SPRING 2026

SDSU

MAGAZINE



‘The World Can Be Yours’

From Afrikan Student Union stages to the Grammy Awards, jazz great **Gregory Porter** (’97) found his voice at SDSU.

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PHOTOGRAPH BY **MATT FURMAN**

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF JIMMY FUTTY

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PHOTOGRAPH BY SCOTT HARGROVE

FROM THE PRESIDENT

AS WE REACH THE CONCLUSION OF THE ACADEMIC YEAR AT SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY, I AM FILLED WITH GRATITUDE FOR THE community that continues to shape this amazing institution's momentum and impact. Our student body of approximately 44,000 is the most academically accomplished in our 129-year history. Our faculty and staff have enhanced SDSU's national and international reputation as an R1 research university. And the record-breaking support of our alumni and donors has fueled our continued growth amid nationwide economic uncertainty, demonstrating extraordinary confidence in SDSU's trajectory and mission.

Today, SDSU stands at a powerful inflection point, building on a legacy of excellence while boldly defining our future. We recently reached an important milestone by completing the initial phase of our WASC Senior College and University Commission reaccreditation process—a rigorous affirmation of our academic quality, institutional effectiveness and student-centered mission. The deep introspection that process required is now shaping the second phase of our We Rise We Defy strategic plan. We are charting an ambitious course for the next five years that will elevate SDSU's global standing, expand research and innovation, and ensure access and success for the talented students who earn the opportunity to become Aztecs.

Across our campuses in San Diego and Imperial Valley—and through SDSU Global Campus—our physical and academic footprint continues to grow. We are expanding student housing and enhancing the campus environment to foster belonging, well-being and academic achievement. Meanwhile, we are investing in state-of-the-art facilities that support cutting-edge research, interdisciplinary collaboration and workforce preparation in high-demand fields. And our award-winning Career Services team is doing more than ever to connect students and graduates with gainful, fulfilling careers.

SDSU's rise is also gaining visibility on the national stage. Aztec athletics will compete this fall in the inaugural year of the new-look Pac-12 Conference, a defining moment that will strengthen our reputation and the Aztec pride shared by our more than half a million alumni worldwide.

Whether in the lab, the classroom or in competition, SDSU's drive to compete and excel at the highest levels has never been stronger. And none of this progress happens by accident. The engagement, mentorship and generosity of our SDSU community is expanding scholarships, fueling discovery and creating transformative opportunities that will change lives for generations.

Thank you for standing with SDSU and for demonstrating what it truly means to be an "Aztec for Life." Together, we are advancing our university—and shaping the future of our region and our world. Go Aztecs!



ADELA DE LA TORRE, PH.D.

2000

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRYANA QUINTANA

GROWING SCIENCE

Bob Mangan ('77) has dutifully tended to San Diego State University's greenhouse over the past 45 years, and for nearly every one of its 400-plus plant species, he has a story.

In previous chapters of his life, the SDSU botany alumnus worked as an illustrator, bartender, bouncer—or, as he puts it, a "tranquility expert"—and nursery manager. But his true calling has always been botany. He has devoted himself to acquiring, growing and caring for each plant in what he describes as a "dying science." During countless greenhouse tours, he has shared that devotion with visitors, students and anyone else with an interest.

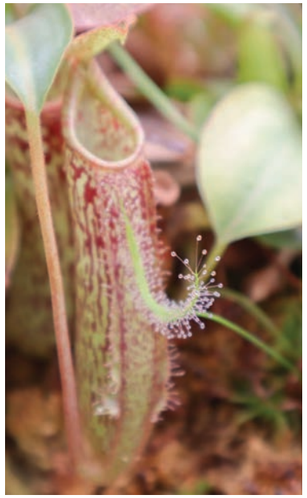
The greenhouse, run by the College of Sciences, dates back to the 1960s. Since becoming manager in 1978, Mangan has more than quadrupled its specimen count, including some that are rare and endangered. The plants support biology teaching, giving students a close-up view of processes such as how root systems work. They also serve as a research resource for labs studying plant growth and genetics.

Though Mangan retired in December, he still returns weekly as a volunteer. Here's a sampling of what visitors may experience if they're lucky enough to tour with Mangan.

—Bryana Quintana



Fun fact: This hanging **Spanish moss**, which is not a moss at all, belongs to the same family as pineapples. In this section of the greenhouse, Bob Mangan also takes care of a tree with roots that grow upward to gain moisture from clouds and ferns whose leaves are dotted with spores that spawn new plants (both not pictured).



Left: "Normally, sugar is a reward for doing something cool for the plant," Mangan says. "With these, it's a deadly lure." The **pitcher plant** baits bugs with sweet nectar before the insects fall into digestive enzyme fluid.

Right: When these **chocolate trees** flower, Mangan pollinates each blossom by hand with a paintbrush. SDSU emeritus professor Jim Alexander saved these trees, now woven with **vanilla orchid vines**, from a fungus that ravaged the chocolate industry decades ago.





Left: "I love **bromeliads** because they have real cute flowers," Mangan says. Nearby is a staghorn fern (not pictured) he grew from a cutting he received at age 21 that peaked at about 400 pounds.

Left: Neighboring this **crested blue myrtle cactus** are plants grown by biology faculty for researching genetic changes and testing different growing conditions. Not pictured, a dudleya species discovered by SDSU alumus Mark Dodero ('83, '84, '96).

Right: "Look at this guy: He's got a little happy face," Mangan says. The plump body of **elephant's foot** stores water, and under drought conditions, the leaves drop, returning once moisture is replenished.



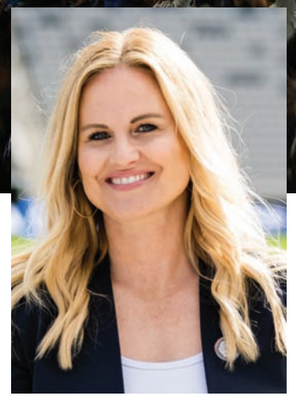




statelately
/Tell Me a Story

THE ULTIMATE TEAM BUILDER

BY JENNIFER BOWER AS TOLD TO REBECCA NORDQUIST



Jennifer Bower ('03) was one of San Diego FC's first team members. She joined the soccer club less than two years before its inaugural March 2025 kickoff. As chief revenue officer, she oversees ticketing and sponsorship strategy to drive the franchise's long-term growth.

The former San Diego State University cross-country and track and field standout has built her career around sports. Bower, who studied management, helped secure the title sponsorship for Snapdragon Stadium in 2021 as a vice president for Legends and spent 10 years with the San Diego Chargers in client services, sponsorship marketing and partnership activation. In her own words, Bower reflects on being part of SDFC—the city's first Major League Soccer team—during its historic debut season, which culminated in an unprecedented playoff run.

THERE'S ONLY EVER GOING TO BE ONE INAUGURAL MATCH IN AN INAUGURAL SEASON.

When the ball was kicked off at Snapdragon Stadium and I looked down to see the building completely packed, all of our sponsors up, all of the gear out, it was the coolest moment. When I started, we had no players. No roster. No revenue. We were working out of an Airbnb. And seeing it all come to life was pure joy—for the city, the fans, the players and the staff.

I've chosen to build my life in San Diego. I've spent my career in sports and entertainment here, and my husband and I are raising our daughter and son here. To know I played a part in bringing something like that to this city—there was a lot of pride. Everyone celebrated on the Sycuan Piers after that first match. There was laughter, tears, hugs, high-fives. It was every range of emotion because everybody was processing it differently. I was taking it all in.

And then came the playoffs in October.

We overcame the Portland Timbers 2-1 in the Western Conference series. We were one game away from the final against Messi and his Inter Miami side, the eventual 2025 MLS champions.



Jennifer Bower ('03), center, and the San Diego FC staff built the franchise into a 165-person front office in a mere 21 months.

The playoffs were disbelief—but ultimately belief. From day one, we talked about building a top-tier team. But making the playoffs in your inaugural season? That's challenging. It's hard enough to qualify when players and coaches have years of chemistry. We were building everything from scratch.

Throughout my career, I've seen big sporting events, but for some of our staff, this was their first playoff experience. I was living it through them, and that was a really special moment.

There were a lot of challenges up until this point, but we overcame most of them. By the end of the first season, we were ranked near the top of MLS in attendance and ticket sales. We signed 47 partners, including national brands and local companies, that rallied behind us. Selling the sponsorship on the front of the jersey was also a huge milestone. DIRECTV stepping in as a national brand for a brand-new team in San Diego? That was critical for our success.

And then there was Sharp HealthCare, the largest private employer in San Diego. We built our performance center, where our players train, in 10 months next to Singing Hills Golf Club in El Cajon. That deal wasn't just about revenue. It impacts Sharp's 19,000 employees. It connects their name to our first team, academy, our growth and our future. Those partnerships matter beyond the numbers.

Making all of that happen before the first kickoff meant working nights and weekends, and being readily available 24/7. I spent a lot of time away from my family. I give all the credit to a supportive spouse who's been with me through it all. We have each other—and a lot of child care help.

All of the challenges, sacrifices and successes made our playoff run even more meaningful. It has been a wild ride in the very best way. ●

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF JENNIFER BOWER

SDSU MISSION VALLEY RIVER PARK OPEN FOR RESERVATIONS

Along the edge of the San Diego River, the SDSU Mission Valley river park has become a gathering place for San Diegans. On any given day, community members can be found enjoying activities ranging from pickup games to milestone celebrations. The public can reserve these areas for a wide array of occasions and events.

The large recreation fields support practices, games and tournaments for sports such as soccer, flag football and rugby. For company picnics or family-friendly events, a table cluster near the playground offers a central place to meet and spend time together. For more structured programming, the outdoor classroom provides a setting for workshops and team-building sessions. Other areas include the labyrinth stage pad for performances, and basketball and pickleball courts for league play and small tournaments.

Unlike many public parks, the river park operates without taxpayer subsidies. Revenue generated through reservations supports the maintenance and long-term care of this beautiful public amenity that will serve the community for generations.

The visibility of the river park will only grow as the Los Angeles Olympics approach, with the nearby stadium set to host soccer matches in 2028, bringing global attention and renewed energy to Mission Valley. *—Ryan Brothers*

Reserve space at the SDSU Mission Valley river park.



PHOTOGRAPH BY SCOTT HARGROVE

MOCHICHIS

At their Encinitas shop, Beth and Jordan Kass greet the morning with fresh mochi donuts and a steady stream of regulars—and make the hard work look easy. By Felicity Desuasido



LONG BEFORE THE SUN RISES, THE BAKER AT Mochichis powers up the kitchen for a new day. Soon owner Beth Kass ('03) drops off her two children at school and rushes into the shop, preparing ube Oreo, churro and creme brulee donuts. Regulars start to line up just before 9 a.m., ready to pick up their orders from their local, family-owned donut shop.

Mochichis is Beth's dream business. She first tried a mochi donut—a unique, chewy treat made with mochi, a Japanese rice-based delicacy—on a family vacation. She fell in love with the donuts. Inspired, she and her husband, Jordan ('02), opened the Encinitas location in 2024, drawing from lessons she learned at San Diego State University.

"SDSU was a learning ground to try things and fail in a safe way," says Beth, who was involved in a student alumni organization. "Without that experience, I wouldn't have had the opportunity, or even the faith in myself, to start something. In college, I saw on a smaller scale that your ideas really can come to life."

The Mochichis atmosphere embodies Southern California, where Beth and Jordan grew up. Mochichis stickers cover the walls, and sunlight illuminates plants lining the windows. Menu items also include donut sundaes and popular drinks like brown sugar milk with boba, strawberry matcha lattes and horchata slushes. Donuts are even served on skateboard decks, paying homage to the area's skate culture.

To make everything come together, the behind-the-scenes work is never-ending. Every morning, Beth and Jordan bake backup donuts, ensure drink ingredients are ready and double-check that the kitchen preparation is complete.

"It's like a dance," Beth says. "I'm in here right away, checking on how the numbers are, checking on how the labor is, making sure inventory is up to date."

They look back at when they first opened and see how far they've come. On the soft opening, their donut fryer short-circuited and quit working. On another occasion, Jordan knocked over a piece of expensive kitchen equipment, which cracked and broke. However, even when things go sideways, the couple's resilience always prevails.

"It's either sink or swim, and sinking is not an option, so you just work," Jordan says. "You just swim."

Before Mochichis, Beth and Jordan had civilian positions at Naval Station Rota in Spain, a joint U.S.–Spanish naval base near the Strait of Gibraltar. Beth was a strategy and future requirements director and an installation business manager, and Jordan was an asset management branch head. They were also members of Operation Allies Welcome, an initiative that supported Afghan nationals following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021.

"We have taken on very difficult, long projects, long hours, in our previous careers, and that prepared me for nothing when running a restaurant," Beth says.

While they never expected to go from military careers to donuts, their experiences at SDSU aligned with the skills needed to start a business.

Beth's leadership roles in SDSU's former Student Alumni Association sparked her passion for entrepreneurship and fostering community, while Jordan's expertise in city planning came in handy for building the shop and obtaining city permits.

"City planning is also about building stuff and supporting the community, so that's part of what I loved about it," says Jordan, whose mom, Linda Kass ('67), studied social work at SDSU and dad, Norman Kass, is a professor emeritus of psychology.

The Mochichis dream grew even bigger after Beth became a pop-up vendor at Snapdragon Stadium for SDSU events. The shop appeared there two to three times a month.

"It's really just an amazing part of being an Aztec, and being able to bring Mochichis into that fold is really special," Beth says. "It's fun. It's like an immediate connection."

One connection at the shop stands out for Beth.

Every Wednesday, two young girls stop in with their mom. One of them greets Beth with an enthusiastic, "Hi, best friend!"

"I would have never had these connections if we didn't have this spot," Beth says. ●



Mochichis
AZTEC OWNERS
Beth ('03) and Jordan ('02) Kass
mochichis.com
1452 Encinitas Blvd.
Encinitas
760-274-6111

AZTEC-OWNED BAKERIES

Craving something sweet or planning an event? These bakeries might be what you're looking for.

GOLD COAST BAKERY
AZTEC OWNER
Eli Cooperstein ('15)
goldcoastbakery.com
National commercial baking company
1590 E. Saint Gertrude Place
Santa Ana, CA 92705
714-545-2253

PANADERÍA CONTRERAS
AZTEC OWNER
Briana Urias Contreras ('19)
hotplate.com/panaderiacontreras
Authentic, clean Mexican pan dulce
Menifee
Pickup or delivery only (includes San Diego)
619-547-8202

CAKE BY SIERRA
AZTEC OWNER
Sierra Zavala ('21)
cakebysierra.com
Customized cakes for all occasions
El Cajon by appointment only
858-381-4208

SUGAR KILN COOKIES
AZTEC OWNER
Lea Marie Dennis ('04)
sugarkiln.com
Chef-crafted cookies for wholesale, catering and shipping
Online, pickup only
San Diego
619-302-7655

PARFAIT PARIS
AZTEC OWNER
Ludivine Ryon ('13)
parfaitparis.com
Award-winning French patisserie
Liberty Public Market
2820 Historic Decatur Road, #17
619-819-7681
SEE WEBSITE FOR MORE LOCATIONS



Briana Urias Contreras' bakery offers conchas, specialty breads, cinnamon rolls and other pastries.

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

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CAITLYN SMILEY (LEFT) AND COURTESY OF BRIANA URIAS CONTRERAS

BEYOND the APPLAUSE

Gregory Porter's voice has carried him across continents, but the San Diego State University alumnus remains guided by lessons shaped long before the spotlight found him.

BY AARON BURGIN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATT FURMAN

GREGORY PORTER ('97) sat in his apartment near San Diego State University, weeks before he was set to graduate, and his mind drifted. Where was his place in the universe? What was his space?

Today, Porter, a two-time Grammy Award–winning jazz vocalist, husband and father of two, knows where his place is.

On the afternoon of Sept. 4, it was Hamburg, Germany, as he prepared to perform in front of a sellout crowd at Elbphilharmonie Hamburg.

On Nov. 15, it was Cape Town, South Africa, as his baritone voice soared in front of thousands of people at the Grand Arena.

And on a chilly Dec. 6 evening, it was The Soraya at Cal State Northridge—about 90 minutes south of his hometown, Bakersfield, California—where Porter and his five-piece ensemble warmed an audience of more than 1,600 people with Christmas standards with a jazz twist.

"You don't have to choose one place that is your soil or that you're supposed to be," Porter said via Zoom from his hotel room in Hamburg. "Quite frankly, the world can be yours if you are willing to think that big, and I don't know if I was willing to think that big yet back then. But it has come true for me that anywhere I go in the world, somebody knows my name."



PORTER'S RISE WAS MARKED by a series of defining moments. One came as a chart-topping song in an unexpected genre.

In 2015, Disclosure, an acclaimed British electronic music duo, asked Porter to collaborate on a song called "Holding On." The pulsating beat and Porter's voice blended to become one of the biggest dance music hits of the 2010s, topping the Billboard Dance Club Songs charts. Today it has more than 72 million listens on Spotify.

He had just won his first Grammy for "Liquid Spirit" and was emerging as one of jazz's defining voices. A year later, the vocalist, who performs in a Kangol Summer Spitfire flat cap and neck sleeve combo that has become his trademark look, released an R&B version of "Holding On" on the album "Take Me to the Alley," earning his second Grammy.

None of this was part of his original plan. As a standout football player at Highland High School, Porter dreamed of playing in the NFL. The 6-foot-5 offensive lineman earned a full scholarship to play at SDSU, where he practiced alongside future NFL great Marshall Faulk ('95).

Just weeks into fall practice during his first year, a severe shoulder injury sidelined him. Doctors said he would never play again. A conversation with his mother, who was dying of cancer, changed everything.

"My mother was so important to me that I couldn't even see life without her, and I wanted to let her know that she did a great job in raising me," Porter said. "And so I was trying to let her know that I am going to be a good guy and go out and get a job and be simple and normal, and she said, 'Don't forget about your music. It's the best thing you do.' She encouraged me to be risky and to go out there and apply myself in music."

Porter, then a public administration major, poured himself into music and theater his final years at SDSU. His booming voice became a staple on campus, earning him the nickname Luther, inspired by the famed R&B crooner Luther Vandross. He often performed the national anthem or the Black National Anthem—James Weldon Johnson's "Lift Every Voice and Sing"—at various Afrikan Student Union functions.

At off-campus venues like the Onyx Room, Porter jammed with many of the founding figures of San Diego's modern jazz scene—trumpeter and now SDSU artist in residence Gilbert Castellanos, the late Daniel Jackson and UC San Diego music professors Kamau Kenyatta and George Lewis—all of whom he considers mentors along his journey.

But it was in New York, specifically the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, where Porter's musical career took off. Working as a chef at his late brother's restaurant Bread Stuy, Porter made the rounds at local venues. There, he met the musicians who would become his longtime tour band and it's where Motéma Music would sign him to his first record deal, releasing "Water" in 2010.

THE ROAD HAS BEEN at the heart of Porter's success. For nearly 25 years, touring has been a way of life, dating back to his first passport stamp for a performance in Ukraine.

Porter found beauty performing in corners of the world considered dangerous, recounting with fondness concerts in Rwanda and Lebanon, countries with respective modern histories of genocide and conflict. He considers those performances among his most memorable.

"Even the places having some difficulty, war politics, currently in office, there is beauty everywhere," Porter said.

His 2023 concert in Cape Town, South Africa—his first solo concert in the country—made the strongest impression. He took the stage and looked out at 6,000 mostly Black faces who knew almost every word to every song. They sang aloud in distinct accents, layering their own harmonies and bringing Porter to tears on the stage.

"Six thousand Black faces, beautiful people, in a garden in Cape Town," he said. "It was such a powerful experience for all of us."

Porter prides himself on making music that can serve as a salve or awaken the conscience—and touring allows him to see the fruits of that labor. In communities facing hardship, audiences have taken his music as inspiration and uplift.

"Sometimes when I'm in the Middle East, I get messages, in troubled places where people need a balm, and it's really something," he said.

Beyond the cathartic moments of the concert, life on tour might not be as glamorous as people think, Porter said. Contrary to the perception of a musician's life on tour, he takes a hands-on approach in the hours leading up to a show.

"People assume there's a bunch of handlers, people bringing me grapes that are already peeled or oranges that are already supremed," Porter said. "I like to do a lot of things on my own."

The soulful frontman takes his own clothes to the laundry or dry cleaners. He likes to get out and drive—sometimes, he says, a little too fast.

But he mostly likes to maintain calmness. He'll go for walks and visit local museums, and he and his bandmates always find time to sample local cuisine. Foie gras in France and sushi in Japan are among his favorites.

Back at the hotel, he'll rest, stretch and talk to his family. Sometimes, it's a phone call, other times, it's FaceTime.

Anything, really, to conserve his energy for the show.



AZTECS IN MUSIC

Leonard Patton, '09

Pat Metheny, a 20-time Grammy-winning jazz musician, is one of Leonard Patton's heroes.

The San Diego–based jazz vocalist and percussionist says he's been living with Metheny's music for years. So when the call came to join him on the Side-Eye III+ Tour, it carried a special weight.

"This is not just playing a gig," says Patton, who earned his Master of Music from SDSU in 2009. "This is on a deeper emotional level."

The tour spans more than 70 stops worldwide through October, and for Patton, the opening shows in Jackson, Mississippi, mean the most.

"A little over three years ago, I lost my father, who was born in Mississippi," he says. "So there'll be a whole lot of emotions from just playing those first two shows."

When home in San Diego, Patton runs The Jazz Lounge, the concert venue he founded in 2021, with the help of his wife of 28 years, Jerusha Patton, and their oldest son, Jotham. Patton also performs often with his band, LP and the Vinyl.

This year, Patton is again nominated for Best Jazz at the San Diego Music Awards, alongside fellow SDSU alumni Ed Kornhauser ('09) and percussionist Nathan Hubbard, and SDSU resident musician Gilbert Castellanos.

Patton, a self-described introvert, says he has always let his music speak for itself. This year, it seems to be saying plenty. *—Rebecca Nordquist*

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF ARCOLIN TOMMASO AND LEONARD PATTON (RIGHT)

"Right or wrong, sometimes I am saving my physical energy, and sometimes even my emotional energy, for the stage because I don't want to be exhausted in any way once I get there," Porter said. "That way, when it's time to hit the stage, it's not about the performance: It's intention, it's message, it's imparting love. I'll hit the notes; it's not about showing off. Music is more than 'just the music.'"

THIS WAS A LESSON, he said, that was instilled during his days in downtown San Diego.

"I think about my cultivation in the San Diego scene and how important many of the jazz musicians who are holding it down, how important they were to my musical journey," Porter said. "Cats like Rob Thorson, Gilbert Castellanos, Brian Levy—those cats were super important to me, and encouraging."

Castellanos and Levy have since found their way to SDSU's School of Music and Dance as an artist in residence and as the director of jazz studies, respectively.

Levy, a jazz saxophonist, remembers those days with Porter fondly.

"Before Gregory was famous, he spent a lot of time with Gilbert in the downtown scene. I remember him coming to the jam sessions and hanging out and really getting immersed in the music," said Levy, who studied at the renowned New England Conservatory of Music.

Today, under Levy's leadership, SDSU's jazz program is amid a renaissance. When Levy took over direction in 2023, SDSU had up to 10 new jazz majors each year. This year, there were 28. The program's growth has also been strengthened by support from the Pitt and Virginia Warner Endowment for Jazz Studies, the Eugene and Barbara Bowman Endowed Scholarship, the Cruzan Jazz Guest Artist Series and Bill and Chutaphin Yeager.

PART OF LEVY'S SUCCESS is attributed to modeling the program after a conservatory, inviting more guest musicians to perform alongside and emphasizing auditions, ensemble training and frequent on-stage opportunities that prepare students for professional careers.

SDSU also hired several new lecturers and professors with deep roots in the local jazz scene, including bassist Luca Alemanno, guitarist Steve Cotter, and vocalists Jane Monheit and Leonard Patton ('09), both of whom tour regularly.

"It's been about making connections for the students and creating experiences that are real-world rooted," Levy said. "And the energy that it's created here has been amazing."

That energy has led to tangible stories of student success. Luke Little, a sophomore upright bassist and jazz studies major, recently returned from his first international tour in Hungary, calling it an "unforgettable experience," and Ryan Kupsch, who plays several low brass instruments, will perform with the San Diego Symphony at the Rady Shell this summer.

In Porter, Levy said, students find inspiration because they see a person who was in their shoes as a student and has created a storied career.

"Gregory gives them a lot of hope," Levy said. "Sometimes you hear that choosing jazz as a major isn't a wise choice. But you see someone like Gregory who has the talent and work ethic and he's made it, and you can see yourself in him."

Porter's bit of advice for students is to focus on perfecting their craft—and good things will follow.

"You will find that the greatest artists aren't just in it for the business or to sell records; at least it's not their main goal," Porter said. "All the greats we hold on to, the Coltranes, Miles Davises ... they are trying to appeal to our better nature, trying to push us to be better and greater. So if young artists are striving to perfect their instrument and who they can be in music, the good stuff will come."



AFTER FIVE STRAIGHT MONTHS of traversing the globe, with Hamburg now a distant memory, Porter finally steps off a flight at Burbank. It's December, and he's home to see his family and to perform locally, including a stop at The Soraya at Cal State Northridge. The idea, he says, is to spend two weeks on the road and two weeks at home, but it rarely works out that way.

He makes his way to Bakersfield to see his sister and brother, his wife, Victoria, and two sons, Demyan, 13, and Lev, 4. His cocker spaniel jumps into his arms, and everything feels right.

"It's very good, it's grounding," says Porter, who also has a home in New York City. "I haven't been home in about five months."

He unapologetically spoils his children when he sees them. If it's ice cream they want, they're going to get it. Lev has 30 toy dinosaurs? He's getting No. 31.

It drives Victoria crazy, he admits. But it's his way.

"I don't have time to have the discipline of not trying to spoil my kids," Porter says with a laugh.

He prioritizes talking with his boys, especially Demyan. They take walks and talk about the important things: girls, body image, emotions. It's what his uncles used to call "managed smack."

"He's on the cusp of young manhood, and I know our time is precious, so I try to be present and hear him," Porter says.

These are the moments that sustain him on the road, the ones that make the sacrifices worthwhile. But Porter understands that it's his family that makes the biggest compromise.

"They are my inspiration," he says. "They have to stay home, be educated. My wife has to be there to hold things down, and that is the sacrifice of this career. I know it is something I am giving up to have a career."

After a while, work calls. He heads to The Soraya, donning an olive green three-piece suit with a chunky black turtleneck—and, of course, his signature flat cap and neck sleeve. With a warm smile, he greets the audience, regaling them with stories of Christmas until they could almost smell the greens, mashed potatoes and turkey he describes.

As he concludes, the audience roars, and he and his bandmates embrace, shake hands and smile.

His 2025 tour is done, and 2026 beckons.

"It's been a long year, but I'm grateful for every second of it," he says. ●

FIVE QUESTIONS WITH

Luke Little

JAZZ STUDIES SOPHOMORE

Luke Little is officially an international touring musician. The upright bassist just returned from a two-city stop in Hungary. Get to know him here. *—Rebecca Nordquist*

What was that first overseas tour like? Unforgettable. European audiences have such a deep appreciation for the arts. Everything felt more alive overseas.

Most memorable performance? Jacob's Music Center with Gilbert Castellanos. Not only was I in the presence of master musicians, but that night alone opened my eyes to something deeper with music. I realized I have an immense responsibility to uphold my musicianship and give something beautiful to every person who hears me.

How has SDSU's jazz program shaped you? I have definitely felt more true to my individuality. There aren't many places where people will dig you for who you are. Musicians here are open and curious.

What's your dream career? To play and teach music for the rest of my life. I'm deeply passionate about passing down the spirit of the music I love to younger generations.

Where can fans see you perform? I'll be at Dizzy's on May 23, Tio Leo's near Morena Boulevard on June 7 and The Merc in Temecula on Aug. 13—all with the Joshua White trio.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF LUKE LITTLE

A DAY ON THE SAVANNA



This drone is equipped with a pyranometer-pyrgeometer instrument. Robert Collins uses it to measure land radiation.

BY LESLIE L.J. REILLY AND ROBERT COLLINS

On the savannas of Botswana, fire is a constant presence, and understanding its impact has brought Robert Collins, a San Diego State University master's student, to the country for a third time as part of a NASA-supported grant.

Led by geography Associate Professor Fernando De Sales, the research team includes Ibisia Jack, an SDSU doctoral student in geography, and collaborators from UCLA, UC Berkeley and the University of Virginia. Together, they're studying how fire reshapes savanna vegetation and rainfall through land-atmosphere interactions.

While Jack conducted interviews with locals, farmers and University of Botswana students to better understand their perspectives on fire and climate change, Collins focused on field data.

"My personal goals were to become more familiar with drones," Collins says, "and how to fly them, how to use them, how to process the data."

This story follows a day in Collins' fieldwork, where drone flights, data challenges and unpredictable weather define life as a climate researcher.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF ROBERT COLLINS AND IBISIA JACK

6:30 A.M. With an early start to the day, we build a campfire to boil water for coffee and make breakfast, which is usually oatmeal or granola.

7:30 A.M. We assemble fieldwork equipment, including drones, generator, pyranometer/pyrgeometer, weather balloons, helium tanks and data stations. Pack personal bags with necessary items like food and laptops.



8 A.M. Every day is a different field site. The shortest drive is about 45 minutes, and the longest is four hours. Sometimes we cross paths with lions, giraffes, leopard tortoises and other creatures.

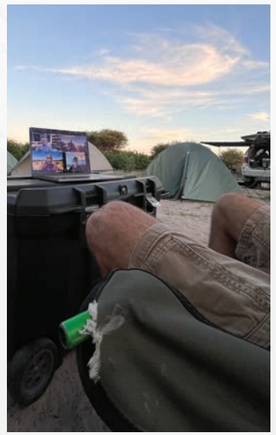


9 A.M. Time for fieldwork. Emphasis on *work*. We set up an awning for shade to combat temperatures of 100 degrees-plus, assemble the tower configuration for incoming radiation measurements and ready the drones. We wait for the best opportunity to launch. This depends heavily on cloud cover, as clouds obscure incoming radiation, cause shadows and throw off our measurements.

3 P.M. Before we break down the equipment and drive back to base camp, we ensure data from the drone and tower station are properly offloaded.



4 P.M. This is our time to take care of any logistical issues such as auto repairs or picking up tools we might need. Running a field campaign in a foreign country is tricky, and sourcing the right tools, materials and labor can be challenging. We also enjoy interacting with the locals. One day we showed students from Ngwatle Primary School how to fly drones.



6 P.M. Back at camp, instruments sometimes break and need creative repairs. We've used soldering and electrical tape to fix broken wires and jimmied solar panels to power our Wi-Fi unit. It's also a good time for Zoom calls and to review data collected from the day. Sometimes we drive into the village to refill our water barrel for drinking, cooking and bathing.

7 P.M. On good days, we'll have steak for dinner, or if we're really lucky, our colleagues from the University of Botswana display their culinary prowess and prepare some traditional meals for us. Beef seswaa, which I often buy from roadside vendors, is my favorite.



9 P.M. We have to make sure all our food is stored properly to avoid unwanted animal guests. Once that's done, we wind down and enjoy some conversation around the campfire or watch a rugby match with the help of our Starlink unit. It's also free time to wander and admire nocturnal geckos.

10:30 P.M. It's bedtime at last—and we all hope it doesn't rain. It is the rainy season, and I'd already lost a couple of books when water found its way into my tent through a big hole—another creative fix needed.



Ibisia Jack deploys this weather balloon to track fire-related atmospheric anomalies.

New Supercomputer Fuels Data-Intensive Research at SDSU

The James Silberrad Brown Center for Artificial Intelligence in the Fowler College of Business recently launched a powerful new supercomputer. It enables multiple SDSU scholars to simultaneously conduct data-intensive research that contains significant amounts of high-resolution images or complex artificial intelligence analytics.

The supercomputer, a gift from a donor, features eight Nvidia B200 DGX GPUs, which provide 440 GB of VRAM or storage. This allows researchers the ability to analyze data at greater speed and paves the way for quickly publishing critical results that can be used by scientists on a global basis.

The technology is being used at SDSU to improve weather forecasts, predict the occurrence of lung cancer among specific U.S. population sectors, diagnose mental health disorders among children and improve human/robot interactions.

"Currently, robotic responses are based on math and programming; however, we are researching technology that enables robots to better understand the spoken word so they can accurately react to verbal commands," says Aaron Elkins, director of the James Silberrad Brown Center for Artificial Intelligence and professor of management information systems at the Fowler College of Business. "This requires all eight GPUs to break down speech into small segments that can be reconstructed and understood by robots. In turn, the robots can carry out appropriate commands without the use of prior programming."

—Suzanne Finch

WHERE IDEAS COME TO LIFE



The T-Squeeze founders: Thaddeus Okasinski (left) and Holland Peil ('25).

At ZIP Launchpad, San Diego State University student founders turn curiosity into companies. Here's how they do it.

BY REBECCA NORDQUIST

The Zahn Innovation Platform Launchpad cultivates detectives.

Not the kind who carry badges. The kind who ask the right questions and then turn the answers into businesses.

Erica Snider, the program manager at ZIP Launchpad, San Diego State University's startup incubator, says the goal is to develop students who approach problems with curiosity, investigate multiple angles and translate insight into solutions.

"The entrepreneurial mindset is going to serve these students in everything they do now and post graduation," Snider says.

Holland Peil ('25) embodies that mindset.

Nearly seven years ago, Peil read a study that said a single tea bag can release billions of microplastics in one serving. Intrigued, he started digging.

"I couldn't find anything having to do with microplastic filtration for tea bags, so that would be the start of T-Squeeze," Peil says.

That instinct to investigate a problem and pursue a solution is exactly what ZIP Launchpad is designed to nurture. With the help of the H.G. Fenton Company Idea Lab on campus, Peil and his partner Thaddeus Okasinski, a senior business major, worked with student engineers to build a prototype of a microplastic-filtering tea infuser, and the marketing intern helped guide its social media presence.

With that development, Peil and Okasinski are progressing through ZIP Launchpad's four-stage path: E-Track, In Flight, Launch Track and Launch. Open to students in all majors, staff and faculty, ZIP provides funding, mentorship and expert guidance to help teams move from concept to company. The program started in 2012 with generous support from the late Irwin Zahn. His son, Peter Zahn, continues his father's legacy of fostering the entrepreneurial spirit.

Meet more alumni and students who are solving problems one company at a time.

"The T-Squeeze team has embraced rapid prototyping and real-world testing from day one. They're actively pressure-testing their assumptions by talking to strangers and refining their idea based on what they learn."

—CAMERON BROCK, H.G. FENTON COMPANY IDEA LAB MANAGER

STAGE 1
E-Track
Problem worth solving

E-Track is the proving ground. Students define a problem, talk to real customers and gather evidence to see whether their idea has traction before moving forward.

STAGE 2
In Flight
Concept validation

COMPANY DateFlo
SDSU FOUNDER Qudsi, senior business management major with a minor in leadership
PROBLEM TO SOLVE When it comes to dating, Qudsi says, people care deeply about their partners but often don't know where to start when planning something meaningful. "One thing that really clicked," Qudsi says, "was when I asked a friend at midnight what he was doing for Valentine's Day the next day, and he said he was probably just going to reserve a restaurant." A creative date planner himself, Qudsi knew how that would end.
THE IDEA DateFlo is an AI-powered app that plans and customizes dates. Users input preferences—dietary restrictions, budget, likes, dislikes and even love language—and the platform generates a complete plan. It recommends restaurants, suggests menu items, calculates estimated costs and adds nearby activities to enjoy such as farmers markets or unique shops.
THE IMPACT Through customer research, Qudsi found that people value quality time far more than the planning process itself. DateFlo reduces decision fatigue so couples can focus on connection and quality time.
THE VISION DateFlo is being optimized for San Diego, and Qudsi plans to expand and customize it for cities across the United States.



"I've known Qudsi for a number of years now and was excited when he was admitted to the ZIP Launchpad. He's one of those students who knows everyone, which is his entrepreneurial superpower."

—ERICA SNIDER, ZIP LAUNCHPAD PROGRAM MANAGER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KYNAN MARLIN

STAGE 3

Launch Track
Build and traction

COMPANY College Cubbies
collegecubbies.com, 619-975-4677
SDSU FOUNDERS Seniors Dawson Gregg (mechanical engineering) and Corbin Yates (economics)
PROBLEM TO SOLVE For college students, two major life events hit at the worst time. "Finals and moving," Dawson Gregg says, "and you don't want to deal with them at the same time."

Students, especially out-of-state students, often don't have the capacity to rent a vehicle, track down boxes, find storage and coordinate help while trying to finish the semester. Plus, parents can't always take time off to help their children move.
THE IDEA College Cubbies is a student-run one-stop shop for moving and summer storage. The team delivers boxes a week in advance for students to pack, and College Cubbies picks everything up and stores it over the summer. The items are then delivered when students return. "It's a flexible solution for students and parents," Gregg says.

Students reserve a pickup for $49, then pay monthly by item, generally $15 to $40.
THE IMPACT Gregg hopes to ease the logistics of moving for the students and colleges they serve. "We want to reduce the crunch that creates traffic and stress each year," he says.

He also notes that parents like the student-to-student model because they feel safer having fellow students working with their children.
THE VISION In 2025, the company's first year, College Cubbies served 67 students and brought in $42,000. This summer, Gregg hopes to help 400 to 600 students, with $300,000 to $400,000 in revenue. "We're definitely working hard toward that goal," he says. "It's something we wake up every day and think about."

Long term, Gregg and his partners, who also include non-SDSU students Ryan Carney and Shawheen Ghezavat, hope to expand into college towns throughout the U.S., potentially starting with the University of California, Los Angeles or the University of California, San Diego.



Move-out ready (from left): founders Shawheen Ghezavat, SDSU seniors Dawson Gregg and Corbin Yates, and Ryan Carney.

"Dawson and Corbin have impressed us so much with their drive and passion. Not only are they some of the hardest-working students I've met, but they are constantly learning new tools and testing new strategies as well. If you want a good example of entrepreneurial spirit, look no further."

—ERICA SNIDER, ZIP LAUNCHPAD PROGRAM MANAGER



McKenna Avery's ('20) Hempress Hygienics at Windmill Farms in San Diego.

STAGE 4

Launch
Operate autonomously

COMPANY Hempress Hygienics
hempresshygienics.com
SDSU FOUNDER McKenna Avery ('20, sustainability)
PROBLEM TO SOLVE Most conventional pads and tampons contain synthetic materials and chemical additives, despite being used in one of the most sensitive parts of a woman's body. The products can also take hundreds of thousands of years to biodegrade.
THE IDEA With hemp newly legalized under the 2018 Farm Bill, McKenna Avery and her founding partner, Marilyn Califano, then an Oregon State University student, saw an opportunity to create nontoxic, plant-based period care that was safer for women and better for the planet. "This bridged my passion for women's health and sustainability so well," she says.

Avery focused on development, working with a former Johnson & Johnson product developer who had also created the first NASA space diapers and the original plant-based diaper.
THE IMPACT For Avery, success is measured by health outcomes and environmental responsibility. "People always tell us, 'I don't have these weird symptoms anymore,' or 'I feel good about using this product,'" she says.

The impact went beyond developing the company. "Every single skill I learned from having this startup has allowed me to apply that to everything I do," Avery says. "Everything's problem-solving, everything's logistics, everything's operations."
THE COMPANY TODAY In 2023, Harper Hygienics majority acquired Hempress Hygienics. The approximately $3 million deal stabilized and scaled the company through debt relief, financing and manufacturing support. Today, Hempress is available in more than 800 retail locations across the United States.

"For me, it lines up," Avery says. "We got nontoxic, sustainable products to women who have seen real changes from using them."

"McKenna was an absolute pleasure to work with. Her passion for sustainability made her a perfect founder for Hempress. She's driven, compelling and an impressive example of student entrepreneurship."

—CATHY PUCHER, SDSU ENTREPRENEURSHIP INITIATIVES EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KYNAN MARLIN AND REBECCA NORDQUIST (FAR RIGHT)

SDSU Innovation Ecosystem

Aspiring CEOs and researchers can engage with these entrepreneurial initiatives to transform their ideas into market-ready ventures.

Programs and Spaces

Lavin Entrepreneurship Center
Organizes events, competitions and programming for entrepreneurial students

SDSU Mission Valley Innovation District
A regional hub connectingresearch, industry and community partners

Zahn Innovation Platform (ZIP) Launchpad
A free on-campus incubator for students, faculty and staff

The H.G. Fenton Company Idea Lab
A dedicated makerspace for prototyping and hands-on startup support

Lavin Entrepreneurship Program
Mentorship from industry founders to foster an entrepreneurial mindset among students

Education and Experience

Applied Coursework
Academic degrees and training through the Fowler College of Business

Startup Stories
A speaker series featuring founders' entrepreneurial journeys

Professional Growth
Paid internships, plus consulting in the Wendy Gillespie Center for Advancing Global Business

Mentorship and Expertise

Domain Experts
Dedicated office hours with specialists to solve specific venture hurdles

Legal and Intellectual Property Support
Access to legal expertise for protecting and commercializing discoveries

Funding and Capital

Seed Funding
Access to early-stage capital to launch successful businesses

Scholarships and Awards
Financial support specifically for student innovators and researchers

Commercialization Grants
Funding from SDSU Division of Research and Innovation to help bring patented products to the market

Interested in connecting with SDSU's innovation ecosystem? Scan the code or email **innovation@sdsu.edu.**

What Lies BENEATH

SDSU SCIENTISTS SPENT A WEEK AT SEA STUDYING ANCIENT INDIGENOUS LANDSCAPES BURIED UP TO 400 FEET BELOW THE SURFACE.

BY BRYANA QUINTANA



LEADING THE WAY Joining the research cruise were Amy Gusick, anthropology curator at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles, and biologists from the University of California, San Diego.



HANDS-ON LEARNING SDSU students (from left), including seniors Madison Hack, Tyler Dodge and Jovani Bell, practiced methods they had only talked about in their geology classes, Associate Professor Jillian Maloney says.

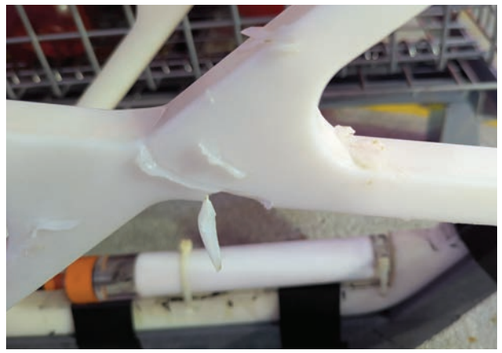
PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF JIMMY FUTTY AND ANDREA FABBRIZZI

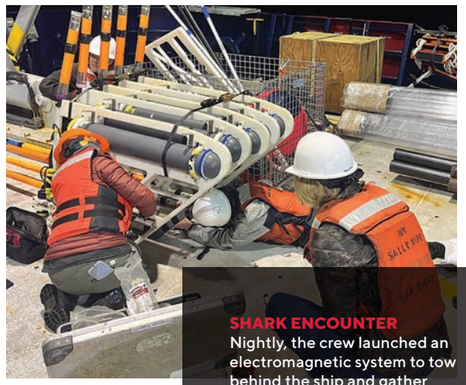
A GLIMPSE BENEATH THE OCEAN allows researchers to see thousands of years into the past. The Channel Islands off Southern California offer a rare opportunity to do just that. The northern islands, which include San Miguel, Santa Rosa, Santa Cruz and Anacapa, were one large land mass when the first humans inhabited them, but glacial melt after the Ice Age covered 75% of that landscape with water.

Over Thanksgiving, SDSU researchers—including Jimmy Futty, a geophysics Ph.D. student; Roslynn King ('22), now an assistant professor at Colorado School of Mines; Jillian Maloney, associate professor of geological sciences; and 13 students—set sail alongside collaborators to study this largely unexplored submerged area. They partnered with the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians to identify culturally significant areas and align these with scientific interests.

The team endeavored to understand how the land evolved, where people lived and how resources were used, as well as potentially identifying early human migration pathways into North America. From strange bacteria to areas where sediment filled in old rivers and secrets behind Southern California's shallowest known methane seep, their discoveries paint a picture of life long ago.



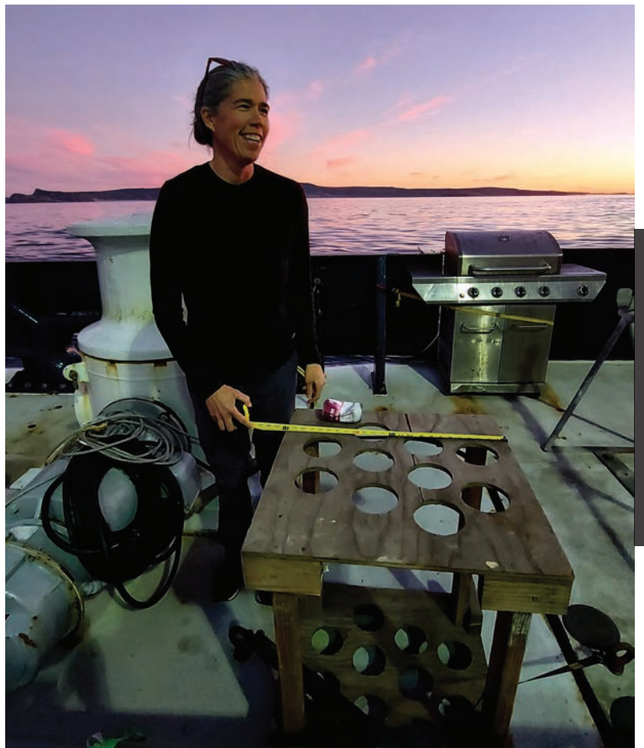




SHARK ENCOUNTER
Nightly, the crew launched an electromagnetic system to tow behind the ship and gather data. After the first deployment, one mount came back broken with serrated cuts all over. "When we went to clean it, one of the students found a great white tooth," Futty says.

ALL HANDS ON DECK
The research team worked 12-hour shifts around the clock. "It's been a wonderful partnership, utilizing the strengths of all the institutions to forward this research, to train students, and having other scientific disciplines think about the fact that they are working on ancestral lands," Gusick says. "Including Indigenous knowledge should be a standard part of scientific exploration."







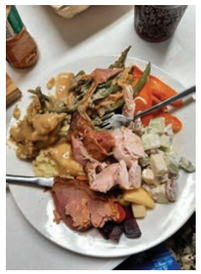


RESEARCHERS' TOOLBOX
Researchers like Maloney (left) gathered samples of water around a shallow methane seep—a spot on the seafloor where methane gas leaks into the surrounding water. One of many cutting-edge research tools used during the cruise included one that gathered water samples in large bottles (right) and measured properties such as temperature, oxygen level and salinity.



A SCIENTIFIC PATH
Futty, who led the research cruise, came to SDSU at age 30 to finish his undergraduate degree and is poised to become a triple SDSU alumnus in 2027. While he struggled with school growing up, the Earth and Environmental Sciences Department quickly felt like home.





A THANKFUL CREW
Trip organizers didn't expect many students to sacrifice their Thanksgiving break for this trip. "This is the first cruise where so many people wanted to come that I had to tell several that there weren't enough seats," Futty says.

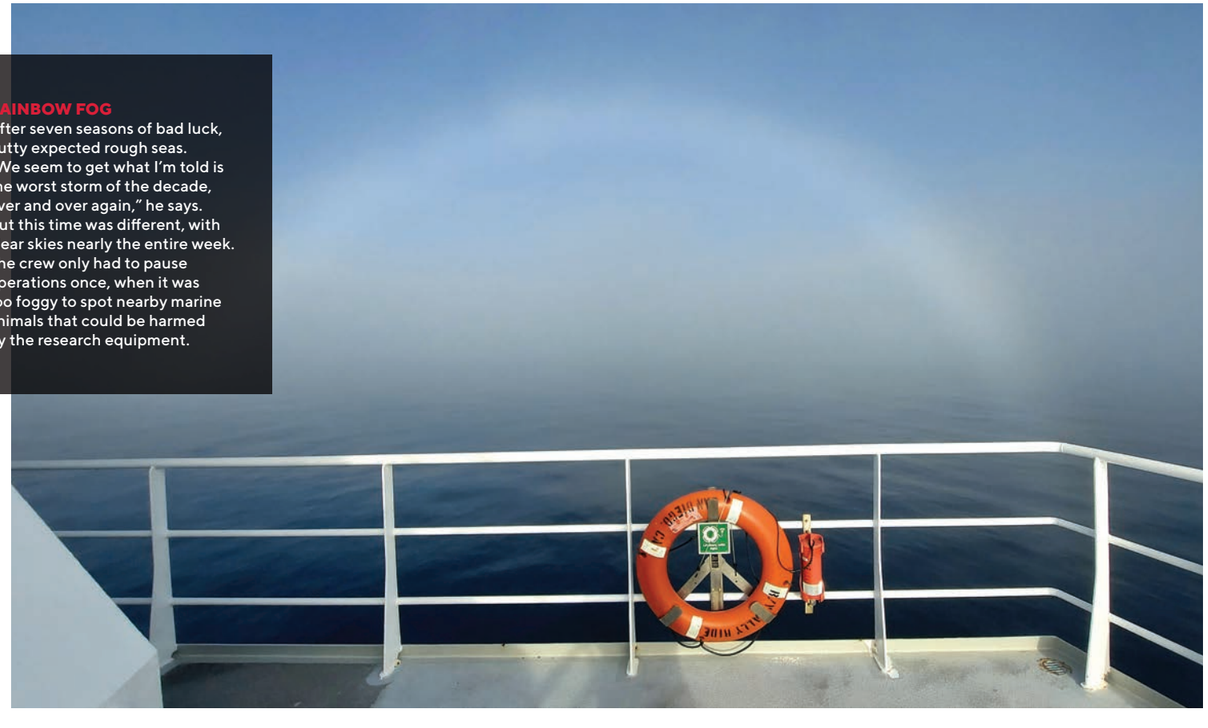
PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF ROSLYNN KING, JILLIAN MALONEY, JIMMY FUTTY AND ANDREA FABBRIZZI

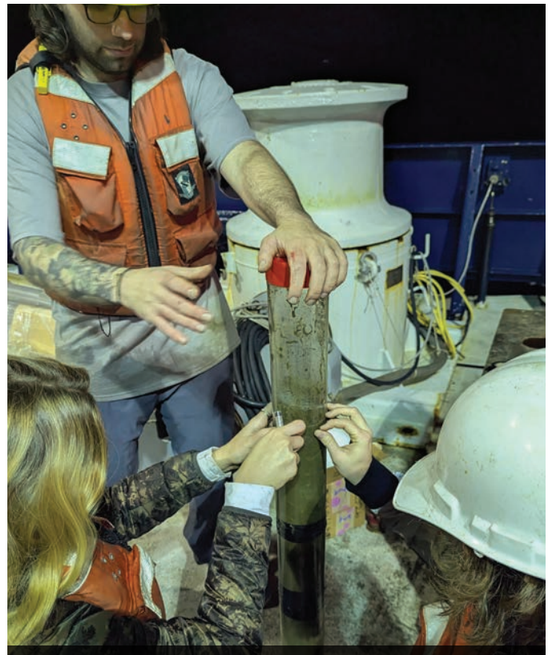
A FUZZY SPECIES
An exciting find was this white, hairlike bacteria living on the surface of the methane seep. "It was a biological species that had never been identified around the islands before," Futty says. "This is going to end up being one of the most shallow-water and near-the-coastline organisms of this type that's ever been identified on the coast of California." The team, including King (left), will analyze how it survives in such an extreme environment, living off gases bubbling out of Earth's crust, and its effects on the surrounding ecosystem.





RAINBOW FOG
After seven seasons of bad luck, Futty expected rough seas. "We seem to get what I'm told is the worst storm of the decade, over and over again," he says. But this time was different, with clear skies nearly the entire week. The crew only had to pause operations once, when it was too foggy to spot nearby marine animals that could be harmed by the research equipment.





TIME TRAVELING
Maloney says they were attempting to reconstruct the past through their findings. "As you move down the sediment core, you're moving back in time," she says. Cores collected from the seep were filled with an unknown chalky white sediment that bubbled up the tube and smelled like rotten eggs—the result of sulfides created by chemical reactions between methane and bacteria. Studying this sediment, its age and origins will lend key information on the landscape and climate that existed thousands of years ago.







STUDENT COLLAB
Galilea Orihuela (from left), Cameron Kuld and Jovani Bell trade the classroom for open water. They join peers and researchers from UC San Diego, the University of Hawaii, Colorado School of Mines and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF JIMMY FUTTY, JILLIAN MALONEY, ROSLYNN KING AND ANDREA FABBRIZZI

why we give



Bob Payne ('55) helped start the L. Robert Payne School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, which has helped graduates like Paris Landen ('12) excel in their careers.

"BOB'S VISION AND ENDURING GENEROSITY MADE THE SCHOOL OF HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM MANAGEMENT POSSIBLE. TODAY, HIS CONTINUED SUPPORT ALLOWS US TO INVEST DIRECTLY IN OUR STUDENTS AND ADVANCE A PROGRAM THAT LEADS THE INDUSTRY AND SERVES OUR COMMUNITY."

—ADRIENNE VARGAS
Vice President for University Relations and Development

THE DONOR

Bob Payne ('55), a hotel and restaurant developer, helped shape San Diego's tourism industry. The longtime San Diego State University supporter and alumnus was also the catalyst behind the School of Hospitality and Tourism Management.

THE GIFT

A $1 million contribution to support student awards, industry and academic research, facility enhancements, marketing efforts and more.

WHEN BOB PAYNE SAW EARLY RENDITIONS OF A SIGN OUTSIDE Adams Humanities for the L. Robert Payne School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, he didn't like what he saw.

"My name's too big," he told Carl Winston, the school director. "Make the School of Hospitality letters bigger, and make my name smaller."

The humble (and immediately granted) request from a man who helped build the hospitality industry in San Diego didn't surprise Winston. At inception, Payne provided $1.1 million in seed money for the now internationally recognized school, and his guiding principle ever since has been "be practical, get results and I'll stay out of your hair," Winston says. Today the school—currently celebrating its 25th anniversary—awards degrees to some 125 students a year and boasts a 99% job placement rate in the industry.

Despite decades of relevance to the regional economy, SDSU did not have a School of Hospitality and Tourism Management until 1999, when Payne's cajoling of then-President Stephen Weber on the subject came to fruition within the College of Professional Studies and Fine Arts.

Payne—who also supports the Parma Payne Goodall Alumni Center—knew the territory as the owner of two San Diego hotels with 800-plus rooms and the developer of a chain of dinner house restaurants. Given the city's status as an internationally acclaimed tourist destination, the 1955 San Diego State College alumnus knew of an acute need for trained personnel to serve visitors and to handle meetings and events.

"In a community the size of San Diego, it was a big void," Payne says, "and I'm proud of the fact that Steve Weber recognized that and we got together and started the program."

An additional $2.4 million contribution in 2010 rebranded it as the L. Robert Payne School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, and Payne recently kicked in an additional $1 million to support student awards, research, events, facilities and more.

Over its 25 years, the school has grown from a first-year cohort of 13 students to an enrollment of 500, serving an estimated 20% of HTM students statewide, and built deep connections with the industry.

The school also offers two online master's degrees through SDSU Global Campus, including a meeting and event management degree created in an exclusive collaboration with Meeting Professionals International. A newly reimagined senior-level certificate program in meeting management with MPI updates the curriculum and builds stronger peer connections among industry leaders.

The program's 99% overall career placement rate is driven largely by seven to eight well-known companies eager to recruit Payne graduates into management training programs, Winston says. "Most of my students get scooped up in the fall semester," he adds.

Among those working-professional graduates is Paris Landen. Since 2021, she has served as the general manager of The Magnolia, a 1,200-capacity performing arts center in El Cajon operated by Live Nation Entertainment. Landen returned to SDSU to complete an HTM degree in 2012 after a few years working in the field. In late February she was coming off an especially busy December and January performance schedule, with legendary groups like War and The Roots, and preparing for a sold-out concert by Latin rock artist Beto Cuevas.

"The main thing I got out of the program is just learning the importance of teamwork in our field dynamic," says Landen, who considered herself more of an independent type at the beginning of her career. "So much of what I do now is team management, and it just allows me to achieve better success."

Landen says Payne's vision "has really helped bring hospitality to another level of respect that didn't exist before."

With Payne's confidence, the school uses his contributions where they are needed most. That translates into executive-in-residence programs, budgetary help for students who study abroad, an endowed chair for the Sycuan Institute on Tribal Gaming and general program support.

Winston notes with pride that the average class size in HTM is about 30 students, similar to what might be found at a private school.

"You can't do that with a state budget," he says. "You've got to have private money to make that happen."

Payne wants his latest contribution to help SDSU make an even bigger splash in the field.

"The new gift is really based on what we need to do to get even greater exposure, larger enrollment in the program," he says, with the goal of building a stronger national, international and local reputation. *—Jeff Ristine*

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

PHOTOGRAPH BY SCOTT HARGROVE

classnotes

/Alumni Spotlight on Mission-Driven Work



For **Carly Asher Yoost**, leadership and purpose have always intersected.

At SDSU, Yoost gained more than classroom knowledge. Through hands-on work at the SDSU Children's Center, she developed a deeper understanding of child advocacy.

"They were lessons I didn't really know I was learning at the time," Yoost says, "but that became very important down the road."

Those early lessons later aligned with the foundation laid by her family. Her father, a technology entrepreneur, dedicated his career to combating child exploitation.

Following his unexpected passing, Yoost and her sister, Désirée Asher, restructured his company before its sale. She then carried forward his child protection efforts into what is now Child Rescue Coalition, serving as CEO for 10 years and now as founder and chair of the board.

Today, the nonprofit provides technology and training to law enforcement across the U.S. and in more than 100 countries. While arrest data is often underreported, Child Rescue Coalition's tools have led to the arrest of more than 17,000 predators, the rescue of nearly 4,000 children and the prevention of approximately 850,000 cases of abuse worldwide.

"This technology is saving children's lives, and that's something we should all be fighting for," Yoost says. —*Gema Deleon*



Michael Minjares ('89 journalism, '95 M.A.) knew two things early on: He was going to be the first in his family to graduate from college, and he would attend San Diego State University. Growing up with parents who worked on campus and with Aztec memorabilia on his bedroom walls, he felt as though SDSU was his destiny.

As a student, Minjares immersed himself in campus life, becoming an SDSU Ambassador and a member of several student organizations. It was there that he discovered his true passion for helping others succeed.

After spending 17 years mentoring students at SDSU, Minjares brought his purpose-driven work ethic to the Jacobs & Cushman San Diego Food Bank, where he serves as director of grants management. He secures critical funding to support families facing food insecurity.

The food bank serves approximately 400,000 people monthly, with programs designed for low-income families, seniors and students. Minjares relied on free school meals as a child and strives to make an impact on families who are in similar situations.

Says Minjares, "Every day, I enjoy and take pride in using the skills I honed at SDSU to secure badly needed resources for San Diegans striving for a better life." —*Taylor Harris*



With a background in psychology and human services, **Melinda Forstey** ('15, MBA) always knew she wanted to make a difference in people's lives.

After relocating to San Diego in 2009, Forstey joined Serving Seniors, a nonprofit dedicated to providing meals, housing and supportive services to older adults throughout San Diego County. Through her role as a development assistant, Forstey gained a firsthand look at how vital mission-driven organizations are in strengthening and uplifting communities.

Inspired to expand her leadership capacity, Forstey pursued her MBA at San Diego State University. Her time there helped equip her with a versatile skill set that translates seamlessly across industries, particularly within the nonprofit sector.

Today, Forstey serves as CEO of Serving Seniors, where she has helped expand the meal program to more than 1.5 million meals annually and has led the development of multiple affordable housing communities. The San Diego Union-Tribune has recognized the nonprofit as one of San Diego's Top Workplaces for seven consecutive years.

What Forstey values most about her role is watching the mission come to life.

"I always like to say that we may be serving them, but they're also serving us right back," Forstey says. —*Taylor Harris*

1960s

Michael Supancich ('66, B.S., zoology) enjoys retirement in Carlsbad and credits SDSU for preparing him for success at Northwestern University Medical School.

1970s

Ernie Williams ('73, B.A., recreation; '78, M.S., rehabilitation, '78, M.S., tourism management) retired after 28 years in higher education and now resides in the Seattle area.

Mark Orwoll ('78, B.A., journalism), a former The Daily Aztec staff member, received the 2025 Lowell Thomas Travel Writer of the Year Silver Award, one of travel journalism's highest honors.

1980s

Paul Van Richter ('83, B.A., geography) founded Van Richter Records in 1993. The industrial music label helped shape the genre's darker edge, championing boundary-pushing European and American artists, adapting to digital shifts and preserving rare releases while remaining a vital force in the scene.

Ritchie Mendoza ('84, B.S., microbiology), a self-proclaimed die-hard Aztec for Life, celebrates 20 years at UCLA Medical Center and promotion to senior clinical lab specialist.

1990s

Anthony Paoletti ('90, B.A., graphic design) works as a senior sales engineer for Technology by One Workplace and is celebrating 33 years of marriage.

Leslie Levinson ('90, B.S., accountancy) and **Jim Levinson** ('84, B.S., accountancy) were honored with the Fostering Hearts Legacy Award by Walden Family Services.

Phil Konstantin ('91, B.A., political science) was named a Cherokee Elder by the Cherokee Nation and is active in the San Diego Cherokee Community. A cancer survivor, he continues sharing content on his YouTube channel @TravelsWithPhil while encouraging health awareness.

Elizabeth Rountree ('93, B.A., English and comparative literature) serves as associate vice president for enrollment management at CSU Monterey Bay. She earned her doctor of education in entrepreneurial leadership in education from Johns Hopkins University.

Bob Carilli ('95, B.S., telecommunications and film) launched Bright Art Box, a creative venture producing custom light art after successful business exits.

Thomas Fletcher ('95, B.A., speech communication) accepted a new role as senior vice president of global partnerships with the Houston Rockets after six seasons in a similar role with the Phoenix Suns.

2000s

Kim Perigo ('02, B.A. & '04, M.A., communication; '13, Ed.D., educational leadership) is a full-time professor at San Diego Mesa College and directs its speech and debate team.

Griff Stone ('04, M.A., political science) retired after 25 years as a federal agent and analyst. He now resides in Bangkok.

Vernon Rodgers ('04, B.A.A.S.) passed away at 98. A WWII veteran drafted in 1945, he served in the 511th Parachute Infantry, 11th Airborne Division, before later fulfilling his lifelong goal of earning his degree from San Diego State University.

Giselle Cortes ('08, B.A., urban studies) published "Cushing's Syndrome: From Misdiagnosis to Recovery," a personal journey of resilience, self-advocacy and the transformative power of uncovering the truth.

Steve Jaffe ('08, B.A., journalism and media studies) released "The Layoff Journey," guiding readers through the seven stages of grief after job loss.

2010s

Yanelli Nunez ('11, B.S., biology) was named a 2025 Science Defender by the Union of Concerned Scientists for her clean energy policy work.

Josh Aaron ('13, B.S., marketing) founded Sexy Time, a mobile app helping couples prioritize connection.

Philip Lai ('09, M.A., psychology; '15, Ph.D., language and communicative disorders) was named community chair for Early Childhood Education at the University of Nebraska at Kearney with a concurrent appointment at the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska.

Uday Korat ('16, M.S., electrical engineering) is a hardware design engineer at Google, developing tensor processing units.

Julie Ciocho ('18, B.A.A.S., psychology) earned her master's in applied behavior analysis in 2021, became board certified in 2023 and now serves as a lead behavior analyst in San Diego.

2020s

Catherina Cojulún ('20, B.S., television, film and new media) completed her short film "New Human," now screening at multiple international film festivals.

Submit Class Notes through SDSU Alumni's online form at sdsu.edu/classnotes or scan the code.

SDSU ALUMNI

2025–2026 Alumni Board of Advisers

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Visit **sdsualumni.org/pastpresidents** for a full list.

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Assistant Director, Alumni Engagement: **Dustin Adkins** ('20, '25)

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

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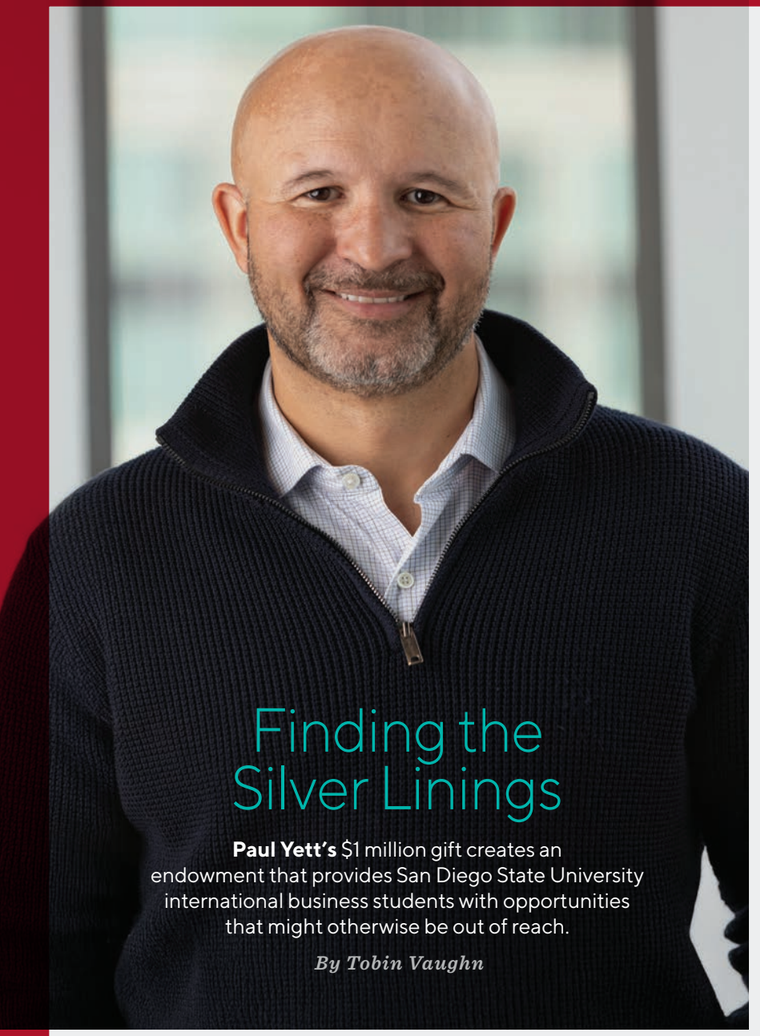
PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF CARLY ASHER YOOST, MICHAEL MINJARES AND MELINDA FORSTEY



Finding the Silver Linings

Paul Yett's $1 million gift creates an endowment that provides San Diego State University international business students with opportunities that might otherwise be out of reach.

By Tobin Vaughn

Inspired by his own student experience, Paul Yett ('92) is helping international business majors access internships that expand their horizons.

Most days after school, Paul Yett's ('92, finance) aunt would ask about his day. His response often leaned toward the negative. "Stop right there," she would say. "You need to tell me three positive things."

Her words brought Yett a valuable course correction.

"She exposed me to a great way of thinking," Yett says. "I try to live by the philosophy of finding the positive: What's the silver lining in your life?"

Yett considers his SDSU finance degree a major silver lining. He's a member of the advisory board for the university's international business program and recently pledged $1 million to establish the Paul Yett International Business Internship Endowment in the College of Arts and Letters. Student recipients will be named Yett Global Fellows and receive stipend support.

The endowment allows students to choose career-launching internships over a paycheck. By covering expenses associated with unpaid or underpaid internships, it removes the financial pressure that often forces students to pass up transformative experiences.

Hisham Foad, an associate professor in economics and director of SDSU's international Business program, says Yett's endowment will help give more students greater opportunities for success.

"These experiences can make unbelievable differences in people's lives with results seen not just today but going decades forward," Foad says.

The inaugural cohort of Yett Global Fellows for 2026 includes 10 students. Seven will pursue internships, and three will attend a weeklong student leadership conference this summer in Colombia.

Now living in the Bay Area, Yett is a managing director at Hamilton Lane, an investment management company where he enjoys "singing the praises of private equity" and helping clients build financial portfolios.

Yett credits much of his success to his time at SDSU. He says navigating the challenges of a large university—crashing closed classes and circling crowded parking lots—made him more intrepid by honing coping skills he still relies on.

As a student, Yett thought he would graduate and work at a Wall Street firm. The reality? He had a lot of interviews—and a lot of rejection, he says. He has the letters to prove it.

Yett's advice to students is to manage their expectations and remain flexible. He is grateful to give back to SDSU through philanthropy and by sharing his 30-plus years of experience.

"I want to share the journey with others and help expose them to whatever career path or area of finance they're interested in," he says.

Ultimately, he hopes they find their own silver linings. ●

To make a gift to SDSU, contact Mary Darling: mdarling@sdsu.edu or 619-665-2879.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF PAUL YETT

throwback



University historian Seth Mallios (right) and journalism student Zoe Zarling

What Was Hiding in Plain Sight

For decades, one mystery at Love Library defied every attempt to explain it—even by those who knew San Diego State University best.

By Seth Mallios and Zoe Zarling



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDRE YOUNG

Seth Mallios, Kit and Karen Sickels Endowed Chair in University Heritage and Community Engagement: In my 25 years at SDSU, I've uncovered a wide range of campus treasures—from lost Depression-era murals to a fully stocked Cold War bomb shelter. But one mystery eluded me since 2001: the symbols embedded in the exterior of Love Library. There are 672 of them, evenly spaced on each side of the building. I searched archives, quizzed SDSU staff and six university presidents—and came up empty. Worse, most people didn't even know what I was talking about.

So perplexed was I that I ranked the symbols No. 1 on my list of Where in the University? on the last page of the history book "Hail Montezuma!"—and then I moved on to other enigmas.

Zoe Zarling, journalism and media studies junior: I first noticed the symbols while admiring Love Library in 2024 before I was a student at SDSU. Curious, I took photos. Then a feature-writing assignment last year at SDSU gave me the opportunity to investigate. At the library, nobody I spoke with was familiar with the symbols. I discovered through online photos that the symbols weren't on the orignal structure. The only other reference I found was a brief mention in "Hail Montezuma!" I reached out to Dr. Mallios, and our conversation motivated me to keep digging.

SM: Zoe's curiosity and dedication rekindled my interest in the glyphs. Great students have a way of re-energizing difficult projects. We met and focused her research on a simple but critical question: When were the symbols added?

ZZ: I combed through yearbooks, catalogs and photographs. Then I found it. Images from March 1996 showed Love Library without the symbols. A photograph dated Sept. 19, 1996, showed them fully installed. The glyphs had been added in the summer of 1996. I was bursting with excitement over my findings.

SM: Meanwhile, I embarked on a new round of questioning longtime SDSU employees. One email chain led me to former SDSU architect Tony Fulton. He explained that after the 1994 Northridge earthquake, the library underwent seismic upgrades that required large anchor bolts through the building's exterior. Rather than leave them exposed—"eye-catchingly ugly," he said—he designed covers and decorated them with Aztec-inspired symbols.

ZZ: We met to discuss our findings, and the smile on his face when I walked in told me he had big news too. Soon laughter filled the room as the decades-old mystery had been solved. ●

More "Where in the University?" mysteries.

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SDSU Alumni
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