Director Destin Daniel Cretton ('11) on the importance of Marvel’s first Asian American superhero.
Looking Forward
How seven alumni are envisioning a better future, post-pandemic.

Looking Forward
Seven alumni on how COVID-19 impacted their fields — and what comes next.

16 Comics Fans, Assemble!
The university is becoming a leader in teaching around the comic arts.

Including:
A Q&A with Destin Daniel Cretton (’11), director of the upcoming Marvel movie, “Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings.”

Summer ’21 is a time of great anticipation at San Diego State University. First and foremost: We are delighted — overjoyed, really — to prepare for a return to mostly in-person instruction this fall. It has been a long 16 months, and I can hardly wait to see a full population of students once again traversing Aztec Walk, heading to classes in the Old Quad and watching our athletes compete.

Campus life will look and feel a little different, to be sure. But our returning students have already shown the resilience and perseverance to thrive under extraordinary conditions, and the vaccines that have made the return to our in-person activities and traditions possible are an amazing display of the research and science we highly value.

Also awaiting our students is an expanded Aztec Recreation Center (p. 4), a $77.6 million project to bring this facility up to date. And we’re now just barely a year from the opening of a new Aztec Stadium, the very first feature of SDSU Mission Valley (p. 6), which I visited for a construction tour last month (see photo on right). I could see the outline of the bowl for the eventual football field, and a whole section of seating that was beginning to take shape.

With ARC and Aztec Stadium, SDSU is building a better future. That’s the theme, both literal and figurative, of this issue. Our centerpiece looks at the future through the eyes of seven alumni who are particularly suited to forecast our post-pandemic lives.

Our content team looks at the future through the eyes of seven alumni who are particularly suited to forecast our post-pandemic lives in public health, entertainment, the arts and public affairs. In another feature, you’ll learn how philanthropy is advancing a new Performing Arts District.

And our cover story on writer/director Destin Daniel Cretton (11) kicks off a section on SDSU’s singular contributions to an important part of our culture: comics.

Enjoy the reading that awaits you.

Adela de la Torre
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San Diego State University
state lately

ARC EXPANSION SET TO OPEN IN FALL

THERE’S A NEW VIEW FROM AZTEC WALK. An expansion of the Aztec Recreation Center (ARC), which got underway in March 2020 just after the campus emptied in response to COVID-19, is on pace to finish up this fall. Construction will then turn to a renovation of the original features, built in 1997.

The $77.6 million update is bringing some of the latest fitness trends and sustainability features to one of SDSU’s most popular but undersized facilities. The Associated Students-managed center will grow to 138,000 from 78,000 square feet to meet user demand. The new two-story structure will include synthetic turf in an open-space area for functional training, an indoor rock-climbing wall and bouldering area, and a hot yoga studio. An indoor track, about an eighth of a mile to a lap, will have views of campus in every direction. The facility also will have five fitness studios (up from two), seven court and gym spaces, areas for SDSU’s growing Adaptive Athletics program and a Shake Smart. It aims to be LEED Double Platinum-certified, with recycled water to irrigate landscaping and flush toilets.

ARC director Mark Zakrzewski expects the new space to become a counterpart to the Conrad Prebys Aztec Student Union across the mesa — with a similar “living room” vibe, where friends socialize between classes. He says, “We know that sense of community, sense of belonging, is really important.” —Jeff Ristine

NEW DEGREE COMPLETION PROGRAMS

BUSY WORKING PROFESSIONALS IN THE IMPERIAL VALLEY who are looking to finish up and receive a bachelor’s degree with a flexible schedule will now have a way to do so. Through a brand new partnership between SDSU Imperial Valley and SDSU Global Campus beginning this fall, faculty will be offering two new online programs: a bachelor’s in business administration and a bachelor’s in child development. Fowler College of Business faculty will be teaching key business concepts, entrepreneurship, strategy and more. Through SDSU’s Department of Child and Family Development, the bachelor’s in child development students will gain 120 hours of community outreach experience in the region working directly with child and family services providers.

109:

Graduates who walked the stage at SDSU Georgia’s commencement in Tbilisi on June 8. All are new STEM professionals, including the first-ever cohort of civil and construction engineers.

GO AZTECS! 4 CONFERENCE CHAMPS THIS SPRING

1. Outdoor Track and Field Mountain West Conference (MWC) champs — plus nine track and five field All-MWC athletes, with Head Coach Sheila Burrell picking up her fifth MWC Coach of the Year honors.

2. Water Polo Golden Coast Conference regular season co-champs, with All-Americans Emily Bennett and Karli Canale.

3. Men’s Basketball MWC regular season champs, with Matt Mitchell as MWC Player of the Year and Head Coach Brian Dutcher as MWC Coach of the Year.


HOW FANS CHEERED THEM ON VIRTUALLY:

Brought more than 700 tickets for the Aztec Virtual Sellout of the MWC tournament and more than 600 fan cutouts for the stands at Viejas Arena. The Show must go on!

A FRESH NEW LOOK AT SDSU IMPERIAL VALLEY

BY THE END OF SUMMER, all 12 buildings on the Calexico and Brawley sites will be painted the same distinctive white with turquoise trim — Balsa and Blue Spruce, from Sherwin-Williams — used on the San Diego campus. “The consistent color scheme between the campuses is a visual reminder that ‘We are One SDSU,’” says Dean Gregorio Ponce. The makeover began in December and also involved giving the buildings “a bit of love” such as repairing wall cracks and re-patching stucco, says Maribel Madero, the project lead and director of business and financial services. “We’ve received positive comments from students, staff and faculty,” she says. “The light color helps the landscape around the buildings pop and gives a different vibe when you walk into the campus.”

Welcome to the Family, San Diego City College!

The latest SDSU Microsite Degree Completion Program location joins Southwestern College and San Diego Mesa College.
COUPLE CREATES ENDOWED PROFESSORSHIP

DENNIS SZETO (’75) AND HIS WIFE, ELAINE SZETO, donated $500,000 to the San Diego State University Fowler College of Business in June. The gift was matched in full from Ron and Alexis Fowler’s $2.15 million 2016 endowment and will provide $1 million to create the Dennis and Elaine Szeto Endowed Professorship in Finance. Endowed professorships recognize teaching excellence and are reserved for the most outstanding instructors. They help attract and retain top, talented faculty members. Dennis, a private equity investor and business advisor, and Elaine, whose career is in medical communications, met at a Castro Valley church. “We are both Christian believers and we both believe in giving back,” Elaine says.

Other recent endowed professorships to Fowler College include the Robert and Amy Abramson Endowed Professorship in Finance and the Terry L. Atkinson Endowed Professorship in Finance. —Tobin Vaughn

WE NEED REAL CHANGE IN FOSSIL FUEL ENERGY CONSUMPTION, USES AND EMISSIONS. I’m thrilled that the U.S. is committed to making that happen because that level of substantive change is only going to happen through policy changes.

As individuals we play a critical role in demanding systemic change from our government leaders. There are also meaningful everyday actions each of us can take. A part of this is just being aware and informed about climate change. It’s similar to how more people are aware of the importance of a healthy diet than they were five or 10 years ago. We need that same awareness about a healthy climate and a greater understanding of the impact our actions have on the environment: emissions from our cars, how much plastic we use, the trips we go on, all this equals our carbon footprints.

Reducing meat consumption is one great example of how micro-decisions at the individual level can change the status quo. I’m a vegetarian but my family eats meat so this is something we talk about at home and something I talk about with my students in my classes. A high level of meat consumption in the U.S., particularly beef, is tied to deforestation and an increase in greenhouse gas emissions. By reducing, not even eliminating, how much beef each person consumes, the actions of millions of individuals can make a real difference in lowering carbon emissions and decoupling consumption from environmental degradation.

Climate change is already part of our everyday lives. We need to adapt and mitigate that now. In Southern California, we’re witnessing sea levels rising, cliff erosion in places like Del Mar or inundation in Imperial Beach, and a now almost year-round wildfire season.

Climate solutions are about using less and being smarter with how we use resources: conserve water and energy, improve efficiency of cars and appliances, switch to desert landscaping instead of thirsty lawns, avoid the use-and-throw-away culture of plastic forks, spoons, straws and cups, recognizing that by protecting the environment we are protecting our communities. Personally, I’m big on reduce, reuse, recycle. For me that means bringing my own mug to a coffee shop (when it’s safe to do so) and avoiding ‘use and dispose’ products and those with excess plastic packaging. —as told to Padma Nagappan

1,950/ DONORS WHO TOGETHER CONTRIBUTED MORE THAN $301,000 TO SDSU’S DAY OF GIVING ON MARCH 9.

No. 23/ Aztec star cornerback Darren Hall went to the Atlanta Falcons in the fourth round of the NFL Draft. He is the eighth SDSU football player selected in the last five drafts.

3/ College of Engineering faculty members who received National Science Foundation CAREER awards this spring for research on drones, human/robot interactions and rooftop solar energy.

296/ Student researchers who presented their award-winning findings at the 2021 Student Research Symposium.

100/ Artifacts currently displayed at the “Nathan Harrison: Born Enslaved, Died a San Diego Legend” exhibit at the San Diego History Center, curated by anthropologist Seth Mallios. He and students recovered 50,000 items in a decade of excavation at Palomar Mountain.

380/ NURSING STUDENTS WHO HELPED VACCINATE THE PUBLIC AT COUNTY SITES.

9,041/ SDSU graduates who walked the stage during seven historic ceremonies over three days at Petco Park in May.

Happy 40th anniversary to the School of Public Health! About 75% of the County of San Diego’s public health workforce are its alumni.
AZTEC STADIUM IS STARTING TO TAKE SHAPE AT THE SDSU MISSION VALLEY SITE — with construction on track for the Aztecs’ Sept. 3, 2022 home opener against the Arizona Wildcats.

The first structural steel columns for the 35,000-capacity venue went up in May, starting with the south side, and will continue through mid-September. Concrete blocks for future concession stands also went up in May. This work is mirrored by final demolition on San Diego Stadium, including the removal of its 1,450 supporting steel piles from 70 to 100 feet underground.

The remains of concrete poured in 1966 — 126,000 cubic yards — is being recycled along with parking-lot asphalt and kept for use as fill and hardscape. That’s a key point, says Director of Construction James Cleaton, in achieving LEED Neighborhood Development for SDSU Mission Valley. (The Aztec Stadium project is also on track for LEED Gold certification.) The mammoth pile of rubble, known affectionately on-site as Mount Aztec, will be used to help lift the development site above the San Diego River and Murphy Canyon Creek floodplains, then later as a base for future streets and other hardscape.

The stadium is the focal point for 2021-22 construction, the first component of a redevelopment boom that will include space for research and collaboration, a river park, housing, shops and a hotel. Preparation for those future phases of SDSU Mission Valley is also underway. “We’re putting in the initial infrastructure to allow for up to 4,600 residential units and an Innovation District,” Cleaton says. “All of those need sewer, water and electrical, and fiber optic cable.” — Jeff Ristine

90%  Amount of the old San Diego Stadium that’s being recycled.

NEARLY 70:  Varieties of California and San Diego native plants, trees, shrubs and grass that will be planted on site.

2 MILLION:  Square feet of asphalt that has been removed and crushed to be reused on site.

428,458:  Square feet of available roof space located throughout SDSU Mission Valley that will incorporate solar panels.

80+:  Acres of total park and open space at the site.

$750,000:  Gift from Ben Clay (’69) and Nikki Clay (’67, ’72, ’21 LHD), in support of the river park.

NEARLY 70:

2 MILLION:

428,458:

80+:

$750,000:
SEVEN ALUMNI ON HOW COVID-19 IMPACTED THEIR FIELDS — AND WHAT THEY PREDICT AS WE MOVE CLOSER TO A POST-PANDEMIC FUTURE.

County of San Diego Public Health Officer Wilma Wooten, M.D. (’90) leads the COVID-19 pandemic response and protects the health of more than 3 million residents — a job she takes very seriously. When California reopened on June 15, COVID-19 vaccination rates were up and hospitalizations and ICU admissions down in San Diego County. But Dr. Wooten wouldn’t be an effective public health officer if she threw caution to the wind. So she’s sticking with her “Failure is not an option” pandemic mantra for now.

As a result, the county is laser-focused on working with community partners and health care workers to conduct outreach and education to get as many people as possible vaccinated.

The state goal is to administer at least one dose to 75% of the eligible population. At the time of this writing in late June, the county was already there with 77% having received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine and 65% of all residents, age 12 and older, fully vaccinated — the highest vaccination rate in Southern California.

“We are still cautiously optimistic,” Dr. Wooten says. “But we do see a light at the end of the tunnel.”

Dr. Wooten has provided steady leadership since the pandemic began, even as other public health officers in California and nationwide resigned after harassment and resistance to public health orders. The San Diego Union-Tribune named her San Diegan of the Year in 2020, noting she “stood firm in advocating for best practices,” such as wearing masks, social distancing, limiting travel and avoiding indoor gatherings.

If there’s an upside to the ordeal, Dr. Wooten says it may be the spotlight it cast on disparities in health services. “This pandemic really shed light on flaws of our society that played an important part in who was getting sick and who was getting tested and who’s getting vaccinated — and so we had to pay closer attention to that,” she says.

Attention is also being focused on strengthening public health infrastructure — including the workforce, she says. That’s why the long-standing relationship between the county and SDSU’s School of Public Health has been so important. “SDSU was one of the first contractors we partnered with to push health workers into the community to engage those individuals that could not be reached by our case investigators or contact tracers,” Dr. Wooten says. The effort continues around testing and encouraging vaccination.

The county also relies on a pipeline of students to fill their ranks. An estimated 75% of their public health workforce are SDSU alumni. And Dr. Wooten only sees more interest in public health work from students called to action by the “once in a lifetime” nature of the pandemic.

“I’m certain that we will have more outbreaks and epidemics,” she says, “but a pandemic of this magnitude — I hope that is not experienced again in our lifetimes.” — Lisa Haney

PUBLIC HEALTH OFFICER
DR. WILMA WOOTEN:
THE COVID-19 OUTLOOK IS CAUTIOUSLY OPTIMISTIC

COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO PUBLIC HEALTH OFFICER WILMA WOOTEN, M.D. (’90) LEADS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESPONSE AND PROTECTS THE HEALTH OF MORE THAN 3 MILLION RESIDENTS — A JOB SHE TAKES VERY SERIOUSLY. WHEN CALIFORNIA REOPENED ON JUNE 15, COVID-19 VACCINATION RATES WERE UP AND HOSPITALIZATIONS AND ICU ADMISSIONS DOWN IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY. BUT DR. WOOTEN WOULDN’T BE AN EFFECTIVE PUBLIC HEALTH OFFICER IF SHE THREW CAUTION TO THE WIND. SO SHE’S STICKING WITH HER “FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION” PANDEMIC MANTRA FOR NOW.

AS A RESULT, THE COUNTY IS LASER-FOCUSED ON WORKING WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS AND HEALTH CARE WORKERS TO CONDUCT OUTREACH AND EDUCATION TO GET AS MANY PEOPLE AS POSSIBLE VACCINATED.

THE STATE GOAL IS TO ADMINISTER AT LEAST ONE DOSE TO 75% OF THE ELIGIBLE POPULATION. AT THE TIME OF THIS WRITING IN LATE JUNE, THE COUNTY WAS ALREADY THERE WITH 77% HAVING RECEIVED AT LEAST ONE DOSE OF A COVID-19 VACCINE AND 65% OF ALL RESIDENTS, AGE 12 AND OLDER, FULLY VACCINATED — THE HIGHEST VACCINATION RATE IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA.

“WE ARE STILL CAUTIOUSLY OPTIMISTIC,” DR. WOOTEN SAYS. “BUT WE DO SEE A LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL.”

DR. WOOTEN HAS PROVIDED STEADY LEADERSHIP SINCE THE PANDEMIC BEGAN, EVEN AS OTHER PUBLIC HEALTH OFFICERS IN CALIFORNIA AND NATIONWIDE RESIGNED AFTER HARASSMENT AND RESISTANCE TO PUBLIC HEALTH ORDERS. THE SAN DIEGO UNION-TRIBUNE NAMED HER SAN DIEGAN OF THE YEAR IN 2020, NOTING SHE “STOOD FIRM IN ADVOCATING FOR BEST PRACTICES,” SUCH AS WEARING MASKS, SOCIAL DISTANCING, LIMITING TRAVEL AND AVOIDING INDOR GATHERINGS.

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ATTENTION IS ALSO BEING FOCUSED ON STRENGTHENING PUBLIC HEALTH INFRASTRUCTURE — INCLUDING THE WORKFORCE, SHE SAYS. THAT’S WHY THE LONG-STANDING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE COUNTY AND SDSU’S SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH HAS BEEN SO IMPORTANT.

“SDSU WAS ONE OF THE FIRST CONTRACTORS WE PARTNERED WITH TO PUSH HEALTH WORKERS INTO THE COMMUNITY TO ENGAGE THOSE INDIVIDUALS THAT COULD NOT BE REACHED BY OUR CASE INVESTIGATORS OR CONTACT TRACERS,” DR. WOOTEN SAYS. THE EFFORT CONTINUES AROUND TESTING AND ENCOURAGING VACCINATION.

THE COUNTY ALSO RELIAMS ON A PIPELINE OF STUDENTS TO FILL THEIR RANKS. AN ESTIMATED 75% OF THEIR PUBLIC HEALTH WORKFORCE ARE SDSU ALUMNI. AND DR. WOOTEN ONLY SEES MORE INTEREST IN PUBLIC HEALTH WORK FROM STUDENTS CALLED TO ACTION BY THE “ONCE IN A LIFETIME” NATURE OF THE PANDEMIC.

“I’M CERTAIN THAT WE WILL HAVE MORE OUTBREAKS AND EPIDEMICS,” SHE SAYS, “BUT A PANDEMIC OF THIS MAGNITUDE — I HOPE THAT IS NOT EXPERIENCED AGAIN IN OUR LIFETIMES.” — LISA HANEY
Public health threats throughout the centuries have inspired design and architecture styles. Following tuberculosis outbreaks in the 1800s and the 1918 flu pandemic, architects incorporated sunshine and fresh air, believed curative, into houses in the form of sleeping porches and loggias (rooms with one or more open sides) for napping and sunbathing. You can still see examples in many Craftsman bungalows in Southern California, though many have since been glassed in, according to Studio E Architects principal at the firm Mathilda Bialk (’04) says whether the COVID-19 pandemic inspires similar design changes remains to be seen. But one lasting effect the architect hopes it will have is addressing equity needs in housing.

For example, if you were fortunate enough to have a single family home with windows on both sides for fresh air and ventilation and a yard to hang out outside and not be around people, it was a luxury, she says. “Maybe we need more outdoor space. Maybe grabbing a cup of coffee on the sidewalk is a really nice thing to do. And hopefully we can kind of harness that and keep that going.”

“It’s about outdoor space even,” Bialk says. “So rather than one huge outdoor communal space, trying to create some variety and ways that that can be broken up, so that people can have privacy and space between them and their neighbors.”

One change from the pandemic she sees as a positive is parklets creating more outdoor space, and a real desire to create some kind of outdoor space. “I really hope that one of the outcomes of this is — specifically in San Diego — that really we start to realize maybe we don’t need so many cars,” Bialk says. “Maybe we need more outdoor spaces.”

Social Entrepreneur Mario Scade: Outdoor and Mobile Is Here to Stay

Mario Scade’s Aire Fitness company turns old shipping containers into mobile outdoor fitness centers. In 2020 during the pandemic, he devised a way to convert the containers into QUIKLAB mobile COVID-19 testing units for TPT Med Tech. Now, with vaccine rolling out the outbreak in the U.S., the entrepreneur is looking to outfit the labs for services like health care centers in underserved communities.

“It’s about access,” Scade (’02) says. “This could be a solution for those neighborhoods.”

The pandemic opened his eyes to other opportunities as well. With YMCAs, recreation centers and gyms forced to shut down or move their equipment outdoors, he saw a way to promote his mobile fitness centers as an affordable alternative to building and maintaining expensive fixed facilities. Additionally, his semi-permanent modular units can fit close enough to the stage to get good sound. Other more fixed locations can also move their equipment outdoors, eliminating construction costs.

Scade has also observed that in the COVID-19 era, many people prefer fitness routines performed entirely outdoors. He is moving quickly to globalize his business as world economies rebound from the pandemic. In addition to an original location in Chula Vista, he has secured a second manufacturing facility in his native Spain, to serve the demand he foresees emerging across Europe and the Middle East.

Despite plans for rapid expansion, Scade stays true to the sustainability values his parents instilled in him. Recycling shipping containers remains at the core of his plans.

“Resilience is the key — it’s my favorite word and what I have always worked for,” Scade says. “It’s about making the right choice: the right choice for the environment, the right choice for social impact, and the right choice economically for a company to be financially sustainable.”

Currently, he is negotiating deals he says will increase his business tenfold over last year. Up next: Aire Home, mobile fitness units for homeowners.

“Right now it’s a gym, but tomorrow you could transform it into an office or a garage flat,” Scade says. “That’s the opportunity I’m seeing now: I see opportunities everywhere.”

—Tobin Vaughn

ARCHITECT MATHILDA BIALK: EVERYONE NEEDS SAFE LIVING SPACES

In July 2020, hundreds of San Diegans pulled into the Del Mar Fairgrounds parking lot, rolled down their car windows and listened as the San Diego Symphony and Los Angeles Philharmonic musicians played Mozart and Mendelssohn from a small stage.

Mainly Mozart had secured the spot for the free concert just a week before. The dirt parking lot off I-5 was a stark contrast to the organization’s usual highly anticipated event: the All-Star Orchestra Festival of top musicians from the nation’s leading orchestras that the organization had put on every June for more than 30 years, most recently at Balboa Theatre.

Yet the small drive-in show was a success. The audience bided its appreciation. Musicians enjoyed performing for a crowd again, cried.

Mainly Mozart later learned it had pulled off the nation’s first classical music performance for a live audience since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Newsweek recognized the feat, and The New Yorker and Musical America both included it in lists of the year’s key moments.

The organization wanted little more than to find a way to stay true to their mission, and felt Zoom Happy Hours with musicians, while popular, weren’t enough. “We started doing everything we were doing under the banner of keeping live music alive,” says Nancy Laturno (’79), co-founder and chief executive officer of Mainly Mozart. It was a leap of faith — and one they were anxious to work. Whether it was an audience of five or an audience of 5,000 was really not at all the relevant point,” she says. “Turns out it was an audience of 700, the most Laturno’s team determined could fit close enough to the stage to get good sound. After a few more free concerts, they moved to a larger parking area at the Fairgrounds where they could fit 350 cars and a larger stage. Most shows sold out.

About 40% of the attendees had never attended a Mainly Mozart concert before. It was a time when people were starved for entertainment and socially distanced activities, sure. But Laturno thinks it was more than that. The drive-in venue was attracting families with young children who might have traditionally been turned off by the concert hall setting. “This isn’t an audience we can turn our backs on as we go forward,” she says.

The Fairgrounds drive-in shows wrapped in April and the nine-day All-Star Orchestra Festival took place in June at Del Mar Surf Cup Sports Park. A return to a concert hall is likely for summer 2022, but Laturno hopes to maintain an element of outdoor performance in the festival, as well as the occasional free drive-in community concert. “Sentimentally, I don’t think we can move completely away from drive-ins,” she says.

The constantly changing dynamics of the pandemic were challenging, with every day feeling like a plan B with no contingency, but they forced Mainly Mozart to be creative.

“We never would have afforded to take this risk,” Laturno says. “This risk was forced upon us. And for us, it’s been a rebirth.”

MARIO SCADE: AIRE FITNESS COMPANY turns old shipping containers into mobile outdoor fitness centers. In 2020 during the pandemic, he devised a way to convert the containers into QUIKLAB mobile COVID-19 testing units for TPT Med Tech. Now, with vaccine spurring the outbreak in the U.S., the entrepreneur is looking to outfit the labs for services like health care centers in underserved communities.

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Photographs: Matt Furman (top left and right). J. Kat Woronowicz Johnson/J. Kat Photo, Inc. (bottom).
Not applicable
COMIC-CON put San Diego at the epicenter of the comics world and now SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY is putting scholarship around comics on the map.

With one of the largest library comics collections in the nation and faculty, students and alumni doing interesting comics-related work, the university is becoming a leader in the comic arts.

AS A FILM STUDENT AT SDSU, Destin Daniel Cretton ('11) won the top prize for short film at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival. After earning his master’s in television, film and new media production, he was back at the festival in 2012 debuting a feature.

“Destin Daniel Cretton is kind of a big deal,” SDSU’s magazine declared at the time — presciently, it turns out.

Cretton went on to write and direct a feature adaptation of “Short Term 12” (his 2009 short), starring Brie Larson. It won a slew of awards in 2013 and launched both Cretton’s and Larson’s careers. The pair collaborated again on the film adaptations of the memoirs “The Glass Castle” and “Just Mercy.” The latter, starring Michael B. Jordan and Jamie Foxx, is a legal drama based on civil rights attorney Bryan Stevenson who worked to exonerate death row prisoners. The film was named Outstanding Motion Picture at the NAACP Image Awards in early 2020 and its themes of unequal treatment under the law took on greater poignancy later that year after the killing of George Floyd.

Now “Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings,” which Cretton directed and co-wrote, will open in theaters on Sept. 3 and feature Marvel’s first Asian American lead superhero. Cretton, who is of Japanese-American descent and grew up on Maui, thinks deeply about the impact it might have on Asian Pacific Islander Desi Americans. He says, “I definitely feel the weight of hoping that we are putting something into the world that is good and beneficial to our community.”

Here’s what else he had to say during a Zoom in May.

Were you into comics growing up?

I honestly never got into comics growing up, but like any kid I was into all the superhero movies and shows. At the time when I was growing up, we were still watching the “Batman” TV show, the one where they would walk up the side of buildings by turning the camera sideways. And “Superman,” and “Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.” So when I first started making little short films with my grandma’s VHS camera, making movies that were about fantastical superhero type people and also martial arts was probably our go-to thing when we were young.
Actor Simu Liu plays a superhero by the end of the movie. Would hang out with and watch him grow, and turn into a character that feels very much like someone I like me, they don’t dress like me or listen to the same types of music as me. So this was a really special experience like me, they don’t talk like me now; it’s been gradual. It also was the realization, Oh, I have an accent that people don’t understand.

There are a lot of stereotypes in some of the early “Shang-Chi” comics. Was it important for you to tell the story in a new way and correct that? One hundred percent. The first meeting that I had with Marvel was just a general meeting to hear what they were doing. And I wasn’t even expecting to pitch on that job, but I was hoping I’d just be able to express some of the things that I would hope that they would do or not do in this movie. And it was a very big job. I’d also understood that there were a lot of things to avoid from the comics. But the comics at their core revolve around relationships within a broken family. So we were able to zero in on some of the things that we really loved about the comics and breathe new life into it, and also breathe new life into it in the context of really the Asian American experience.

And that was something that I don’t think we’ve really ever seen on film before. We have Jackie Chan and Jet Li and Bruce Lee, and as awesome as they all are, they don’t seem that funny, but I wasn’t offended. No one’s ever gonna say, “What?” And I didn’t realize, Oh, I have an accent that people don’t understand. I didn’t talk like I talk now, it’s been gradual. It also was the first time in my life really that I started to see the manifestations of different forms of subtle racism, and I didn’t know what it was at home. It was the first time somebody in a bar came up to me and jokingly called me Bruce Lee, and put up karate chop hands. And at the time I was like OK, that doesn’t seem that funny, but I wasn’t offended. No one’s ever seen how I look and just associated it with the only famous Asian person they know.

Are there lessons you learn at SDSU that are still really important to your work today? Before I was accepted into SDSU, I was planning to make a short film in San Francisco every summer. We would go looking to rent equipment and I just called up Greg Durbin [professor of film at SDSU], the only other independent filmmaker that we knew in San Diego. He invited us over to his house and he had a 35 mm camera package that he was going to rent to us for dirt cheap. And he went out of his way doing this for us — taking way too much time with two strangers, teaching them how to do things in his garage. But that mentality is really the heart of filmmaking. It’s this giving, sharing, familial mentality that was really shown to me by Greg. So that support I think is really necessary — and not being afraid to ask for it and then also remembering to give it to people when they need it.

A little while later I applied to SDSU and got in. The other thing that I learned from my experience in general at SDSU, through a lot of short films and documentaries, was the power of exploration. And it’s a difficult one to hold on to in the industry once money is involved, because the exploration is connected to taking big risks, to trying things you haven’t tried before. Trying to look at a subject or using the camera in ways that might be a little more unexpected. It’s a mentality that I tried to remind myself that I have to keep going back to, as I’m making movies.

As an SDSU film student, did you ever imagine one day you’d be directing — and co-writing a screenplay for — a Marvel movie? At the time, no. That wasn’t a life goal by any means. I grew up on big Spielberg blockbusters — really the only type of movies that made it into the theaters on Maui. I was introduced to independent cinema when I went off to college in San Diego, and that’s where I thought I would always stay, in terms of the types of movies I’d be exploring. But this has been a big change and it’s been really fun.

What advice would you give to SDSU film students? Don’t spend a lot of money on your films. Rather than putting all this money into one big (short) film, I would break that up and try to do as many as you can, and explore as many things as you can. You just get better with every movie. I get rejected from Sundance with every short film that I did, but it was my eighth one that did get in.

The other, probably more important, piece of advice is to just practice being unapologetically yourself regardless of what people’s opinions are of that self. That’s your secret weapon in an industry that is based on creativity. Everything that you’ve experienced up until this point — your unique personality, your cultural background, your taste in film and cinema — that’s the thing that makes whatever you make unique. Hold on to that.

Interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.
Jackson teamed up to co-found the Comics Working Group, with Pollard, a history professor. "Everyone who hears about it is incredibly excited and wants to be here working in our collection," says Elizabeth Pollard, rebranded in 2021 as Comics@SDSU. The group now has about 25 faculty members and aims to boost the comics curriculum at SDSU (and eventually create a certificate in comic studies).

That’s already happening in a less formalized way across the university, with comics or graphic media being used in a range of courses across the colleges, including graphic medicine and engineering textbooks. “In the College of Arts and Letters, pretty much every department has someone who is integrating comics into their courses, whether it’s one reading of many or the focus of the readings,” Pollard says. The Comics@SDSU-developed Comics and History course, introduced in fall 2020, attracted 438 students across the history and English departments. “One of the great things about this course is everyone showed up having done the reading and wanting to talk about it — that was thrilling as a teacher,” says Pollard. Graphic novels and sequential art force the reader to engage with not just the words in the speech bubbles but with the art in the panels too. “It encourages a participation in visualization that brings you, the reader, into the process of making meaning,” she says. “That’s why they work so well and why people like them so much.”

The Comics@SDSU group is thinking beyond campus. They aim to create a summer institute for college and K-12 teachers to teach ways to integrate comics into their curriculums. The group is also expanding their reach to the full California State University system. In April, Jackson and Pollard hosted a Zoom gathering with faculty members from 11 CSU locations to talk about how they can collaborate and share individual expertise across the different institutions, as well as dream up new projects. Ideas include a lecture series, workshops and a possible podcast.

The takeaway: A lot of excitement across the system. Pollard says, “For us, it’s about spreading the word that the history and English departments. “One of the great things about this course is everyone showed up having done the reading and wanting to talk about it — that was thrilling as a teacher,” says Pollard. Graphic novels and sequential art force the reader to engage with not just the words in the speech bubbles but with the art in the panels too. “It encourages a participation in visualization that brings you, the reader, into the process of making meaning,” she says. “That’s why they work so well and why people like them so much.”

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Schauffele, a decorated golfer from Scripps Ranch High School, spent his freshman year at Long Beach State University before transferring back home to SDSU. At Long Beach, he was named Big West Conference Freshman of the Year and earned First Team All-Big West honors in 2012.

The pair met at the first team meeting of the 2012-13 season and bonded through practice rounds, tournaments and attending SDSU men’s basketball games. “We became really close really fast,” Kaiser says. “We like to joke around, but we want to work hard and get the job done. We have the same goals, so I think that aligns really well with our personalities.”

After transferring to SDSU, Schauffele picked up right where he left off at Long Beach State. Over his three seasons with the Aztecs, he won two tournaments, while posting 22 top-10 finishes and 16 top-5 efforts, garnering All-Mountain West honors each year. Schauffele capped off his collegiate career by earning third-team All-America honors from both Golfweek and PING his senior year.

“He knew he would be on tour,” SDSU men’s golf head coach Ryan Donovan says. “He’s one of the hardest working guys I’ve ever had in 18 years of coaching, and I think that says a lot. He’s playing to win every week, and that’s something hard to teach.”

During his two years at SDSU, Kaiser was also a significant contributor to the Aztecs, earning starts in 12 of 13 tournaments and posting four top-20 finishes during his junior year.

**THE APPROACH**


Tied for the lead heading into the final hole, Schauffele pulled out a pitching wedge on the par-3, 161-yard hole surrounded by bunkers and took a powerful swing. When the ball came to rest three feet from the hole, Schauffele calmly tapped in for birdie, securing the duo’s first win on the PGA Tour.

“Tied for the lead the entire week, Schauffele continued to show his poise and calmness under pressure,” says Ryan Donovan. “He’s a great little competitor.”

**THE DRIVE**

Schauffele and Kaiser both took the long way to Aztecs golf. Kaiser was league MVP and an all-conference pick as a senior at Atascadero High School in Atascadero, California, before spending two years at Allan Hancock College in Santa Maria, California. There he logged top-five finishes at the community college state tournament in consecutive years.

As a partner to one of his closest friends. He said yes.

Four PGA Tour wins, nine top-10 finishes in major championships (including a tie for seventh at the U.S. Open last month), and a top-10 world ranking later, the duo is rolling like a downhill putt. And it all started at SDSU.

**CLOSE TO THE PIN**

Like the Farmers Insurance Open each January, this year’s U.S. Open returned the pair to familiar ground. Schauffele’s hometown, now adopted as such by Kaiser.

“I live 20 minutes from the course,” says Kaiser. “It’s my favorite week when we play the Farmers because you have that hometown feel, everyone is rooting for you.”

Known for its breathtaking views on the coastal cliffs of La Jolla, Torrey Pines Golf Course is anything but a vacation. When asked about his thoughts on the course, Kaiser responds with two words initially.

“It’s hard,” Kaiser says, laughing. “You have to do everything correct to score well. You have to drive it really well, you have to putt it really well. But Xander is the kind of well-rounded player who can do well there.”

Earlier this year, Schauffele and Kaiser tied for second at the Farmers, their highest finish at the tournament. “That was huge for us and our confidence going forward for the U.S. Open,” says Kaiser.

Another booster: “The fans were amazing,” Kaiser says. “We heard ‘Go Aztecs’ quite a bit and we try to give the thumbs up and try to acknowledge everyone who roots for us.”

**“THERE’S NOT MANY CADDIE-PLAYER RELATIONSHIPS LIKE OURS.”**

—Austin Kaiser

Donovan credits Kaiser as an integral part of the duo’s meteoric rise. “He’s got a calmness about him that’s very soothing,” Donovan says. “He’s learned the game, and he definitely puts in the work to do his best and create the best gameplan for Xander to execute.”

Kaiser does whatever it takes to make Schauffele comfortable. “My mantra is ‘Be more than a caddy,’” he says. “In the early days that meant waking up early to make breakfast with a hotplate in a hotel room and driving between tournaments in his 1999 Honda Accord.

“I wouldn’t caddie for anyone but him,” says Kaiser. “To Kaiser and Schauffele, they are not caddie and golfer; they are teammates, continuing the strong bond they built at SDSU.

“Keeps it easy on me and I keep it easy on him,” Schauffele told SDSU’s magazine in 2017. “We just have a lot of fun out there.”
DURING THE PANDEMIC.

THE ARTS DIDN’T STOP DURING THE PANDEMIC.

Artists found new ways to create — and even to perform. SDSU students rehearsed in parking lots and put on virtual concerts and theater productions, including “Pippin,” in the spring. But the full magic that happens when performers and their audience are in the same space for a live show, gathering in community, was lost. Now, the next time we’re able to assemble safely for a show, we’ll appreciate it more, Shannon says. "More than ever, we need the power of the arts to tell our stories that lift people..."
HELLO, LIL’ SDSU FANS!

These children of alumni are already showing serious school spirit.

1. Malachi (name inspired by former SDSU basketball player Malachi Flynn!), 8 months. Alumni parents: Melissa Tom ('11) and Wesley Tom ('12).


10. Adrian, 3. Alumni parents: Angelo Hernandez (10) and Merry Mendoza (10).


*If you've welcomed a baby within the past year, email GoAztecsMarketing@sdsu.edu and SDSU Athletics will email you an official Aztec Newborn Club certificate, plus a 20% off coupon for the SDSU Bookstore/ShopAztecs.com to put your baby in Aztec gear. Include your baby’s name and birthday, along with your own name and email address.

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A NUESTRA SALUD: Confronting Public Health and Mental Health Challenges and Solutions in Our Transborder Region

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NOV. 16-17 2021

THIRD ANNUAL BI-NATIONAL CONFERENCE

*SDSU Alumni Lifetime Member

Photographs: Laura Herrera (8). SportsPhotos.com (14, 15).
With chickens stuck at home during the COVID-19 pandemic, Fontana Unified School District counselor Eduardo Valencia ('98, M.S., school counseling) went door-to-door to check in on his elementary school students. His Taco Bell lab (where more than one dozen SDSU alumni work) was monitoring the “brains” of the rover and preparing to hand over a healthy spacecraft to landing team. “It was the most intense few hours of my life,“ Mr. Valencia says. With his team assured to work at NASA one day, and ultimately on a Mars rover mission, she didn’t expect it to happen so early in her career. “Working the last few years on the Mars 2020 Mission has truly been a dream come true,“ she says. In May, Marína celebrated another special lifetime moment when she married John McGorry (’77, B.S., kinesiology) whom she met at SDSU—Lisa Money.

1970s

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10. SARA HIBBARD (B.S., management) recently joined Shell & Wimer’s new San Diego office as an associate in their corporate and securities practice group and will be working with their life sciences and medical technology industry group.

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The night before the Perseverance rover touched down on Mars on Feb. 18, Anauchristina Monro (’17, B.S. aerospace engineering) was on console for the avionics subsystem. The systems engineer at NASA Jet Propulsion Lab (where more than one dozen SDSU alumni work) was monitoring the “brains” of the rover and preparing to hand over a healthy spacecraft to landing team. “It was the most intense few hours of my life,” Ms. Monro says. With her team assured to work at NASA one day, and ultimately on a Mars rover mission, she didn’t expect it to happen so early in her career. “Working the last few years on the Mars 2020 Mission has truly been a dream come true,” she says. In May, Ms. Monro celebrated another special lifetime moment when she married John McGorry (’77, B.S., kinesiology) whom she met at SDSU—Lisa Money.

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As the world grapples with the disturbing rise of white supremacy, it is worth recalling that nearly 60 years ago, a San Diego State student stood up to similar fascists in one of the most memorable moments in university history.

On March 8, 1962, American Nazi Party leader George Lincoln Rockwell, who regularly claimed that the Holocaust never happened and sought to revoke African American citizenship, spoke on campus at the Open Air Theatre (OAT) in a Committee for Student Action-sponsored event.

During his address to the crowd of nearly 3,000, Rockwell called Jewish people the “cause of the world’s troubles,” and also vilified “Negros,” “queers” and women, according to reports in The Daily Aztec (DA). One particular person in attendance, a 22-year-old senior physical education major and football player, was moved to counteract the venomous views. “When some guy like Rockwell gets up there and starts knocking your religion and your beliefs, you feel you have to do something about him,” the young Jewish man from Brooklyn, NY, who now chooses to remain anonymous, recalled to the DA soon after the event. Accordingly, he left his seat to confront the hatemonger.

Since Rockwell had brazenly invited anyone on stage to debate his points, OAT security let the student through with hardly a second glance. DA reporters noted that the young man initially went for the microphone to offer an opposing opinion, but when Rockwell shoved him away, the student punched him in the jaw with such force that the American Nazi’s sunglasses flew across the stage. Mayhem ensued as friends ushered the student away from the OAT, and Rockwell took refuge in a nearby building.

As Rockwell exited campus, other students pelted him with raw eggs and smashed the windows on his car. Undaunted by this treatment, he later mocked the response to his speech in a post-event press conference covered nationwide as a “pansy picnic.”

A retrospective look at the event that gripped campus and made international headlines.

By Seth Mallios

Professor of Anthropology Seth Mallios is the university history curator and director of the South Coastal Information Center at SDSU. He curated the exhibition “Nathan Harrison: Born Enslaved, Died a San Diego Legend,” currently at the San Diego History Center.
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