

**F G C U 3 6 0 . C O M**



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SPRING 2022

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# FIRST



WGCU

## On-the-job training

Journalism students learn from the pros through Democracy Watch program

BY DAYNA HARPSTER

**T**HE FIRST TIME journalism student Samantha Roesler intended to cover a government meeting, she attended a city council meeting in Bonita Springs. She lives in Bonita, so that made sense.

"I had never even attended a meeting

and didn't bother looking through an agenda," the senior says, and laughs about it now.

As one of three Democracy Watch fellows during the spring semester, Roesler learned quickly that homework was required. She was covering stories for WGCU and in uncharted territory. This wasn't like interviewing students on

campus for Eagle Media – of which she is executive editor. "Those seemed like practice stories to me," she said recently, remembering.

She was surprised by some of what she saw. "There were disagreements in that meeting. I wondered, are they really supposed to be yelling at each other?"

She realizes now that public comments

PHOTOS BY JAMES GRECO



**Through this collaboration, we hope to continue to bring strong stories to Southwest Florida's residents and visitors for years to come.**



**PAM JAMES, DEMOCRACY WATCH LIAISON  
AND EXECUTIVE PRODUCER OF CONTENT FOR WGCU**

can get fiery and she enjoys seeing the passion with which people engage with their elected officials. She knows how important a story's background is – and that's made an impression not only on WGCU but also the Bonita Banner, Marco Eagle and Estero Life magazine, for which she freelances now. "I feel like with every story I do I become a little micro-expert," Roesler says. "That's what I love about journalism."

Fellow Sabrina Salovitz loves the politics. Her media experience began her freshman year in high school when she more or less fell into a TV production class because she simply needed another few credits. And then she grew throughout high school as an activist with March for Our Lives. "I spoke at a lot of events and got confident about speaking to older people," she says.

But it can get rough out there, the senior acknowledges. She has been surprised by some people's remarks. "People have accused me of recording them without permission. Or of spinning their quotes. At the end of the day I remember I'm a good journalist. I follow ethics. I've been corrected on things before. That's life, it happens.

"People have very strong beliefs. That's a beautiful part of politics that I love. I love when I can get a quote where

someone is super-impassioned."

That would include the Rev. Houston Cypress, a member of the Miccosukee Tribe who laments the degradation of the Everglades in a story Salovitz reported for NPR's Next Gen radio. She was chosen for a week-long workshop held by NPR to train six students to cover climate change.

Journalism Professor Lyn Millner designed the Democracy Watch program, created a proposal – help with which she credits Clark Bell, former journalism program director for the Robert R. McCormick Foundation and "a good friend of the journalism program." Millner worked with the

FGCU Foundation to pitch the program (successfully) to Foundation donors Howard Cohen, Linda Penniman and Jim Hale, all of whom are current members of the WGCU Public Media Advisory Board.

Adjunct journalism instructor Mike Walcher, who was an anchor reporter for WINK TV from 1998 to 2016, put together a syllabus and started teaching the Democracy Watch class last fall. Of the seven students that first semester, three were chosen to be paid fellows earning \$10 an hour, or about \$1,350 a semester.

"The Democracy Watch program is a great example of the synergy between FGCU and WGCU. It gives our students

**LEFT: FGCU journalism major Samantha Roesler interviews Bonita Springs city councilman, Jesse Purdon.**

**RIGHT: Democracy Watch fellows Katuska Carrillo, Sabrina Salovitz and Samantha Roesler with instructor Mike Walcher.**







In the WGCU studio, Sabrina Salovitz feels confident about her ethics and skills.

real-world experience, helps WGCU broaden its reach, and benefits the public by shining more light on the operation of our government,” says FGCU Vice President for Advancement Kitty Green.

“Through this collaboration, we hope to continue to bring strong stories to Southwest Florida’s residents and visitors for years to come. It’s also important (and a pleasure) for WGCU to help be a part of raising up a new generation of multimedia journalists,” says Pam James, Democracy Watch liaison and executive producer of content for WGCU.

Strengthening WGCU’s news coverage is one of the top goals expressed by General Manager Corey Lewis, in that post since May 2021. He believes public media is aptly positioned as a nonprofit, member-supported service to ensure that Southwest Floridians have relevant news and the context as commercial media delivers less.

It seems as if Democracy Watch already has nudged WGCU news a little further along that path. “Many of their stories are not showing up (elsewhere) in local media,” says Walcher. “I think that’s a good way to look at the success of what we’ve done so far. Really that was the goal, to fill in the huge gaps left by local media, which has had so many cutbacks.”

Diverse voices were not showing up in local media, either, the way Democracy Watch fellow Katuska Carrillo, ’21, thought they should be. Carrillo earned a bachelor’s in journalism from FGCU in December, and was asked to stay on as a fellow for the spring term. “I didn’t have the opportunity to branch out and get involved the way I wanted to” at FGCU, Carrillo says. But the Democracy Watch experience has solidified in her mind what her career path should be. “I like representing underrepresented populations,” says Carrillo, who describes herself as Latina.

She recently covered a fair housing initiative in Immokalee and wrote an emotional and insightful story about a Hispanic family who lost their grandmother to COVID, and what put Hispanic families at risk.

“I definitely was intimidated at first,” says Carillo. “Sometimes it felt like I didn’t belong there, but as time went on, I realized what I was doing was important.” ■

## UPDATES:

### NEW FACES – AND VOICES – AT WGCU

Sandra Viktorova joined WGCU FM as the new Morning Edition host and reporter Feb. 7. Longtime WGCU morning show host and Assistant News Director

John Davis is turning his attention to in-depth general assignment and investigative reporting.



Sandra  
Viktorova

Viktorova, a Suncoast Emmy Award-winner, may sound familiar to local listeners due to her previous role at WFTX Fox 4. She has worked in Miami, Orlando, Fort Myers, Denver and Laredo, Texas, with CBS and NBC affiliates and the Univision Network. She earned a degree in broadcast journalism from Florida

International University and recently moved from Miami to Charlotte County.

PBS/NPR Sponsorship Manager Mary Doscher began working with the WGCU fundraising and underwriting team in December 2021. Prior to joining WGCU, Doscher was director of PBS television sponsorships and media partnerships for WPBT-WXEL: South Florida PBS for nearly 10 years. She graduated from Drake University with bachelor’s degrees in broadcast journalism and telecommunications, and theater and dance.

Doscher has worked media sales in markets from West Palm Beach and Miami to Minneapolis, Green Bay and New York City. Reach her at [mdoscher@wgcu.org](mailto:mdoscher@wgcu.org) or 590-2338.

WGCU in November welcomed Tom Bayles to its staff as environmental reporter. Bayles has worked the environmental beat for years, among other assignments, for the Sarasota Herald-Tribune, Sarasota Magazine, the Associated Press and the Tampa Bay Times. He is a graduate of the University of South Florida, where he earned a bachelor’s degree in social science education and a master’s degree in journalism.



Tom  
Bayles

His award-winning stories have made their way from print to television, radio and audiobook.

Watch for his work at [wgcu.org/environment](http://wgcu.org/environment), in the Green Flash newsletter and on WGCU FM. Bayles can be reached at [tbayles@wgcu.org](mailto:tbayles@wgcu.org) and 941-713-7570.

Recently adding to WGCU FM’s local content stream is the feature “Song of the Day,” curated by former editor for The News-Press Sheldon Zoldan. “Part history, part trivia, part music,” the Friday radio feature proves that every aspect of life has a musical connection. ■

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**JOIN THE CONVERSATION** on social media and find out what's happening at FGCU.  
**#FGCU, #WINGSUP, #WEAREFGCU**

## SEARCH BEGINS FOR FGCU'S NEXT PRESIDENT

Florida Gulf Coast University has launched a national search to hire the university's fifth president to succeed President Michael V. Martin, who retires in December.

The university has selected a Presidential Search Committee, with nominations provided by faculty and staff, including representation of students, alumni, employees and members of the community. Edward Morton, the FGCU Board of Trustees vice chair, chairs the committee.

"It is vital for all FGCU stakeholders - our students, parents, employees, alumni and community members - to take an active role in the search process so we can find the right person to lead this university into its next 25 years," said Blake Gable, chair of the FGCU Board of Trustees.

Details are available at [fgcu.edu/presidentialsearch](http://fgcu.edu/presidentialsearch)

## NEW LOGO TO REFRESH THE UNIVERSITY'S PERSPECTIVE

What do you call the university logo? An arch? A wreath? What many agree on is that the design is outdated, does not serve FGCU well in the digital age and the 25th anniversary is a good time for an update.

To that end, the university has hired Ologie, a nationally known marketing and design firm, to conduct a thorough exploration of the university's needs and aspirations to create a modern, scalable institutional logo, as well as wordmark and brand architecture. The athletic logo will not be changed.

Two university committees composed of faculty and staff are helping to guide Ologie's work, which includes conducting focus groups and assessing logos from competing institutions.

The goal is to represent FGCU's youth and vitality, distinguish it from its peers and competitors and generate pride in the university among all members of the FGCU community. A new design is expected this fall.

## LOOKING FOR CLASS NOTES?

Read them online or submit yours -  
[fgcu360.com/class-notes](http://fgcu360.com/class-notes)

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## SPOTLIGHT

## Precious Gunter has a big job, a big title and an even bigger heart

BY ARTIS HENDERSON

**I**T'S TUESDAY, FEB. 1, AND Florida Gulf Coast University is celebrating Lunar New Year. In room 213 in the Cohen Student Union, red and white paper lanterns hang from the ceiling. Gold streamers reflect sunlight pouring through the windows. Banners written in Chinese calligraphy wish everyone good fortune and a happy year of the tiger.

Students and faculty gather at tables spread throughout the room. Precious Gunter sits among them. She laughs, talks and reaches for new year delicacies with a pair of wooden chopsticks. She's happy to be there and to join in, even though she has a million tasks on her to-do list. Still, she takes this pause in her day to make her presence known. "I rarely eat lunch," Gunter confesses. "But it was important to be there."

Gunter has a reputation as one of the most effective people on campus. She has a big title – chief equity, ethics and compliance officer and Title IX coordinator. As chief compliance officer, she oversees the university's compliance and ethics program. This includes making sure it adheres to Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (Title IX), Titles VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Sections 503



## PRECIOUS GREEN GUNTER

- ▶ **Title:** Chief Equity, Ethics, and Compliance Officer and Title IX Coordinator
- ▶ **Committees she serves on:** 20+
- ▶ **Personal hero:** Thurgood Marshall
- ▶ **Favorite color:** Purple
- ▶ **Countries lived in:** Germany, United States
- ▶ **Degrees held:** B.S. in human resource management from the University of South Carolina; J.D. from North Carolina Central University of Law
- ▶ **Alter ego:** Instructor in the Lutgert College of Business
- ▶ **Favorite way to say I love you:** *Ich liebe dich*
- ▶ **Heroes she has dressed up as:** Thurgood Marshall
- ▶ **News that gave her joy this year:** The confirmation of Ketanji Brown Jackson as the first Black woman to serve on the Supreme Court

and 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. She also chairs the University's Title IX and Diversity and Inclusion Committees to ensure the university remains compliant. Additionally, she assists with programming and trainings to promote education and awareness throughout the university community. And, on top of everything else, she teaches at the university's Lutgert College of Business. She handles all of this with grace.

FGCU President Mike Martin calls Gunter a valued, productive member of the FGCU leadership team. "She is very bright, always engaged and is here to serve," he says. "She's a person of high integrity and provides a great role model for our students."

No two days are alike for Gunter, except that they are all astonishingly busy. By 11 a.m. on this day, she'd already had conferences with

FGCU's athletic director, associate provost and director of employee relations. And she was meeting with the president at 2 p.m. "That doesn't even count all the emails," she says good naturedly.

Last year, Gunter took three months of maternity leave for her first baby. It was the longest stretch of time she'd gone without working since she was 16 years old. Before she left on leave, she compiled a list of all the committees she serves on. The grand total? 19. "It's probably more now," she says.

Being on committees is part of her job description, true. But Gunter genuinely likes to be involved. "Equity is important," she says. "It should be woven into everything we do at the university. If I say no when I'm asked to serve, then I worry that message might get lost."

Gunter also tries to attend as many events as she can, like the Lunar New Year celebration. She believes the university's faculty and staff should model the kind of inclusivity they hope to create in the world, not simply teach definitions in the classroom. "It's important that we include equity at every level," she says. "This is coming from a new mother who has a little girl running around and copying everything I say and do."

The best practices Gunter seeks to model at home and for the FGCU

community come from those she learned growing up. Her church, the African Methodist Episcopal church, was an essential part of her upbringing.

"Watching the elders, watching my mom, watching my grandmother get up to do Sunday announcements. All of those things are critical to my roots and my success," she says. "The church has a rich history, and I learned a lot not just about religion but also about Black history. That created an important foundation for me." She credits those early experiences with giving her a level of empathy that has pushed her to devote her life to others. "They made me who I am."

Recently, one of the many emails that came through her inbox asked Gunter to sit on an evening panel for Women's History Month. On one hand, she considered declining. After all, her husband and daughter would be waiting for her at home. But then she reconsidered. Maybe she would ask her husband to bring her daughter to watch the panel. The more she thought about it, the better the idea seemed. She remembered her own early lessons on modeling, the role her mother and grandmother played in her life, and she imagined showing her own life lessons to her daughter. "It's good for her to start seeing these images," Gunter reflects.

As her life moves forward, she asks herself how she can teach equity and inclusion so that those around her will take the lessons forward into their own lives. She devises new ways to show up and be present. And she considers how she can model the type of world she wants to create – for her daughter, for her students and for the university as a whole. ■



Gunter and her daughter Marley

## RESEARCH

## Students prove dogged when it comes to reading

College of Ed program helps children practice literacy skills with canine cohorts

**STORY AND PHOTOS  
BY KAREN FELDMAN**

**T**WO ROWS OF DOG runs stretch the length of a cavernous room with a concrete floor. The occupants comprise an eclectic group.

There's Kiera, a lumbering, brown and white pit bull mix, her face streaked gray, her beseeching brown eyes clouded with age. Eight brown and black puppies of indiscriminate breed run and tumble over one another, amusing themselves and onlookers. Gizmo, a fluffy Pomeranian, struts proudly around his enclosure like a runway model.

Eager barking erupts as eight youngsters ranging from pre-school to second grade file in, followed by a gaggle of parents and other adults.

Those without their own books select one from the bookshelf in the Gulf Coast Humane Society's dog room, then find a four-legged occupant to read to.

Welcome to the monthly Reading to Dogs hour. Here's what is happening:

- Children, some of whom aren't avid readers or may not yet know how, sit on the floor near the dog of their choice, turn book pages and tell stories to dogs.

- Their parents listen without having to take charge of sessions.

- The dogs may not understand the words, but they love that someone has stopped by to talk to them at their eye level. Many sit right next to their gate and listen raptly. Call it doggy enrichment.







**Wilhelmina Greer, 6, reads a book about a dog to Gizmo, a Pomeranian, at Gulf Coast Humane Society in Fort Myers.**

■ And FGCU researchers observing the activities gauge the children's interactions – their reading skills, their emotional and social responses, plus how attentive and engaged they are.

Other benefits become evident, too.

"It's definitely a great experience for the kids," says Kat Brown, an FGCU senior majoring in psychology. An honors student, she's a research assistant on the project to Melissa Rodriguez Meehan and Nate Turcotte, FGCU assistant professors of education. "They don't feel judged when reading, and they also get to interact with animals they might not get to at home. They get to read aloud without judgment and also see other children reading and enjoying it."

Meehan says the children enjoy selecting their own books to read.

"I encourage this freedom," she says. "They read what they want, how they want, with which dog they want. It helps with motivation. We found that with the participants, they experience an increase in confidence and motivation to read."

It's a great way for youngsters to get an early start on community involvement as well.

"A couple of parents pointed out the reason they wanted their kids to come was to instill in them the idea of volunteerism," Brown says. "I think the program helps the development of their empathy. They see how dogs react to their presence. I heard one kid ask about the donation box as he came in. 'Why are these dogs here?' 'Did they have a family before?' I feel like that's a part of the process of developing empathy."

This project grew from when Meehan was a kindergarten teacher earning her doctoral degree and studying with Professor Tunde Szecsi, program coordinator of the Department of Teacher Preparation Programs in FGCU's College of Education. Today, Meehan ('10, MPA; '20, Ed.D.) is Szecsi's colleague and interim program coordinator while her mentor is on sabbatical.

At first, a small group of children read to the dogs informally. Meehan, who has three dogs of her own – one adopted from Gulf Coast Humane Society – got



involved with her own students and some older students from the school. It was one of the older participants who built the bookshelf the readers still use today.

"I asked one little boy who was talking to a dog named Senior why he read to dogs and he said 'Dogs are great listeners.' I thought that was beautiful," Meehan says.

Next came a Facebook page for parents to sign up their children to take part. "The program exists so I thought it was good to use it as a research project," she says. "We can find out more about the successes, the challenges, get more people aware of it. We can give them feedback on what worked for us and what didn't. For me it's a very neat project. It's kids and dogs — my two favorites."

Gizmo appears spellbound as Wilhelmina Greer, 6, sits and reads him a story. Her father, Brian Greer, listens intently, too, holding his cell phone up so her mom, Amanda Tovar, who had to work and couldn't attend, can watch via Facetime as the first-grader at Gulf Elementary School in Cape Coral reads a story about George the dog.

"It's great," says her dad. "She practices reading and the dogs get attention. We all love it."

The Fleitas family attends the monthly sessions regularly. In fact, they are good friends with Chopper, a pit bull who had been at the shelter for four months. Nico, 5, is in kindergarten at St. Francis Xavier Catholic School in Fort Myers. His 7-year-old brother, Junior, attends second grade there.

"We come 'cause of the dogs," Nico says, looking up briefly from his "Wonders of America" book. "We like to read to them."



**Eager barking breaks out when youngsters and their parents arrive at Gulf Coast Humane Society.**

Their mother, Angela, agrees. "Junior doesn't like reading most of the time but he likes doing it here," she says. "They have more empathy toward the dogs now, too. And he really likes to read to Chopper."

Meehan says that she usually fills two groups on a Saturday and hopes to expand the program to other shelters so more children and dogs have a chance

to experience the joy of reading.

Assistant Professor Nate Turcotte says, "I look at schools and see silos of learning. You go to reading class and learn to read 270 days a year without recognizing that that's not how learning happens. It extends beyond the school. This is a neat program that's engaging the kids, getting them interested in reading. They pick their own book, pick their own dog, do whatever they want. Add in a parent and you have an extra layer of family. It's a really neat collective learning experience."

Helping to remove the stigma about shelter dogs is another plus, Meehan says the research has shown. "They see firsthand all kinds of dogs, even pit bulls, are really nice. And it supports an understanding of what shelters do."

Turcotte adds, "These are perfectly fine dogs. This encourages people to adopt, not shop. I think the shelter appreciates people coming in and spreading awareness. And

it's meaningful to the dogs. They are more socialized and they are better when they are adopted."

After the hourlong session, shelter volunteers bring Chopper out to the front lawn where the children pet him.

It's hard to say who is happier as the Fleitas boys stroke Chopper's soft black fur and he snuggles close to them, tail thumping, a doggy smile on his grey muzzle as he lands kisses on their cheeks and ears.

A week later, the Reading with Dogs Facebook page announces that, after 132 days at the Fort Myers shelter, Chopper has a family of his own. ■

## CUTTING EDGE

# Art & sole: Marketing major gains foothold with custom-painted athletic shoes

BY ALEXA GRUBER

**C**USTOM-PAINTED sneakers are all the rage. You see them on TikTok, and on the FGCU campus, where even one of the women's basketball players owns a pair.

If you've wondered where you can order your own custom-decorated shoes, check out Vinnys Customs.

A New Jersey native, Vincent Lamanna is a junior marketing major at FGCU with a unique shoe business. Using his self-taught hand-painting and airbrushing skills, he has been crafting made-to-order shoe designs for a year and a half.

"My gift is something that I can share and make people smile," Lamanna says.

Using Instagram as his marketplace, Vinnys Customs has attracted a clientele that includes college athletes such as former FGCU basketball superstar Kierstan Bell to celebrities such as DJ Steve Aoki.

One of his first customers, Chestnut Hill College golfer P.J. Schulte, says his pair of Vinnys Customs don't go unnoticed on the course.

"Being a college golfer, not many other kids are pulling up in custom shoes, so I get asked about my shoes every round I play," Schulte says. "I always refer them to Vinnys Customs. I think Vince could make a real business out of what he's doing, and I'll be a customer for as

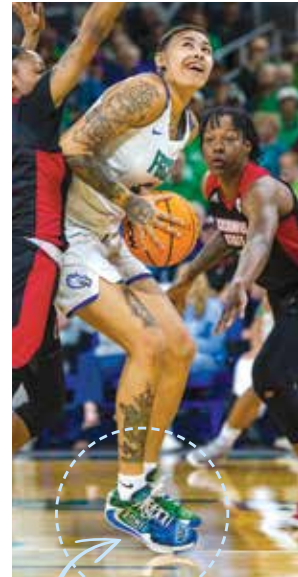
long as I'm playing golf."

If you want your own pair, contact Lamanna via Instagram and collaborate on what you want your design to look like. Buy the style and size shoes you want painted, then ship them to Lamanna. Depending on the intricacy of the design, a pair of Vinnys Customs can range from \$70 to more than \$500.

Juan Zavala and his wife, Pilar Guzman Zavala, are small-business owners in Miami who are big fans of Vinnys Customs. Juan was scrolling through

Instagram and spotted a local athlete with a striking pair of Vinnys Customs.

He ordered the first pair as a present for his wife and was so impressed by the professionalism and quality of work, he immediately ordered a pair for himself.



Zavala notes that working with Lamanna is a "very simple and seamless process. Sometimes people are artistic and creative, but they don't know how to handle customers. Vinny has what it takes."

Growing up in a family that owned a small business, Lamanna has learned how to run his own with integrity and consistency.

Taking advantage

of the Runway Program, part of FGCU's entrepreneurship initiative for students and alumni, has helped Lamanna sharpen those skills, as well as learn and implement more ways to grow his business.

Scott Kelly, Runway Program director and Lamanna's mentor, says Lamanna has "turned his skills and talent into a viable, revenue-generating business."

"He was awarded \$10,777 from the Runway Program in spring 2021," Kelly says. "Vinny has done a great job using the tools, theory and skills learned in our programs to launch and grow his business."

— *Alexa Gruber is a senior communication major and University Marketing & Communications division intern. Students interested in an internship can contact Keith Gibson at [kgibson@fgcu.edu](mailto:kgibson@fgcu.edu).*

**Vincent Lamanna shows off his creations. Our own Kierstan Bell (above) wears a pair on the courts.**







ON THE  
**WEB**  
FGCU360.com  
SEE THEIR  
VIDEO

COMMUNITY

## Helping the homeless, one person at a time

BY NINA BARBERO

**A** DECADE AGO, 8-year-old Will Constantine asked his mother, Kerry, how people without houses stay warm in the winter.

“That’s how it all started,” says friend Tara Geissinger. “She helped him gather some blankets from their house and went downtown and handed them out to homeless people around Lions Park. She recognized the need was out there, and

so we banded together and created this group.”

“This group” is Blankets & Blessings, a nonprofit founded by Constantine, Geissinger and a few other Fort Myers parents who wanted their then-



elementary-aged children to “get some perspective,” Geissinger says.

“We grow up sometimes sheltered from some of the aspects in our community and we wanted our kids to have that foundation and be aware of how fragile that can be,” Geissinger says.

Blankets & Blessings collects blankets, toiletries and bug repellent they distribute to homeless people in places such as the Sunday dinners offered by Citygate Ministries in downtown Fort Myers.

I thought it was a really great idea.”

The students collected toiletries, jackets and other items for the nonprofit. They also attended the Sunday dinners offered by Citygate Ministries, often bringing water, lemonade or baked goods to be served, and talking with dinner attendees.

The project was eye-opening for Berrette, a Fort Myers native who says she generally saw 40 to 50 people attend the dinners, with closer to 70 on colder days.

“People have this idea about the homeless

lemonade] and drank four or five cups, and he explained that 10 minutes before the dinner, he had passed out. He couldn’t afford insulin to regulate his sugar, so he was getting his sugar from the lemonade.”

Berrette says even after the class ended in December, several group members still volunteer at the Sunday dinners. The dinners include home-cooked meals from volunteers, warm food from local restaurants and recently expired baked goods from Starbucks and Publix.

**“People have this idea about the homeless that they’re drug addicts who spent away their money so now they’re living on the street, but I heard so many stories and got to really know the people there, and they all are really just going through a tough time. It can really just happen to anyone.”**

DOMINIQUE BERRETTE, FGCU HONORS COLLEGE STUDENT

“Our goal was to work in the background,” she says. “We partner with organizations that are already out there on the ground doing outreach.”

In fall 2021, five FGCU Honors College students got to see the importance of the group’s work when they volunteered for Blankets & Blessings as part of an Honors Foundations of Civic Engagement class.

The students included two of Tara Geissinger’s children, Jack and Kaya, along with Ben Styra, Katelin Hand and Dominique Berrette.

As part of the class, students volunteer for a community project.

“We look through the different aspects of volunteering and talking not only about how to volunteer, but what types of projects can really help the community,” says Berrette, a sophomore majoring in psychology who says she’d like to work in public health.

“The homeless population has been increasing a lot with COVID-19,” Berrette says, “so when I saw Kaya’s discussion post talking about Blankets & Blessings,

that they’re drug addicts who spent away their money so now they’re living on the street,” Berrette says, “but I heard so many stories and got to really know the people there, and they all are really just going through a tough time. It can really just happen to anyone.”

Geissinger says she’s noticed events such as the Sunday dinners grow in attendance in recent years.

“There are a lot of families out there living paycheck to paycheck,” she says. “You have things like a job loss or an illness that you don’t recover from as quickly as you thought you would and you start incurring medical bills. Things like that can knock a family right out from their housing.”

One person who stuck out to Berrette was a diabetic man who told her he can’t afford insulin.

“He kept coming up for refills [of

Geissinger says she is glad the students got to speak with the homeless through the project.

“Until you get face-to-face with people who are living on the streets, it’s easy to make assumptions about them and their choices,” she says. “I think the kids did a really good job of plugging in and talking to people.”

While Blankets & Blessings isn’t looking for volunteers, Geissinger says it accepts donations of clean blankets and toiletries at The Golf & Casual Shop off of U.S. 41 in Fort Myers, which is owned by a Blankets & Blessings volunteer.

In the 10 years since Geissinger, Constantine and a handful of other parents launched Blankets & Blessings, Geissinger is proud of the difference it has made in individual lives.

“When you dig into the homelessness issues Lee County has, it’s overwhelming. There’s a lot of bureaucracy,” she says, “and little organizations like us with no overhead, we’re agile. We can jump in between the hoops and really make a huge difference for individual people and families.” ■

(L-R) Jack Geissinger, Katelin Hand, Dominique Berrette, Kaya Geissinger, Benjamin Styra, Nathan Spoor lend a hand to the less fortunate.

## STUDENT SUCCESS

## Graduate student finds career choice came naturally

BY RICK WEBER

**G**ROWING UP IN rural Rhode Island, Ella Guedouar lived on a dead-end road with hundreds of wooded acres that seemed to call her name.

She knew the woods like the back of her hand and treasured all four versions of it as it changed with the seasons: the “tree graveyard” where she was guaranteed to find turkeys and a small pond with weird red mushrooms growing on the trees by the banks. The late summers would yield what seemed like millions of tiny Eastern American toads. She would grab her biggest bucket and collect as many as she could find. Her neighbor noticed, and every time he cut the grass, he would bring her the biggest toad he could find.

She spent a lot of time just watching animals: the deer that crossed through the playground of her backyard; the coyotes that ate the food her neighbors would leave out; and the birds eating the seeds that her dad had just planted in the lawn.

There came a time when she wanted to run away and live in the woods, bringing only a bag of chocolate chips with her. Wildlife and nature were that captivating to her.

“I used to mistake my love for animals as just a hobby and wanted to pursue something that seemed more mysterious and difficult than ‘just animals,’ ” she says. “As a kid, when you think of a career that deals with animals, your options are limited to a zookeeper and a vet. There wasn’t much discovery involved. Or so I thought.”

After her family moved to Florida in 2018, she entered FGCU as a dual-enrolled student at age 16 – meaning she was still in high school but attending college and earning college credits. She chose to major in psychology to study



ON THE  
**WEB**  
FGCU360.com  
BOBCATS ON  
CAMPUS

PHOTOS COURTESY



the human mind and how it functioned. What drives people to do what they do? She wanted to understand.

While taking the required course, Foundations of Civic Engagement, she decided to do something untraditional – and uncomfortable. Instead of choosing a project related to her major, she joined the pre-vet students in volunteering at Octagon Wildlife Sanctuary in Punta Gorda. She figured she might as well explore something before she committed to psychology for the rest of her career.

She immediately fell in love with the animals and continued volunteering there for two years after the project concluded. She began to question the original path she had set for herself. She scheduled a meeting with Associate Professor Billy Gunnels, director of Scholarly Innovation and Student Research, to help her gain research experience in her final year before graduating.

Her plan was to go big: She wanted to create her own project and write it up to submit and defend as her honors thesis. She got the idea from her Human Memory and Cognition class, where a vervet monkey was used as an example for language use in animals. And a vervet monkey named Ross happened to be at Octagon.

Gunnels told her about ethology, or animal behavior, and that was an a-ha moment. She realized it combined the two things she loved the most: psychology and animals. When she learned that Gunnels was an ethologist, she pestered him to take her on as his research student.

“I said, ‘No, I don’t think that’s going to happen,’” Gunnels says. “She wanted to work on a project with this vervet monkey. I was sort of resistant, and she kept coming back with more information, better information and clearer information to make the argument that this was a good

idea and she should do it.

“I’ve noticed a lot of students who have passion. And then I’ve noticed a lot of other students who are very inquisitive. Ella combines those two things with a third trait that separates her: She gets things done. There are a number of students who are really good at asking questions, and that’s great. And there are a lot of students who are very enthusiastic. Ella was able to take both of those things and combine it with the ability to start something and see it through to completion. It was really impressive.”

Guedouar designed a study looking at innate referential language recognition in a socially isolated monkey using alarm calls. After a year of hard work, she successfully defended her honors thesis just before graduating, and presented her research at an international conference hosted by the Animal Behavior Society. Her paper is now in the process of publication in the first edition of the Florida Undergraduate Research Journal.

She plans to complete her master’s in environmental science in 2023, then do

her doctoral research in Africa, focusing on human-wildlife interactions or interspecies interactions. Her main goal is to connect all of her research back to conservation and take every opportunity to advocate for wildlife.

“Animals are so much more complex than we think,” she says. “Like us, there are reasons they do the things they do, and I want to figure out why or how. Animals can’t tell us what they’re doing or why they are doing something, which makes this field that much more difficult. They are so diverse and mysterious and there is so much left to discover, but for some animals, it’s a race to save them from us.

“We tend to heavily focus on cute, fuzzy animals like pandas and lions and forget about or even despise the slimy, scaly or small animals, regardless of how important they may be to the functioning of an ecosystem. A lot of people don’t see first-hand the impact that their choices or lifestyles have on the environment, like the damage pollution does to our sea life or the wildlife that gets evicted because we want to build houses somewhere.” ■



**LEFT: Ella Guedouar handles a rattlesnake while researching its behavior on campus.**

**While volunteering in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe on a lion conservation and research project in July, 2021, Guedouar checks an anesthetized lion.**



# ARTS



FGCU PHOTO



My students are now becoming professors and helping the next group of students. This historical cycle continues in a natural manner, which brings me great satisfaction.

MICHAEL BARON, HEAD OF KEYBOARD STUDIES



## PIANO

### The keys to success

Bower School's 15-year-old piano program strikes a chord with aspiring artists and generous donors

BY DREW STERWALD

**B**USTS OF BEETHOVEN AND MOZART watch over Michael Baron in his second-floor office in FGCU's Music Building. Franz Liszt's hazel eyes gaze over the composer's shoulder from a large print on a wall the Romantic-era rock star shares with framed copies of masterwork scores by other classical music icons.

"I'm surrounded by the great masters every day and by rising young musicians who are so talented and eager to learn and get better," Baron marvels. "It's a wonderful place to be."

His current and former proteges say the same about Baron's piano studio, a carefully curated and cared-for collection of gifted musicians who have been achieving accolades in competition and advancing to elite graduate programs for 15 years now. This year alone, one of his current students won a state competition FGCU has dominated year after year against bigger and longer-established schools. Three others swept the top awards last fall in the Parnassus International Piano Competition for Caribbean and Central and South American pianists.

Undergraduate success is a just a prelude for some high-achieving alumni of the program, which Baron developed in 2006 as one of the three faculty founders of the Bower School of Music ("& the Arts" was added to the name just a few years ago). Priscila Navarro, whose 2013 solo recital at New York's Carnegie Hall helped put FGCU on the classical music map, recently completed her doctorate at the University of Miami; she continues to win international competitions and has scaled such heights that she's now being invited to judge some of those same events. In March, she returned to Carnegie Hall to perform a program of piano duets with Baron, selections from an album of French music they recorded together last fall at FGCU.



"I'm proud that we're pulling above our weight in the piano area," Baron said. "We're surrounded by much, much bigger schools and we seem to be doing a lot more. The trajectory has been quite extraordinary."

As the Bower School of Music & the Arts looks to chart its next stage of donor-supported growth that potentially includes graduate programs and new facilities (*see story on page 40*), Baron and his students, alumni and supporters reflected on keys to the piano program's success. Recurring themes: Baron's exceptional ear for talent and his dedication to recruiting and nurturing promising young artists; a school culture that encourages hard work, collaboration and career preparation; strong donor support that ensures top-quality Steinway instruments, life-changing scholarships and opportunities to travel for performance and competition.

South Korean native Hyae-jin Hwang, first met Baron when she was a high school exchange student in Colorado and he was a tenured associate professor at Colorado Mesa University in Grand Junction. She studied with him until she had to return home, but a few years later Baron reached out and encouraged her to study with him again in his then-new role as Myra and Van Williams Distinguished Professor of Music and head of keyboard studies at FGCU.

"Dr. Baron guided me to experience many of the different paths a pianist could possibly take and to be connected with more people outside of school to extend my perspective and network," says Hwang, who's now on the piano faculty at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. "Through the experiences I had during my time at FGCU, I became a more experienced and versatile performer. This not only helped me to make a successful transition to my graduate school but also built my lifelong skills."

Now that the student has become the teacher, Hwang says she tries to emulate Baron in the way she connects with and cares for his pupils, many of whom



**Hyae-jin Hwang**

come from humble backgrounds halfway across the world.

One of his current undergraduates, junior Michelle Wijaya, became FGCU's first student from Indonesia after sending Baron an audition video. In addition to helping her adapt to a new country and way of living as a college student in America, he connected her with financial assistance that was critical to her ability to study abroad. She has attended FGCU with support from the Marc and Babette Weksler Music Scholarship among others.

"He cares about each and every one of us, and not only in matters of the

piano," says Wijaya, who this year won first place at the state level of the annual Music Teachers National Association competition, continuing a track record of FGCU domination in the contest for pianists up to 26 years old. "He gives honest feedback. I've known some teachers who are too nice and some who are too harsh. He's in between, and I like that."

"Chill" is how the 20-year-old described the harmonious vibe among her peers, in contrast to the cutthroat competitive culture and music-is-everything mindset of some conservatories. Performance majors don't just learn the challenging repertoire of a concert pianist.

Outside of their weekly lessons and hours of practicing, they are coached in behind-the-scenes concerns such as wardrobe choices, stress management and interviewing, and also encouraged to provide piano accompaniment to other Bower instrumentalists. Those on the teaching track also tutor students from area schools.

"I feel tremendous responsibility that my students can earn a living," Baron says. "If they're going to teach in the public school system, they'd better be good. They're not just going to be playing Carnegie Hall or winning international competitions."

Her classmates take their keyboard studies seriously, Wijaya says, but also enjoy the freedom to explore other academic and personal interests. With its international demographic, the 14-16 students in the limited-access piano program each year gain familiarity with diverse cultures and experiences that broaden their worldview — an asset

whether they aim for a concert career or a teaching position. As the saying goes, music is an international language.

Baron's own studies and performances are grounded in Europe and Asia as well as the United States; he earned his doctorate



**Arturo Fernandez, Indiana University Associate Professor Roberto Plano, Victoria Paulino and Michelle Wijaya performed in the professor's masterclass at Indiana University in 2020.**

**RIGHT: Priscila Navarro at FGCU in 2012.**





in piano performance from The Ohio State University and studied extensively in Italy. In addition to teaching and judging competitions in person and online, he performs more than 40 concerts a year around the world, appearances usually accompanied by master classes with promising young pianists that often yield recruiting prospects.

Baron has tuned his pitch successfully but not exclusively to South America. Victoria Paulino de Souza, who led FGCU's clean sweep in last fall's Parnassus International Piano Competition, hails from Brazil; her Peruvian classmates Jair Aaron Zacarias Malqui and Arturo Manuel Fernandez placed second and third in the contest.

Baron's highest-achieving alum and his first pupil from South America was Peruvian Navarro, whom he discovered through networking at a summer music festival. A 15-year-old student at the National Conservatory of Music in Lima at the time, her recordings impressed him enough to get her a full scholarship to FGCU.

"I immediately recognized the tremendous potential she had," Baron recalls. "She turned out to be, as everyone knows, a phenomenal talent."

Longtime Bower supporter Myra Williams has seen that happen time and again, and it's one of the reasons she knows her gifts for scholarships, programming and other vital needs are benefiting the school and its students. A former piano student herself, she's even had a few sessions with the maestro.

"He's very shrewd in his judgment of students. Sometimes he selects students who don't have great preparation, but they bloom under him," Williams says. "He goes out of his way to nurture them. When COVID hit, he was driving students to Miami to get flights to go back to their home countries if they could, or finding ways for them to stay here. He couldn't be a more caring professor."

Or a better role model for generations of aspiring Eagle artists. Now 27, Navarro sees herself as an encouraging beacon for other young pianists to follow to FGCU and aim even higher than she did.

# A R T S

The mentor-apprentice model that she and other students have experienced with Baron is grounded in hundreds of years of musical tradition and is an important legacy for the program, according to Navarro.

“It’s almost miraculous for someone from my background and social-economic status to have come as far as I did,” she says in an interview from Miami, where she lives and teaches while continuing to travel for concerts and contests like the Leeds International Piano Competition in England, where she placed in the top 10 last year. “It’s one of the most historically important competitions, with people from the top schools in London, Paris, Vienna — the top pianists of this generation. Here’s me, who went to FGCU, a young school with a small music faculty. I’m really proud and thankful that I’ve been able to have this kind of unique experience.”

In what amounts to the equivalent of a musical coda, a concluding passage that echoes a previous theme, the student is now emulating the master. As artistic director of the Parnassus Music Society in Peru, she is helping shape the futures of other gifted Latin-American musicians. “It’s my initiative to continue in my way what Dr. Baron does,” Navarro says. “It’s important not only to practice and work as hard as you can, but to have opportunities to showcase your talents and meet exceptional piano teachers throughout the world.”

Baron couldn’t be more proud.

“I’m getting old enough now that things are coming full circle,” he says. “My students are now becoming professors and helping the next group of students. This historical cycle continues in a natural manner, which brings me great satisfaction.” ■

## LISTEN UP

Michael Baron and Priscila Navarro’s “French Music For Piano Duo” can be purchased as a CD online at **MSRCD.com** (catalog number MS1732) or **Amazon.com**, or heard on most streaming services.



Professor Michael Baron and his former student, Priscila Navarro, at Carnegie Hall this spring.



## UPDATES:

### FACULTY, ALUMNI TEAM UP ON 'ONE ISLAND'

Florida Gulf Coast University faculty and alumni are collaborating on an original work that's part installation, part theatrical performance and will be presented on campus in June in the Wasmer Art Gallery in the Arts Complex.

"One Island" is a production of Ghostbird Theatre Company, which was founded in 2012 by James Brock, professor in the Department of Language & Literature, and alumni Brittney Brady ('11, English and Theatre), Katelyn Gravel ('12, English and Theatre) and Philip Heubeck ('10, Art). They partnered with other artists, performers, musicians and writers during the global pandemic to reflect on "themselves, their place, their health and their spiritual priorities," according to the company's website.

Ghostbird received a \$10,000 National Endowment for the Arts grant to support the development and production of "One Island," along with grants from the Florida Division of Arts & Culture and the City of Fort Myers.

Performances are at 7:30 p.m. June 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12. Tickets are \$20 general admission or \$10 for students and can be purchased through the company's website, [ghostbirdtheatrecompany.org](http://ghostbirdtheatrecompany.org). The installation will remain on view for free through June 24. ■





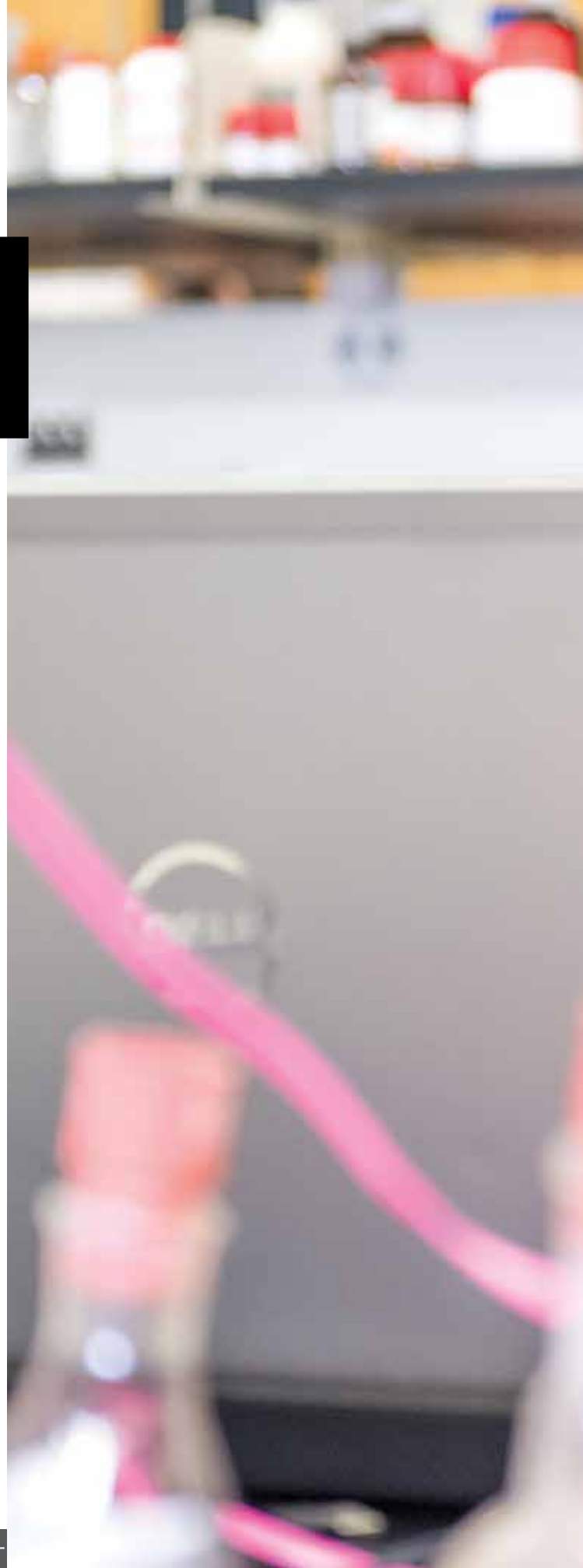
# BRIDGING THE STEM GAP

FGCU helping boost  
minority participation  
in engineering, sciences

**STEM is the future** – and the future has already arrived. Jobs in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) are projected to grow exponentially in the next decade. The facts are well known, collected and dissected by the STEM Education Coalition in Washington D.C., the National Academy of Sciences, the Pew Research Center, and others. All agree: Quality STEM education is key to growing the U.S. economy and vital to the country competing on the global market. But these same stats also expose the disturbing reality that diversity in STEM-related fields is sorely lacking.

**By KAREN BOOTH**

Photos by JAMES GRECO







**T**he Florida-Georgia Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation (FGLSAMP) aims to reverse the trend. The alliance's stated goal is "to assist universities and colleges in diversifying the nation's ... STEM workforce by increasing the number of STEM baccalaureate and graduate degrees awarded to populations historically underrepresented in these disciplines."

Composed of 14 Florida and two Georgia institutions, the Florida-Georgia program is one of more than 40 Louis Stokes alliances nationwide striving to do just that. Claude Villiers, professor of civil engineering in the U.A. Whitaker College of Engineering, came to FGCU in 2012, bringing the program with him.

As both an undergraduate and graduate student at Florida University and assistant professor at City College of New York, Villiers had some exposure to the program prior to arriving at FGCU. "I understood its benefits and wanted FGCU to be part of the program," says Villiers, who serves as its director.

The alliance is about students interacting with role models and bonding with other students who look like them and who face similar challenges. "It's the impact you can make on this group of students that is close to my heart," he says.

"I think of FGLSAMP as a bridge to help students transition from undergraduate education to graduate school," says Villiers, who estimates that the program has served a minimum of 10 students per year since its inception at FGCU. "This year, we have 17 students enrolled in the program. For the most part, once students engage with the program, they stick with it until graduation."

**PREVIOUS PAGE:** Jamie Gaitor working in the FGCU chemistry lab in 2017.

**RIGHT:** Engineering Professor Claude Villiers leads program to attract diverse students to STEM majors.

The criteria for student participation are straightforward. Students must major in a STEM field, have a GPA of 3.0, and be a U.S. citizen or permanent resident. "Ninety percent of participating students are minority students, but we are not exclusive," Villiers says. "If a non-minority student shows an interest and has the potential, we will accommodate that student."

Coordinated by Florida A&M University and funded by the National Science Foundation, the program at FGCU recently received a five-year extension to its grant, totaling \$100,000 (\$20,000 each year), allowing Villiers to continue to distribute stipends to eligible students.

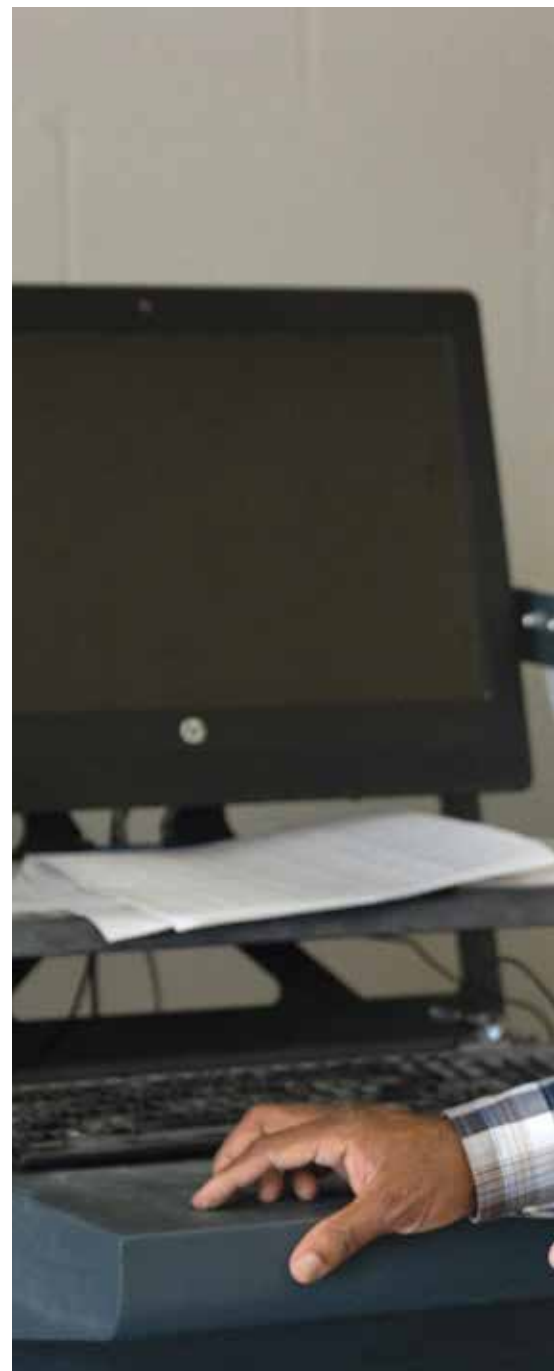
Funding eligibility depends on a student's activity. The average stipend is \$500. If, however, the student engages in undergraduate research and puts in significant lab hours, that student could be awarded as much as \$1,000 or perhaps a bit more. Students track their hours and submit funding requests.

"By participating in this program, students have the opportunity not only to better themselves, but also to better society," Villiers says, using their talents to fuel the economy not only of their local communities but far beyond.

"Without this program, many students could be left behind. Maybe they do not go to a conference or conduct research with faculty. Maybe they don't have the money for books or even gas," he says. How students use the stipend is up to each one.

The highlight of the program, he said, is the opportunity for students to conduct undergraduate research, but there are many others – attending conferences, having access to informative webinars, and networking with professionals in their field rank high on the list.

"As director," Villiers says, "I communicate these advantages to faculty in engineering and the arts and sciences. They, in turn, recommend students they believe would benefit from participation." Villiers then interviews students and assesses their interest and eligibility.



Here's how it works: A cohort of students, often from different disciplines, meet once a month to support each other and share information. "Sometimes students present their own research at these meetings," Villiers says. "Other times, we invite a guest speaker." Topics might include information on how to



choose and apply to graduate school and how to make an effective scientific presentation.

“The program prepares students for grad school, but another measure of success is the number of students who engage in undergraduate research, something they might otherwise not have done,” he says.

The program is named for civil rights attorney and advocate Louis Stokes, the first African American elected to Congress in the state of Ohio back in the 1970s. In 1992, Stokes was part of a congressional initiative focused on supporting underrepresented populations in pursuing undergraduate degrees in STEM fields.

Stokes served for 30 years. Judging from the feedback from FGCU graduates who have pursued – or are pursuing – a master’s or doctoral degree after participation in the program, the FGSLAMP has done its founder proud.

“What makes me most excited about the program,” says Villiers, “is the impact it makes on the students who go on to graduate school and have successful careers in the STEM fields. Many of these students might not even have considered STEM without their experience in FGSLAMP.”

## **Kelsey Sinclair, '18**

**B.S. Biology**

**Minors in mathematics  
and chemistry**

*University of South Florida*

*'19, M.S. Medical Sciences*

Sixteen-year-old Kelsey Sinclair defied the odds by completing high school and college within six years, thanks to FGCU’s dual enrollment program.

In 2014, Sinclair registered at FGCU as a high school junior and never looked back. After two years in the program, she earned her high school diploma while, at the same time, accumulating credits toward her bachelor’s degree. As a result, she was eligible to enroll in FGCU as a college junior, graduating with her bachelor’s degree in biology in 2018.

Make no mistake. That’s pretty heavy duty for a teenager, especially considering she also chose to participate in FGCU’s Florida-Georgia Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation (FGSLAMP) program, an experience she credits for motivating her to pursue research as a career.

From that auspicious beginning, Sinclair went on to earn her Master of Science in medical sciences from the University of South Florida. Now she is a research technician in computational biology at the University of Florida. Her objective is to earn her doctoral degree in engineering.

“My ultimate goal is research involving prosthetics,” Sinclair says. “I have the background in biology, math, and computer science, but to do what I want







From left to right: FGCU students Luis Angeles and Ana Avella, current participants in FGLSAMP, talk with Claude Villiers on campus.

to do, I need engineering, because to build prosthetics you need both building and programming skills.

“Prosthetics is a tough field. Everyone with a disability is different. It’s not one size fits all. Building a prosthetic takes many skills,” she says. “If, for example, you’re building an arm, you need to know the nerves in the body, how a hand moves, what the prosthetic arm needs to be able to lift things up, to be stable and to carry loads like a normal arm would.”

Sinclair describes herself as a problem solver. “I like things that are difficult. I like to think about the details – this specific person, this body, the size of this person. You don’t want the prosthetic to be too heavy or too small.” Analyzing each client’s needs and attending to myriad details she says is critical.

“I think it’s a really cool field to get into,” Sinclair says, although that might rightly be considered an understatement.

Building prosthetics and changing the lives of others is not only a cool field, but also one that feeds the soul of both maker and recipient. It doesn’t get much better than that.

## **Jamie Gaitor, '17**

### **Biology**

*Carnegie Mellon University*

*Ph.D. candidate, Chemistry*

FGLSAMP plants seeds – of inspiration, of ideas, of useful resources, of possibilities and opportunities. Participants in the Florida-Georgia Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation – aka FGLSAMP – need only be mindful that the day to act will come when the time is right.

For Jamie Gaitor ('17, Biology) the day to act came some three years after graduating from FGCU. It was then that he recalled learning about the prestigious GEM Fellowship while participating in the alliance program at his alma mater. The GEM Fellowship supports graduate students interested in research or other technical careers in industry or academia and, reasoned Gaitor, it was a perfect fit for him. Subsequently, he applied for and received the award, which includes,





Francesca Moloney is now an innovation engineer for NextEra Energy Resources.

among other things of value to a graduate student, a generous stipend.

As of this writing, Gaitor is halfway through the fourth year of his five-year Ph.D. program in chemistry at Carnegie Mellon University. “The [FGLSAMP] program definitely influenced my career path,” says Gaitor, who as a first-year and first-generation FGCU student had identified medicine as his goal. However, he says, “The regular meetings with other students similar to me, all of us learning about research together, bouncing ideas off each other ... the

experience was transformational.”

Gaitor credits both Associate Professor Arsalan Mirjafari, who teaches chemistry, and Villiers with being crucial to shaping his career path. Pondering his future, Gaitor says, “I could choose to do a post-doctoral program followed by a career in academia, run a research group, and mentor students while teaching. Or I could choose to work for an industrial company, maybe in a national lab as a staff scientist.”

Whatever path he chooses, he expresses gratitude for his FGCU mentors and the

FGLSAMP program for planting the seeds for success. One thing is clear. Whichever path he chooses, he is bound to make his alma mater proud.

## **Roshanak “Roshie” Gonzalez, ‘19**

### **Bioengineering**

*UC Berkeley*

*Ph.D. Candidate, Neuro-engineering*

Sometimes all it takes is a casual conversation and a wise listener with a simple suggestion. Take Roshanak “Roshie” Gonzalez (‘19,

Bioengineering). In conversation with Villiers, Gonzalez expressed an interest in research as a career option. Villiers took it from there and invited her to take part in FGLSAMP at FGCU. As director of the program, he knew only too well its value.

That simple suggestion led Gonzalez to work in Associate Professor Jorge

supportive of each other.”

Gonzalez, who is half Iranian and half Cuban, said that together with her student cohort and with the guidance of educators and professionals, the enrichment programs, and undergraduate research presentations, she has never looked back.

Gonzalez’ focus on movement

is an innovation engineer for NextEra Energy Resources, “...the largest solar and wind provider in the nation,” says Moloney.

She is a member of a Juno Beach company’s team of technicians focused on developing sustainable solutions to the inevitable challenges central to the operation of electric vehicles.

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**“I definitely would not be in the field I’m in now without my participation in FGLSAMP and the encouragement and support of the engineering faculty at FGCU.**

**Our professors were invested in us. FGCU was family.”**

FRANCESCA MOLONEY, '14, INNOVATION ENGINEER

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Torres’ bioengineering lab, where she conducted research involved in detecting toxins in the air and identifying their specific chemical properties, a study originally funded by the Department of Defense.

After graduation, Gonzalez secured a prestigious two-year post-baccalaureate program with the National Institute of Health where she worked as a full-time researcher in the National Eye Institute’s Vision Lab, an experience that further fueled her interest in research as her calling.

Today, Gonzalez is a candidate for her Ph.D. at the University of California, Berkeley, where she is specializing in neuro-engineering. “The single most pivotal factor to my being at Berkeley was my participation in the FGLSAMP,” she says. “I would not have been involved in undergraduate research until my senior year, but I started as a sophomore, meeting regularly with a small group of students in the same boat as I’m in; we were all minorities, all very

disorders took shape early in life as she watched her mother, paralyzed from the waist down since the age of two, exhibit such grace and courage despite her physical challenges. “Over the years, I’ve seen a lot of cool technology involving the brain, which controls everything else,” says Gonzalez, who wondered what the science of neuro-engineering might have in store for people who, like her mother, struggled with limited movement. To that end, Gonzalez envisions a career in either neuro-engineering research or education.

### **Francesca Moloney '14 B.S. Civil Engineering**

*University of South Florida  
'19, Ph.D. Mechanical Engineering*

Francesca Moloney harbored no secret desire to pursue a Ph.D. or even a master’s degree. In fact, when asked, the first-generation student’s answer was a definitive “no.”

Fast forward eight years. Moloney

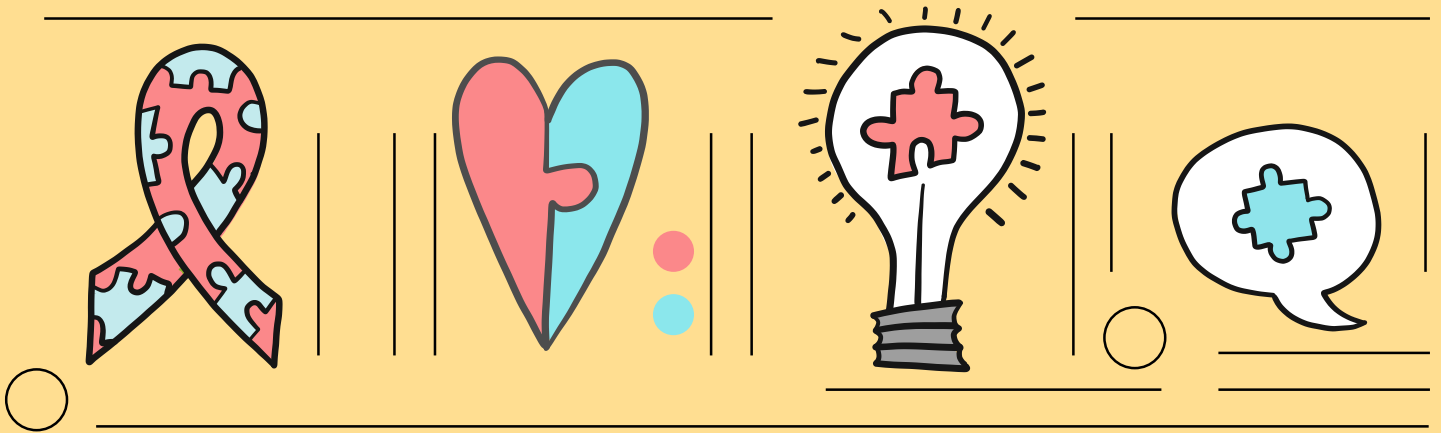
Among many issues, the team looks at innovating ways to increase battery storage, enhance renewable energy sources, and build a nationwide, sustainable infrastructure to serve private and commercial needs.

Needless to say, Moloney’s definitive “no” morphed into an enthusiastic “yes,” prompted by her participation in the Florida-Georgia Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation (FGLSAMP) while in her junior year at FGCU. Immediately following graduation, Moloney enrolled in a five-year Ph.D. program at the University of South Florida. Specializing in mechanical engineering, she earned her degree in 2019.

“My passion has always been solar and renewable energy,” Moloney says. “This is basically my dream job. If it wasn’t for supportive professors like Dr. Villiers and support from the FGLSAMP scholarship program, I would not be where I am today,” she says.

“FGCU was family.” ■





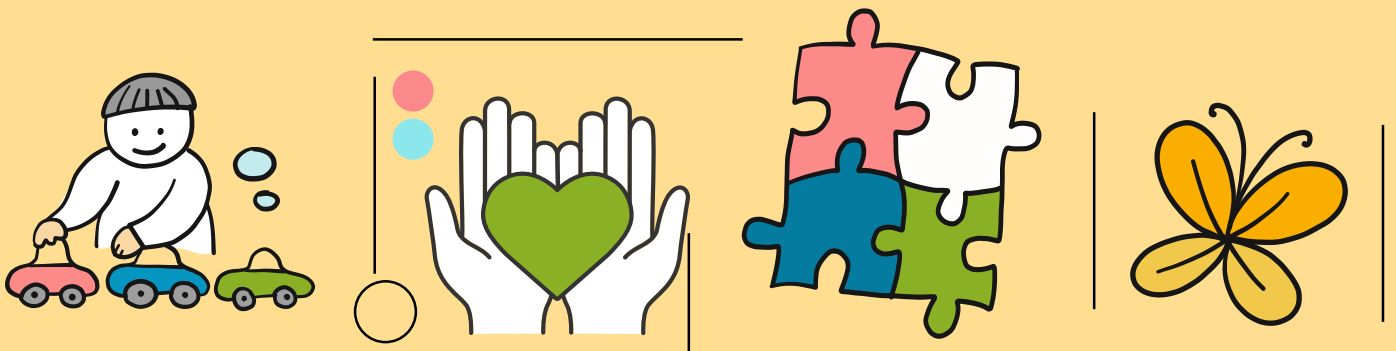
**CONNECTING THE**

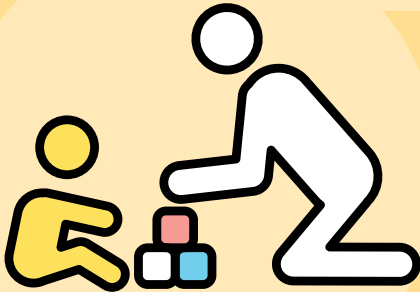
# AUTISM

**COMMUNITY**

FGCU is developing as a regional hub for innovative programs and training professionals to fill the chasm in services for families.

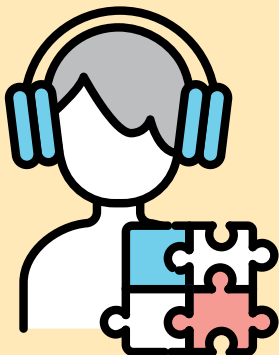
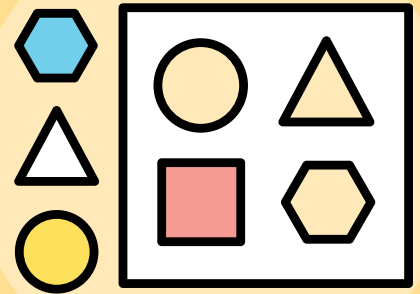
**BY DREW STERWALD**





**About 1 in 44 children**  
has been identified with autism  
spectrum disorder (ASD).

1 in 6 (17%) children aged 3-17  
years **were diagnosed with**  
**developmental disability.**



ASD is more than **4 times**  
**more common among**  
**boys** than girls.



# W

hen Annemarie Connor utters the phrase “our college students with autism” in conversation, it usually elicits a look that says, “Wait – what? College students with autism?”

At the time she joined Florida Gulf Coast University’s occupational therapy faculty in 2017, she says Adaptive Services had 42 or so students who identified as having autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and requested accommodations. This school year, the number is 101.

This growing campus population reflects a wider trend. Nationally, the prevalence of autism has skyrocketed from one child in 150 in 2000 to one in 44 last year, according to Centers for Disease Control & Prevention statistics. “A good portion of why that is, is that we’re getting better at diagnosing individuals, particularly those who have autism but have average to above-average IQ,” Connor explains. “We’re understanding people’s needs better.”

But society is not keeping up with the need for more resources for families grappling with the developmental disorder, which ranges widely in severity and can be diagnosed within the first two years of a child’s life – but often isn’t until much later. Services lag far behind the mounting need in many communities, including Southwest Florida.

## Filling the gap

All these factors, along with research Connor already was conducting when she arrived here, fueled creation of FGCU’s Community Autism Network (CAN) a year ago. The multidisciplinary initiative aims to turn evidence-based research into educational and clinical models that can

help fill the chasm in community resources — especially for those aging out of school system programs and into adulthood, the workforce and independent living. With community partners, CAN also brings together practitioners and families for health and wellness events such as therapeutic playgroups and life skills training.

“FGCU has this potential to be a hub for autism,”

Connor says. “We can be generating new programs, testing their validity, and in the next phase pushing them out in the community. Not only is FGCU prioritizing this, but our community is saying, ‘Yes, we want this.’”

What started as a grassroots effort

to involve faculty and students from strategic disciplines in her autism intervention research has gained endorsement from university leadership, institutional seed funding and the backing of community philanthropists. Shawn Felton, interim dean for Marieb College of Health & Human Services as well as executive vice president for Academic Affairs, calls it “the right thing to do” and sees autism as another field of excellence that FGCU can develop as an institution.

“They are building something that can make an indelible impact,” Felton says of CAN. “Their motivation and work really demonstrate the spirit of FGCU from day one: You roll up your sleeves and get the job done. They recognized a huge void in Southwest Florida and have been really trying to connect all the services.”

Already, CAN’s efforts through teaching, scholarship and service have yielded results:

- ▶ 250-plus hours of group interventions, including training and educational opportunities for members of the autism community, service providers, family members, faculty and students
- ▶ 18 funded FGCU student researchers and five peer-reviewed articles
- ▶ More than \$1.4 million in grants and donations, including \$1 million from the Golisano Foundation
- ▶ Multiple news features about programs such as Putting Along the Spectrum, which provided young adults with autism the skills to help them gain comfort and confidence on a golf course

Connor’s and CAN’s commitment to improving resources for the community inspired Theresa Lemieux to get on board as an advocate as well as a donor after participating in one of the network’s programs. The retired schoolteacher has a 21-year-old son with autism and worries how he will live independently; her daughter also has youngsters diagnosed on the spectrum, so Lemieux sees a wide range of need.

“I could see the passion Annemarie had was very much like the passion I have about how little there is in the area and how much the community needs to be aware that more providers and services need to come to this area,” Lemieux says. “No one is prepared. It’s thrown everyone for a loop.”

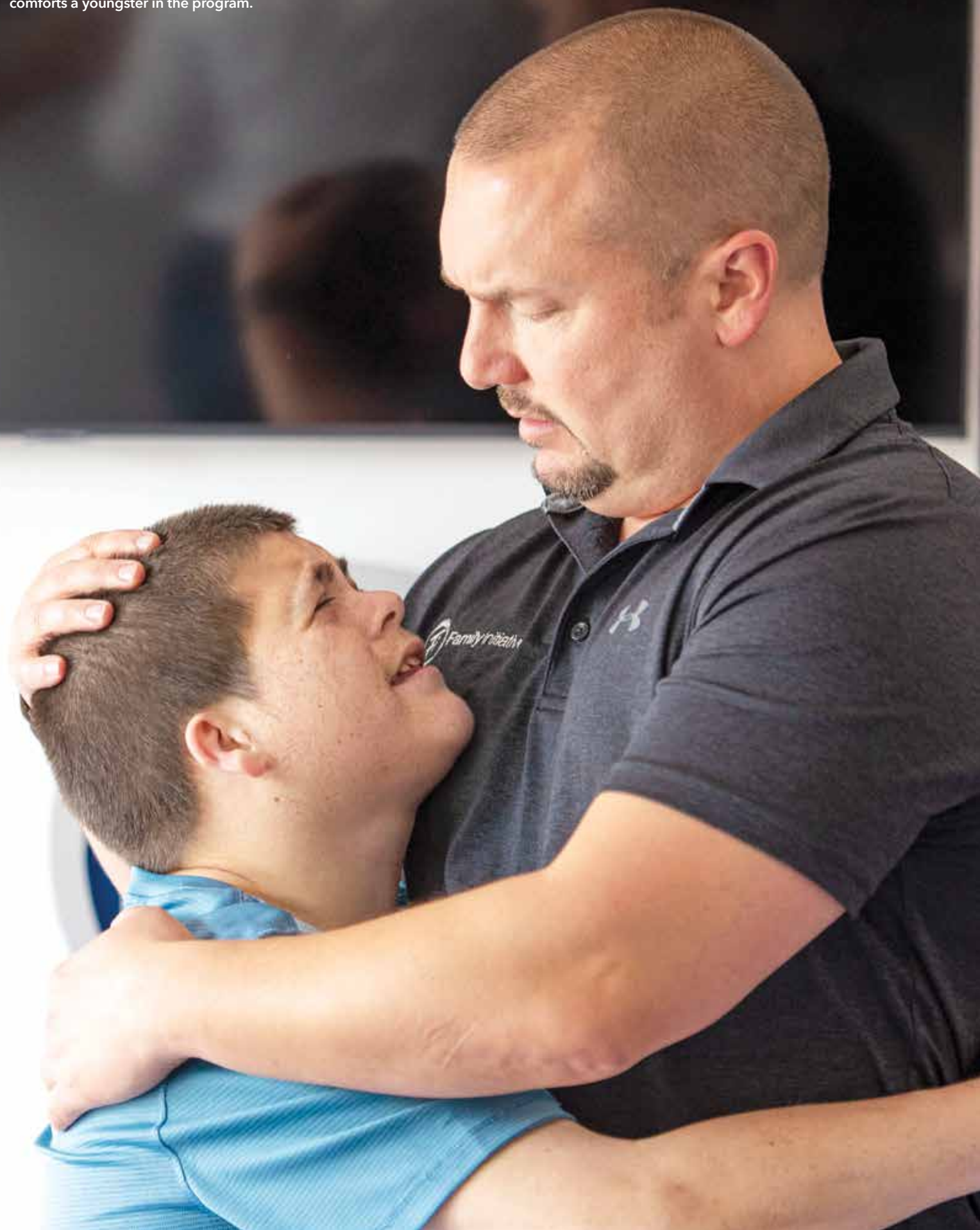
## The path to becoming a hub

The Community Autism Network is relatively new at FGCU, but the university is not new to the field of autism syndrome disorder. This spring, FGCU’s Promising Pathways autism conference celebrated its



Annemarie Connor

David Brown, president of Family Initiative, comforts a youngster in the program.





# AUTISM

## FACTS:

- ▶ **AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD)** is a developmental disability that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges.
- ▶ Diagnosing ASD can be difficult because there is no medical test for it. Doctors look at the child's behavior and development to make a diagnosis.
- ▶ There is currently no cure for ASD. However, research shows that early intervention treatment services can improve a child's development.



YEAR	PREVALENCE*
2000	6.7
2002	6.6
2004	8.0
2006	9.0
2008	11.3
2010	14.7
2012	14.5
2014	16.8
2016	18.5
2018	23.0

\* COMBINED PREVALENCE PER 1,000 CHILDREN (RANGE ACROSS ADDM SITES)

15th anniversary, drawing a crowd to hear returning keynote speaker Temple Grandin, likely the most well-known and most influential individual in the autism community.

The annual gathering is held in April, which has been earmarked as a month to raise autism awareness since the 1970s. Despite five decades of educational efforts, the public still struggles to understand autism and the vast need



**Temple Grandin**

for more resources and research. Autism is a developmental disability that can cause significant social and communication challenges as well as behavioral issues such as repetitive activities or

resistance to changes in routine. The learning, thinking and problem-solving abilities of people on the spectrum can range from gifted to severely challenged, according to the CDC's description. Connor's research and CAN's mission focus on higher-functioning adolescents and young adults, an underserved group

**ABOVE: Family Initiative Program Manager and FGCU alum Cora Romero (center) spending time with some of the teens at Teen Hangout Group.**

**RIGHT: The Family Initiative Center creates a non-stressful sensory environment for therapy and socializing.**

within an underserved population. Less than a third of individuals with ASD have intellectual disabilities, and 69% have average or above-average IQs. Yet they can founder without the resources of school system programs and clinical services as they transition to adulthood.

"We're looking for ways to help individuals who have great potential to engage in independent living and careers but are struggling because of the social challenges of autism," she says. "Only 39% of individuals with autism who go to college graduate, and it's because of social aspects and mental health issues related to that."

Connor describes it as a cycle: Social anxiety prevents students with autism from engaging in the classroom and in campus life; this isolation spurs depression; depression lowers motivation to learn and often leads to dropping out. Mental and physical health have long





been accepted as critical to overall student success — even when autism is not a factor.

To help break that cycle, CAN has developed initiatives like Assistive Soft Skills and Employment Training (ASSET). The 13-session program focuses on communication, critical thinking, networking and psychological wellness among other skills.

“Our data consistently shows improvement in social confidence and functioning and confidence in applying those skills in work-based settings,” says Connor of ASSET’s results.

Success is partly due to a multidisciplinary approach that brings together faculty and students in social work, occupational therapy, education, psychology, counseling and rehabilitation science. That’s a critical lesson for FGCU’s practitioners-in-training, who already are using the ASSET manual to help service providers off-campus implement the program.

“Autism is complex, people are complex, human behavior is complex and there is such variety with ASD diagnosis,” Connor explains. “More often than not, for the best services to occur you need to be interfacing with colleagues from other disciplines. That results in the best care, and that’s what we’re modeling here.”

### Creating Club CAN

Alice Norwood, a junior social work major with autism, completed ASSET and another CAN program that delves into getting and keeping a job. She describes her autism, diagnosed in 2020 when she was 18, as mostly a social impairment. Sometimes, she finds it difficult to set boundaries with others and to recognize them in others, she says.

“I struggle to communicate effectively and appropriately sometimes,” Norwood says. “I struggle with fitting in, but I have actually found a lot of confidence. I’ve told my closest friends that I’m on the spectrum, and it doesn’t faze them at all.”

Norwood made such an impression on the CAN team that she was invited to join as an undergraduate researcher and help graduate students run the programs. She’s also helping them develop Club CAN, a drop-in autism-friendly space on campus where students can socialize, study or exercise.

“This has been an amazing opportunity, and I am so grateful for it,” says Norwood, who plans to pursue a master’s in social work.

“Alice is the best advocate on the team on any topic related to autism

— even among people who are highly educated on the topic,” says Kevin Loch, who’s working with CAN as part of his master’s in occupational therapy program. The network is helping him and others in the next generation of practitioners to develop skills and tools through hands-on experience that complements classroom knowledge and spans disciplines, he says.

Having close relatives on the autism spectrum is part of what inspired him to seek experience working with young adults transitioning into independent living.

“I saw the whole development of their lives and the things they struggled with,” Loch says. “I came in knowing I wanted to gain experience with this population. Going out into the community and interacting with families and hearing their struggles fueled that fire. I wanted to go out and make a change. I’ve already been doing that thanks to CAN.” ■

### FOR MORE INFO

Support the Community Autism Network:  
[fgcu.edu/mariebcollege/giving](https://fgcu.edu/mariebcollege/giving)





## Alumni pair up to provide a lifeline to families struggling with autism

BY DREW STERWALD

**A**fter Amy Richardson's daughter, Olivia, was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder about eight years ago, the Cape Coral mom scoured Southwest Florida from Naples to North Fort Myers to find resources to help her understand autism and nurture a child with social and behavioral issues associated with the developmental disorder.

Richardson found few options, she says, and eventually stopped looking. She kept up doctor appointments, but even they seemed ill-equipped to offer much guidance, she says.

"I knew she needed more," Richardson says. "I took to the internet and found Family Initiative. It has been such a positive impact in our family's life and Olivia's." After six years of taking part in clinical therapy and other activities

with the nonprofit organization, Olivia's tendency to display aggressive behavior and to run away in public places has dramatically lessened, her mom says.

Family Initiative was founded by two Florida Gulf Coast University alumni – David Brown and Anjali Van Drie – committed to providing more and better services for children and young adults with autism as well as compassionate support and training for their families. Both

PHOTO BY SAMANTHA ROMERO

completed their master's degrees in social work at FGCU in 2012 and were crossing paths professionally in child-welfare agencies, when they grew alarmed by two entwined issues: the increasing numbers of children in that system who were autistic or likely to be diagnosed autistic if they were evaluated properly and the lagging

Brown says. "Today 1 in 44 are diagnosed. In just six years, the rate has exploded."

He points to a combination of factors. As autism awareness has increased, more children have been evaluated. How children are screened has changed, with clinicians now recognizing how gender bias influences diagnoses – because autism

supermarket, whatever the day entails. Focusing on the immediate environment – what is happening before and after behavior such as hitting, spitting or throwing objects – they can use the information to help change behavior in the future, Van Drie says.

"My job is to identify goals in behavior

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**“When we started, the CDC said 1 in 100 children were diagnosed with autism. Today 1 in 44 are diagnosed. In just six years, the rate has exploded.”**

DAVID BROWN, FGCU ALUMNUS

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resources for those children and their struggling families.

"It was shocking to me how little was available," Brown recalls.

They decided to take the initiative and establish their own nonprofit in 2015 to help fill the gap. Family Initiative's team of clinicians serves children through applied behavior analysis and occupational therapy services and also offers autism play groups, teen meetings, parent education and support groups and more. Some programs, like social-skill building, are free; clinical services such as occupational therapy are typically covered through insurance or fees. The organization also provides child welfare caregiver training and support.

Since 2015, the number of children they've served has soared from 21 to 1,325, and Family Initiative has grown to four resource centers and 44 employees – including other FGCU alumni.

"When we started, the CDC said 1 in 100 children were diagnosed with autism,"

**ABOVE LEFT: FGCU alumni David Brown and Anjali Van Drie founded Family Initiative to help children with autism.**

presents differently in girls and boys. And the general population boom in Southwest Florida is bringing a wave of new families in need of services.

"We're hiring people as fast as we can, trying to keep up with the pace and build infrastructure," Brown says.

The Collaboratory and The United Way are major funders of Family Initiative, which also receives support from private individuals. State aid helped pave the way for Family Initiative's latest addition, a 3,900-square-foot support center in Cape Coral that opened in April 2021. Inside the center, sound-reducing panels, subtle colors, low-emission paint and other features intentionally create a non-stressful sensory environment for therapy and socializing.

But the majority of Family Initiative's work is out in the community, according to Van Drie, a board-certified behavior analyst. In response to urging from families, Family Initiative started offering applied behavior analysis a few years after opening. The evidence-based practice involves clinicians spending hours with families in their homes, at the

reduction and skill acquisition to work on," Van Drie says. "Typically, our kids haven't learned how to communicate their needs in another way, so they show aggressive or destructive behavior. We focus on problem behaviors and teaching our kids a better way to get their needs met, teaching skills to help them be more successful out in the world."

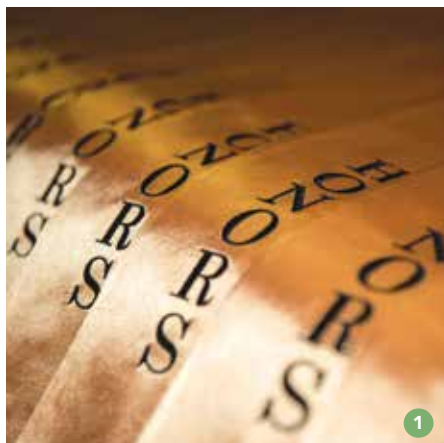
In the past, some critics have labeled the practice as coercive, she says, but it has evolved and been endorsed by the U.S. Surgeon General and national associations.

"The approach we use is very family centered, very community oriented and very collaborative," Van Drie says.

For families like Richardson's, Family Initiative's efforts have been a lifeline amid a void of resources. They give parents the tools and confidence to handle situations when they're on their own and have made a world of difference, Richardson says.

"They are in your life helping you, training you, not just giving you child therapy. They come to your house, go to your school, and give playback behavior by behavior so you learn what you can do to help your child. It's a game changer." ■

# GIVING



## University launches comprehensive campaign to ensure continued excellence

BY KAREN FELDMAN

**A**S FLORIDA GULF Coast University heads into its second quarter-century, there is much to celebrate: a thriving institution educating 16,000 students, almost 40,000 alumni, a distinguished faculty and a sustainable campus.

FGCU has become an influential force in Southwest Florida, contributing nearly \$600 million annually to the region's economy. It has created a robust workforce of teachers and healthcare professionals, engineers and entrepreneurs, social workers and scientists.

The Daveler & Kauanui School of Entrepreneurship ranks among the top such schools in the nation and the Marieb College's School of Nursing is the best in the state. The Water School at FGCU focuses on critical issues such as climate change, natural resources and ecosystem health.

The university's athletics teams have captured 87 conference and tournament titles in 14 years of NCAA Division I competition. Its musicians, artists and actors enhance the region's rich cultural fabric.

But there's no resting on our laurels here. We aren't done yet.

"We're celebrating the past and getting a jump start on our future," says Kitty Green, vice president for Advancement and executive director of the FGCU Foundation.

To that end, the university has launched a \$75 million comprehensive fundraising campaign.

"What has been accomplished in the last 25 years is truly remarkable, but we are just getting started," Green says. "There are so many exciting possibilities ahead for this university."

The campaign will help FGCU increase academic excellence by creating new endowed faculty positions, funding

opportunities for undergraduate and graduate research, and modernizing the library.

There are plans to make WGCU Public Media, already a powerhouse for news and excellent programs, an even more robust organization, with expanded local programming for both radio and television.

Given that most FGCU students stay and build their careers in Southwest Florida, investing in the university's future is an investment in the region.

Here are just some of the goals of the comprehensive campaign:

► **(1) Honors College:** The college for high-achieving students has grown from 532 students in 2015 to 1,250 this year. Plans for the campaign include relocating the college to the Wilson G. Bradshaw Library, where the student experience will be much improved and staff will have badly needed office space. There are several opportunities for supporters to name offices and the college itself.







What has been accomplished in the last 25 years is truly remarkable, but we are just getting started. There are so many exciting possibilities ahead for this university.



KITTY GREEN, VICE PRESIDENT FOR ADVANCEMENT AND  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE FGCU FOUNDATION

► **(2) Marieb College:** Considering that Southwest Florida has a large population of older residents, it's a prime place to serve as a living laboratory for researching and fulfilling their needs. Marieb College of Health & Human Services is well-positioned to provide a holistic approach to successful living that could become a model for communities around the nation. In addition to producing more of the healthcare providers that are so desperately needed, it aims to create an institute to study and implement ways to enhance aging, care delivery and quality of life.

► **(3) Library renovation:** The Bradshaw Library is among the original buildings on campus. While it has been upgraded over the years, it now requires retrofitting to keep up with the high-tech needs of today's students. Planned upgrades include the creative commons, a workspace where students from various disciplines can work alongside one another on projects involving video and audio production, robotics, 3D scanners and printers and other such equipment; a research commons, where significant research and scholarship produced across the university can be stored in an



accessible space; and an expanded area for archives and special collections, which has a substantial number of priceless collections but needs additional climate-controlled space and secured vaults.

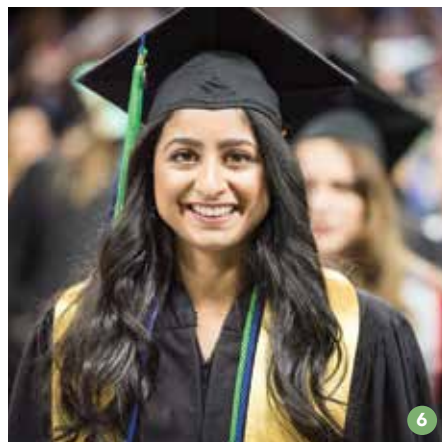
► **(4) Bower School of Music & the Arts:** The school annually brings more than 150 events to the region and educates the performers, artists, music therapists and actors who share their talents with the community. Expanding the music building with more rehearsal and classroom space will allow the school to grow this very successful program. Eventual designation as a museum and the growth of a museum studies program will be possible if the art

gallery is expanded with the addition of larger exhibit areas and storage capacity.

► **(5) Endowed faculty:** Academic excellence begins with an investment in outstanding faculty. Providing the means to create endowed chairs will assist in recruiting the most outstanding national and international leaders in their academic disciplines to become members of the FGCU faculty.

► **(6) Scholarships:** At least 60 percent of students at FGCU work at least 20 hours a week to afford their education. Scholarships, paid internships and stipends make a tremendous difference, allowing students to focus on their studies and take part in college activities and, in many cases, to be able to attend college at all. The need continues to grow. Not only does it help students while they are in school, but it also gives them a better start when they graduate with less debt.

► **(7) Community Autism Network at FGCU:** This is an interdisciplinary training service and research collaborative based in the Colleges of Health & Human Services, Education and Arts & Sciences. The goal is to enrich the lives of those on the autism spectrum, their families and the agencies that serve them by expanding the programs offered at FGCU. ■



## FGCU Silver Celebration delivers impressive sum, memories

**P**ICTURE THIS: Alico Arena transformed into an upscale nightclub complete with a 7-piece band and dance floor. The movers and shakers of Southwest Florida were all in the same room focused on one thing: financially supporting the future of Florida Gulf Coast University. President Mike Martin arrived on his familiar golf cart, driving it right into the party flanked by music students playing a song they arranged for the moment. It was Martin's final gala as FGCU's president, and he took time to reminisce about his time on campus.

The night of FGCU's Silver Celebration, marking the university's 25th anniversary, was a mix of celebrating the past and focusing on the future. Kitty Green, vice president for Advancement and executive director of the FGCU Foundation, set the tone: Enjoy yourself, but prepare to support our students. Her thoughts were echoed by Braxton Rhone, a 2006 alumnus, who shared his story of success thanks to his time at FGCU and made a donation of his own.

Dudley Goodlette recalled the creation of FGCU against what, at times, felt like insurmountable odds. The former Florida state representative and FGCU Board of Trustees chair said, "I cannot imagine another community doing so much in so little time!" His speech encapsulated the success of the past and set the stage for the future of FGCU through a new \$75 million comprehensive fundraising campaign. By the end of the night, \$6.3 million of the goal had been raised. ■

— Kyle McCurry







1. Indera DeMine and Stacey McBride
2. President Mike Martin arrives with FGCU music students
3. Tracy Doan and Margaret Antonier
4. Amanda Lentini, Sen. Lizbeth Benacquisto, Kaisa Schmidt, Zannon Garza
5. Robert Murray, Dr. Jo Stecher, President Martin, Dr. Arie van Duijn
6. Jill and Braxton Rhone
7. President Martin, Robbie Roepstorff and former President Wilson G. Bradshaw
8. Dr. Lee and Gene Seidler
9. Dolly Bodick, Dr. Krzysztof Biernacki, Swantje Biernacki and Alan Korest
10. Jodi Pendergrass and Commissioner Cecil Pendergrass
11. Jeff and Amy Ospina





## FGCU entrepreneurs receive \$4 million gift

Rist Family Foundation invests in the future

BY KYLE MCCURRY

**F**LORIDA GULF COAST University's Daveler & Kauanui School of Entrepreneurship has received a \$4 million gift from the Rist Family Foundation. Led by the entrepreneur's entrepreneur, Brian Rist, and his wife, Kim, the foundation is no stranger to FGCU. This is its second substantial gift to the university in the past two years.

"I got involved with the university almost a decade ago," Brian Rist says. "I've watched it grow. I've watched the things they've done and how they've changed Southwest Florida. That motivates my family and me to get more involved."

The school's institute is now known as the Rist Family Foundation Institute for Entrepreneurship in recognition of the gift. The institute is responsible for the Daveler & Kauanui School of Entrepreneurship's outward-facing community engagement, including the Runway Program, which works with alumni and students not enrolled in the entrepreneurship school, and the Veterans Florida Entrepreneurship Program. The funds will be distributed over several years, focusing on specific needs within the school.

In 2020, the foundation pledged \$1 million toward construction of the entrepreneurship school's building, Lucas Hall, with a portion designated for the

Newton Ethical Leadership Initiative to help expand ethics-based education.

"Support like Brian's is what makes our school so unique," says Sandra Kauanui, director of the school. "He is providing the resources that will last a very long time. It will continue to support the school for many years. Having his name on the institute gives us the drive to be as successful as he's been."

Rist founded Storm Smart, a hurricane protection products company. As the business grew, so did his interest in philanthropy. It's a lesson Kauanui hopes her students will learn.

"He's not only successful, but he's also taken care of his people and the community.

**LEFT: Philanthropist and entrepreneur Brian Rist shares his knowledge with entrepreneurship students.**

**BOTTOM: Brian and Kim Rist**

That sends a message we want to send to our students. Give back when you've been successful," Kauanui says.

Kauanui is the reason for Rist's interest in the School of Entrepreneurship.

"Her passion, her drive, her tenacity is what just blew me away," Rist says. "The commitment that she's made to that school and those students is the driving force behind it. I've also watched her start to put other pieces in place. Not only is she passionate, but she has an army behind her that is equally as passionate."

Among her lieutenants is Eric Arseneau, assistant director of the school.

"We've always thought optimistically about our goals, but this gift allows us

to stretch them even further," he says. "We're expanding our academic offerings and making college more affordable with scholarships for even more students. I am confident the result will be more exceptional entrepreneurs who will lead our region's economic and societal success in the decades to come."

That's what Rist expects. It's one of the reasons why he recently accepted a new role at FGCU. Starting with the spring 2022 semester, Rist is an adjunct instructor giving students insight into his life as a successful entrepreneur.

"I think I'm the winner in this deal," Rist says. "I come from a background of entrepreneurship. I only wish I had gotten the head start those students are getting now." ■

## FOR MORE INFO

Daveler & Kauanui School of Entrepreneurship, [fgcu.edu/soe](http://fgcu.edu/soe)



## NEW UNIVERSITY LICENSE PLATE LETS DRIVERS DISPLAY THEIR EAGLE PRIDE

The word on the street is there's a shiny new license plate available for alumni and friends of Florida Gulf Coast University to show their Eagle pride.

The updated plate exchanges the university logo for the FGCU Athletics logo - the same featured on game day apparel. This concept aligns with most of the State University System schools that use their athletic logo for their universities' license plates.

The change is especially significant during the university's 25th anniversary year. "This was a great time to make the change because FGCU, after its famous Dunk City run, has experienced an increase in demand for merchandise," says Tony Lee III, director of development for University Advancement. "Partnering with Athletics is an excellent way to expand our brand into the marketplace."

One of the best features of the new plate is that 100 percent of the net proceeds from sales benefit athletics scholarships.

"Every time you see an FGCU plate on the road, you can imagine that you've provided a meal for a student or will help Eagles graduate with less student debt," Lee says.

The goal of the new plate is to build excitement and increase sales.

"Each sale brings awareness to the university and supports a student, so we hope everyone will drive with FGCU pride," he says.

Purchase an FGCU plate today on the FGCU website: [fgcu.edu/licenseplate/](http://fgcu.edu/licenseplate/), or visit the local tax collector's office. ■







## Middle-income students get help from couple who understand their challenge

BY KAREN BOOTH

**M**ARY AND RICK Reichle understand, firsthand, the challenges of juggling the responsibilities of life with financing an education and relate to FGCU students who struggle to do the same.

“I was a first-generation student,” says Mary Reichle, who earned her bachelor

and master’s degrees in social work from St. Louis University in Missouri. She did this with help from scholarships, grants and hard work – all the while raising her three children as a single mom. Rick Reichle graduated from University of South Florida, also worked throughout his college years and, like his wife, understands and appreciates the determination of FGCU students to succeed.

Both of the Reichles strongly believe in “paying it forward.”

Acting on their belief – and as a testament to the confidence they have in FGCU’s students – they created The Mary T. and Richard G. Reichle, Jr. Scholarship Endowed Fund. An annual award, the fund provides a full tuition scholarship to a deserving first-generation, middle-income student from Florida. The first



scholarship will be awarded for academic year 2022-23.

“We are so appreciative when families are so generous and so willing to help our students and can’t thank the Reichles enough,” says Jorge Lopez, associate vice president of Student Financial Enrollment and Business Services. “Receiving a scholarship means so much to our students, just knowing someone has given them an opportunity to attend college and complete their degree. Scholarship recipients feel a real sense of responsibility to perform.”

“What’s different about the Reichles’ scholarship is its criteria in support of middle-income students. While we have many outstanding scholarships for low-income families, the system lacks support for the middle-income bracket. The Reichles’ scholarship helps to close that gap.”

“We’ve been very fortunate in our lives,” Rick Reichle says, “and see it as a sense of duty to give back. We can’t think of anything better than a scholarship.”

“Everything is based on environment,” Mary Reichle says. “If you live in a family that encourages education, it’s easier, but sometimes, even then, you need a little help. Scholarships give families and kids a chance.”

The Reichles have lived in Florida for three decades. They were here when FGCU was just an idea. They watched it grow and develop, observed firsthand the positive ways in which faculty and students impact Southwest Florida, and they decided to help the cause.

The Reichles want only the best for FGCU’s students. In addition to their current endowed fund, they are long-time donors to FGCU’s athletics program, evidenced, in part, by their 19 years as enthusiastic season ticket holders for both the FGCU men’s and women’s basketball teams.

Bottom line: Mary and Rick Reichle are not only friends of FGCU today, but their legacy will live on in perpetuity, fueled for generations by the recipients of The Mary T. and Richard G. Reichle, Jr. Scholarship Endowed Fund. ■



## ALUMNUS GIVES BACK TO LIFT UP CRNA STUDENTS AT FGCU

Thirty minutes.

That’s the window of time nurse anesthetist Johny Williamceau has to get to Gulf Coast Medical Center to save a life. “When the call comes in, every minute counts,” Williamceau says.

The 2020 graduate of Florida Gulf Coast University’s Master of Science in Nurse Anesthesiology program assists with surgeries, accidents and ailments, administering anesthesia that helps patients withstand surgery.



**Johny Williamceau**

Becoming a certified registered nurse anesthesiologist (CRNA) wasn’t easy for Williamceau, but it’s an accomplishment he looks back on with tremendous pride. Originally from Haiti and moving to east Naples at age 12, he’s been closely affiliated with the

university since high school. “The mentors that I’ve been fortunate enough to encounter along the way, the ones that saw the light in me, they are the reason I’m here today,” he says.

That support system of faculty, advisors, peers and colleagues helped Williamceau succeed in one of the most demanding programs in nursing, and do it with a sense of gratitude.

That’s why he’s developed a scholarship for two students working their way through the Bachelor of Science in Nursing to Doctor of Science in Nursing Nurse Anesthesiology program at FGCU. “Nothing in this life is easy and if there’s anything that I can do to ease the burden of someone on the same grueling journey that I traveled, I’m honored to do so,” he says.

Rochelle Jackson, director of development at FGCU says, “Johny is the generous type, always willing to make a commitment to others. He’s truly one of those FGCU students that made the decision to stay here and infuse the community with care and compassion.”

That care comes full circle to FGCU, where, Williamceau says, “my life was shaped.” He knows the importance of education and the struggles students can face that can make all the difference in whether they graduate and excel or walk away from their dream altogether.

Two JW Foundation scholarships were awarded in Fall 2021 and that generosity has already made an impact for two thankful students. Williamceau exudes pride knowing his contribution has made a difference. “It’s who I am,” he says. “Helping those who will be my colleagues in the future. I don’t have to be a millionaire, but once you care, you care.” ■

– Katy Hennig

# SPORTS

## WOMEN'S BASKETBALL

### Women's basketball team makes second round of NCAA tournament

It's Aces – Las Vegas-style – for Bell

BY SETH SOFFIAN

**N**ATTILY DRESSED in New York City to attend the WNBA Draft on April 11, FGCU's Kierstan Bell and Karl Smesko stood and hugged after her name was announced in the first round, 11th overall.

Only the second FGCU player ever drafted and the first to be selected among the top 12 picks of the first round, Bell held her new Las Vegas Aces jersey aloft in a fitting cap to what was yet another season of greatness from Smesko's program.

Program-best Top 25 rankings, regular and postseason ASUN titles yet again, a third victory in the NCAA Tournament and, yes, one audaciously thrilling half game of basketball in pursuit of the school's first ever Sweet 16 berth, were just some of the headlines.

"There's not many teams who got to experience all the things we did, especially as a mid-major," says Smesko, whose squad finished 30-3 – his seventh season with at least 30 wins in 20 years at FGCU – and No. 23 and No. 20 final rankings in the media and coaches polls, respectively.

"I appreciate it all," Smesko said.

FGCU, which entered the Associated Press poll on Nov. 23 for its earliest entry into the poll in program history, defeated

16th-ranked Virginia Tech 84-81 with a thrilling finish in the first round of the NCAA Tournament in College Park, Maryland.

Excluding the 2019-20 postseason, which was cancelled at the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was FGCU's eighth NCAA Tournament appearance in 10 possible chances and fifth consecutive.

Two days later, the 12th-seeded Eagles led fourth-seeded Maryland on its own court 39-36 with 3:32 remaining in the second quarter on a 3-pointer by graduate student Kendall Spray, who was fourth in the nation, shooting 45.6 percent beyond the arc in her lone FGCU campaign.

But the Terrapins, ranked 13th in the country and finally healthy after being limited by injuries much of the season, ultimately pulled away in arguably their best game of the season.

"I remember Diamond saying, 'We're not going to lose this game,'" Maryland's Angel Reese, who had 21 points to go with a game-high 24 points from fellow 6-foot-3 wing Diamond Miller, said of an exchange between the two just prior to Maryland closing the half on an 11-0 run.

"FGCU is a really good team," Reese said. "But we played well tonight."

FGCU, which committed 15 turnovers after having only three against Virginia



Kierstan Bell



“

“There’s not many teams who got to experience all the things we did, especially as a mid-major.”

”

KARL SMESKO, HEAD COACH, FGCU WOMEN’S BASKETBALL

Tech, didn’t blame injuries, even though starting point guard T.K. Morehouse missed practice for the first time all season before the Maryland game because of a foot ailment that flared up late in the first round.

And Bell, who missed nine games after undergoing surgery in January for a partially torn meniscus, had been extremely limited in practice after returning to action in late February.

The 6-foot-1 junior, who was named the Becky Hammon Mid-Major Player of the Year in both of her seasons at FGCU after transferring from Ohio State, had been exceptional for decisive stretches of multiple late-season victories.

That included a regular-season win at Liberty to clinch the top seed for the ASUN Tournament, a pair of stellar second-halves in the conference tournament defeats of Stetson and Jacksonville State, and more winning moments late in the defeat of Virginia Tech.

But faced with limited practice, short rest and a long-armed Maryland squad shooting superbly from outside, Bell wasn’t able to summon more heroics in the 89-65 Maryland win.

“We were asking quite a lot of her. She hadn’t been practicing much up and down,” Smesko said. “It was kind of the same way for T.K. It (the foot injury) was



**ABOVE:** Kierstan Bell and the FGCU women celebrate their win over Stetson in the ASUN semifinals.

**RIGHT:** Coach Karl Smesko after the Stetson victory.



the worst it’s been. We weren’t sure she was going to be able to play at all. I feel bad for her because she was far from 100 percent.”

The loss dropped FGCU to 0-3 in the second round of the NCAA Tournament and underscored how difficult it is to win on what is always the home floor of a top-four seed in the second round.

Without Bell – who joined former FGCU star Whitney Knight, the No. 15 overall pick by the Los Angeles Sparks in 2016, as WNBA draftees – the task won’t get any easier. Morehouse and fellow

starter Emma List return next season, but the Eagles also lose Spray, Karli Seay, Kerstie Phillips, Tyra Cox and Andrea Cecil from the main rotation.

As has always been the case in his program, though, Smesko expects the Eagles to regroup and take another shot at new heights, which helps explain why they’ve been great all along.

“We want to get to the NCAA Tournament. We want to win championships. We want to go as far as we can,” he said. “But we still realize that we’ve been right about the most successful mid major over the last 15 years. We’ve really played really well for a long time.” ■





## MEN'S BASKETBALL

## Men's basketball team looks to former Penn State coach for new approach

BY SETH SOFFIAN

**F**GCU DIRECTOR OF Athletics Ken Kavanagh says he's never been more confident in a coaching hire.

University President Mike Martin says he was convinced FGCU was making its already exemplary athletics program even better.

And an array of players, parents, coaches and administrators around the country gave ringing endorsements as well to FGCU's hiring of former Penn State and Boston University head coach Pat Chambers as the fifth ever to lead the Eagles men's basketball program.

"If it ain't broke, don't fix it. That doesn't apply at a great university," Martin said during a news conference to introduce Chambers on March 15 in Alico Arena. "Make it better. That's what we do here. That's how we've come this far in 25 years."

Chambers, 51, a father of four and native of Newtown Square, Pennsylvania has had a home in Naples for almost a decade. He succeeds Michael Fly.

Fly, who went 22-12 in his last of four seasons as head coach and was 55-59 overall at FGCU, was the last on-court connection to the 2012-13 squad that famously became the first in NCAA



**Pat Chambers**

Tournament history to reach the Sweet 16 as a No. 15 seed.

An assistant coach for seven seasons at FGCU prior to his 2018 promotion, Fly was released from the remainder of his contract after East

Division No. 3-seed FGCU lost 81-68 to eventual champion and West Division No. 2-seed Bellarmine in the ASUN Tournament quarterfinals March 3.

Fly agreed to stay on as coach for what

**LEFT: Coach Michael Fly 2021 calls plays as FGCU played former FGCU coach Andy Enfield's USC team in November.**

**BOTTOM RIGHT: FGCU playing against North Alabama in the first round of the ASUN championship.**

turned out to be two postseason games for the Eagles in The Basketball Classic: a home defeat of Detroit Mercy and a road loss to Coastal Carolina.

Tavian Dunn-Martin, a first-team All-ASUN selection and a finalist for the Lou Henson Mid-Major Player of the Year Award, became the first FGCU player to surpass 700 points in a season.

"Michael Fly has been an invaluable member, teammate and friend to so many of us over the last 11 years," says Kavanagh. "The last four years he did everything he could to continue to move the program forward. Nobody, in my opinion, bleeds more green and blue than Michael Fly."

## Energize the program

In making the change, Kavanagh is seeking to revive the enthusiasm levels FGCU enjoyed under former coaches Andy Enfield and Joe Dooley, who combined for three NCAA Tournament appearances (2013, 2016, 2017) and six straight 20-win seasons starting in 2012-13.

He found his answer quickly in Chambers.

A former assistant coach to two-time NCAA Championship-winning coach Jay Wright at Villanova from 2005 to 2009, Chambers went 21-14 in each of two seasons at Boston University and led the Terriers to what remains the last of their seven NCAA Tournament berths, in 2011.

He took over at Penn State the following season and led the Nittany Lions to at least 20 wins two times, including in 2019-20, when Penn State earned its first ranking in the Associated Press Top 25 poll since 1996, reaching as high as No. 9.

Penn State, which also won the

NIT championship two years earlier with four victories in Madison Square Garden to complete a 26-13 season, was poised to make the program's 10th appearance in the NCAA Tournament in 2020 prior to COVID-19's cancellation of postseason.

"Coaching in the Big Ten (Conference), with these great Hall of Fame-type coaches, that was my classroom," says Chambers, rattling off the names of coaches like Tom Izzo, Bo Ryan and Tubby Smith. "Preparing for those teams, those coaches and players, they made me better."

Given football-mad Penn State's comparatively lesser resources than nearly all league foes, Kavanagh confidently included "proven winner" among the traits he ascribes to Chambers, who listed faith, passion and attitude among his core principles for success.

"High integrity, family man, knows the game, relates to players, connects with donors, a proven winner and great ambassador," Kavanagh says. "We want to win, and we want to win in a way where we get back to seeing the crowds that we had."

## Continuing to learn

Chambers doesn't take over at FGCU with a spotless record. A racially insensitive remark he made to a player in 2019

contributed to his dismissal just prior to the 2020-21 season.

But Chambers faced the issue head-on.

During a year away from basketball and then as an assistant last season at LaSalle, Chambers read, attended diversity, equity and inclusion courses and talked at length with players – parents and others – people of color especially, about his mistake, and how to learn from it.

"I learned so much from them,"

Chambers says of former players, including those from Penn State. "I had those uncomfortable conversations. 'Teach me. Help me grow. I'm not in your shoes.' They were incredible to show me where I need to get better. And I was willing to do that."

Extensive vetting left Kavanagh and FGCU confident not only that Chambers was genuine in his growth and contrition, but that he also is the man to connect with players and fans, and help re-establish the program's rising arc.

"It's important that we develop deep, genuine relationships built on trust," Chambers says, pointing to player development as a key item in his success. "Some coaches have that (all business) approach. That's just not what I was taught." ■



# ALUMNI

## ALUMNI AWARDS

### Alumna's been pushing the envelope on the job and in her personal life for years

BY KAREN BOOTH

**A**N AWARD IS A tangible recognition of how the past influences the future. FGCU's annual Alumni of Distinction Award is one such prize, defined by the personal triumphs, professional achievements and humanitarian contributions that characterize each recipient. FGCU's 2021 Alumna of Distinction, Samantha Scott ('05, Marketing), embodies the spirit of the award and is a worthy example to all who follow.

Courage and kindness further define Scott and give voice to her journey from an FGCU undergraduate to wife, mother, entrepreneur, humanitarian and respected member of the Southwest Florida community.

"To be honest, there is no single word to describe my having been selected as Alumna of Distinction," Scott says. "I was genuinely surprised. I was familiar with the nominees this year and honored just to be on the list."

The trajectory of Scott's "from-there-to-here" story is at first glance relatively linear. She skipped a grade in elementary school, took advanced classes in high school and graduated at age 17.

Like many students, financing her education was top of mind when choosing a college. And like many students, she chose to attend a community college for her freshman and sophomore years, transferring to FGCU as a junior.

However, unlike many university students, she knew that marketing was her future. "I joined the Ad Club [student chapter of the American Advertising Federation], concentrated on my coursework, and enjoyed the rigors of my classes," she says. Scott graduated in 2005 at age 20.

Not one to miss a beat, Scott and her husband launched a direct mail and printing business and Pushing the Envelope, a marketing and public relations company in Fort Myers, one month after Scott's graduation. They later sold the direct mail business. In 2010, in recognition of her accomplishments, she was featured in Gulfshore Business magazine's "40 under 40" feature.

Webster defines "to push the envelope" as "surpassing normal limits or attempting something viewed as radical or risky." In a word or two – "a daring maneuver." Pushing the Envelope has lived up to its name, growing exponentially over the years.

"What differentiates our business is our focus on marketing strategy and testing,"

she says. "We continually test to ensure our plans are working; we refine and then we move forward."

The words "Test, Measure, Refine, Repeat" feature prominently on their website [www.getpushing.com](http://www.getpushing.com) and is a mantra to be respected by all team members. Whether the project focuses on marketing and branding, advertising strategy, web development, or more, the goal is the same – develop the communication strategies specific to each client and then ensure the plans work.

Over the years, Scott has served on the boards of various organizations. "I learned the importance of service a long time ago thanks to my mentor who encouraged me to get involved with the community," she says, emphasizing the importance of choosing organizations that resonate personally. She advises to limit the number of organizations served at any one time, so as not to dilute efforts because of lack of time or interest.

"I tell people, one thing can move something forward a mile, or one thing can move things forward an inch," she says. "I want to make a change. Over the years, I have chosen specific things I'm passionate about and that I believe might benefit from my attention."

Currently, Scott serves on the boards of the FGCU Foundation as chair of the nominating committee, as well as the Fort Myers Chamber of Commerce and Gulf Coast Humane Society.

"I'm passionate about the Foundation





“

**I want to make a change. Over the years, I have chosen specific things I'm passionate about and that I believe might benefit from my attention.**

”

SAMANTHA SCOTT, ALUMNA OF DISTINCTION



and joined because I believe in its mission,” Scott says. “The Foundation supports individuals who want to succeed, giving them a much-needed hand up, not hand out. We could all use a hand up at one time or another.” Scott adds that she relied on scholarships so she especially appreciates what the Foundation does for students.

“Also, as chair of the nominating committee, I help to shape the future of the Foundation. It’s exciting to me – what will the Foundation look like in the future, who will benefit, and how will it grow?”

“Samantha Scott is an engaged chair and a tremendous advocate for the university,” says Kitty Green, executive director of the Foundation and VP for Advancement. “She’s a credit to FGCU and to women. The fact that she is able to give the kind of dedicated service she gives to the board on top of running a company and raising a family is amazing.”

Scott chose to serve on the board of the Gulf Coast Humane Society because she loves animals and is a huge proponent of rescuing animals. She chose the board of the Fort Myers Chamber of Commerce because she recognizes the values of chambers to local business. “I might make a connection with someone, and then I might be better positioned to help someone else. It’s a powerful tool,” she says. “You only get things back when you invest the time and the energy.”

Scott reflects on her FGCU roots that took hold, grew and have shaped her career and helped her help others. “It’s clear that what we do impacts others,” Scott says. It follows that depending on the person, the impact can be positive or negative. Scott, clearly, is a positive force for change.

“My Christian belief drives everything I do personally,” she says. “Naturally, this translates into my work. Do the right thing and help make the world better through time, talent and treasure. I work with my teammates to do the same and, hopefully, I will instill these same values in my children.”

Scott and her husband celebrate 18 years of marriage this year. They have three children: their son Asher, who passed as an infant; daughter Charlotte, 20 months; and Ella Grace, 7 months. ■



## ALUMNI AWARDS

### Soaring Eagle awards honor high-achieving young alumni

BY DON MANLEY

**I**T USUALLY TAKES MANY YEARS TO BUILD THE SORT of life that brings with it accolades and recognition from the community and your peers. But there are some exceptional human beings who make an impact early.

At Florida Gulf Coast University, we call our young movers and shakers Soaring Eagles. They are alumni who, within 10 years of graduating, have made noteworthy achievements in their professional or volunteer lives.

There was an impressive number of nominees in this year's group, making it harder by the year for the FGCU Alumni Association to select the winners.

"The number of great nominees grows every year," says Kim Wallace, senior director of Alumni Relations. "It's so rewarding to see our graduates not only succeeding in their chosen fields but becoming such valuable members of the community. And while the decisions grow more difficult each year, that's a good problem to have."

And now, the winners of this year's Soaring Eagle awards.

*Each year, the Alumni Association recognizes alumni who are successful in the community and in their professions. We encourage alumni, friends, faculty and staff to nominate alumni for either of these prestigious awards.*

#### ALUMNUS OF DISTINCTION

This is the most prestigious award the association bestows upon a graduate. It honors alumni who have upheld the tradition of excellence through their personal accomplishment, professional achievement and/or humanitarian service.

#### SOARING EAGLE AWARD

A graduate from each college is honored (within 10 years of graduation) for outstanding achievement or service in their professional or volunteer life.

**Sean DeRossett, '21**

*Interdisciplinary Entrepreneurship Studies  
Daveler & Kauanui School of Entrepreneurship*

FGCU is where Sean DeRossett discovered the purpose and passion that led to receiving the 2022 Daveler & Kauanui School of Entrepreneurship Soaring Eagles Award.

"I found my niche within the School of Entrepreneurship and that's when I found my purpose," says DeRossett. "I became extremely passionate about the field, and the exciting and innovative environment that Florida Gulf Coast offered me truly enhanced my educational experience."

The Naples resident is founder and CEO of Keyrift, LLC, a company dedicated to making piano instruction enjoyable for children who struggle with traditional lessons. DeRossett designed a patented, color-coded product, "Improkeys," that simplifies that learning process.

He was named the 2020 School of Entrepreneurship Student of the Year. DeRossett volunteers with New Horizons of SWFL after-school program, the FGCU Veterans Florida Entrepreneurship Program and the university's Runway Program, a free business incubator open to students and alumni. He's also studying for a master's degree in entrepreneurship at the Daveler & Kauanui School.

"I'm truly grateful to be named a recipient of this award," DeRossett says. "Being able to say that I'm among the other recipients is a true honor. It feels great because I know all the hard work I put into my business, and into school and my classes. For Florida Gulf Coast University to see all the hard work and dedication I put in, that means a lot to me and it really encourages me to push forward to continue trying to do the best that I can."

**Tatiana Devia, '12**

*M.S. Forensic Studies  
College of Arts and Sciences*

Tatiana Devia has made being a voice for the voiceless and an advocate for the underserved her life's work. It's also the reason she was selected as College of Arts and Sciences' 2022 Soaring Eagle recipient.

She is a staff attorney for the Corporate Accountability Lab, a Chicago-based nonprofit that's dedicated to fighting corporate abuse of human rights and the environment. There, she leads a program seeking justice and accountability for human rights victims in her native Colombia.

Devia says her experience with the Forensic Studies Department and working closely with the Justice Studies program's chair, Heather Walsh-Haney, helped her to become "a more well-developed attorney."

While in Southwest Florida, she worked as an investigator for the Fair Food Program, founded by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, which ensures humane wages and working conditions for farmworkers. Her next career move saw her employing her forensic studies knowledge as an international human rights investigator.

Devia, who has a bachelor's in anthropology from the University of Central Florida, graduated from the American University Washington College of Law, in Washington, D.C., in 2018, with a specialty in international human rights.

"It really took me back to my FGCU experience and my forensics work and that entire journey," Devia says about being named a Soaring Eagle. "Every single thing that I've done, it all started with my forensics work at FGCU. It was very special to get, not just an award, but to get it from FGCU."





## ALUMNI AWARDS

**Cindy Michaels, '16**

*Special Education  
College of Education*

Cindy Michaels' dedication to her students and her profession radiate from her voice when discussing her role as a middle school, ESE-Autism Spectrum Disorder teacher.

"I love my job and I love the school that I work at," says Michaels, who is in her seventh year teaching at Veterans Park Academy for the Arts in Lehigh Acres.

The passion she exhibits as a professional, as a community volunteer and for FGCU have led to the Lehigh Acres resident receiving the College of Education's 2022 Soaring Eagle Award.

"I was excited just to be nominated," Michaels says. "When the video came out and I was named a winner, I cried, because in education, we don't get a lot of kudos. I don't do it for the kudos, but it was amazing to win and get that recognition. It took me aback and I was shocked because there were a lot of great nominees. I'm grateful and thankful in so many ways."

Her role as mother to two autistic sons, now 16 and 14, and the success the older son's pre-K teacher had in transforming the non-verbal child, inspired her career choice.

"He had a lot of behaviors and the teacher who worked with him gave him his voice back and he started talking," Michaels says. "I wanted to do the same thing for other families, and I do it every day and I love it."

**Corey Smith, '12**

*Civil Engineering  
U.A. Whitaker College of Engineering*

Giving back has long been a priority for Corey Smith. That focus applies in his personal life, as well as to Florida Gulf Coast University.

"FGCU created so many opportunities for me that I really feel it's important for me to give back to the university and to the communities that I live in and build in," says Smith, a project manager with Suffolk Construction in Tampa.

He has worked on projects ranging from \$1 million to more than \$75 million, including at FGCU.

Over the years, he has traveled to Guatemala with the FGCU nursing program, as their engineering support, supported the establishment of FGCU's student chapter of Habitat for Humanity and volunteered for the organization, and tutored middle school students in math, science and history.

He's also been active with the American Society of Civil Engineering, the College of Engineering's Civil and Environmental Advisory Committee, served on the FGCU Alumni Association Board of Directors, and Lee County Public School's Advanced Placement Capstone Academy.

In recommending him for the award, Smith's supervisor, Josh Christensen, says, "We strongly value our relationship with FGCU, and graduates like Corey only make that bond tighter and more valuable as we continue to recruit highly skilled graduates like Corey to our company."



## Robert Sorenson, '12

*Human Performance*

*Marieb College of Health & Human Sciences*

Robert Sorenson took on a new and important role with FGCU after receiving his bachelor's degree in Human Performance in 2012.

Since then, he has supported

the Exercise Science and the Experiential Learning programs by mentoring students in their internships.

As the director of wellness at Moorings Park Retirement

Community in Naples,

he has developed the facility into a sought-after

internship site. He has also

become an adjunct professor

within the Exercise Science program.

Those are just a few of the reasons why he was nominated for the Marieb College of Health & Human Services' 2022 Soaring Eagles Award by Barbara Tymczynsyn, the program's academic coordinator of clinical education.

"It's very humbling to be recognized for personal growth and identified specifically by the university," Sorenson says. "In my professional career, I've found a real niche environment where I've been able to thrive and I attribute much of that to my schooling at Florida Gulf Coast University and the Human Performance program, now Exercise Science; that really instilled professional behaviors in me."

Post-FGCU, he went on to earn a master's in gerontology from Nova Southeastern, in Fort Lauderdale, and a doctorate of education in health professions from A.T. Still University, in Kirksville, Missouri.

Sorenson credits his FGCU education with creating the foundation for his professional achievements.

"All the growth I've had as a leader, all the growth I've experienced through the organization where I work is because of my FGCU experience, in particular, the program I went through."



## Andrew Townsend, '18

*Management*

*Lutgart College of Business*

Receiving the 2022 Lutgart College of Business Soaring Eagle Award has been a surreal experience for Andrew Townsend.

"I'm blown away by it," the Fort Myers resident says. "I knew I was nominated, but I also am very aware that there are a lot of other successful people in business and management positions who've graduated from FGCU and received the award. I'm very humbled by it. I'm very grateful. I think it's one of the biggest accomplishments of my life and I'm very proud of it."

Townsend co-owns the Cattysack Café in Gulf Coast Town Center. The business serves coffee, pastries, beer and wine, but the main attraction is the opportunity to commune with adoptable cats and kittens in a separate room. He partnered with Gulf Coast Humane Society to help more than 1,000 rescue cats find homes in just the last year.

Cattysack General Manager

Maureen McLaughlin

nominated Townsend for the award, crediting him with starting a business to help the Southwest Florida community, including partnering with other area businesses.

"He works hard to ensure the business thrives every day and has made waves even beyond Fort Myers," she adds. "Gulf Coast Humane Society has pulled shelter cats from as far as Orlando and Sebring to bring to Cattysack to find better lives. In just a few months Andrew's business has exceeded expectations and I am sure he will continue to do so." ■





## COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

### Alumni leading fight against hunger and homelessness

Grads find common cause, careers at Community Cooperative

BY KAREN BOOTH

**F**LORIDA GULF Coast University's founders understood that community service is a profoundly transformative experience that enriches lives as well as learning.

Service-learning, a core component of FGCU's curriculum and values, is the means by which students learn the why and how of community service — a learn-by-doing model woven into the university's fabric since its inception. First-year students or lower-level transfers must complete 80 hours of service-learning as part of their graduation requirement, while those admitted as upper-level

transfers must complete 40 hours. For some students, service is firmly rooted in their DNA; for others, it's a whole new journey of discovery.

Not surprisingly, seven FGCU alumni for whom service is central to their lives now work at Community Cooperative in Fort Myers, an organization committed to eliminating hunger and homelessness in Lee County. Eagle undergrads often work alongside them through internships and service-learning opportunities.

#### **Stefanie Ink Edwards** ( '08, Marketing ) Chief Executive Officer

Stefanie Ink Edwards was appointed chief executive officer in June 2021 after



**Stefanie  
Ink Edwards**

seven years with the organization. "Community Cooperative is a grassroots nonprofit organization founded nearly four decades ago by concerned citizens who realized there were people in our community who were going hungry," she said.

"Today we specialize in a holistic approach, offering education and resources to those who are experiencing food insecurity or are on the brink of homelessness," she says. "We look to not only meet the



**LEFT: FGCU alumni working at Community Cooperative include, from left, Hoyuky Pec, Blair Fretwell, Kate Major, Tami Holliday, Grisel Brewster and John Roberts.**

**RIGHT: In 2021 alone, Community Cooperative assisted more than 42,226 Lee County residents, providing more than 2 million pounds of food to neighbors in need.**

immediate need of making sure someone isn't hungry, but help determine why and what resources they may need to help a person onto the path to success."

But that's just one piece. The organization also operates Meals on Wheels, Sam's Community Café and Kitchen, Social Services and Education Resource Center and the Community Market. Programs are supported by philanthropy and grants from community partners including United Way and Lee County.

Community Cooperative's impact is powerful. In Lee County, one in six residents need food assistance. In 2021 alone, the cooperative assisted more than 42,226 Lee County residents, providing more than 2 million pounds of food to neighbors in need. To accomplish this herculean task, the cooperative relies on the help of volunteers who logged more than 32,000 hours.

Edwards acknowledges she might be a bit biased, but says she loves working with alums. "They're well-rounded individuals, hardworking, talented and dedicated to this community and I am proud to work alongside them."

### **Kate Major ('14, Social Work)** **Social Work and Education Manager**

Kate Major is a difference maker. Her journey began as a child at the side of her grandmother. "I credit my grandmother for teaching me the importance of community, and I give credit to FGCU for their service-learning program, their energy and the many volunteer opportunities."

While at FGCU, Major interned at the Community Cooperative, helping with special events and engaging in community outreach. She loved the experience and

stayed on for one year after graduation. She then accepted a social worker position in a private practice for a couple of years, worked for Lee Health for a bit and, finally, in October 2021 found her way back to Community Cooperative.

"I needed the time to grow and find my roots, the time to realize how lucky I was to be at the Community Cooperative," Major says. "I'm grateful for the community I live in and passionate about the work I do. I feel like I make a difference here. I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be."

Major supervises FGCU alumni **John Roberts**, ('18, *Social Work*), homeless care social worker, and **Hoyuky Pec** ('20, *Social Work*), family and elder care social worker; and, together with Pec, mentors Leticia Martinez, one of several FGCU interns.

### **Leticia Martinez ('22, Social Work) FGCU Intern**

While Martinez had performed community service before engaging with the service-learning program at FGCU, she said that interning at Community Cooperative has broadened her knowledge base.

"Honestly, at first I was a little intimidated working with the homeless population. I'd never done that before. But you learn as you go. Over time, I've developed clients of my own, and I learned a lot from them. It is an eye-opening experience," Martinez says.

She has nothing but good things to say about FGCU's service-learning requirement. "It's a good thing to do regardless of your major. Everything I've learned is applicable in some way to my future goal, which is to work with children in my community.

"I've always had a passion for doing the best I can for my community. I grew up in Immokalee," she says. "There's a lot of poverty there, and I'd like to work with the children. My internship has taught me lots that will be useful to me in my career."

### **Blair Fretwell ('05, Financing and Accounting) Chief Financial Officer**

Blair Fretwell had service in her blood. Prior to joining Community Cooperative in 2013, she worked for several years for a private CPA firm. However, when the CFO position opened at Community Cooperative, she made the transition. "It's still numbers, but the numbers I deal



with on a day-to-day basis make a positive impact on someone's life."

Prior to attending FGCU, Fretwell had a solid base of community service, having volunteered with Jobs Daughters, a Masonic-affiliated youth organization for girls and young women focused on confidence building and skills training. She, too, welcomed FGCU's service-learning requirement.

"I love the mission of Community Cooperative," she says. "It's really opened my eyes to the needs of the community. I believe it's so important to give back, so people don't feel forgotten.

Rounding out FGCU's cohort of alumni at Community Cooperative are **Tami Holliday** ('12, *Legal Studies*), community relations manager; and **Grisel Brewster** ('12, *Legal Studies*) director of development.

"Meeting people where they are is instilled in us," Major says. "It is important to have grace when working with individuals and agencies. Talking with students, clients and our partners, and encouraging others is the only way to feel fulfilled in daily life. It's a very humbling experience." ■

CLASS OF 2014

## Alumna overcomes Lyme disease, launches foundation to help others

BY NINA BARBERO

**W**ENDY PHILLIPS was getting married. She also thought she was dying.

"I was sleeping 16, 17 hours a day," she says. "I started developing heart palpitations, seizure-like activity, neuropathy. I went to the ER nine times for these different symptoms. I was just searching, trying to figure out what was wrong with me."

Phillips noticed a strange set of persistent symptoms three years previously when she was a seemingly healthy FGCU student studying biology. It began with memory loss and fatigue.

She graduated with her bachelor's in biology in 2014 and moved on to graduate school at California State University-Long Beach to study biochemistry. When she moved across the country, the strange symptoms moved with her. During the next two years, Phillips dealt with rage, back pain and obsessive-compulsive thoughts.

"It was becoming really debilitating and I ended up leaving my graduate program after two years," Phillips says. She moved home to Florida.

By the time she was 26, Phillips had been sick for four years. She'd seen cardiologists, rheumatologists, neurologists, allergists and more. No one could tell her what was wrong. Family members and doctors suggested it could be tied to anxiety.

Finally, in 2017, a nurse told Phillips about a patient she'd seen the year before with similar symptoms who had been diagnosed with the tick-borne illness Lyme disease. The nurse referred Phillips to Boynton Beach physician Jody Greenfield, who started Phillips on antibiotics before

her blood test came back because of the severity of her symptoms. When the results did return, Phillips was diagnosed with Lyme disease.

When people and animals are bitten by a deer tick carrying a certain bacterium, they can develop Lyme disease. While it's more commonly found in the Northeast than in Florida, Greenfield says the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is finding ticks carrying the bacterium in more and more states. Greenfield frequently treats patients who have traveled from other parts of the

"With ticks, you have to brush up against them," Greenfield says. "They don't fly, they don't fall out of trees, they're usually in tall grass or leaf litter. Ticks are tiny, so you may not see them."

He says the best ways to prevent tick bites are to avoid being in wooded areas, to spray your body with insect repellent containing DEET if you will be in the woods, and to check for ticks on your skin after coming indoors.

A decade after her own tick bites, Phillips uses her story to help others recovering from Lyme disease.

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**"We just want to fundraise as much as possible so we can help more people."**

WENDY PHILLIPS, LYME TREATMENT FOUNDATION  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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country or who work with pets.

"I had two patients who were dog groomers and the dogs came from different parts of the country," he said. "Ticks were on the dog, crawled onto them, gave it to them and then they got pretty ill."

One of the aspects that Greenfield says makes Lyme disease hard to diagnose is that infected people can exhibit a wide variety of symptoms, which might not appear immediately after the tick bite. "Some people can get symptoms the next day, some people can get symptoms a year later," Greenfield says. "It's important that people are aware of it. It's becoming more prevalent in the country."

In Phillips' case, she recalls brushing ticks off her legs while visiting Vermont in 2011 — two years before she noticed symptoms.

"It was such a battle," Phillips says. "A year into treatment I started to feel better and I thought, 'Oh my gosh, what if I couldn't have afforded to see a Lyme disease specialist?'"

In 2019, she launched and became executive director of the Lyme Treatment Foundation, a volunteer-run nonprofit organization that helps patients in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Germany pay for Lyme-disease testing and treatments. Since its launch, the foundation has awarded more than \$425,000 in grants to people with Lyme disease and related tick-borne illnesses. Individual grants may be awarded up to \$4,000.

"We've had more than 700 applications," Phillips says.

The foundation has also partnered

with two diagnostic labs that offer discounted testing to grant recipients.

Phillips is excited to be funding a research project, “New pharmacological agents to treat persistent infections,” in England at The University of Oxford in collaboration with The University of Leicester.

The former biology student says she never imagined being on the funding, rather than the research, side of a project such as this one.

“I always thought I was going to work for a pharmaceutical company and do clinical trials, but I guess you never know what you’re going to be doing,” Phillips says. Although she’s not using biology the way she imagined when studying at FGCU, Phillips says her science education gave her a strong foundation to understand the research and medical conversations she has at the foundation.

The foundation has given Phillips experiences she never expected to have, such as meeting with Florida senators Rick Scott and Marco Rubio to discuss increasing federal funding for Lyme disease.

She also has partnered with a celebrity who publicly overcame Lyme disease, pop singer Avril Lavigne. The Avril Lavigne Foundation provides some of the donations that fund the Lyme Treatment Foundation’s grants. In October 2020, Phillips recorded a video to be played during Avril Lavigne’s live streamed concert supporting the Avril Lavigne Foundation.

“It wasn’t in person, but it was really amazing,” Phillips says, adding that speaking at events usually sparks an increase in donations to the foundation, which is supported by small businesses and individual contributions.

“The work is never-ending for fundraising,” Phillips says. “We just want to fundraise as much as possible so we can help more people.” ■



## FOR MORE INFO

Visit [lymetreatmentfoundation.org](https://lymetreatmentfoundation.org)



## University wide showcase brings the community to FGCU

**F**OLK DANCING AND DRUMMING, computer coding and coping mandalas, face painting, basketball and a poetry slam were among the hundreds of activities that took place on FGCU Day, when Florida Gulf Coast University kicked off its 25th anniversary celebration.

The day-long event, which took place Feb. 12, combined the annual alumni Homecoming, Eagle Expo for prospective students and their parents, plus a fun-filled celebration for the whole community. Although exact numbers were hard to come by, an estimated 4,000 people visited campus.

After a strong showing for the Alumni 5k, a competitive pancake cook-off saw eight top university administrators flipping flapjacks before a cheering crowd. FGCU Baseball Coach Dave Tollett emerged victorious, followed by what contest judge President Mike Martin declared “a seven-way tie for second.”

As faculty, staff, students and friends of FGCU fanned out across campus to seven unique neighborhoods, there was music and discovery around every corner. King, the gentle Eastern Indigo snake and wildlife ambassador, was surely a star of the show with two performances that drew large crowds.

Lutgert College of Business showcased its premier programs, offering challenging games like Plinko with accounting majors and the Game of Life with supply chain majors.

The U.A. Whitaker College of Engineering team constructed a green building sculpted out of cans with “FGCU” in blue, and later donated the contributions to the Campus Food Pantry. The College of Education offered relaxing coloring activities, and education students provided insight into what it’s like to prepare for their careers.

Student and alumni entrepreneurs showcased their businesses at the newly opened high-tech learning facility, Lucas Hall. Research was on display with the Vester Scientific Dive team and their vessel, alongside an exhibit of coming attractions from The Water School. Marieb College of Health & Human Services offered health checks and tours of their facilities.

The day ended with well-attended alumni tailgates for two spirited Eagle basketball games against Stetson University.

— *Katy Hennig*



PHOTOS BY JACK GEISSINGER, JAMES GRECO, SASHA MINSKY, ASHLEY PAPP AND SAM ROWERO





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**FGCU DAY provided fun for everyone**  
**See pages 62-63**

PHOTO BY JAMES GRECO