it seemingly vanished.



Historic Walking Tours of SDSU by Seth Mallios is available from major online bookstores and at Aztec Bookstore.

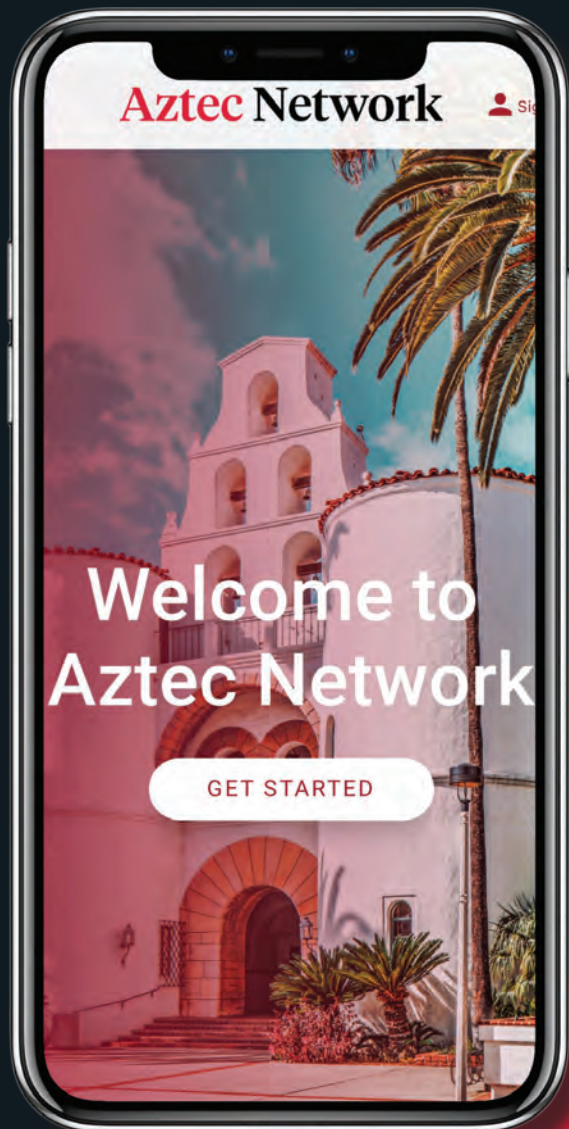
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