

SUMMER 2023

# SDSU

MAGAZINE

# 'That Was No Ordinary Moment'

**Lamont Butler's** buzzer-beater in the Final Four will continue to reverberate well beyond the basketball court.





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Rising senior Lamont Butler and the Aztec men's basketball team captivated the country during their run to the NCAA national championships final. What will the hard-earned success mean for SDSU?

Photograph by Matt Furman  
Story by Wayne Drehs



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Photograph by Matt Furman

# SDSU

MAGAZINE

SDSU Strategic Communications and Public Affairs publishes *SDSU Magazine* and distributes it biannually to members of the SDSU alumni, faculty, staff and friends.

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magazine@sdsu.edu  
www.sdsu.edu/magazine

Periodical postage paid at San Diego, CA  
Volume 30, No. 1, copyright 2023  
San Diego State University  
Circulation: 60,000

Postmaster:  
Send address changes to:  
San Diego State University  
5500 Campanile Drive  
San Diego, CA 92182-8045  
alumdata@sdsu.edu

Opinions expressed in SDSU Magazine are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the university administration nor those of The California State University Board of Trustees.

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## FROM THE PRESIDENT



### WHAT AN INCREDIBLE TIME IT IS TO BE PART OF THE SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY!

The Aztecs' magical run to the NCAA men's basketball national championship final was an experience few of us will ever forget. In this issue, we explore how that success might impact the university, and we get to know rising senior Lamont Butler, whose iconic buzzer-beater propelled SDSU into the championship game.

But that's just the beginning. Research activity and support are at all-time highs, and SDSU's global impact is growing through our programs in Palau, the Republic of Georgia and our newest campus center in Oaxaca, Mexico. And, true to our mission, we celebrate our rich diversity and soaring student success, all while shrinking achievement gaps and expanding access to an excellent university education.

We'll examine the powerful benefits of our many student community centers and introduce you to SDSU Imperial Valley's new Student Accommodation Services Center, which is minimizing both academic and physical barriers for students with disabilities. Our Imperial Valley location is growing fast, with development of its new \$80 million STEM laboratory and teaching facility that will offer new programs in engineering, chemistry and sustainability to serve California's Lithium Valley.

And as SDSU continues to rise as an elite academic institution, we check in on construction progress at SDSU Mission Valley and dive into groundbreaking research being conducted by students and award-winning faculty on artificial intelligence and a binational approach to studying Mexico's Coronado Islands. We introduce you to SDSU's first-ever recipient of the prestigious Truman Scholarship, and further abroad, we spend time with SDSU doctoral student and Fulbright Scholar Al Schleicher, who taught and conducted research on teacher education programs at the University of Belize.

SDSU launches its graduates into meaningful careers where they tackle some of the world's greatest challenges. Highlighting our award-winning pre-professional health programs, we follow the Flying Samaritans of SDSU as they provide free health care in Tijuana. We also peek in on Aztec Electric Racing, a student-run team that is preparing a new generation of minds to drive the global evolution of electric vehicles. And we introduce Techstars San Diego Powered by San Diego State University, a small-business accelerator that will connect our students and innovation ecosystem with exciting startups from around the world.

As you learn more about our people, their studies and their bright futures, I hope you'll be part of the continued ascendancy of San Diego State University! ●

  
ADELA DE LA TORRE, PH.D.

Photograph by Scott Hargrove



# state lately

## THE NEXT PHASE FOR SDSU MISSION VALLEY

**The construction around Snapdragon Stadium continues, and soon it won't be the only jewel on the site. By Ryan Brothers**

**SINCE OPENING IN SEPTEMBER**, Snapdragon Stadium has become the new home for Aztec football as well as professional rugby and soccer. Now the stadium is making room for Major League Soccer's newest team, which will start play in 2025.

The May announcement came just months after approximately 32,000 San Diego Wave FC fans broke the National Women's Soccer League regular-season single-game attendance record. (The previous record was 25,218, set in 2019 in Portland.)

The momentum continues this year: The stadium will host more than 45 special events, including concerts by Coldplay, Guns N' Roses and P!NK.

But Snapdragon isn't the only project in play

at SDSU Mission Valley. There are others on the horizon for the mixed-use, transit-oriented development that are moving along as planned. Upon full buildout, the site will include 80 acres of parks and open space, up to 4,600 market-rate and affordable housing units, 1.6 million square feet of office, technology, laboratory and research space, 90,000 square feet of retail space and a hotel. [Here's what to expect next:](#)

Courtesy of LPC West: design by Lever / FPBA / JCFO

### INNOVATION DISTRICT

The first innovation district project will provide 315,000 square feet of leading-edge facilities for research and innovation in three buildings designed and built by LPC West. This includes the headquarters for Techstars San Diego Powered by San Diego State University, a startup business incubator, that will further amplify SDSU's economic impact to the region. (See Page 20 for the story.) Expected completion: 2026.

### RIVER PARK

As the neighborhood grows, it will flow into the new 34-acre river park with access to multiuse fields, bike paths and walking trails. With natural shade from the elevated trolley line and native trees, the park will encourage outdoor leisure year-round. The area will also help restore the ecosystem by reintroducing dozens of native floras to the region. Expected completion: end of 2023.

### RESIDENTIAL AND RETAIL SPACE

The first market-rate residential and retail project, including approximately 600 apartments and 30,000 square feet of ground-floor retail space, will be developed by AvalonBay Communities. The apartments will be a mix of studio through three-bedroom units, and the neighborhood-serving retail space will provide a variety of options, including a grocery store, for those living and working on-site. Expected completion: 2026.

### AFFORDABLE HOUSING

An affordable housing development, led by Chelsea Investment Corporation, will support tenants averaging 50% area median income. The first project will consist of approximately 180 units, ranging from one-bedroom through four-bedrooms, and a community-serving child care facility to support up to 70 preschool and pre-K children. At full buildout, 10% of all housing units on-site will be restricted for affordable housing. Expected completion: 2027.



For more information about SDSU Mission Valley, scan the QR code or follow the progress on your favorite social media platform.

## \$10M

**THE ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY, IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY, AWARDED SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY \$10 MILLION** to facilitate the SDSU Center for Community Energy and Environmental Justice. It will provide critical services to rural, remote and Indigenous communities to access federal resources for environmental and energy justice projects. The center will eventually be headquartered in SDSU Mission Valley.

"As the only California university selected to lead this work, this is clear recognition of our faculty's ability and passion to foster mutually beneficial relationships with tribal and other key communities," says Adela de la Torre, president of SDSU. "And this empowerment focus is exactly what makes SDSU distinct as a major research university — our focus is not just on the idea but on creating a sustainable and positive impact." —Sarah White



# AZTEC

## PROVING GROUND

**AFTER NINE LONG MONTHS OF MANUFACTURING AND DESIGN ITERATIONS,** this AER-23 electric race car is track ready. Aztec Electric Racing, a student-led team at SDSU, will pit it against more than 70 universities at the Formula SAE Electric national competition (June 14-17) in Michigan. AER, which receives significant philanthropic support from Richard Woodcock, will face big-name programs that have dominated the top 10 slots, including McGill University, MIT and Carnegie Mellon.

While the national stage provides some healthy competition, it's just a starting point for these AER teammates. These students, along with others in the College of Engineering, are graduating in prime positions to land jobs in high-demand fields. In fact, several former AER members now work for companies such as Tesla, Rivian and NASA, among others. "Our alumni have directly cited their involvement in Aztec Electric Racing during their interviews as sources for their engineering experience, problem solving and team-working abilities," says Andrew da Cunha, SDSU mechanical engineering graduating senior and president of AER. Not a bad endorsement. —Melinda Sevilla

### Did you know?

The AER-23's max power is 80KW, and it weighs 520 pounds. For comparison, its power-to-weight ratio is almost four times that of a Tesla, with a 170KW max power and 3,600-pound weight.

### Motor

Some Tesla models can reach 60 mph in 2.1 seconds. The AER-23 needs a fraction more: 2.3 seconds.

### Rear Wing

The full carbon aero package, which boasts a strength-to-weight ratio that's 10 times higher than steel, includes the front carbon splitter, front carbon vents, rear carbon diffuser with winglets and rear carbon rear wing.

### Steering

One goal for this car? High-speed turning. They expect to tackle turns at 30 miles an hour.

PEGGY & ERIC JOHNSON  
DR. RICHARD WOODCOCK

### Suspension

The pull-rod suspension lowers the chassis and the center of gravity to improve efficiency in cornering, body roll and high-speed stability.

### Seat

The custom carbon seat is a bit of a luxury. It's also the strongest material on the market.

### Wheels

The wheels measure in at 10 inches. For comparison, standard road cars have wheels that are between 14 and 19 inches in diameter.



Sabrina Davidson is an SDSU alumna who graduated from the School of Art and Design in 2021 and is earning her master's in architecture at Arizona State University. An eclectic artist in both visual and performing media, Davidson created "The Black in Crimson and Black" — a mural in the University Library that honors the contributions of SDSU's Black luminaries — with fellow alumna Avia Ramm. What follows is Davidson's story of finding her passion in the arts and how that led to the November 2022 unveiling of the iconic mural.



Sabrina Davidson (left) and Avia Ramm: the creative minds behind the SDSU mural "The Black in Crimson and Black."

## ART APPRECIATION

**THE DAY "THE BLACK IN CRIMSON AND BLACK" MURAL WAS UNVEILED WAS REALLY WILD.** To see it on the wall was beautiful. It was as if to say, "Yes! Black people, we are here, and we are part of the history of San Diego State University and have been here for a very long time."

Of the seven people in the mural, Joe Johnson, the former dean of the College of Education; Hal Brown, the university's first Black administrator; and Amber St. James, a drag icon and activist, were there. While their legacies live on in many ways at SDSU, it was amazing to know that their legacies would also live on through this mural.

It felt good to put more of us on the walls.

My first memory with art goes way back. As a kindergartener in Houston, I was given an assignment, and I drew a horse and a man on a horse. Pretty simple, but my teacher said it was good — and something sparked in me. I was appreciative, and then I just kept drawing. And I went all over the place, honestly.

I have been, in so many words, putting little tools inside of a little pouch that is becoming bigger and bigger as far as what I can possibly do as an artist. I am a musician and a photographer. I am a painter and sketch still to this very day. I organize and make ceramics. Thank goodness I went through the studio art program at SDSU because they don't make you choose a major, per se. You can pick and choose what you're interested in — and that was my art

style anyway: picking and choosing, putting them in my pouch.

An assignment in an experimental art class three years ago eventually led me to "The Black in Crimson and Black." It taught us how to be a muralist from design to finished project. My mural was called "A Place to Gather," which was inspired by an experience I had while taking Arabic. I noticed there weren't many books in our library on the Arabic language, and I wanted to further the representation of different cultures at our school. I wanted to see South Asian folks on the wall. I wanted to see them somewhere; I wanted to hear about them.

Serendipity comes to mind when I think of this mural. After I finished the project, I happened to see a flyer outside my class from Annie Buckley, the director of the School of Art and Design. She was asking for mural proposals. So, I turned mine in, and after I didn't hear back, I saw her walking down the hallway and followed her into her office. I asked if she had received my proposal. She did — and she liked it.

That became the first mural I ever created, and it is still on the wall of the art department building. It opened the door for me to work on a number of projects at SDSU, including "The Black in Crimson and Black." My experience with art has been incredible, but I know I still have much more to give. My pouch still has a lot of room. —By Sabrina Davidson as told to Aaron Burgin

Photograph by Leobardo Ramirez



Cheers from Enrique Hernandez, Snapdragon Stadium executive chef.

## SERVING UP THE CULINARY WORLD OF OAXACA AT SDSU

**FOOD IS THE ULTIMATE UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE.** And Enrique Hernandez, executive chef at Snapdragon Stadium, learned a phrase or two from some of the most renowned culinarians in Oaxaca, Mexico.

In collaboration with SDSU's Aztec Identity Initiative, which focuses on respectful and accurate engagement with the university's Aztec identity, Hernandez traveled to the SDSU Oaxaca Center for Mesoamerican Studies in February as part of an Aztec Shops delegation. Here's how the SDSU community can expect to benefit from this cross-cultural experience.

**Q. So, SDSU chefs in Oaxaca: How did that come about?**

**A.** It's three things. 1) We want to support SDSU's mission to transcend borders; 2) this is about honoring and celebrating Aztec culture in a way that's culturally authentic and 3) we're looking to create an experience that cannot be matched in any other university environment.

**What was the trip like?**

We learned from some bona fide stars in Oaxacan cuisine. I'm talking about award-winning chefs like Celia Florian and Vicky Hernandez and Rodolfo Castellanos. We learned everything from shopping strategies at the local *mercados* to techniques in the kitchen.

**And you'll be bringing back some of these recipes to SDSU, right?**

We chefs are applying what we learned to an expanded Menú Azteca that will debut on campus — first in catering and then hopefully at places like Aztec Markets, Faculty-Staff Club, The Garden and UTK — and at Snapdragon Stadium in the fall.

**Can you offer any preview of the menu?**

Authentic, pre-European Aztec menus are big on *maize* [corn] and *nopal* [cactus]. So, expect more items similar to the Tamal Azteca, a tamale that football fans enjoyed at Snapdragon, quesadillas with Oaxacan cheese, enchiladas with mole negro and spicy chocolate desserts.

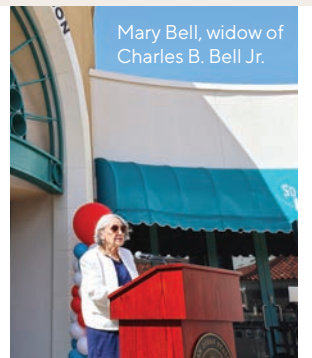
**Anything for adventurous guests?**

The Chapulines Azteca will be back. Those are toasted grasshoppers mixed with roasted nuts and spices. Also expect a new *molcajete* [fire-roasted] salsa ground with chichatanas — smoky, salty Oaxacan ants.

**What's your lasting memory from the trip?**

On the last day, we prepared a meal for the staff at the SDSU Oaxaca Center for Mesoamerican Studies. We inaugurated its kitchen and traditional *comal* [a griddle made from sandstone], and I can tell you the view from the rooftop is sensational. —Benjamin Eisenstein

Photographs by Benjamin Eisenstein (left) and Rachel Crawford



Mary Bell, widow of Charles B. Bell Jr.

## NEW NAMES UNVEILED FOR SDSU MAINSTAYS

Two of SDSU's building names have been replaced with tributes to inspiring figures from university history.

East Commons is the Charles B. Bell Jr. Pavilion, and West Commons is now the Ellen Ochoa Pavilion. The changeovers became official in the spring in separate dedication ceremonies.

"It's exciting to highlight such influential people who have had a lasting impact not only on campus but [also] in the nation," says Chris Medellin, director of the Native Resource Center that is now housed in the Ellen Ochoa Pavilion.

Bell, who died in 2010, taught mathematics and statistics at San Diego State College from 1958 to 1966 and at SDSU from 1981 to 1992. He was the first Black faculty member to achieve tenure.

Ochoa was NASA's first Latina astronaut and flew on four Space Shuttle missions. At SDSU, she earned her undergraduate physics degree in 1980 and played flute in the Marching Aztecs. She later served as director of the Johnson Space Center in Houston. Now retired, Ochoa has paid numerous visits to SDSU during and after her astronaut days, always making a point to engage with students, and was awarded an honorary doctorate in 2019.

—Jeff Ristine



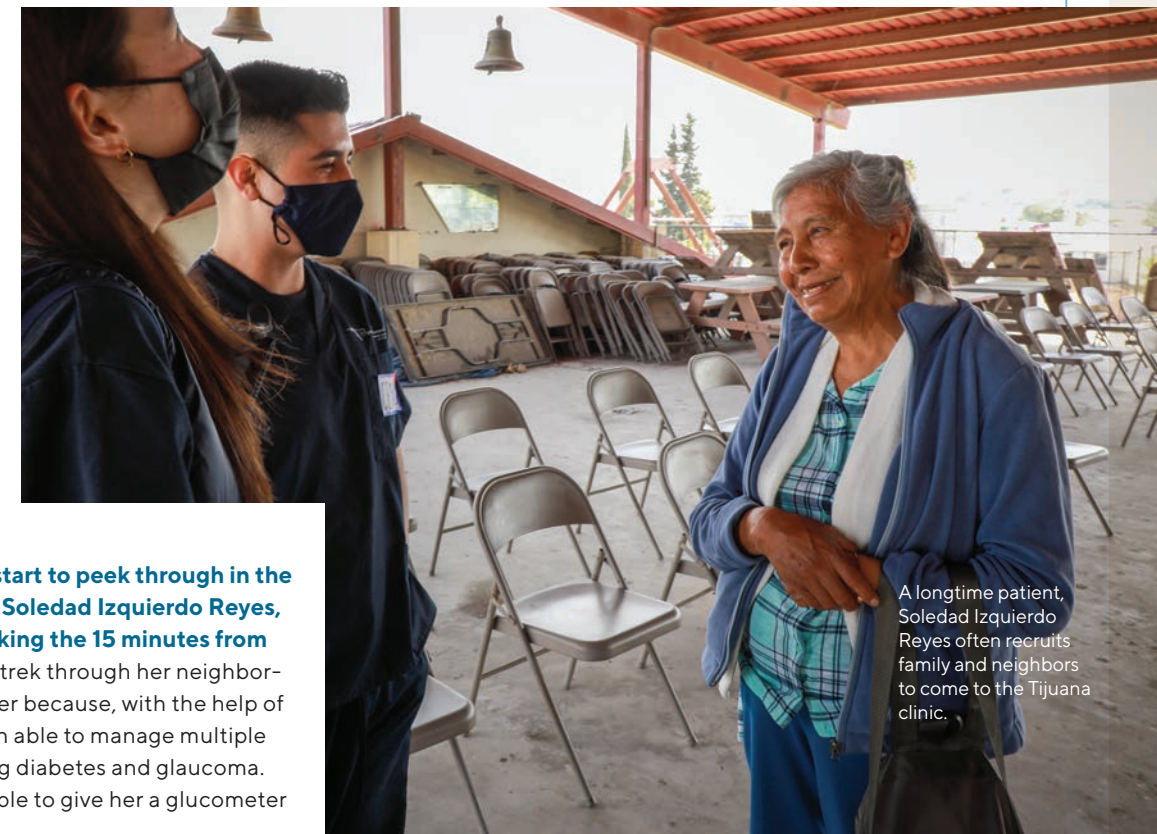


# MEET THE FLYING SAMARITANS

Every month, this group of San Diego State University students and alumni caravan to Tijuana to provide free health care to patients — and everyone involved benefits in big ways.



Volunteers, including Yuritz Garcia, appreciate the opportunity to practice speaking Spanish in a medical context.



A longtime patient, Soledad Izquierdo Reyes often recruits family and neighbors to come to the Tijuana clinic.

### A palpable excitement fills the air of a dimly lit assembly room in Tijuana.

On this cold Sunday morning in March, San Diego State University students try on navy shirts and pants emblazoned with the Flying Samaritans logo. This is their first official uniform as medical service providers. As volunteers for the international student-run nonprofit, many hope to become doctors one day.

More experienced volunteers, already dressed in their scrubs, retrieve PVC pipes and curtains to erect makeshift stalls where local patients will meet privately with medical providers.

Outside, more students set up folding chairs, sweep up bird droppings from the pigeons living in the eaves and organize boxes of multivitamins on tables. Others carefully alphabetize prescription medications in the pharmacy. In the dental room, the student coordinator and pre-dental assistants sanitize and arrange instruments on chairside trays.

A sudden clanging of a bell pierces the air, beckoning parishioners of the church next door to attend morning Mass and signaling that the free medical services offered by the SDSU students and partner providers are now available.

Since 2011, the SDSU chapter of the Flying Samaritans has organized monthly medical clinics across the border, and together with physicians, dentists and physical therapists from San Diego and Baja California, they provide complimentary consultations, medications and treatments to dozens of residents of an underserved community. To support this effort, the Flying Samaritans rely on donations, fundraising and student dues to cover expenses and purchase more than 200 medications.

“We are more than just a student organization — and we take that very seriously,” says Michiko Adams, president of the group and a ‘23 graduate who double-majored in biology and Spanish. “We are here to provide much-needed services. This opportunity to help our patients is a privilege.”

### As the first rays of morning light start to peek through in the small Mexican town of La Morita, Soledad Izquierdo Reyes, a 79-year-old resident, starts walking the 15 minutes from her home to the SDSU clinic.

The trek through her neighborhood’s steep streets is worth it to her because, with the help of the Flying Samaritans, she has been able to manage multiple chronic health conditions, including diabetes and glaucoma. The Flying Samaritans were even able to give her a glucometer and test strips for at-home care.

Izquierdo Reyes has been coming to the clinic since before the COVID-19 pandemic, when the SDSU group collaborated with Build a Miracle, a U.S. nonprofit that provides housing and education resources.

“I’m very happy with your services. Everything, everything!” Izquierdo Reyes says to Adams in Spanish. “I don’t know how to express my thanks enough.”

Izquierdo Reyes appreciates how kind and well-educated the SDSU students are, and she encourages her family and other community members on a budget to come to the clinic, especially for dental care like cleanings, fillings and extractions.

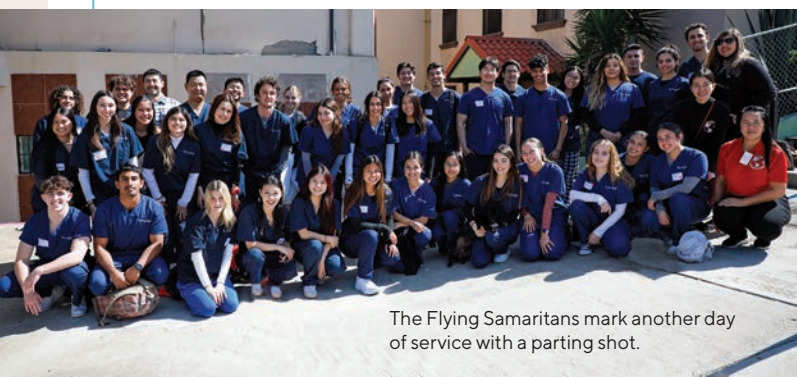
“People don’t realize that access to dental care is a luxury,” Adams says.

The licensed dentists who Flying Samaritans partner with teach patients how to brush their teeth and take care of their mouth.

“Being able to teach other pre-dental volunteers more dental knowledge, I honestly felt like I was a dentist,” says Victoria Vongkaysone, SDSU biology graduating senior and dental clinic coordinator.

But her most beloved aspect of participating in a clinic isn’t the career development or the friendships she has made.

“One of the best experiences is seeing how happy the patients are after. They’re just so appreciative,” Vongkaysone says. “They’re really good patients.” —Sarah White



The Flying Samaritans mark another day of service with a parting shot.



After the disruption of the pandemic, the clinic started offering physical therapy consultations again.

Photographs by Rachel Crawford



Hands-on experience (left to right): SDSU’s Victoria Vongkaysone and Lena Phan with Dr. Santiago Bedoya.



## A LEAGUE OF HER OWN

**Sandrien “Sandy” Mekany is San Diego State University’s first Truman Scholar – and the honor is set against a backdrop of advocating for others.**

**SANDRIEN “SANDY” MEKANY** was listening to a lecture in a political science class at SDSU one Thursday afternoon in April when she walked university President Adela de la Torre, Provost Salvador Hector Ochoa, interim College of Arts and Letters Dean Ronnee Schreiber and other staff. One of Mekany’s advisors carried a small bouquet of flowers.

Mekany was about to learn that she was SDSU’s first-ever recipient of a Harry S. Truman Foundation graduate scholarship.

“Once I saw all of them, I knew,” says Mekany, who spent more than two months on her application. “I had seen a video in the past of another Truman Scholar that they surprised at a conference, and I was like, ‘Is this what’s happening?’”

The federally funded scholarship, which recognizes public-service leadership, puts Mekany in some lofty company. Georgia politico and voting-rights activist Stacey Abrams, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch and San Diego Mayor Todd Gloria all are previous recipients. Nationwide, she is among 62 scholars in the 2023 class.

As a senior, Mekany was an Associated Students officer whose multiple extracurricular activities included mentoring and tutoring younger students for the International Rescue Committee, a nonprofit focused on refugees, migrants and asylum-seekers. The work speaks to a passion of hers sparked by her own upbringing in San Diego’s Scripps Ranch community as the daughter of Chaldean refugees who fled Iraq during Saddam Hussein’s regime; Mekany was sometimes torn between her Arab and American identities.

“The biggest thing I want to do is work in a career where I’m able to advocate for minority students to ensure that they have equitable educational opportunities,” says Mekany, who admires the example set by Pakistani education activist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai.

The Truman scholarship carries an award of up to \$30,000 for future graduate or professional school studies. Mekany is contemplating graduate degrees in education and law. Her dream job? Working as a civil rights lawyer, perhaps within the U.S. Department of Education and in a program specifically helping girls. —*Jeff Ristine*



Photograph by Rachel Crawford

## ASK A RESEARCHER

**ZAHRA NILI AHMADABADI, PH.D.**

*Assistant Professor  
of Mechanical  
Engineering*



### FROM REALISTIC-LOOKING IMAGES OF POPE FRANCIS

in a white puffer jacket to simulated humanlike conversations, artificial intelligence has made a large appearance this year. Mechanical engineering professor Zahra Nili Ahmadabadi talks about where her research fits into the buzz, and what lies ahead in her ever-changing field.

**Q: AI involves replicating human intellectual processes like speech recognition and image processing through machines. What are you investigating?**

**A:** My lab works on developing high-performing auditory systems for robots to understand dynamic environments, like in search and rescue, and tracking

different marine species and vehicles under water.

### What projects are you working on, and what do you hope to uncover?

We’re working on projects related to auditory perception technologies in different environments. Our research aims to use the physics of sound, adaptive control approaches, and machine learning to enable sound source detection, localization and classification in highly complex real-life environments.

**You have more than a dozen undergraduate and graduate students supporting you in your Dynamic Systems and Intelligent Machines Lab. How does DSIM prepare them for postgraduate work?**

New industries that produce different kinds of robots and self-driving cars are emerging rapidly. DSIM lab students learn fundamental knowledge in the areas of robot dynamics and machine learning, which makes them highly desirable to these companies upon graduation.

### What are some breakthroughs in your research?

In research supported by the Air Force Research Laboratory, we discovered that combining physics of sound propagation with machine learning techniques is very effective in significantly increasing the accuracy of robots’ auditory perception process.

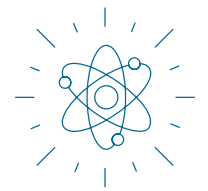
### What should we expect to see in the future with the emergence of new AI platforms such as ChatGPT?

We will perhaps see more advances in natural language processing, leading to more sophisticated chatbots and virtual assistants that can predict users’ needs and preferences and generate more tailored responses.

### How will AI technology affect the future of work and education?

While earlier digital technologies automated routine tasks, the AI with prediction capabilities will automate non-routine tasks. This will cause dramatic changes in job functions. For instance, health care professionals can use the AI models to improve diagnosis and save their time to focus on treatment options.

—*Melinda Sevilla*



## BEST OF THE BEST

Over the last academic year, six faculty members in four colleges at SDSU have earned National Science Foundation Early Career Development Awards. As the foundation’s most prestigious honor, the award provides \$500,000 to \$1 million to each recipient for advancing research and undergraduate research opportunities with a community-engagement component.

Through these five-year grants, each faculty member is further raising SDSU’s national profile as it advances its goal of being an R1 research institution.

—*Melinda Sevilla*

The awardees include:

**Nicholas Johnson**  
(Teacher Education)

**Amneet Pal Bhalla**  
(Mechanical Engineering)

**Duy Nguyen**  
(Electrical Engineering)

**Hassan Davani**  
(Water Resources Engineering)

**Stephanie Ries-Comou**  
(Speech Language & Hearing Sciences)

**Udak George**  
(Math and Statistics)



As a transfer student to San Diego State University, *Aiyiana Tiger-Mantanona* didn't feel at home for the first few months — until she connected with a student community center.

**'IT'S A PLACE WHERE I CAN BE ME'**

By Aaron Burgin

Photographs by Matt Furman

**W**hen Aiyiana Tiger-Mantanona arrived at San Diego State University in the fall two years ago, she felt lost, alone.

Growing up near Sacramento, the transfer student had no family or friends in Southern California. Depression soon kicked in, and she was on the verge of ending her SDSU experience before it even started.

Then, as the end of 2021 neared, at the urging of her mother, she visited the Native Resource Center located in the West Commons, now called the Ellen Ochoa Pavilion.

And that's when everything started to change for her.

"I was super depressed and had a really difficult time transitioning to SDSU, and I was about to drop out," says Tiger-Mantanona, who is of Chamorro ancestry from the Mariana Islands and is also Native American (Choctaw, Seminole and Cree tribes). "The Native Resource Center became a recurring place for me, a safe place to express myself, connect with other individuals like myself and build a sense of community on campus."

The San Diego State University Pow Wow, hosted by the Native Resource Center, is a long-standing tradition that brings the Native American community together every year.



That is, in essence, the goal of each of the student community centers at SDSU. In addition to the Native Resource Center, there are nine others, including the Asian Pacific Islander Desi American Center, the Black Resource Center and the Cross-Cultural Center at SDSU Imperial Valley.

Jessica Nare, the associate vice president for Community and Belonging, says statistics compiled by SDSU show that students, like Tiger-Mantanona, who are involved in high-impact practices — including participation in campus organizations such as the community centers — have higher retention and graduation rates.

"We know that students who feel connected to the campus and have spaces to explore their identities have better academic outcomes," Nare says. "We encourage students to develop a community so they can develop their own home away from home."

Tiger-Mantanona might describe the Native Resource Center as her home away from home. The '23 graduate spent upward of 30 hours a week there, sometimes event planning at the front desk, other times mentoring fellow students. Often, she found herself sitting on one of the center's couches, bathed in the '90s R&B playing in the background, sharing a laugh with friends.

"It's a place where I can be me," says Tiger-Mantanona, a sociology major who minored in American Indian Studies.

For much of her youth, Tiger-Mantanona was ashamed of her Indigenous roots — and for some reasons that hit closer to home.

"I was bullied by the other side of my family [who are not Native], and it made me shy away from my Native roots," says Tiger-Mantanona. "I disconnected myself from my culture. I think my mom knew I was a little bit ashamed, but I was closed-minded to what she had to say. I think she is really proud that I am so involved now."

That shame started to dissipate during her senior year of high school when she and other Indigenous students successfully challenged her high school's prohibition on decorating graduation caps with, among other things, eagle feathers — a Native American tradition for her tribes.

This time in high school laid the groundwork for what Tiger-Mantanona would eventually experience at SDSU, and she credits the Native Resource Center's inviting atmosphere and the passion that exudes from its regular members as critical in her own identity quest. She also says that the people around her took a lot of pride in their culture.

"Everyone there is just so passionate about helping each other in so many different ways, and seeing that dedication really makes me happy and feel supported," Tiger-Mantanona says. "Also, professors in the American Indian Studies program

To learn more about the student community centers at SDSU, scan this QR code.



and staff regularly come into the space, so having that connection makes a difference."

One of those staff members is Jennifer Clay, the center's assistant director. Clay had a huge influence on Tiger-Mantanona's decision to stay at the university and embrace her Native heritage.

"It makes me feel like we are on the right track as far as providing a place that is welcoming and providing a place for Native and Indigenous students to be supported not only emotionally but also academically," Clay says. "To see her blossom and grow and reach out for things that aren't always comfortable shows she has really grown these past few years."

As her time at SDSU came to a close, Tiger-Mantanona found herself in a position to help the next wave of Indigenous students on campus find their way — and themselves. She mentored first-year and transfer students as part of the Ely-mash Yuuchaap Indigenous Scholars and Leaders Program.

"I love it," Tiger-Mantanona says. "I eventually want to be a therapist, so being a mentor fulfills my passions of helping people. I get to help students achieve their goals and maintain a healthy lifestyle, and through them, I learn so much about myself. They help me evolve and expand my own knowledge." ●

### SDSU IMPERIAL VALLEY OPENS CENTER FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

The Student Accommodation Services Center at SDSU Imperial Valley opened its doors in March to continue minimizing academic and physical barriers for students with disabilities.

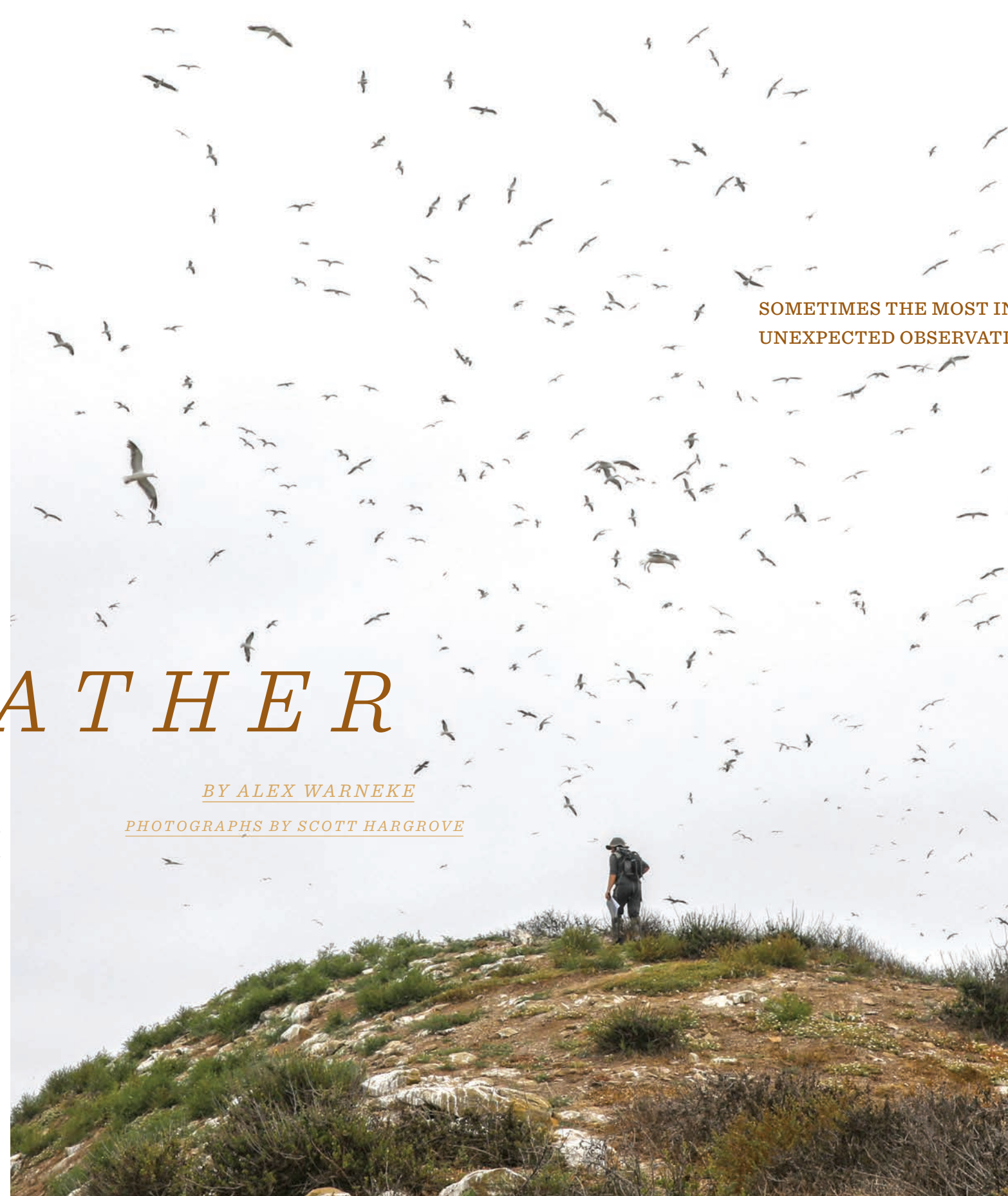
"As we continue to facilitate students' academic development through our new center, which is part of the university's expansive student support services and resources, we hope to also encourage our community to advocate for disability rights," said Norma Aguilar, SASC coordinator at SDSU Imperial Valley.

With the support of student employees, services and accommodations include note taking, accommodated testing, sign language interpreters and textbooks in accessible formats.

Located in SDSU Imperial Valley's Calexico campus, the center is designed to be a calming space that has a projection of the Northern Lights and soothing background music.

SASC serves more than 25 undergraduate and graduate students, and its staff will continue to both provide and advocate for awareness and academic services for students with disabilities. —Daniella Rodiles





SOMETIMES THE MOST INTRIGUING RESEARCH QUESTIONS STEM FROM UNEXPECTED OBSERVATIONS.

Such was the case when Roman Nava-Landeros, a San Diego State University graduate student, described a study site as having an unusually high number of rattlesnakes. And not just rattlesnakes, birds too.

This observation, made on the small chain of Mexican islands just south of San Diego known as the Coronado Islands, piqued the curiosity of SDSU biology professor Jeremy Long. Due to their isolation, islands are often limited in important resources such as food and space that might support such an abundance of species. Something was askew here — and Long wanted to know more. The ecologist, who studies the relationship between plants and herbivores, joined forces with fellow SDSU professor Rulon Clark and Jesús Sigala-Rodríguez from the Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes in Mexico. With a collaboration that spanned ecosystems — as well as countries, disciplines, techniques and time — the investigation began.

HOW DO THESE FISH FARMS INTERACT WITH THE ISLAND ECOSYSTEM?

As the boat puttered to their first stop, South Coronado, from Playa Popotla on mainland Mexico, Long and his team of colleagues and graduate students passed several large ring-shaped structures scattered atop the water. Within, the surface churned with movement from 100-pound tuna swimming below. These fish farms, also known as aquaculture facilities, grow fish for human consumption. The same birds Nava-Landeros had described to Long dove in and around the farms, feeding on the bait fish used to sustain the growing fish and then flying off over the island. Observing this chaotic symphony of fins and feathers led the researchers to a compelling hypothesis: What if the birds, snakes and fish farms were connected?



Doctoral student Anthony Truong (left) and biology professor Jeremy Long.

Mishal Ibrahim/Unsplash.com



*WITH A COLLABORATION THAT SPANNED ECOSYSTEMS — AS WELL AS COUNTRIES, DISCIPLINES, TECHNIQUES, AND TIME—THE INVESTIGATION BEGAN.*



*Scan the QR code for a video about the Coronado Islands trip.*

A LOOK INTO THE PAST HELPS INTERPRET THE FUTURE

SDSU graduate researcher Ana Gómez Ramírez helped lead the task of counting birds and collecting samples of plants, beetles, lizards, mice and rattlesnakes to better discern the island dynamics. However, to fully answer their question, the team also needed to compare these data to historical observations — before the fish farms were present — and an ecologically similar control location without fish farms. For this, Long turned to the San Diego Natural History Museum and Cabrillo National Monument. Contrasting modern data with that from historical collections and the control site would help reveal just how the islands might have changed over time and if the fish pens were a driving factor. While there is still work to be done, initial analysis of the island samples compared to the control site show a strong difference in nutrient signatures — a potential indicator of fish farm impact.



WHERE DOES THE RESEARCH GO FROM HERE?

For Gómez Ramírez, working on this project is special. As a biologist raised in Mexico, she says she feels a sense of purpose by giving back to her country through her research on the Coronado Islands and the larger insights this research might yield.

Historically, many island ecosystems have been devastated by species introduced by humans. Despite conservation efforts, islands often struggle to return to their previous state. Though the project is ongoing, the team’s preliminary observations from its four visits to the site since 2019 suggest that the Coronado Islands have changed over time in many ways, including increases in nesting seabirds and their use of the fish farms for feeding. If fish farms positively impact seabird populations and their influence on islands, this research, supported by California Sea Grant, might help inform island restoration and conservation efforts elsewhere. The exploration continues...



CONNECTING ALL THE ACTIVITY IN AND AROUND THE ISLANDS

With so many birds feeding from the farms and bringing increased nutrients onshore by way of their guano, or bird droppings, Long and his team hypothesized that the birds could be paving the way for a higher abundance of rattlesnakes and other species. Equipped with bird-spotting scopes and tissue collection vials, the group set out across the island to obtain the data needed to better understand this land-sea connection.





For more information about  
Techstars San Diego Powered  
by San Diego State University,  
scan the QR code.



Why has **Andy Ballester**,  
co-founder of one of  
the world's most  
familiar startups,  
chosen to support the  
next generation of  
world-changing  
founders?

## RETURN ON INVESTMENT

By *Tobin Vaughn*

Photograph by *Matt Furman*

**W**hile studying computer engineering at the University of Illinois, Andy Ballester got a job streamlining used car sales online. It was the early 2000s, and as he recalls, the work was a technological wonder at the time.

Back then, if a dealership had a computer, it was likely in an office where it was the only device connected to the internet, Ballester explained during a Zoom interview in March. "The ability to put anything online was magic — it was amazing," he says. "I lucked out with what was really a startup job, being able to practice a software product on tech-timid audiences, which shaped a lot of my career."

After a move to San Diego, Ballester landed a position at another startup. "That kind of set up my path for continuing the startup journey," he says.

In 2008, Ballester and business partner Brad Damphousse launched a startup that they rebranded as GoFundMe. Within four years, it would gain recognition as a hugely successful charitable crowdfunding platform. Having generated billions of dollars for causes and projects, including those to support medical expenses, disaster relief, education, community building, creative initiatives and other projects, GoFundMe has become virtually synonymous with online fundraising.

Now, although he still sits on the GoFundMe board of directors, Ballester has moved on to many other enterprises helping various startups and their founders with product development and business growth. He also volunteers as a mentor. His latest venture involves an investment in a collaboration with San Diego State University.

**In October 2022, SDSU announced a partnership with Techstars**, a top startup accelerator network, to establish Techstars San Diego Powered by San Diego State University. Techstars supports many of the world's best entrepreneurs with access to capital and mentoring, and helps startups find customers, hire talent and choose the right infrastructure.

SDSU's intent with the program is to boost the San Diego region's innovation ecosystem by building a hands-on, mentorship-driven environment for startup founders and providing ways to approach industry-specific challenges. With a planned launch in September at SDSU, the program will ultimately be located in SDSU Mission Valley's 1.6-million-square-foot Innovation District, which is expected to be completed in 2026.

Ballester, who has a passion for creating products that drive change on a large scale, is serving as a mentor for Techstars San Diego Powered by SDSU. He is also gifting key funding alongside Ron Fowler, one of the university's most significant donors and founding chair of The Campanile Foundation.

"There is no place like the SDSU Innovation District anywhere in San Diego," says Hala Madanat, SDSU vice president of Research and Innovation. "I think people like Ron and Andy, who have a vision, understand that."

When the university asked local entrepreneurs what was missing in San Diego and how SDSU could serve to fill that gap, the top response was the lack of a tech-driven regional accelerator to attract startups from all over the world. According to Madanat, a majority of respondents interviewed specifically mentioned Techstars, including Ballester.

"Andy was one of the first to bring the idea of Techstars to the table, and he said he was willing to support it," Madanat says. "From an SDSU perspective, this partnership puts us on the map as a leader in the entrepreneurship ecosystem. We welcome others who would like to join Andy and Ron in their philanthropic support of this important program."

**A contributing factor to Ballester's support of Techstars San Diego Powered by SDSU is his familiarity with the university and its expanding reputation as an entrepreneurial springboard.** Having become involved with SDSU's nationally recognized incubator, ZIP Launchpad, as a donor and a mentor over the past four years, he has seen first-hand how the university encourages entrepreneurial students.

"I love SDSU and what they've done to get students involved in entrepreneurship — giving them the option of doing that," Ballester says. "I think the entrepreneur ecosystem they have is just stellar."

Cathy Pucher, the executive director of ZIP Launchpad, is impressed by the level of experience and enthusiasm Ballester brings to the on-campus program. With his extensive knowledge, she says, he has something to offer entrepreneurs from any background, at any stage of their development and from any age group.

"Andy has faced a lot of challenges and overcome them," Pucher says. "He has incredible patience, and his knowledge and passion make him an outstanding mentor."

Twelve startups will be selected from what are expected to be hundreds of applicants from around the globe for the inaugural cohort of Techstars San Diego Powered by SDSU. Their progress will be presented during a demonstration day set for Dec. 7 at the program's conclusion.

**The university signed a three-year contract with Techstars to form Techstars San Diego Powered by SDSU with available opportunities for donors to contribute by making a gift.** What organizers hope will result from the program is wider exposure of San Diego's entrepreneurial ideas and talent to the world and, conversely, a broader international influence to inspire solutions to San Diego's challenges.

Ballester's own entrepreneurship has a philanthropic bent. Through GoFundMe, he managed to drive an astonishing amount of positive impact. He hopes to achieve a similar result for his adopted hometown.

"I see homegrown startups looking for solutions to community equity and social justice problems a lot more than in some other places," he says.

Ballester cites the climate crisis and housing as two overarching challenges deserving of greater entrepreneurial approaches.

"These are the things I think about constantly in my work, and things I think we all need to work on at all levels philanthropically, entrepreneurially and in the public sector," he says. "We need to bring everybody together around those things."

An investment in Techstars San Diego Powered by SDSU, Ballester believes, is a great next step in achieving that. ●



SDSU education doctoral student **Al Schleicher** wasn't in Belize with his hand out.

The Fulbright Scholar was all in for a collaborative experience that would create lasting effects on the country's educational endeavors.

# GIVE AND NOT TAKE

By *Michael Klitzing*

Photographs by *Sarah Wilkins*

If you're looking to find most Americans in Belize, you needn't look further than the tourist haunts well-documented by guidebooks and blogs.

There are Mayan wonders near the Guatemalan border. There are famous Caribbean hot spots like Caye Caulker and San Pedro.

If you were looking to find San Diego State University Fulbright Scholar Al Schleicher in Belize in the spring, however, you would have needed to stray from the Gringo Trail that crosses through much of Latin America.

From the airport near Belize City, \$100 gets you a trusted expert to navigate 80 kilometers of rural highway dotted with lush palms, fresh coconut stands and tapir crossings. You would have soon found yourself on the balcony of Schleicher's comfortable two-bedroom apartment in the capital city of Belmopan, sharing a Belikin beer.

A few things to know about Belmopan before we continue.

First, the scorching 95-degree temperature on this day in late March? Completely normal.

Second, with a population of about 20,000, it's the smallest seat of power in the Americas. It has one stoplight, a few



restaurants clustered around the bus depot and some pleasant, brightly colored residential neighborhoods. It's also home to the University of Belize, the country's premier institution of higher education and Schleicher's workplace from January until May. And like every other Belizean city, the official language is English.

Schleicher, a student in SDSU's Joint Ph.D. Program in Education with Claremont Graduate University, feels right at home.

"When's the last time you walked down the street and a stranger said, 'Good morning'? Everyone says good morning here," Schleicher says. "People are friendly — and it's genuine."

As he wrapped up his work as a Fulbright Scholar — a U.S. Department of State program that sends U.S. academics abroad to teach, conduct research and carry out professional projects — Schleicher was out to return the hospitality in kind.

**SDSU is no stranger to Fulbright success.** The university has been named a Fulbright Hispanic-Serving Institution Leader by the U.S. Department of State for its success sending students abroad on the Fulbright U.S. Student Program.

However the Scholars program, which is more faculty focused, has been — to this point — a much rarer animal.

"SDSU is committed to promoting internationalization throughout every aspect of the academic experience," says Cristina Alfaro, SDSU associate vice president for International Affairs. "Encouraging our faculty to pursue Fulbright Scholar opportunities is crucial in developing international diplomacy and

relationships that will ultimately benefit our students, and we intend to develop this area through our university's global strategy."

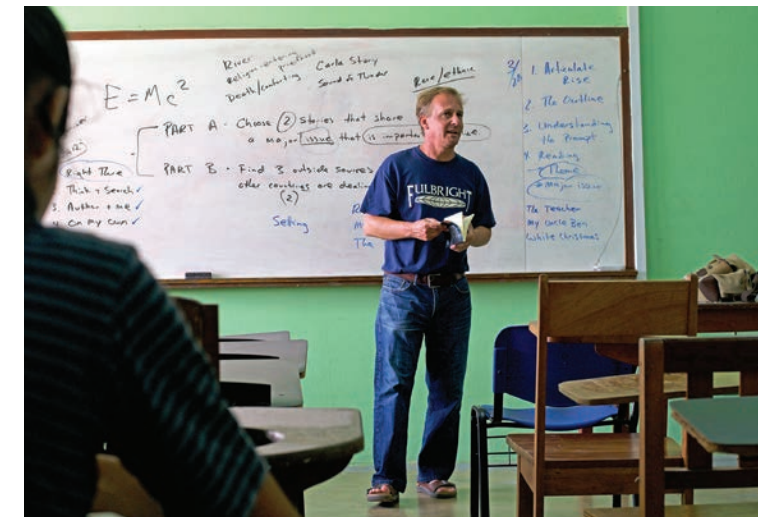
Schleicher — a former classroom English teacher in Los Angeles who received his undergraduate degree from SDSU in 1997 — was drawn to Belize when he learned about its low rate of literacy. But he was intent on not taking what he's dubbed "the Indiana Jones approach" to his Fulbright project.

"Indiana Jones was a professor who traveled the world taking stuff that didn't belong to him," Schleicher says. "I'm not here to collect data on your K-12 kids and take it back to the United States to publish. Now, if you want to work on a research project together? Let's do that."

**Around UB's tidy Belmopan campus — marked by towering palms, lounging iguanas and purple- and gold-painted buildings on stilts — Schleicher was dubbed "Professor Al" by his new boss, Dean Thisbe Lucas-Usher.**

Schleicher's original Fulbright proposal was to build professional learning communities for Belizean in-service teachers as a way of impacting the country's low literacy rate. However conditions on the ground quickly made clear that would not be realistic.

Schleicher had to pivot. He quickly developed a nuanced understanding of the local education challenges, primarily what he sees as a mismatch between the student population, which primarily speaks Creole, and the English-only instruction



Al Schleicher fit right in at the University of Belize, and Dean Thisbe Lucas-Usher (below) says he was "one of us."



offered by the schools. Another factor was that an associate's degree is the only requirement to teach; UB's programs, however, offer bachelor's degrees in education.

Throughout his project, he focused on supporting the university's Education and Arts faculty as they grew their education research enterprise.

"Professor Al has been a blessing to our faculty — he's one of us," Lucas-Usher says. "As soon as he arrived, he told us that he's willing to lecture, that he's willing to give presentations in our classrooms and that he's willing to engage in research with our faculty. His knowledge and experience have benefited us greatly."

Schleicher taught two classes, one in English and another in research methods in education. He also assisted a group of 15 faculty members as they worked to launch a research office, even authoring integral proposals.

He also found other ways to help, from procuring dozens of hard-to-find books for the college's fledgling education research library, to getting UB's early childhood laboratory school ready to reopen for the first time since the pandemic.

In addition to his research expertise, Professor Al wielded a mop and a paint roller like no other.

"One of the things that's great about the Fulbright is that you learn a lot about yourself," Schleicher says, polishing off the last of his Belikin. "What I've learned is that if a group of people or an individual is receptive to your collaboration, magic can happen." ●





# CALM

BY WAYNE DREHS  
PHOTOGRAPH BY MATT FURMAN

**LAMONT BUTLER DIDN'T EMERGE AS THE STAR OF THE MARCH MADNESS TOURNAMENT BY ACCIDENT. HE SPENT COUNTLESS HOURS HONING HIS GAME.**

# UNDER PRESSURE

**WHAT WILL HIS GAME-WINNING SHOT AND THE TEAM'S MONUMENTAL RUN MEAN FOR SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY?**

**SEVEN SECONDS.** That's how long Lamont Butler had to save San Diego State University's chance at playing in the 2023 NCAA men's basketball championship in Houston. The Aztecs had cut Florida Atlantic University's 14-point lead to one. Now it was on Butler to get to the basket and either draw a foul, dish to an open teammate or shoot. After eight dribbles, Butler found himself in the corner, planting his right foot within an inch of the baseline. He looked up at the clock.

Two seconds. Butler dribbled once more to create space. And then, 18 feet from the basket, he left the ground for the biggest jump shot of his life.

"I felt really good about it," the rising senior says.

It took 1.7 seconds for the ball to travel from the fingertips of Butler's right hand through the bottom of the net. While the ball sailed through the air, the game clock fell to 0.0, red lights illuminating the backboard. The final buzzer sounded — and the future of a young man and the university he proudly represented were forever changed.

Instantly, Butler's world transformed into a blur of high-fives, media interviews, phone calls and incessant text messages. It wasn't until more than an hour later, back in the hotel room shower, that he found a moment to himself. The bathroom mirror began to fog. Hip-hop duo BlueBucksClan played through Butler's phone. And Butler tried to process the insanity his shot helped create.

"It's not like I was totally surprised, but at the same time, you're shocked by the moment," Butler says. "You have people saying it's one of the greatest shots in March Madness history, in college basketball history. And now we're playing for the national championship. It was crazy.

"I just kept thinking, *This is no ordinary shot. No ordinary moment in life.*"

The full impact of that April 1 buzzer-beater and the Aztecs' historic tournament run won't fully be understood for years. JD Wicker, SDSU's director of intercollegiate athletics, says the school has already begun the process of trying to quantify what effect the monthlong presence all over television, in news reports, on social media — and more — could have on the university.

SDSU's early research indicates that during a four-week period — spanning the weeks before and after the title game — an estimated \$402 million was generated in publicity from TV, print and radio. As an external example, after George Mason University reached the Final Four in 2006, a researcher at the school's Center for Sports Management estimated the media exposure was worth \$677 million. For first-time Final Four schools, the increased exposure can lead to a boost in student applications, enrollment numbers, alumni donations and broader visibility of university programs and initiatives. The first-year applications at George Mason increased 22% the fall after the school's Final Four run. A 2015 Forbes study found that from 2009 to 2015, a year after making the Final Four, schools saw an average of an 11% increase in applications.



“It’s 14 million people being introduced to our university,” Wicker says, referring to the global TV audience for the championship game. “We’ve been working hard to build the brand of the athletic department and the institution. This is the best opportunity we’ve had.”

Even before the tournament, SDSU had received more than 100,000 student applications for 2023–24. The university uses a complicated formula to determine how many students it accepts, typically sending offers to roughly 30,000 students each year. The goal is to secure a first-year class of around 6,000.

Also anticipated is a financial boost. The year after Villanova University won the 2016 NCAA championship, the school saw a 56% jump in alumni donations over the previous year. There are also potential increases in merchandise sales, sponsorship and advertising revenue, and ticket sales.

But perhaps the biggest boon could be to SDSU’s résumé in the constantly shifting world of conference realignment. According to Wicker, the university has discussed joining a conference like the PAC-12 or Big 12. With this year’s Final Four run, the Aztecs have the best combined football and men’s basketball winning percentage in the country. That on-field success — combined with SDSU’s growing research enterprise, pursuit of R1 research status, the success of its students and reduction in achievement gaps, and both the emergence of SDSU Mission Valley and the expansion of SDSU Imperial Valley — leads the Aztecs to believe they will be a highly sought-after candidate in a potential realignment.

“Having success in football and men’s basketball is crucial to go with all the other pieces [that SDSU has to offer],” Wicker says. “To make it to the national championship game shows you can win at the highest level in one of the higher-priority sports. It’s hugely beneficial.”

**Twelve days after the greatest moment of his basketball life, Lamont Butler stepped on the pitching rubber at Petco Park in San Diego, his teammates lined behind him.** He and Aztecs head coach Brian Dutcher waited for the cue to throw simultaneous first pitches at the Padres game.

When the SDSU players and staff arrived that evening, the Padres welcomed them with authentic custom jerseys and a luxury suite to watch the game. It was the latest in a string of celebrations where San Diego wrapped its arms around the Aztecs, a team that was one game from giving the city its first major sports championship.

Earlier that day, Butler admitted he had barely thrown a baseball in his life. Before the big moment, he practiced with the Padres game operation staff in right field. It wasn’t pretty. A few throws bounced in front of the catcher. Others shot over the staff member’s head. Yet others were perfectly on target. “You ready for this?” Dutcher asked with a skeptical tone. “You can’t bounce it.”

On the giant video board in left field, highlights replayed from the Aztecs’ tournament run, including Butler’s dramatic jump shot. Players like forward Aguek Arop and guard Micah



**“WE’VE ALWAYS HAD GOOD PLAYERS AND GOOD PEOPLE. BUT PEOPLE DOUBTED US AND OVERLOOKED US BECAUSE WE WEREN’T ABLE TO MAKE THAT SORT OF RUN. BUT NOW THE UNIVERSITY WILL HAVE THAT RESPECT, SO WILL OUR CULTURE AND PEOPLE WHO PLAY HERE. IT’S HISTORIC.”**

**—LAMONT BUTLER, SDSU GUARD**



To read more about Lamont Butler through the eyes of his father, scan this code.

Parrish smiled, phones out capturing the scene. Forty thousand fans stood and cheered. And Butler waved.

His Final Four buzzer-beater had cemented his place in college basketball history. His Instagram followers doubled. Students around campus now nervously asked for selfies with Butler and his teammates or whispered when they walked by. NBA players, including Onyeka Okongwu of the Atlanta Hawks and Trey Murphy III of the New Orleans Pelicans, reached out to Butler. His game-winner had helped place SDSU in its rightful seat at the sport’s head table.

What unfolded was the vision Dutcher and former head coach Steve Fisher had when they arrived from Michigan in 1999. Before then, SDSU basketball coaches didn’t even have their own offices. They worked out of a trailer across the street from Peterson Gym, the 3,000-seat multipurpose arena the Aztecs then called home. In 1997 the school opened the 12,000-seat Cox Arena, now Viejas Arena. And in 1999, the Aztecs became charter members of the Mountain West. Two years after that, the school opened the now Fowler Athletics Center, complete with brand-new administrative offices.

“It was like a Field of Dreams,” Dutcher says. “The rise of the athletic department coincided with the rise of the entire university. We knew we could make this happen.”

Patience, however, was paramount. March basketball is geared for chaos. Three hundred and fifty-eight teams vie for 68 spots in a single-elimination tournament. Two reach the season’s final game. For the Aztecs, their deepest tournament runs had ended in the Sweet Sixteen: once in 2011 with Kawhi Leonard, now with the Los Angeles Clippers, and again in 2014. The 30–2 team from 2020 was ranked No. 6 in the nation and

eyeing a No. 1 seed in the tournament until the season was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In their last three NCAA tournaments, the Aztecs didn’t advance past the first round.

This time was different. The march to the final was not a clichéd tale of an unheralded Cinderella, but rather a testament to the hard work, determination and unwavering resolve Dutcher and Fisher spent two decades building into the Aztec basketball culture. Like most SDSU teams, it was a group of hard-working, unselfish, defensive-minded grinders whose belief in what they could accomplish never wavered.

“We’ve always had good players and good people,” says Butler, who grew up in Southern California and followed the Aztecs. “But people doubted us and overlooked us because we weren’t able to make that sort of run. But now the university will have that respect, so will our culture and people who play here. It’s historic.”

**A few minutes after the shaky practice for his first pitch, Butler wound up and delivered a perfect strike to the Padres catcher.** A few feet away, Dutcher did the same and chuckled. “That’s Lamont,” the coach said later.

The guard’s path to college basketball history had mirrored his university’s: challenging. In the midst of an up-and-down 2021–22 season, Butler learned that his 30-year-old sister, Asasha Lache Hall, had been killed in late January. Butler pondered quitting basketball. She was his biggest fan and attended every home game with their parents, Lamont Sr. and Carmicha Butler, wiggling her way down to sit as close to the court as possible. He couldn’t imagine a game without her there.

“It was hard,” says Butler, the youngest child with two other sisters. “I was kind of lost. I was confused. I didn’t know if my

family needed me to be there for them. Basketball is something I love. And she loved watching me do that. I realized that when I was playing it took my mind off things. It freed me from the grief and the pain. So I tried to throw myself into the game.”

Butler said his teammates and coaches gave him the support and the space he needed to figure out a path forward.

“You can’t preach family. You have to be family,” Dutcher says. “Our coaches, his teammates, we all tried to be there for him. For whatever he needed on a given day.”

Last summer, frustrated by an inconsistent season and pushed by his coaches to improve his midrange game, Butler lived at the Jeff Jacobs JAM Center, the men’s and women’s basketball practice facility, working tirelessly on improving his consistency. He tried to rediscover the stroke that helped him break basketball legend Reggie Miller’s scoring record at Riverside Polytechnic High School just 100 miles north of San Diego. Along the way, he found Miller’s late-game magic, hitting a buzzer-beater to beat New Mexico State in a critical late-season Mountain West game. He also discovered the confidence and resiliency needed to press on without his sister.

“That’s the hardest thing I’ve been through in my life,” Butler says. “You go through something like that, you work through it and you learn there aren’t many things that can hold me down.”

It is these sorts of intangibles that the Aztec No. 5 believes might help him make it to the NBA. Three days after his first pitch at the Padres game, Butler packed his car and headed for Las Vegas to work with a trainer in hopes of improving his NBA draft stock. He had declared for the June 22 annual event, along with rising fifth-year seniors Keshad Johnson and Jaedon LaDee.

Prior to the NCAA tournament, Butler was a blip on



All eyes were on the ball after it left Lamont Butler's hand in the final seconds of the Final Four, and the game-winner they saw changed everything for the Aztecs and head coach Brian Dutcher (bottom right).



**“IT WAS LIKE A FIELD OF DREAMS. THE RISE OF THE ATHLETIC DEPARTMENT COINCIDED WITH THE RISE OF THE ENTIRE UNIVERSITY. WE KNEW WE COULD MAKE THIS HAPPEN.”**

**—BRIAN DUTCHER,  
SDSU MEN'S BASKETBALL  
HEAD COACH**

scouts' radars. But his steady play, leadership and poise in the game's biggest moments opened a door he felt obligated to explore. After training for two months in Las Vegas, Butler processed everything he learned through his evaluations and on May 29 announced his return to SDSU for his senior season. “Forever an Aztec,” he posted on social media alongside a black heart and a red heart. As for Butler's teammates, LaDee will also remain an Aztec, and Johnson signed with the University of Arizona.

**A few hours before the first pitch at the Padres game, Butler pulled his home Aztecs jersey over his head for the first time since his 18-foot shot made history.** This time he wore it for a photo shoot at the JAM Center. The black-and-blue, space-themed Final Four logo was still attached to the jersey's lapel. Butler dragged his fingers across the patch, looking down at it. “Crazy,” he says with a grin.

While the Aztecs' postseason run may have opened an NBA door for Butler, Aztec fans wonder if it will bring more high-profile basketball recruits to San Diego. They got an indication of such when University of Southern California transfer Reese Dixon-Waters, the Pac 12's Sixth Man of the Year and a 4-star recruit out of high school, selected SDSU as his new home.

But Dutcher insists his recruiting priorities will largely remain the same and points to the most recent lineup as a reason why. His starting five in the national championship featured 4-star recruit Matt Bradley, 3-star recruits Butler, Johnson and Nathan

Mensah, and unranked guard Darrion Trammell.

“We just had a group of players who took us to the national championship game,” Dutcher says. “Will this give us more national recognition? Of course. Will it change the way we recruit? Probably not. We want guys who have a feel for the game, who have a bit of a chip on their shoulder and aren't reading all their press clippings thinking they've already arrived. Guys who are hungry. And are about the right things.”

Guys like Lamont Butler.

The morning after the Aztecs returned to San Diego from the Final Four, Dutcher was back in the office recruiting. The trophies from the Mountain West tournament and NCAA regional championship sat on the floor of the basketball office lobby, draped in the nets the players and staff cut down after the clinching victories. Dutcher's mind was already on what's next. He began working the phones in a quest to build the next great SDSU team.

“The goal is to put a team together better than this one and see what happens,” Dutcher says. “That's the beauty of the NCAA tournament. You could start this year's tournament over with the exact same bracket and there would probably be four different teams in the Final Four. That's how hard it is to win a game.”

Because it all can come down to one 20-year-old college athlete. With two seconds left on the clock. Standing 18 feet from the basket.

“Looking back on it,” Butler says, “you can't help but ask if God has a plan for all of us when we have to go through certain things so we can handle other moments. I still sit around at times and think to myself, *Dang. That really happened.* It's just crazy.” ●

Photographs by Derrick Tuskany/San Diego State



Photograph by Rachel Crawford

## SDSU ALUMNI'S 'NEXT GREAT CHAPTER'

*In December, Assistant Vice President of SDSU Alumni Jim Herrick retired after 37 years with the university. He started his career in San Diego State University athletics and transitioned to alumni relations as the interim director in 1998, making the move permanent the next year. After Herrick's departure, Stephanie Dathe stepped into the role. The SDSU alumna had served as the director of the Conrad Prebys Aztec Student Union for SDSU Associated Students since 2016. Here's an introduction to the new SDSU Alumni executive director in her own words.*

**WHEN I GRADUATED FROM SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY IN 1995,** SDSU Alumni used the slogan “Everyone Benefits.” I have always liked that because it reinforces the concept that SDSU Alumni has something for everyone. The tagline has an even deeper meaning for me because this organization, and the SDSU community, have supported me throughout my personal and professional life. I have truly benefited from being an Aztec for Life.

Over the years, it has been very important to me to give back to SDSU. But it was when I returned to campus a decade ago that I truly understood the impact that alumni have. Working closely with students who have directly benefited from the support, whether through mentoring, internships or scholarships, I witnessed and experienced the transformational power of being a member of the SDSU community. It is a membership for which I am both extremely grateful and proud.

Part of our mission here at SDSU Alumni is to “instill the principle of Aztec for Life by celebrating the achievements of our alumni.” We are finding new and different ways of engaging and celebrating our alumni, including a new Class Notes page on our website (see Page 31) where we encourage alumni to share their SDSU stories. With more than 478,000 alumni around the globe, I feel great pride when I am out and about and see a fellow Aztec sporting an SDSU T-shirt or proudly displaying an SDSU license plate frame. Don't be surprised if an SDSU Alumni team member spots you in the community showing off your Aztec pride and hands you a little giveaway.

I am honored to be a part of SDSU's next great chapter. It is a tremendous privilege to be the executive director of SDSU Alumni, and I look forward to engaging with you!

*Stephanie Dathe*  
**STEPHANIE DATHE, '95**

*Executive director, SDSU Alumni*



# classnotes

/Alumni Spotlight



Theatre alumna **Lesley Paterson** (M.A., '05) returned to campus in March with her husband, Simon Marshall, to speak with students about securing and writing the screenplay for *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the Academy Award-winning film coproduced by Netflix.

Paterson is not only a successful writer but also a five-time world-champion triathlete. She once competed in a triathlon with a broken shoulder in hopes of using the prize money to renew the rights to option the film — and she did. She renewed the rights for 16 years before she was finally able to produce the gripping film.

"I was an athlete from a very young age but also a ballet dancer and loved the arts. I always had these two parts of my personality," Paterson said to the audience in the Conrad Prebys Aztec Student Union Theatre. "I had high hopes of going to the Olympics. Long story short: It didn't happen. When I found out there was a great master's program here [and then] to jump into that world again was so amazing. I loved every minute of my master's program." —*Lizbeth Persons*



After graduating from SDSU with a degree in political science, **Scott Slater** ('05) found his calling as an entrepreneur/ restaurateur.

Slater started with hot dog stands located outside of 36 Home Depot locations in the Bay Area, with outposts in New York, Phoenix, Orange County and Los Angeles. His first business partner, Fletcher Wimbush, was a fraternity brother from Phi Kappa Psi.

After honing his restaurant chops on hot dogs, Slater switched to hamburgers and developed his namesake restaurant, Slater's 50/50 — a concept he developed while at SDSU and has since sold. The "50/50" burger consists of equal parts beef and bacon. He conceived the idea while tailgating at an SDSU game, when he barbecued a "burger" made completely of bacon. During pilot testing, he found it was highly flammable, so he added beef — and his award-winning hamburger brand was born.

Slater opened Mission + Garnet, a food hall in Pacific Beach, in February. With six branded restaurants — it's a one-stop shop for locals and visitors alike, with outdoor seating and late-night hours.

"The reason I moved back to San Diego from Orange County was because I am an Aztec," Slater says, "and it's the city I fell in love with." —*Leslie L.J. Reilly*



A young **Juan Daniel "Danny" Avila** (B.A., journalism, '22) spent many after-school hours watching ESPN and dreaming of being a sports commentator. He often worked with his father, who was in the landscape business, but decided that education was the way to achieve that goal. He felt called to be an Aztec when he first visited SDSU in 2014. A Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals recipient and transfer student, Avila credits SDSU's Educational Opportunity Program with helping him succeed.

As a senior in 2022, Avila was selected as the Outstanding Journalism Graduate in the School of Journalism and Media Studies. "Danny's passion and desire to learn were off the charts," says Jim Trotter, who teaches sports journalism.

With a degree in hand, Avila headed to Connecticut for ESPN's Journalism Next internship program. He's now a production assistant at the company and is still focused on his ultimate goal of being in front of the camera.

"It already took me a long time to get to where I am right now," Avila says. "I don't mind waiting another couple of years to make the dream happen." —*Christie Ritter*

Photographs by (from left) Ken Jacques, Leslie L.J. Reilly and courtesy of Juan Daniel "Danny" Avila

## 1960s

'68 **William T. Reed Jr.** (B.A., history, social studies and English), who died in March, was a mystery writer alongside his 20-year career as a banker. He published "Expatriates in Paris," his historical fiction novel, in September 2020.

## 1970s

'75 **Richard Robbins** (B.A., English) has released his seventh collection of poetry, "The Oratory of Souls" with Lynx House Press.

'75 **Darrell Wenhardt** (B.S., electrical and computer engineering) was inducted into the Sports Broadcasting Hall of Fame in 2022. In his almost 50-year career, he helped modernize the sports broadcasting industry.

'77 **Gillian Nash** (B.A., journalism and media studies) was named to the Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board by President Joe Biden in January 2023.

## 1980s

'86 **Bill Earley** (B.S., finance), a former SDSU alumni board president, is the author of a dystopian fictional novel, "The Coin," which was published in December.

'87 **Lisa Angelos McKenzie** (B.A., political science) is the founder and CEO of You Night Empowering Events. She earned a Guinness World Record in October 2022 for the most models in a fashion show called "Ribbons Rock the Runway."

'88 **Deanna Mackey** (B.A., journalism and political science) was one of Girl Scouts San Diego's Cool Women of 2023. In 2015, she became president of the Public Television Major Market Group, a consortium of the 40 largest PBS member stations in the U.S. In 2022, she returned to KPBS, the newsroom where she began her career.

## 1990s

'94 **Ileana Ovalle** (B.A., public administration) was named as Google's Head of Global Procurement Responsibility Strategy & Operations. She leads strategy and operations for Google's Environmental and Social Impact and Governance.

'96 **Allen Estes III** (B.A., political science) has been invited to join the American College of Construction Lawyers, a national construction law organization. Estes, a partner at Gordon Rees Scully Mansukhani, serves as a co-chair of the Construction Practice Group, a comanaging partner of the Seattle office and is a member of the firm's executive committee.

'99 **Helen Mader** (B.S., clinical psychology) is the founder and CEO of Behavior Frontiers, a private agency providing clinical outcomes for children with autism founded in 2004. In 2016, Mader developed PrioraCare Data Collection Software, which produced data on the company's treatment efforts.

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



## 2000s

'00 **Zeynep Ilgaz** (MBA), founder of the award-winning company Confirm Bioscience, was named one of San Diego's "Women of Distinction" by Mayor Todd Gloria in March 2023.

'02 **Pamela McConnell** (MSW) is the author of "The Adventures of a Southern (Baptist) Buddhist," which was published in September 2022.

'05 **Marcy Crouch** (B.S., kinesiology and rehabilitation science) dedicates her time to serving women and birthing persons through her company Marcy Crouch LLC. The celebrity pelvic floor PT has been featured by "Today," BlogHer, ScaryMommy and more.

'09 **Rosalyn Sutton** (B.A., political science) was selected by Snell & Wilmer for inclusion in the 2022 and 2023 San Diego Super Lawyers Rising Stars publication, a listing of lawyers from more than 70 practice areas who have attained a high degree of peer recognition and professional achievement in real estate.

'14 **Christopher Soriano** (B.S., communications) is the founder and CEO of Clever Talks, a free conference catered to military millennials. Soriano wrote, directed and starred in *The Wedding Hustler*, a movie about his wedding experience during the pandemic.

'16 **Teal Cooper** (B.A., mass communication and media studies) cofounded VendiBean, a subscription-based coffee vending machine in 2017. Cooper made the 2023 Food and Drink Forbes 30 under 30.

'16 **Alison Zak** (M.A., anthropology) is an author, yoga teacher and wildlife conservationist. Her book "Wild Asana: Animals, Yoga, and Connecting our Practice to the Natural World" was published by North Atlantic Books.

'17 **Derrick Diza** (B.S., management) is the creative director of Disorganized Depictions, a collective of muralists who teach students how to paint murals and create a real impact in the creative economy.

'17 **Matt Hoffman** (B.A., communication) is the new host of "KPBS Roundtable," a weekly radio program discussing top stories. He rejoins the newsroom he worked in as a student assistant at SDSU from 2013 to 2017. Previously, he worked at NBC in San Diego as a writer and editor for its weekend morning shows.

'17 **Arthur Kayzakian** (MFA, creative writing) won the inaugural 2021 Black Lawrence Press's Immigrant Writing Series Prize for his collection, "The Book of Redacted Paintings" (May 2023). Kayzakian is also the winner of a National Endowment of the Arts fellowship. He is the editor of SDSU's literary magazine "Poetry International" and the 2022-23 Dr. Minas Savvas Endowed Fellowship recipient.

'19 **Brooke Hallisey** (B.A., journalism) joined the Schaffer Family Law Group, APC, as an associate attorney in 2022 after serving as a law clerk for the firm earlier that year.

## SDSU ALUMNI

2022–2023 Alumni Board of Advisers

### EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

President: **Risa Baron** ('91)  
 President-Elect: **Sam Brown, Jr.** ('96)  
 The Campanile Foundation Alumni Representative: **Chiloh Baty** ('08)  
 Liaison to Past Presidents: **Charlotte Ochiqiu Hans** ('00)  
 Vice Presidents of Alumni Engagement Metrics: **Wade Aschbrenner** ('91) and **Justin Schlaefli** ('05)

Vice Presidents of Revenue: **Cody Barbo** ('12) and **Christian Deleon** ('09)

Vice Presidents of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging: **Brianna Bennett** ('10) and **Denise Zellmann** ('89, '03)

Vice President of Finance: **Mark Emch** ('84)

Vice President of Special Projects/ Homecoming: **Scott Robert** ('99)

Administrator: **Christy Andrade**

### OTHER ELECTED ADVISERS:

**Kristin Afelumo** ('07), **Victor Alfredo Lopez** ('20), **Dylan Aste** ('06), **Mina Azim** ('12), **Kelly Batten** ('99), **Martin Bridges** ('87), **Greg Chew** ('03), **Marisa Compton** ('06), **Dan Denham** ('99, '02), **Dirk Epperson** ('06), **Carey Fernandes** ('98), **Richard Gonzalez** ('97), **Keith Harris** ('91), **Hass Ibrahim** ('09), **Maria V. Kachadoorian** ('87), **Tom Karlo** ('75), **Kelli Kedis Ogborn** ('07), **Todd Kennedy** ('16), **Todd Lane** ('86), **Martin Lang** ('97, '09), **Yolanda Lugo** ('05, '15), **Cesar Padilla** ('95), **Monica Pelaez** ('01), **Marlene Ruiz** ('75), **Kim Spinardi** ('10), **JR Tolver** ('02), **Krystin West** ('06)

### PAST PRESIDENTS:

First President: **1931 Vesta Muehleisen** (1907)  
 Visit [sdsualumni.org/pastpresidents](https://sdsualumni.org/pastpresidents) for a full list.

### NON-ELECTED ADVISERS:

President: **Adela de la Torre**  
 Vice President, University Relations and Development: **Adrienne Vargas**  
 Senate Chair: **Nola Butler-Byrd** 2022-2023

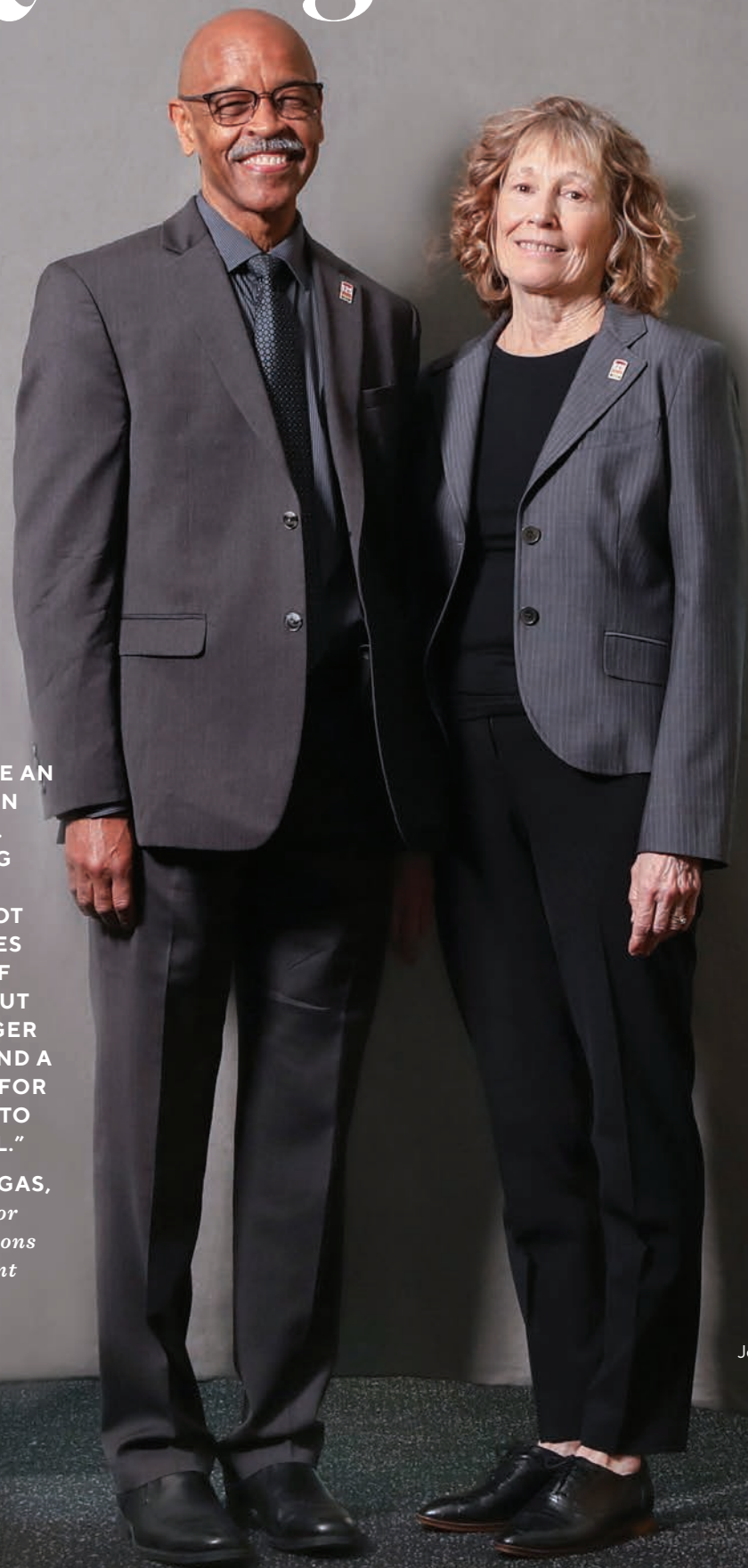
Associated Students President: **Shawki Moore**

### SDSU ALUMNI STAFF

Executive Director: **Stephanie Dathe** ('95)  
 Director, Alumni and Community Engagement: **Malerie McNeill** ('03, '07)  
 Director, Marketing: **Gema Deleon** ('11)  
 Director, Annual Giving: **Hillary Levison**  
 Assistant Director, Financial Management and Alumni Support: **Christy Andrade**  
 Assistant Director, **Parma Payne Goodall** Alumni Center: **Brandon Harrison** ('09)  
 Assistant Director, Alumni Engagement: **Casilda Pagan**  
 Alumni Relations Specialist: **Jen Ranallo**  
 Annual Giving Analyst: **Emily Wenk**  
 Annual Giving Coordinator: **Kaitlin Hahn**  
 Data Control Technician: **Robin Breen Rust**  
 Parma Payne Goodall Alumni Center Event Production Specialist: **Caitlyn Smiley** ('19)  
 Parma Payne Goodall Alumni Center Events Coordinator: **Bridget Koehler** ('22)



# whywegive



Joseph F. Johnson Jr. and  
Cynthia L. Uline

Photograph by Sandy Huffaker

“THESE GIFTS ARE AN INVESTMENT IN THE FUTURE. ESTABLISHING ESSENTIAL INITIATIVES NOT ONLY ENRICHES THE MINDS OF INDIVIDUALS BUT BUILDS STRONGER COMMUNITIES AND A BETTER WORLD FOR GENERATIONS TO COME AS WELL.”

—ADRIENNE VARGAS,  
vice president for  
University Relations  
and Development

## THE DONORS

**Joseph F. Johnson Jr.**, SDSU professor emeritus of educational leadership, dean emeritus of the College of Education, former interim provost and senior vice president, and **Cynthia L. Uline**, professor emerita of educational leadership, former director of the Ed.D. program in pre-K through 12th grade educational leadership and former executive director of the National Center for the 21st Century Schoolhouse

## THE GIFTS

**\$75,000** bequest to support the National Center for Urban School Transformation  
**\$75,000** Gilda Johnson Shumate Endowed Scholarship

### JOSEPH F. JOHNSON JR. AND CYNTHIA L. ULINE WERE FASCINATED

by what they heard from the students at a high-achieving, predominantly Black and Latino school in Fort Worth, Texas, a model for the kind of education the couple believes every child deserves.

The Paul Laurence Dunbar Young Men’s Leadership Academy was honored in 2018 as one of America’s best urban schools by the National Center for Urban School Transformation, where Johnson served as founding director. It’s among more than 170 schools to date to receive the award, which the couple is supporting through a bequest to the center’s home at San Diego State University. High expectations are reflected in the school’s near-100% graduation rate and a creed that affirms, “I am destined for success in everything I do.”

In follow-up interviews via Zoom in 2021, Johnson and Uline asked some of its inner-city African American students why the school was so successful.

“They said, ‘We have the dream team of teachers here,’” Johnson says. “‘They believe in us, and they want to make our dreams come true.’”

Johnson and Uline endowed a \$75,000 scholarship for current and future educators who are involved with the university’s Black Resource Center. It’s named for Johnson’s mother, Gilda Johnson Shumate, who during the family’s temporary residency in Louisiana “didn’t take no for an answer,” they say, in her drive to get Johnson and his three

sisters into a Catholic school that hadn’t previously admitted Black pupils.

The NCUST endowment is named for former College of Education Dean Lionel “Skip” Meno, who recruited Johnson and Uline to SDSU after crossing paths with them in educational settings repeatedly over the years.

“He’s my hero,” Uline says. “He’s just such an incredible leader in all the contexts in which he’s worked, making a difference especially for students who have been marginalized.”

It was Meno and former SDSU president Stephen L. Weber who established NCUST, determined to give the university a role in improving urban education. NCUST studies and teaching practices have transformed learning in urban schools, historically hampered by underfunding or low expectations. Its goal is nothing less than to obliterate the concept of achievement gaps.

Accordingly, NCUST’s “best urban schools” awards go to those achieving impressive outcomes for all the demographic groups they serve. It’s a mission that dovetails with the SDSU-based National Center for the 21st Century Schoolhouse.

Uline, its former executive director, says the center works to help school leaders see the importance of the physical environment where learning takes place, especially for “students who have been on the margins, whose schools are deplorable in many cases.”

It’s all about “preparing leaders who are equity driven, preparing leaders who understand how to build these



Stephen L. Weber  
circa 1995

## A LASTING IMPACT

Stephen L. Weber is the type of person who looks forward, not back. That’s partly why the former SDSU president (1996–2011) established the President Stephen L. Weber Fund for Excellence with a \$100,000 gift. The endowment will support faculty in the College of Arts and Letters and give them the resources necessary to present papers, conduct research and more.

“The freedom and the creativity that we can encourage through this fund will pay wonderful dividends for San Diego State for years to come,” Weber says.

Weber, now 81 years old, was diagnosed with ALS in 2021, and this fund is just one aspect of his impressive legacy. “I look back with a great deal of pride and satisfaction on the time I was privileged to spend at San Diego State,” Weber says. “I am so proud of [the university] and what it has done.” —Staff

dream teams, preparing leaders who understand the whole environment is part of the way toward success for all kids,” Uline says.

There’s that metaphor from the Fort Worth kids again, and part of the motivation for the couple’s philanthropy.

“In a way all the work that we’ve done before San Diego State, at San Diego State and now into retirement is really all about trying to increase the likelihood that kids all over this country will have dream teams of educators,” Johnson says. “That is a big piece of what our careers have been about.” ●



# throwback

## THE TOP 10 CONCERTS OF ALL TIME AT SDSU

By Seth Mallios

So moved by the musical genius of Peter Gabriel at his summer 1983 concert at San Diego State University, one audience member stole the sock right off Gabriel's foot as the singer crowd-surfed — ironically to the song “Lay Your Hands on Me.”

When hard-rocking fans at the 1995 Ozzy Osbourne show got an invitation from the Godfather of Heavy Metal himself to — “Come down here, and get crazy with me! Whoever gets on stage, gets backstage!” — they happily accepted. What ensued was chaos unrivaled in campus history. The concert turned riot was only four songs in. Fearing for their safety, event staff members at the Open Air Theatre frantically shed their neon yellow jackets to

avoid being assaulted.

There are hundreds of stories like these — known and unknown — in large part because SDSU has hosted more live popular music shows than virtually any other university in the nation. As of June, the university's tally of billed musical performances numbered more than 3,000 since the first show by Bill Rossi in 1931. But which shows were the best? Glad you asked.

Since few things evoke a more passionate response from alumni and current college students than musical preference, only one as foolish as I would dare present the following ranked list of the top 10 concerts of all time at SDSU. (See the methodology sidebar.)

10

**MIKE WATT, FOO FIGHTERS, HOVERCRAFT**  
MAY 20, 1995  
MONTEZUMA HALL

(Score: 96.5/100)

Though total chaos typified some of the most memorable SDSU concerts of the 1990s (think a broken water pipe and trash fights at Lollapalooza in the Aztec Bowl in 1994), it's hard to put into words the many nuances and subplots of this particular show. Homegrown opening act Hovercraft featured band members with bizarre aliases and various rock stars, including Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder and Dave Grohl formerly of Nirvana, disguised in drag. The second act was none other than future Rock & Roll Hall of Famers the Foo Fighters (and Grohl sans drag), who were unsigned and had yet to release an album; and bass legend Mike Watt headlined this masterful yet mysterious show in the last stop on his tour.

9

**BOB MARLEY**  
JULY 24, 1978  
OAT

(Score: 97/100)

As reggae's most iconic figure of all time, Bob Marley exhilarated the sold-out crowd during his first and only San Diego State show in support of the landmark albums, “Exodus” (1977) and “Kaya” (1978). This concert cemented reggae's place at SDSU: Annual Reggae Sunsplash festivals were held on campus throughout the 1980s and '90s following this unforgettable performance.



8

**JACK TEMPCHIN, TOM WAITS**  
NOV. 3, 1973  
THE BACKDOOR

(Score: 97/100)

Perhaps no show better exemplified the brilliance of The Backdoor than local talent Jack Tempchin and Tom Waits. While both artists would achieve stunning success later in their careers — Tempchin was inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2019, and Waits was enshrined in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 2011 — the friends cut their teeth together in and around San Diego. They intermittently worked behind the scenes at The Backdoor, played unbilled open-mike Hoot Nites at the club, wrote songs on campus (in fact, Tempchin co-wrote the hit single “Already Gone” at The Backdoor!) and most of all, in the words of Tempchin, “learned [how] to communicate with an audience.”

7

**MADONNA, BEASTIE BOYS**  
APRIL 19–20, 1985  
OAT

(Score: 97/100)

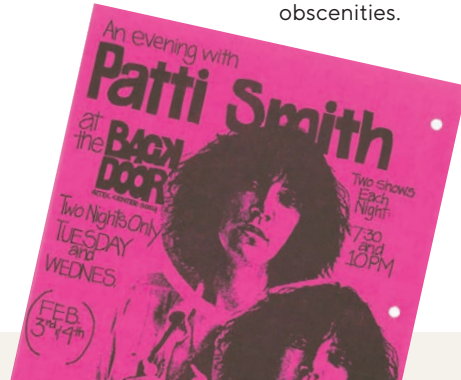
Promoting the ultra-successful album “Like a Virgin,” a slew of MTV videos and an additional chart-topping single from the movie Vision Quest, Madonna was well on her way to becoming one of the world's most influential entertainers when she made her first and only stop at SDSU as part of her first North American tour. Part of the Material Girl's legend at SDSU is that the OAT's dressing room is called “The Madonna Room” because it was allegedly built at her request before she performed.

6

**PATTI SMITH**  
FEB. 3–4, 1976  
THE BACKDOOR

(Score: 97.5/100)

When burgeoning punk-rock icon Patti Smith performed four shows in two nights, all of which were sold out, she introduced San Diego to something entirely new: concerts that were loud, fast and vulgar. Smith impressed, thrilled and, at times, accosted concertgoers by lulling them into a false sense of intimacy with a poetry reading that was then followed by a punk-rock fury of “hostility and resentment,” according to The Daily Aztec. The acts culminated with her ripping the strings out of her guitar, spitting on the crowd and shouting obscenities.



5

**BEYONCÉ**  
AUG. 26, 2007  
COX ARENA

(Score: 97.5/100)

Historical lists rarely spotlight events from the 21st century, but Beyoncé's “flawless” performance, as The Daily Aztec deemed it, was undoubtedly one of SDSU's finest concerts of all time. Her appearance at State, just as she was evolving from entertainment megastar to international icon, included the longest set list for an individual performer in university history (37 songs!) and an inspired blend of the singer's original works with tributes to other performers and her previous band, Destiny's Child.



4

**CANNED HEAT, GRATEFUL DEAD, SANTANA**  
MAY 11, 1969  
AZTEC BOWL

(Score: 98.5/100)

Three months before Woodstock in the summer of 1969, SDSU hosted an outdoor music and art festival with many of the same bands, including headliner Canned Heat, the Grateful Dead and Santana (in his first San Diego performance). The Daily Aztec reported that more than 10,000 people attended the “rock and roll day of fun and sun” that featured a Renaissance fair atmosphere of diversity and goodwill, booths ranging from arts and crafts to the Black Panthers, and an unforgettable, spontaneous jam session between Santana (who had yet to record an album!) and the Grateful Dead.

3

**JIMMY BUFFETT AND THE CORAL REEFER BAND**  
SEPT. 3–4, 1975  
THE BACKDOOR

(Score: 98.5/100)

Despite having his name misspelled on the flyers promoting his first shows at SDSU at The Backdoor, Jimmy Buffett — not “Buffet” — quickly established himself as a burgeoning star. For generations, fans raved about his music, wit (he reminded his student audience, “You might as well enjoy life: God grades on a curve”) and the fact that he first performed “Come Monday” at SDSU.



2

**THE POLICE, OINGO BOINGO, MADNESS**  
SEPT. 5, 1983  
AZTEC BOWL

(Score: 98.5/100)

Touring in support of “Synchronicity,” The Police played their one and only SDSU show to a crowd of more than 21,000, a record-setting number that paved the way for future large-scale concerts. Sting — still with orange hair and tattered sci-fi garb from the recent filming of Dune — led the megapopular British trio in a 21-song, two-hour set. Madness, who opened the show clad in giant sombreros they had just acquired in Tijuana, had just released the single “Our House,” and campus favorites Oingo Boingo played a sterling second set.

1

**ELLA FITZGERALD**  
OCT. 1, 1961  
PETERSON GYM

(Score: 99/100)

When Ella Fitzgerald — also known as the Queen of Jazz and America's First Lady of Song — played at San Diego State, she was one of the biggest musical stars in the nation. Fans in The Daily Aztec gushed that her sold-out show was “perfection.” But even more consequential for race relations in highly segregated 1960s San Diego was the fact that Fitzgerald — three years before the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act — mandated in her contract that if she witnessed any racial segregation at the show, the college would forfeit its deposit and there would be no concert.



### THE METHOD BEHIND THE MADNESS

Before you crush me for being a Gen X homer who dives into the murky waters of musical conjecture, here are my explicit criteria (each on a scale of 1-20 and a top cumulative score of 100).

- The show had to be by artists at or just before their musical apex.
- It had to have either exclusively positive or positively vile reviews (beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but evoking passion is a must).
- The concert had to have some sort of impact beyond the music itself.
- It had to include something distinctive to SDSU.
- The performance had to have created such a buzz that it led to ample embellishment by fans, who may or may not have actually attended the show (but insisted to me that they did).

Patti Smith flyer courtesy of Paul Medeiros; Jimmy Buffett 1976 photo courtesy of Tom Quackenbush; Police 1983 pass courtesy of Keith Rowland; Grateful Dead 1969 photo courtesy of SDSU Special Collections and University Archives.

Ella Fitzgerald 1960 promo photo courtesy of The Daily Aztec; Beyoncé 2007 photo courtesy of The Daily Aztec.





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## INTRODUCING THE 2023 RISING AZTECS

Congratulations to these SDSU alumni for being named as the 2023 Rising Aztecs. This biennial award recognizes up-and-coming alumni who make support for SDSU and engagement with the university part of their lives and careers.



Amber Frankhuizen ('09)  
*Marketing*



Chase Fisher ('10)  
*Communication*



Dusan Selezan ('11, '13)  
*Civil Engineering*



Ezinne Ofoegbu ('15)  
*Kinesiology*



Jeffrey Hinshaw ('14, '16)  
*Kinesiology; Finance*



Jordan Maharaj ('17, '21)  
*Marketing; Public Administration*



Kimberly Spinardi ('10)  
*Accounting*



Courtney Harmon ('07, '13)  
*Art*



Miranda Evans ('15, '20)  
*Public Administration*



Cameron Stacy ('15)  
*Business Management*