



# FGCU 360

FGCU360.COM

**Men's golf shines**

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**Helping hands**

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**Our new logo**

## **GROWING INFLUENCE**

**FGCU STUDENTS, ALUMNI HELPING  
PRESERVE FLORIDA FLORA**



FALL 2022

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PHOTO BY JAMES GRECO





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# FIRST

## COMMUNITY

### Global Medical Brigades makes a world of difference

BY DREW STERWALD

**A**FTER SPRING FINALS ended in May, most students kicked back for a post-semester breather or headed home for summer jobs. Not the 28 Eagles and two faculty members who embarked on a humanitarian mission. Braving chaotic group international travel and steamy Central American temperatures, they brought health care supplies and services to communities in rural Panama that lack such basic human needs.

The Global Medical Brigades' May 9-15 expedition was no summer vacation abroad. It was the climax of months of training, team building and fundraising. About \$60,000 was collected for travel and medical supplies. And members were raring to reboot the troupe's international excursions.

"With COVID, the brigades kept getting canceled," said Andrew Parra, a junior psychology major from Estero and vice president of this passionate posse of good doers. "We did some things over Zoom during COVID, but it just wasn't the same. This year, we were finally given the opportunity to travel abroad and were really excited. There was nothing I would rather have been doing."

The Global Brigades is an international health and sustainable development agency connecting university students with communities in need worldwide.

Student volunteers gain professional training by collaborating with host community members to improve and sustain the quality of life in the regions where they serve.



"Every morning, we would wake up at 6 a.m. and drive 45 minutes to a rural area near where we were staying," said Serena Truong, brigade president, Honors College member and a senior nursing major from Naples. "There were always people already waiting in line in the heat by the time we got there."

The intrepid team helped about 400 individuals from two weeks to 90 years old at grassroots clinics offering

general medical and dental screenings, basic medications and supplies like toothbrushes. Some of the more common conditions they noted: high blood pressure, diabetes, iron deficiency and tooth decay.

Throughout the journey, volunteers worried that COVID-19 would hamper their efforts and mar the experience, but they returned without a single positive case.

As with past trips to Nicaragua and other countries, Panama opened many students' eyes to living standards most Americans take for granted and disparities in health care around the world. The individuals they serve may not have access to or be able to afford dental care, for instance, so students may need to show them how to use the toothbrushes they hand out.

"For many of them, it's a shock. It's their first experience of doing medical care in the middle of the jungle," said their faculty adviser, Courtney Satkoski, an instructor in the Department of Integrated Studies. "They're using dated equipment. It's really hot and really rainy. There's not a lot of modern conveniences. They're pushed against the wall and have to use critical-thinking skills. At first, you see their apprehension, but two or three days later they're really leaping in and overcoming the challenges."

Students also learn the value of teamwork, said Parra, an Honors College member whose long-term goal



“

**It's a great way to be exposed to the world of medicine and service to others. We help people find their passion and grow as individuals.**

”

ANDREW PARRA, VICE PRESIDENT,  
FGCU GLOBAL MEDICAL BRIGADES

is to become a neurosurgeon. The brigade welcomes Eagles studying nursing, health sciences, pre-medical disciplines and other healthcare-related fields. Starting in the fall before the spring trip, members practice taking vital signs, conducting triage and providing basic health care information events such as a pop-up clinic in Immokalee, an underserved community in Collier County.

When their hiking boots hit the ground in Panama, students couldn't count on having hot water – or sometimes running water, period. Even electricity couldn't be taken for granted. They traversed mountainous, jungle-like terrain on 12-to 15-hour days, getting by on adrenaline and the dopamine-fueled high of helping people in need.

“There was one day when a hill was so steep, we had to get out of the bus and walk up,” Parra said. “Seeing brigaders grow and form relationships not only with each other but with community members was the most rewarding part for me. It's a great way to be exposed to the world of medicine and service to others. We help people find their passion and grow as individuals.”

Witnessing that transformation throughout the year is the most rewarding part for Kerry Lee, an associate biology professor who has been involved with Global Medical Brigades at FGCU since 2016. Initially, some students sign on just to collect an experience that looks good on a grad school application or CV, she said.

“Then you see a student who really grabs a hold of it and makes it their own,” Lee said. “They feel pride in the end. It hits you in the heart.” ■



From top, clockwise: FGCU Medical Brigades members sightsee in Panama Oeste. Global Medical Brigades President Serena Truong measures a patient's blood sugar with assistance from Dr. Mei Liang as other team members work with patients.

## STUDENT SUCCESS

## FGCU software engineering student brings skills to Microsoft

BY ANNIE HUBBELL

**M**OVING ACROSS the country to start a job at a mega-corporation could make any working professional sweat. But for Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU) student Katarya Johnson-Williams, it was the opportunity she had been waiting for. A few days into summer, the rising junior moved to Seattle to begin her dream internship at Microsoft.

Johnson-Williams is a software engineering major and has always had her sights on Microsoft. As a sophomore, she snagged the company's explorer internship, which is targeted toward freshman and sophomore college students. For 12

weeks, she worked on the Native Mobile Experiences Team within Microsoft Power Apps, the business application that allows users to build forms and apps with little or no code.

"I love being at Microsoft. It's my dream company," said Johnson-Williams. "There are so many different organizations within Microsoft, and they all have such a big impact. I love my organization because our clients are businesses, so you get to help hundreds or thousands of people at once."

Johnson-Williams' drive and determination did not spark overnight. Her love for software started at age 11, during a coding day event in middle school. She knew that was the path she would pursue in college.

"I think it's so cool that as a software engineer, you get to create things that help make people's lives easier, and millions of people could potentially end up using it. I just love how powerful software is."

Despite starting at FGCU in the middle of a global pandemic, Johnson-Williams took advantage of every opportunity, including the U.A. Whitaker College of Engineering's Bootcamp for Engineering and Mathematics (BEaM).

BEaM is open to incoming FGCU first-year students majoring in engineering or construction management. The 10-day prep program helps develop math proficiency and study skills to prepare students for the engineering and construction management coursework.



Katarya Johnson-Williams

PHOTO COURTESY OF KATARYA JOHNSON-WILLIAMS



"After I got accepted to FGCU, [the U.A. Whitaker College of Engineering] sent a letter out about BEaM, and I signed up because I wasn't able to take computer science classes in high school," Johnson-Williams explained. "I saw this as an awesome opportunity to meet people in my college."

During the program, students connect with others in their field, meet program professors and get comfortable with the campus. This summer, BEaM was held in person for the first time since 2019.

"The program gives students a jump-start before starting classes," said Julie Rose, outreach specialist for the engineering college. "They make connections within the campus community and their programs to help them navigate the college experience and provide them with a sense of belonging. We presented Katarya with the resources, and she not only took advantage of them but created a space for herself to excel academically and personally."

Johnson-Williams believes the BEaM program served as a springboard to her campus involvement. She is an engineering ambassador for the 2022-23 academic year, president of the Resident Housing Association, a two-year learning assistant and served as vice president of the Software Engineering Club during the 2021-22 academic year. She is also involved with several engineering associations on campus, including the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers, the Society of Women Engineers and the National Society of Black Engineers.

Her advice to incoming freshman or current students is to take advantage of all opportunities on campus and not to be afraid of getting involved.

"Step out of your comfort zone. I know it's hard and can be intimidating, but everyone feels the same way," she said.

Fast forward to the start of her junior year, and Johnson-Williams is excited to apply what she learned at Microsoft to her classes. Her ultimate goal is to return to the company as a full-time employee. She learned in her last few weeks as an intern that she will be receiving a return offer to be a Microsoft software engineering intern next summer.

"I am excited to get back to school and start learning more advanced stuff, so I can [go back to Microsoft] and keep contributing." ■

## BY THE NUMBERS

### Academic Building 9

The FGCU community celebrated the opening of Academic Building 9, aka The Water School, this fall. Rising four sparkling stories, it's the largest academic building on campus in square footage. "With so much glass, it really reflects the environment – literally and figuratively," says executive director Greg Tolley. It also doubles the research space available for faculty and students on campus." ■

**\$58**  
**MILLION**  
Construction cost

  
**236 SEATS**  
in largest meeting room

**60** graduate students based in the school



**15-20%**  
of power from solar energy



**58,600**  
square feet  
research/lab space



**1,400**  
Acrylic tetrahedrons representing water molecules in "Omnis," the atrium sculpture by Brian Brush

**114,414** square feet



**\$10 MILLION**  
Will get your name on the school

## SPOTLIGHT

# As student veterans at FGCU, united they stand

BY TRACY INCARDONE

**T**HANK YOU FOR your service.” It is a phrase many have said, and many have heard. Veterans returning home from active duty are revered for their selflessness and dedication and valued for their work ethic, discipline, leadership and mental toughness. However, the transition for veterans, specifically those returning to college to pursue academic goals, can be challenging.

Following the 20-year war in Afghanistan, universities across the country saw an influx of students returning home from military service. Most veteran students returning to the classroom were older, with a world of experience, and many colleges were not adequately prepared to accommodate their unique needs.

Student Veterans of America was established in 2008 to connect veteran students with other students who served and help with the transition into their next phase of life. In 2022, FGCU’s new Military Student Success (MVS) department helped FGCU student veterans establish an SVA chapter on campus. This chapter has already made a great impact for students, families and the community.

“This community has been overwhelmingly supportive of what we are trying to do,” said Ronny Fray Regato, chapter president. Through multiple initiatives and group events, the SVA offers student veterans a community to create meaningful relationships with other veterans, networking and career opportunities, and activities and initiatives to enhance their time on campus.

According to Armando Hernandez, a 2014 exercise science graduate, these initiatives are a tremendous opportunity and invaluable to veteran students. Having been a veteran student himself, he



**Ronny Fray Regato president of Student Veteran's Association, at Operation Strides.**

knows transitioning to student life can be extremely difficult.

“I suffered from sleeplessness, nightmares, social isolation. My goal was to just get done what had to get done and get out,” Hernandez said.

That’s when he turned to exercise. What started as a small habit developed into his life’s passion. Upon graduation, Hernandez helped pilot a program for Home Base, a free 90-day health and wellness program for veterans and their families, in partnership with FGCU.

“Exercise is the least stigmatizing way into self-care,” Hernandez said. “It is very difficult to convince someone to see a clinician, but you can convince them to work out with fellow vets.” Over the last eight years, Home Base has helped 400-500 veterans, and Hernandez credits much of the success to the partnership with FGCU.

Home Base and the SVA are just two of the many opportunities FGCU offers

veteran students. In spring 2022, the group assisted the Office of Military and Veteran Success to host the first SWFL Veterans Expo hosted by FGCU with CareerSource to help spread awareness of local resources and opportunities available to post 9/11 veterans. This expo included local and national employers such as

Lee Health, Arthrex, Gartner and Amazon Military.

In August, the group hosted a day at Operation Strides, partnering veteran students with horses to work on horsemanship skills, build interconnectedness and promote communication and confidence. The SVA chapter kicked off the fall semester with an afternoon of outdoor games and networking called Battle of the Branches.

One current veteran student, Carlos Machado, said, “One of my favorite aspects of being a member of SVA here at FGCU is the exposure to diverse experiences, volunteer opportunities and people met in the process. There is always a social event taking place for veterans, families and supporters of veterans on and off campus.”

With plans to host monthly group activities, a 5k and other events throughout the year, the SVA chapter is not slowing down. They plan to continue to connect veterans, students and the community to enhance the experiences of these heroes who have already given so much. ■

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## RESULTS ARE IN: THE EAGLE (HEAD) HAS LANDED AS THE NEW LOGO

When votes for a new university logo came in, the Eagle Nation overwhelmingly flocked to FGCU Athletics' familiar feathered friend.

An almost yearlong effort resulted in FGCU's first logo redesign, replacing the original O-shaped eagle symbol with its slender outstretched wings, which lacks visual impact and adaptability in today's digital media. In its place will be a three-quarters view of FGCU's ownable Athletics' eagle head facing forward with bold sans serif letters spelling out FGCU and there will be a version spelling out Florida Gulf Coast University.

"As FGCU continues to evolve, the university needs a logo that captures its youth and vitality, distinguishes it from its peers and competitors, and generates

pride and a connection to the university among all members of the FGCU community,"

says Alice Wheelwright, associate vice president of University Marketing & Communications. "By



incorporating the unique eagle head from Athletics into the university's institutional mark, FGCU leverages the equity and affinity for this mark in the marketplace."

The logo redesign committee, composed of representatives from across the university, formed in January 2022. Members worked closely with the marketing and branding firm, Ologie.

After conducting exhaustive research on the university and its brand architecture, including several focus groups of diverse stakeholders, Ologie's creative team came up with three options. Then constituents affiliated with FGCU were asked to vote. The Regional Economic Research Institute at FGCU conducted the survey.

The winner was a strong favorite over the other two options: a green eagle head spiraling into a blue wave and a white eagle head with green eyes and feathers.

However you ranked them, the athletics logo rose to the top. When it came to first-place votes, it garnered 61.5% of the 7,183 votes of current students, alumni, faculty members, staff and others. Logo 2 (green head) gathered 21.1%, while logo 1 (white head) got 17.4% of the vote. Among the words voters used to describe the winner: "clean," "bold," "modern" and "appealing."

The new logo, and accompanying brand architecture, will be phased in through the winter and spring 2023. ■

## LOOKING FOR CLASS NOTES?

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

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Andrew Durso and King,  
an Eastern indigo snake

## CUTTING EDGE

# Beating the bite: FGCU professor's algorithm aids in identifying snakes

BY ANNIE HUBBELL

**I**MAGINE BEING BITTEN by a snake. In the moments of chaos that might ensue, the snake slithers back into the bushes and you are rushed to the hospital. Would you know what kind

of snake bit you? Would you remember what the reptile looked like?

If your answer to either question is “no,” you’re not alone. But these are questions healthcare workers must answer as they determine a course of treatment. And they

aren’t uncommon. There are over 500,000 snakebite encounters worldwide each year.

“Snakes are diverse across the world. A lot of them look similar to each other, so it can be really hard to tell them apart,” explained Andrew Durso, assistant



professor in the Department of Biological Sciences at FGCU. “Most snakes can’t hurt you, but 20% of snakes worldwide are venomous.”

As a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Geneva in Switzerland, Durso joined a team to develop Snake ID, an algorithm to automatically identify snakes in photos.

“We wanted to make one tiny contribution and make it easier for doctors and patients, or anybody involved in the treatment of a snakebite, to correctly identify the snake involved,” said Durso. “In some cases that might influence the treatment that you give. Different anti-venoms are specific to different types of snakes.”

Think of the algorithm like Shazam, the app that listens to a certain song and identifies the name and artist within seconds. Snake ID allows a person to upload a photo of the reptile and add the location where it was taken. The program will then comb through what it has learned from studying more than 725,000 photos and generate a ranked list of possible snake species.

Part of the algorithm’s success is owed to the human eye and crowdsourcing to help identify snakes from photos.

“One big way we tested these

algorithms is that we compared them to the performance of people. We did that by asking people on the internet to help us identify snakes,” explained Durso. “We compared the performance between the two. The punchline: the computer version is better in some circumstances, but humans are still better in other circumstances.”

This is timely research. The World Health Organization (WHO) launched a strategic plan in 2019 to decrease the number of deaths and disabilities caused by venomous snakebites by half by 2030. Durso and his colleagues hope to help the WHO meet its goal while advancing the technology. The next step in their journey to improve treatment options for snakebite victims is turning the Snake ID algorithm into a mobile app.

Another goal of the research is to create better epidemiological data on snakebites.

“We don’t know which species of snakes are biting people in many parts of the world because it rarely gets recorded and reported,” explained Durso.

The research is an international effort made up of a core team of people in different parts of the world. In 2017, Isabelle Bolon, a veterinarian and researcher with the Institute of Global

Health at the University of Geneva, reached out to Durso after seeing he was one of the administrators of the Facebook “Snake Identification” group. The online forum contained a large volume of photos and identifications. Durso joined the Institute of Global Health in 2018.

“His expertise and experience in herpetology, snake identification, and his global network have opened unique opportunities for snake photo gathering,” explained Bolon. “Thanks to his contribution, we were able to build a massive and global photo repository of venomous and non-venomous snakes gathering existing images from museums, personal collections, and open online biodiversity platforms based on citizen science and crowdsourcing.”

In the more than 725,000 photos, 3,000 species of snakes are represented. There are still 781 photo-less species on their “most wanted” list. The team encourages citizens, naturalists and photographers to submit photos and data, especially those species that are missing, to online archives including The Reptile Database, iNaturalist and HerpMapper. ■

**Durso uses Snake ID, an algorithm that can identify snakes through photos.**



Users are encouraged to upload photos through the Snake ID app to fill in species on the “most-wanted” list.





WGPU

## Virtual book club and Harry Potter conjure inclusive connections

BY DAYNA HARPSTER

**I**F YOU CAN'T TRUST THE jelly beans at Diagon Alley, can you trust the ice cream?

Hard to say. What you can trust, it seems, is the power of both food and Harry Potter – who with his fictional wizarding friends visits the cobblestoned shopping alley in London – to bring young people together. In fact, that was the goal of the WGPU Move to Include Virtual Book Club featuring “Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s

Stone,” the first book in J.K. Rowling’s enormously popular series. The club began meeting by Zoom in February and March 2022. When finished with the first book in the series, members decided to stay on and meet over the second one – “Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets.”

At a meeting in July, club members joked about the palatability of Diagon Alley ice cream – since the jelly beans were flavored earwax, rotten egg and worse – and also shared their real-life favorite ice

cream flavors in the Zoom meeting’s chat function.

Their confectionary choices were fairly similar to one another – think vanilla, birthday cake, cookie dough – but chances are the club members’ lives were not. Most participants were recruited statewide by the Center for Autism and Related Disorders and others through FGCU’s Office of Service-Learning. The point was a “level playing field” for all members. Those words were so important they



appeared regularly in the “Muggle mail” they received from book group organizers.

The original spell that yielded the book club was cast by some pre-pandemic video and podcast workshopping in the WGCU studios that paired WGCU staff with local young people with intellectual or developmental disabilities and their peers, including members of the local Best Buddies chapter.

The Harry Potter book club, conceived by college friends Jennifer Mackler of Lee County Schools and literacy coach Kelly Ussery of the Fort Mill School District in Fort Mill, South Carolina, promised to combine the educational and diversity-minded qualities of the workshops with a mainstreaming element. For this workshop series, many of the participants are young adults on the autism spectrum and others are student peers from FGCU. They were fairly distinct groups otherwise not likely to interact. But continuing isolation – both pandemic-related and also an issue for some autistic people – combined with the technology that has become common yielded the idea of a fairly equalizing group experience: a virtual book club.

An anonymous donor to WGCU liked the idea, too, donated \$30,000, and a program began to take shape.

“Instructors told me that the book club made everyone equal, whether they are an FGCU student peer, a young adult on the autism spectrum, an instructor, everyone participated equally,” said Amy Shumaker, WGCU associate general manager for content. “It broke the isolation young adults were feeling – through the magic of Harry Potter.”

“The Harry Potter Book Club was such an amazing experience that allowed me to connect with various individuals across Southwest Florida. I enjoyed interacting with friends online, building connections, and engaging in group activities each week,” said Morgan Calzon,

an FGCU occupational therapy graduate student who participated.

Based on a nine-week curriculum created by Mackler, who works with exceptional students locally, and Ussery, who works with students in South Carolina, the resulting virtual club not only had the dozen-or-so participants talking about the book but also conceiving creative projects that they then shared. One club member rewrote lyrics to a popular song that became about the series villain Voldemort.

Minor distractions at club members’ homes created conversations: dogs barked, cats hogged the webcam and siblings popped in and out as participants met virtually as a group and then in breakout rooms for Harry Potter trivia contests and other discussions.

Discussions began on club meeting nights and continued during the week in new connections with one another, instructors said. Participants easily found common ground.

“I feel like we always go towards food!” co-leader Ussery pointed out that July meeting night.

True that. For the last meeting of “Chamber of Secrets,” club members each received an “Unofficial Harry Potter Cookbook” from WGCU and made a dish of their choosing. They sent photos earlier or showed onscreen on meeting night their cream custard, chewy ginger biscuits, pancakes and other Potter-inspired delights.

“I wonder if there’s a recipe for chocolate frogs?” one asked. Maybe the answer will be in the next book ... or the next. The club began meeting in October about book three, “Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban.”

“We know this is something special,” said Shumaker. “Feedback from the group and parents has been wonderful. WGCU is sharing the book club information with the entire PBS system so more stations can replicate it or something like it in their own communities.” ■

## UPDATES:

### NEW FACES IN PLACE AT WGCU

**Mike Braun** joined the news staff as managing editor in late August, following many years in various management, reporting, editing and design roles at The News-Press. Braun grew up in Illinois and Ohio, graduated from Youngstown State University and worked at newspapers in that area for 25 years before moving to Southwest Florida. He has reported, written and edited news stories on virtually every topic, from sports to traffic crashes to hurricanes. “I am looking forward to working with the dedicated and stalwart staff at WGCU and enhancing our coverage,” Braun said.

**Bryant Monteilh** is WGCU FM’s new midday host. He has been a multimedia anchor, reporter, writer and documentarian for 18 years. A former Marine, Monteilh earned an MFA from Governors State University and a bachelor’s degree from the University of California, Berkeley. He is an active member of the National Association of Black Journalists and the Society of Professional Journalists.

**Jess Trueblood**, graphic designer, began working with WGCU in 2015 as a freelancer. She previously worked in the print industry for several local and national firms and holds a degree in graphic communications from Illinois State University.

**Scott Miller** joined WGCU in April as the associate general manager of business partnerships and corporate investments. For the past 10 years, Miller had a management role with iHeart Media in Southwest Florida. Prior to that, he worked in sales and management in Georgia, Virginia, Pennsylvania and West Virginia for iHeart and Channel Communications. A native of Toledo, Ohio, Miller is a veteran of the U.S. Coast Guard and attended Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia. ■

# ARTS







She's able to transfer skills from one studio to the next and bring fresh perspective to her work, no matter what material she's working with.

ANDY OWEN, ART PROFESSOR



## CERAMICS

# Senior moment: Capstone show a peak experience for art grads

BY DREW STERWALD

**P**ower drills buzz and hammers bang in bursts of activity fueled by excitement, anxiety and caffeine in the Wasmer Art Gallery at Florida Gulf Coast University. It's April 18, 2022, and graduating art majors have begun installing their senior projects, the crowning achievement of years of study and practice.

In three days, each of these 11 aspiring artists will unveil a collection of work they've been conceptualizing, documenting, critiquing, rethinking and fabricating since early January for their capstone class. Many have camped out in the Arts Complex studios into the wee hours, night after night, to finish ceramics, prints and paintings. On the exhibition's opening night, each senior will make brief remarks and field questions from a gallery packed with guests and classmates.

"We're all freaking – we all hate public speaking," Marcela Pulgarin says as she installs her multimedia project, "The Time I Inhabit," in a coveted gallery corner. "But I'm excited, too. I'll have heels on." An extra boost for her confidence, she means.

Pulgarin's collection includes 32 ceramic vessels displayed on pedestals – one for each year of her life. That

might be enough for one student's project, but she's also mounting drawings on paper on adjacent walls and hanging drawings on porcelain from the ceiling. It's a lot. She frets over the arrangement.

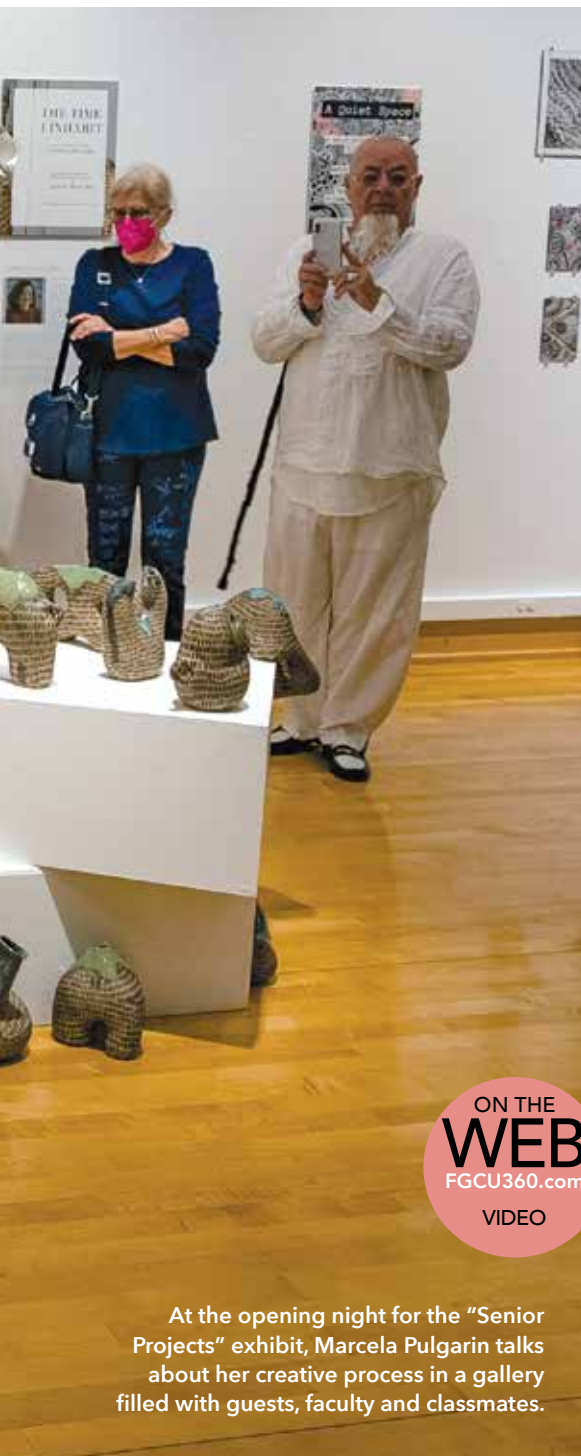
"I'm kind of hating it right now," she says, standing back. "There are little things you can only see when you install."

Maybe so. But in a few days, guests at the opening reception will not see the "little things" her self-critical eye catches. They will, in fact, snap up her drawings and purchase all but two of her ceramics

## The time she inhabits

The "Senior Projects" show presents an opportunity to spotlight the concepts and techniques art majors learned and their research into historical and contemporary artists. The course also is an introduction to the real world of an artist: producing a cohesive collection, mounting an exhibition, writing an artist's statement and designing a promotional poster. Pulgarin agreed to let FGC360 follow her progress throughout the spring semester for this story and a video posted on FGC360.com.

By mid-February, she has already been through a month's worth of meetings with classmates and faculty



ON THE  
**WEB**  
FGCU360.com  
VIDEO

At the opening night for the "Senior Projects" exhibit, Marcela Pulgarin talks about her creative process in a gallery filled with guests, faculty and classmates.



where proposals are evaluated, research and preliminary sketches or models are presented and critiques are offered. Students not only have to explain their creative process, but they must crunch numbers and budget time and money to produce their work. By the time they complete the course, each has created a 2-inch thick binder of documentation that will be preserved in the department's archives.

Pulgarin may have a head start on her classmates in some respects. She's been a gallery assistant at FGCU since spring 2019, notably working beside prominent Naples artist Ran Adler to produce his 2020 Wasmer installation, "Presence." Earlier this spring, she had four pieces selected for the annual juried student show — the fourth consecutive year her work was featured in the competitive show.

Along with her senior project, Pulgarin juggles work at Judith Liegeois Designs in Naples and home life with husband Enrique. They even managed to squeeze in buying their first house just before the senior show opened. This is the time she inhabits, a time of endings and beginnings that inspired her ceramic vessels. Her drawings, she explains, represent her youth in Barranquilla and Cali, Colombia; her hanging porcelain



**TOP:** Pulgarin lays coils of clay on top of each other, building height, pinching and turning to achieve the shapes she desires.

**ABOVE:** Pulgarin tried eight types of glazes before settling on one.

pieces, which resemble crumbled wads of paper, symbolize her transition and self-discovery as an American.

"I want to take ownership of my time and visually re-create the time-lapse I believe has made me who I am today," she says in her artist statement. "I didn't give much thought to time for the first 18 years of my life in Colombia, and when I did, all I wanted to do was to fast-forward. In 2007, I moved to the U.S. and ever since I've been exposed to new cultures and belief systems that have changed how I perceive the world, myself and especially time."

## Conversations in clay

In late February, Pulgarin turns sketches into test sculptures to see how the glazes she chose respond to the kiln's heat when they're fired. She lays coils of clay on top of each other, building height, pinching and turning to achieve the amorphous shapes she desires. Before coming to FGCU, she earned an associate degree in art but had never worked with clay.

"I like the possibilities of the medium," she says, moistening a handful with water. "I like the conversation. The clay is telling me what to do. You can express yourself with it, but you can also make functional things like cups and plates to use around the house."

By the time they're seniors, most art majors zero in on one medium — 2D or 3D, painting or ceramics. Pulgarin is different. She continually pushes herself to master the next thing, conceptually and technically, says Andy Owen, her printmaking professor. He uses her work as an example to inspire other students.

"She's able to transfer skills from one studio to the next and bring fresh perspective to her work, no matter what material she's working with," Owen says. "Some students have skills and don't have the imagination. Some have imagination, but their skills are not quite there. She has both."

## Strength under fire

In mid-March, four seniors compete for time firing ceramics in the slow-baking kilns outside the Arts Complex. Stakes are high. If it's heated too quickly, clay's residual moisture turns to steam and can cause the piece to crack or burst. The first firing transforms the object into a porous state for glazing before it's fired again and becomes a durable ceramic piece. Pulgarin has tried eight types of glazes before settling on one; she doesn't want to obscure or smear the small lines she's meticulously painted on them to symbolize moments of time.

"We're all pulling our hair out," she says. "We're going full speed, staying till midnight. One person goes out to get food and comes back. We're supporting



each other – ‘C’mon stay and get more done.’ ”

They’re gaining strength under fire, like the humble clay they transform into lasting art.

By the time opening night finally arrives, Pulgarin has worked through her dissatisfaction with her installation. “I had to walk out and cry a little.” She came back later and “stared it down until it worked.”

With each artist’s speech, cameras flash and the crowded gallery echoes with applause and supportive hoots.

**Pulgarin tinkers with the arrangement of her ceramic vessels in the Wasmer Art Gallery.**

Pulgarin poses for pictures with her mom and friends while Anica Sturdivant, the gallery’s assistant curator, shepherds a line of people around Pulgarin’s installation. They all want to purchase her work.

“I wasn’t really thinking about sales before. I didn’t intend for the vessels to be very functional – that wasn’t the point,” she says, reflecting on the night. “People responded really well. Honestly, I didn’t think that was going to happen.”

Since graduating last spring, Marcela Pulgarin traveled home to Colombia to visit family and continues working at Judith Liegeois Designs in Naples as she considers her next artistic pursuit. ■



## UPDATES:

### THEATRELAB TAKES ON TITANS OF TRAGEDY

Theatre students will tackle a pair of stage classics this year.

First up is “Antigone,” Sophocles’ enduring Greek tragedy of civil disobedience and, well, complicated family ties. The daughter of Oedipus and Oedipus’s mother, Antigone, faces death as punishment for defying her uncle, the king of Thebes, by burying her beloved brother, who had attacked the kingdom. The production will be directed by David Monagas, an adjunct in Integrated Studies, with performances Feb. 17-26 in the Art Complex’s TheatreLab.

Theatre Professor Barry Cavin will direct “Hamlet,” one of the most influential works of world literature and Shakespeare’s most popular and most produced play. It runs April 14-23.

Tickets for each show are \$10 for the public and \$7 for students. They can be purchased at [fgcu.edu/theatrelab](https://fgcu.edu/theatrelab).

### PIANO DUO PERFORMS

The Baron & Navarro Piano Duo returns to FGCU’s U. Tobe Recital Hall at 3 p.m. April 2, 2023, for a program of wide-ranging music for two pianos.

Michael Baron, head of keyboard studies in the Bower School of Music, and 2015 graduate Priscila Navarro formed the duo in 2013. They performed together at New York’s Carnegie Hall in March 2022 and released their first international recording, “French Music for Piano Duo,” last year.

Navarro, who performed a solo recital at Carnegie Hall in 2013 as an FGCU undergraduate, went on to earn a doctorate in piano performance and pedagogy at the University of Miami. She recently joined the Bower School’s adjunct faculty.

Tickets for the concert are \$10; go to [fgcu.edu/concerts](https://fgcu.edu/concerts) for details. ■

# GIVING

## Education is the key

Donor Cornelius “Pat” Cacho inspires students with his own success

BY KAREN FELDMAN

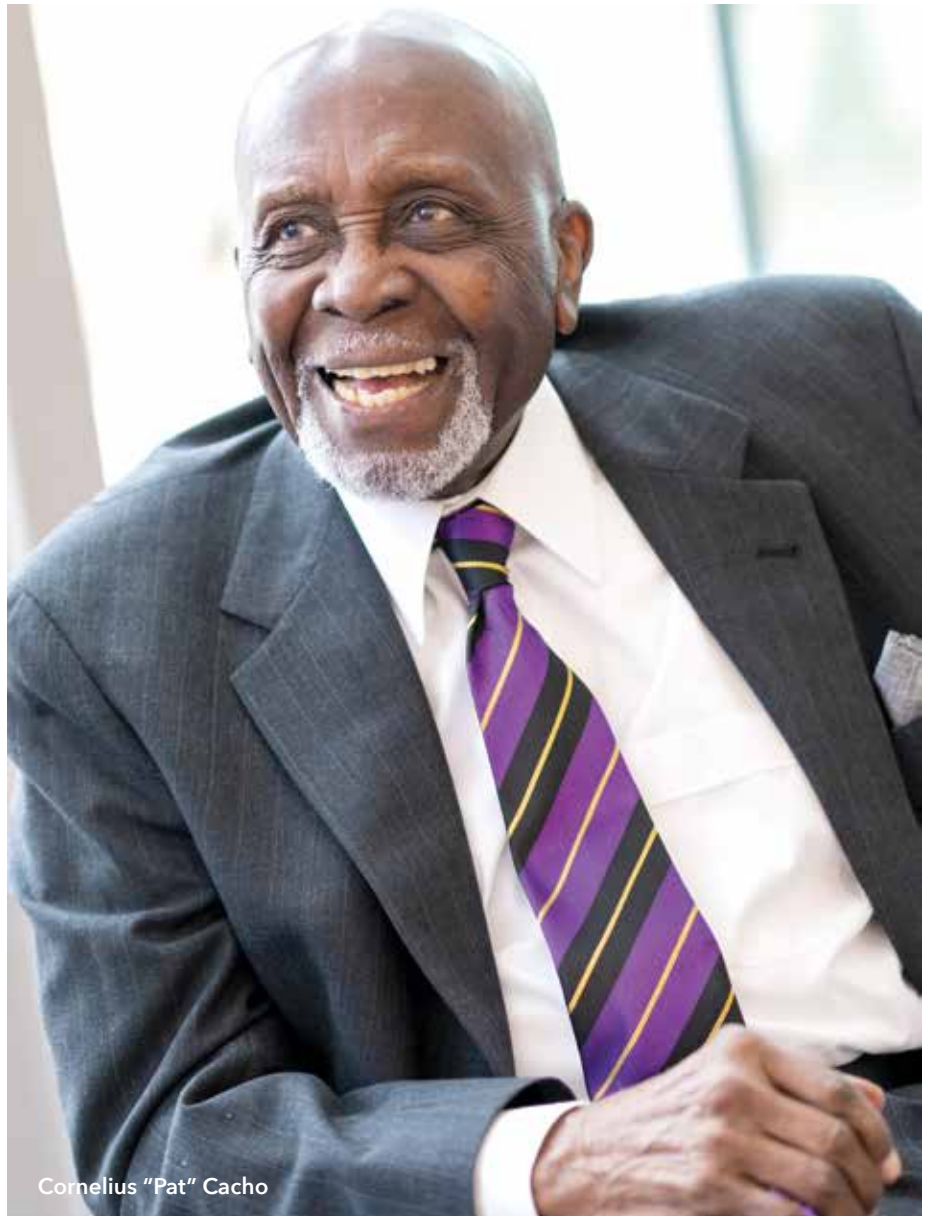
**E**VEN AS A CHILD, Cornelius “Pat” Cacho valued education above most things. Born into modest means in British Honduras (now Belize), he took advantage of every opportunity to learn and better himself.

It paid off, and he’s been paying it forward ever since. Cacho has changed the lives of countless young people over the past 30 years, including dozens of Florida Gulf Coast University students. In appreciation for his many contributions and tireless support, FGCU recently bestowed the honorary doctor of laws degree upon him.

Cacho, 96, grew up the only child of parents who possessed few worldly goods but fierce determination and unity of purpose when it came to ensuring their son received an education. They worked hard to pay the tuition required to send him to school. After completing his high school education, he became a messenger in the national Treasury Department and took correspondence courses to become an accountant.

A supervisor took an interest in the ambitious young man and arranged to send Cacho to England to study. There he earned his accounting certificate, fell in love with economics and earned his bachelor’s and master’s degrees at the London School of Economics.

Upon returning to Belize, he was appointed the assistant secretary of natural resources, a position in the country’s ministry responsible for assessing and managing natural resources.



Cornelius “Pat” Cacho

PHOTOS BY JAMES GRECO





**Pat is one of a kind. He never slows down. He is the model of what someone can do with passion for young people.”**

**MADelyn ISAACS,  
RETIRED FOUNDING FACULTY MEMBER**



“I didn’t know a damn thing about natural resources,” he says.

But he learned. Among his accomplishments was forging an agreement with a group of Mennonites to relocate from Mexico to create a community in Belize that remains today. The job exposed him to many opportunities, including a six-month attachment to the World Bank through which he made many professional contacts. He spent four years in Trinidad and Tobago, working at the University of the West Indies as a bursar and a lecturer on international economics. Then the World Bank offered him a job as an operations officer. He spent the next 20 years in various capacities within the organization in countries across Africa, Asia and Central America.

Upon retiring, he and his wife, Laura, chose to live in Naples. As they got to know their new community, they saw what he describes as “large and disturbing gaps in education and training among African American children and educational deficiencies in the Black population generally.”

That helped the couple decide what they would do next.

Cacho visited the Collier County superintendent of schools and volunteered his services. For 18 years, he tutored high school and middle school students, primarily Black individuals, whom he believed he could help.

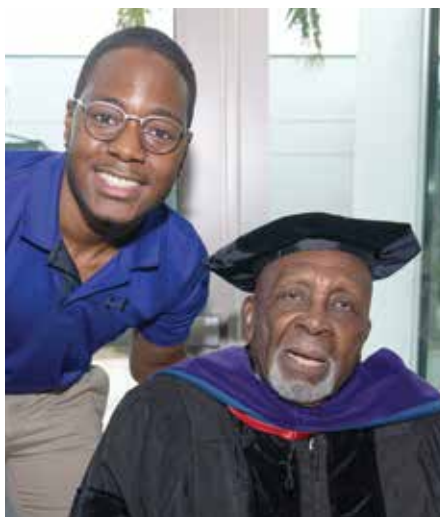
One cultural difference he saw disturbed him: “Black Americans suffer from a terrible inferiority complex. We tried to make them feel that people should respect them.”

He also urged the students he mentored to pursue careers in science, believing there is a great need for more people of color in STEM fields.

Cacho has given his time, talent and

treasure to organizations such as the Collier County Community Foundation, Cleveland Clinic, Early Childhood Coalition of Southwest Florida, FunTime Early Childhood Academy and many more.

His wife was dedicated to similar activities until her death in 2007.



**“I didn’t know if college was for me,” said Jean Sagesse, left, with Pat Cacho. “Mr. Cacho gave me exposure to college.”**

Cacho has since married Leonie Samuels, a former Punta Gorda teacher, who shares his community interests.

FGCU has been fortunate to receive a great deal of his attention and generosity. Cacho has served on the FGCU Foundation Board, is a member of the President’s Society and supported the STEM Camp program, international programs, WGPU Public Media, the College of Education Literacy Festival and the College Reach Out Program. He also provided scholarships for more than two dozen students.

Among those is Kaelyn Julmeus, who graduated in May 2022 and won 11

student awards along with her biology degree. One of those awards was a Fulbright grant to teach English in Poland this fall.

Much like her benefactor, Julmeus understands how valuable education is. The Honors College alumna chose to be a non-degree-seeking student for the summer so she could conduct research in the Peruvian Amazon for 3 ½ weeks. Her plan upon returning home was to study for the MCATs and then head to Poland. After that, she hopes to go to medical school to become a surgical oncologist.

She is grateful to Cacho – as well as Lee Health and Uncommon Friends – from which she received sufficient scholarship money so that she graduated debt free.

“I like what his goal is,” Julmeus says. “He thinks Black students are underrepresented and don’t have access. He wants more Black students to succeed.”

Madelyn Isaacs, a retired founding faculty member who taught counseling at FGCU and has known Cacho for 30 years, says, “Pat is one of a kind. He never slows down. He is the model of what someone can do with passion for young people.”

Jean Sagesse, a senior majoring in exercise science, is a fine illustration.

The Naples resident’s future changed when he signed up for a STEM camp and met Cacho.

“I didn’t know if college was for me,” Sagesse says. “I became aware through the STEM camp, got interested in exercise science and it made me decide to come to FGCU. Mr. Cacho gave me exposure to college.”

Michele Yovanovich, former FGCU dean of students and now vice president of student affairs at Florida SouthWestern State College, says, “He inspires me. He’s not only an advocate, but he also financially supports programs for students of color. He walks the walk, not just talks the talk.” ■

## Shady Rest Foundation invests in Institute on Positive Aging

BY KAREN FELDMAN

**A** GROUP LONG known for its work with older adults has made a major investment to create an institute aimed at radically changing the way that age group is treated in Southwest Florida.

Shady Rest Foundation, has pledged \$5 million to Florida Gulf Coast University's Marieb College of Health & Human Services to aid in the creation and operation of the Shady Rest Institute on Positive Aging.

"This is going to be transformative for Southwest Florida," says Shawn Felton, interim dean of Marieb College. "The region obviously has a vast need to enhance services for older adults. We are confident this institute will become the hub to connect seniors to all the services they need."

Thomas Felke, associate dean of Marieb College and the fledging institute's executive director, says while it won't be a brick-and-mortar building at first, he expects its impact to be palpable.

"Something like this is needed here," he says. "We don't want it to be a place where people are coming to us. We want to be able to meet people where they are."

The longtime FGCU social work professor has been active in community efforts to improve the lives of older residents and individuals experiencing food insecurity and homelessness. He is board chair of The Dubin Center, which helps those with dementia and their families, and a board member of the Area Agency on Aging of Southwest Florida and the Naples Senior Center.

Through his many community connections and previous research, he knows this about older people: "Despite being the largest segment of the population, they feel like a forgotten segment and have a hard time finding and accessing services."

The institute will coordinate the many agencies offering help to older adults and



**From left: Emily Udvardy, doctor of physical therapy student; Dr. Jo Stecher, vice chair of Shady Rest Foundation; Sheila Carlon, treasurer, Shady Rest Foundation; Bob Murray, P.E., chair, Shady Rest Foundation; Dr. Arie van Duijn, member, Shady Rest Foundation; Titilope Somade, doctor of nurse anesthesia practice student.**

try to form a central clearinghouse through which people can locate and access services. It will also provide educational outreach for those working with older residents or who want to but need additional training; advocate for policies beneficial to this age group; and help develop an adequate workforce to provide services for the burgeoning 65+ population. It's expected this population segment will increase more than 50% in Lee and Collier counties and 37% in Charlotte County by 2040.

Shady Rest Foundation previously gave \$4.1 million for scholarships to Marieb College undergraduate and graduate students who plan to pursue healthcare careers involving older adults. The foundation's board members believe this institute is a good next step.

"It fits with our mission," says Jo Stecher, Ph.D., R.N., board vice chair and a former FGCU nursing professor who taught gerontology, among other subjects. While many entities offer services for older adults, "FGCU will be the umbrella, and all the spokes coming out will be the other

organizations," she says.

Felke envisions the institute as a multidisciplinary entity where researchers from various disciplines come together to address problems. He foresees involving Marieb College experts, such as social workers, occupational and physical therapists and nurses, as well as bringing in the Exercise is Medicine program. From the Lutgert College of Business, experts in wills, trusts and estate planning would be valuable. U.A. Whitaker College of Engineering experts could focus on home modifications and livable communities. From the College of Arts & Sciences, music therapy and art therapy could be included.

And that's just the beginning. Felke sees many possibilities for the institute, which he is approaching with this mantra: "Aging is not a disease; it is an opportunity."

Felton says, "We are so thankful for the vision of the Shady Rest board and their commitment to this initiative. Shady Rest will forever be tied to Southwest Florida and its commitment to improving care for older adults." ■



# Golisano Foundation awards \$1 million grant to FGCU's Community Autism Network

BY DREW STERWALD

A \$1 MILLION GOLISANO Foundation grant to the Community Autism Network at Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU) will advance initiatives to improve the quantity and quality of resources available to individuals with autism spectrum disorder, their families and related practitioners.

The network was created about a year ago as an interdisciplinary effort within FGCU's Marieb College of Health & Human Services to conduct research and develop educational and clinical models that could help alleviate a shortage of community services – especially for those with autism who are aging out of school programs and into the workforce and independent living. Nationally, the prevalence of autism has skyrocketed from one child in 150 in the year 2000 to one in 44 in 2021, according to Centers for Disease Control & Prevention statistics.

The Golisano grant will help FGCU train more students and care providers, initiate more research and provide pro bono diagnostic and skill-building services, according to director Annemarie Connor. An associate professor of occupational therapy at FGCU, Connor launched the grassroots network based on continuing research and community needs assessment.

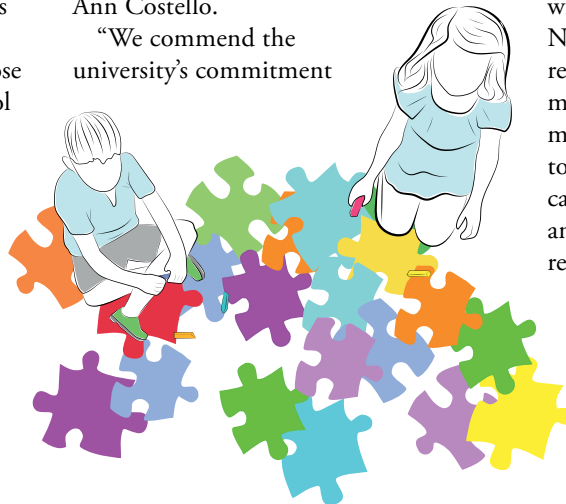
"The focus will be on using the grant with our primary mission of training a workforce that is autism friendly and knowledgeable and to chip away at issues, such as long wait lists for autism diagnosis in the region," Connor said. "I'm elated. I feel this will really spark a lot of change in the region."

The Golisano Foundation is "a world-class leader," she said, "in helping individuals with intellectual and

developmental disabilities and promoting inclusion, self-determination and meaningful engagement opportunities." It was established in 1985 by Tom Golisano, founder and chairperson of Paychex Inc., a leader in the payroll, human resource and benefits outsourcing industry. His local philanthropy also includes Golisano Children's Hospital of Southwest Florida and Golisano Children's Museum of Naples.

The foundation is pleased to provide \$1 million to expand FGCU's program, said executive director Ann Costello.

"We commend the university's commitment



to building campus and community capacity to meet the diagnostic, therapeutic, educational and social needs of individuals with autism in Southwest Florida," Costello said. "We know that this initiative will have a long-lasting and positive impact on those with autism and their families."

Shawn Felton, interim dean for Marieb

College of Health & Human Services, sees Golisano's investment as a validation of what FGCU's Community Autism Network is doing.

"To buy into what we're doing and provide philanthropy support speaks volumes for what they see and believe in," he said. "It comes with a responsibility that we deliver at a high quality. But this is exactly what a comprehensive, regional university should be doing – addressing regional needs."

The Golisano grant will boost FGCU's goal of helping fill that gap. Cost-sharing will enable the Community Autism Network to make several enhancements: refocus faculty and staff time toward more autism-related work; pay for medical doctors or licensed psychologists to offer diagnostic training classes on campus for students and practitioners; and hire postdoctoral fellows to conduct research and develop new programming models that can be tested and implemented in the community.

All will benefit students in the many fields that interact with the autism community, such as social work, occupational therapy, special education, psychology, counseling and rehabilitation science. Beyond them, outreach of FGCU's Community Autism Network extends to a growing campus population of students diagnosed on the autism spectrum; many face social and mental health challenges that make it difficult for them to complete a degree. Only 39% of individuals with autism who go to college graduate, Connor said.

"FGCU has this potential to be a hub for autism," Connor said. "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.' " ■

## HOW TO HELP

Support the Community Autism Network through FGCU's comprehensive fundraising campaign: [fgcu.edu/impact](https://fgcu.edu/impact)



Jair Zacarias and Arturo Fernandez

## Nisita Fund ensures student success and community enrichment

BY KAREN BOOTH

**B**EAUTIFUL MUSIC feeds the soul. And thanks to The Nisita Fund for Music Excellence, gifted to Florida Gulf Coast University five years ago by Maurizio and Laura Nisita, more students interested in studying piano at the Bower School of Music & the Arts and more people interested in listening to beautiful music are able to do so.

“I can’t emphasize enough how the

Nisita Scholarship allows us to recruit and keep extremely talented piano students,” said Michael Baron, professor of music, head of FGCU’s piano program and The Nisita Concert Series. “We’re very fortunate. We have been able to offer scholarships to world-class students, many of whom don’t have access to a musical education or the financial resources to give them what they need.”

In addition, the gift supports the Nisita Concert Series, which showcases faculty

and guest artists who produce more beautiful music. The series features a dozen concerts each season, drawing music lovers to campus from across Southwest Florida.

Maurizio Nisita retired as senior vice president of global operations for Ecolab, a global leader in water, hygiene and infection prevention solutions based in Minnesota; Laura is an award-winning painter. A pianist himself, Nisita describes music as having both an emotional and a rational side.



**“I can’t emphasize enough how the Nisita Scholarship allows us to recruit and keep extremely talented piano students. We’re very fortunate. We have been able to offer scholarships to world-class students, many of whom don’t have access to a musical education or the financial resources to give them what they need.”**

MICHAEL BARON, PROFESSOR OF MUSIC, AND HEAD OF FGCU’S PIANO PROGRAM

“When I look at a piece of music,” he said, “I see the mathematics behind it, the structure of the piece. Then, there is the emotional side. Music makes you feel good. It reconciles with all aspects of life and helps you forget the bad and enjoy the good.”

Over the five years since the Nisitas established their fund with a \$1 million gift, the students’ success after graduation has benefited not only the students themselves, but also has introduced the Bower School of Music to a national audience. Nisita references internationally known Peruvian pianist Priscila Navarro as just one example. Navarro made university history in 2013 when she performed a solo concert at New York’s famed Carnegie Hall while she was still an undergraduate student.

Which brings us to this year’s Nisita scholarship recipients – Jair Zacarias and Arturo Fernandez, also from Peru. Both began playing piano when they were very young and are thrilled with the opportunity to study in America, specifically with Baron.

Baron performs internationally and met Zacarias after one of his concerts in Lima, Peru. A piano performance major, Zacarias now studies with Baron and will graduate in 2023.

“I’ve learned many things from Dr. Baron,” Zacarias said. “His music expertise helps students develop as professional musicians and, of course, the scholarship

has been crucial in supporting my education. I’ve had many performance opportunities and entered important competitions, several of which I have been



Maurizio and Laura Nisita

fortunate enough to win.” He states his career goal as “to learn as much as I can about music and share it with everyone who is interested in this beautiful abstract art.”

Fernandez, also a piano performance major, will graduate in spring 2023. “Besides the wonderful teaching I have absorbed at FGCU,” he said, “the

Nisita scholarship has given me many opportunities to perfect my craft by participating in masterclasses, competitions, festivals and performances. It has also helped me network and meet wonderful local and international musicians.”

Fernandez won his most recent competition alongside Zacarias. The two performed together this summer at the Byrd Collegiate Piano Ensemble Competition, a statewide competition for two-person piano teams. It was the second year they took the top prize.

“My long-term goal is to create a music school in my hometown of Trujillo, Peru, to help talented musicians and to promote artistic activity as well,” Fernandez said. In addition to the Nisita scholarship, he is grateful to have received scholarships from Myra Williams and Carol Avard. Fernandez and his Bower School

peers also benefit from the Nisita Concert Series, which hosts regional, national and internationally known musicians – many of whom offer master classes for interested students. The series and the master classes afford students priceless opportunities to learn and network with exceptional musicians.

The Nisita Fund for Music Excellence not only nurtures aspiring pianists and supports excellence, but also ensures that beautiful music will continue to strengthen and sustain the human spirit. ■

# CULTIVATING CONNECTIONS

FGCU's blossoming relationship with the Naples Botanical Garden benefits students, alumni and international partners

By DREW STERWALD

Photos by JAMES GRECO





# VATING



**B**anana, papaya and pineapple plants aren't the only things bearing fruit at the Naples Botanical Garden. A mutually beneficial relationship between the garden and Florida Gulf Coast University has taken root, yielding jobs in a variety of roles for a crop of Eagle alumni.

For some, a class in FGCU's Harvey Kapnick Research and Education Center, which opened at the garden in 2010, may have sown the seed. For others, service-learning hours, undergraduate internships or graduate practicums cultivated career-starting connections.

Garden staff estimates at least 20 of the 160 current employees are Green and Blue alumni, many of them in roles key

In the wake of Hurricane Ian, many of these Eagles who are now garden employees pitched in to clear plant debris from paths, right tilted trees and hose down plants licked by the saltwater surge. Ian's damage to the garden was not as catastrophic as Hurricane Irma's five years ago, according to the garden's website.

Nevertheless, horticulturist and 2019 FGCU grad Miralny Marante felt sad

#### **LINA RAMIREZ**

*2019, Environmental Studies and Communication Studies; 2022, Environmental Studies Master's Regional Conservation Initiatives Coordinator*

Lina Ramirez's education and experiences at FGCU laid the groundwork for her to become one of the Naples

**“Before I was hired, I didn’t know a lot about plants, but I have learned so much in two years about different species, pests, herbicides – basically garden maintenance. I’m still learning things every day, and some of the biology and environmental courses I took at FGCU, even marine science, are still helping me here.”**

MIRALNY MARANTE, 2019, MARINE SCIENCE, HORTICULTURIST

to the institution's mission. They conserve rare seeds and plants, manage preserved native habitats, coordinate collaborations with other botanical gardens and develop educational programs that inform entertain the park's 220,000 annual visitors.

“There's a great alignment between FGCU and the Naples Botanical Garden,” said Kathy Connelly, vice president and chief of staff of the garden, which opened its gates in November 2009. “We're both kind of in that nimble state where we can adapt and try new things and do things differently. It created a great connection. There are lots of opportunities here for anyone who graduates from FGCU. We are so blessed to have such a great team, and we can thank FGCU for preparing them well.”

when she returned to work Oct. 3 and saw a giant kapok down at the garden entrance. Trees were stripped bare of leaves, which were plastered all over the grounds. A favorite tabebuia, known for its lavish lemon-colored blooms, was blown over. After two weeks of pruning damaged limbs and sweeping up debris, things started to look brighter.

“A lot of trees are flushing out new growth already – I didn't expect that,” Marante said in mid-October. There's so much sunlight in the garden right now, with the lost canopy. The plants are really using the sunlight – it's like Red Bull for them.”

Marante, who joined the garden staff in 2020, is just one Eagle alum among recent hires and one long-timer. Here's a look at how some alumni have blossomed at the garden.

Botanical Garden's latest Eagle alumni hires in August.

Conducting undergraduate research with associate professor Kara LeFevre of The Water School led to helping LeFevre organize a conference on harmful algal blooms – a project marrying Ramirez's passions for the environment and communicating effectively about science. As a graduate student, she continued coordinating such events, including a panel discussion of international speakers that the botanical garden hosted at FGCU. This connection turned into an opportunity for Ramirez to do her master's practicum at the garden coordinating virtual “technical talks” where conservation professionals disseminate research that is recorded and shared with the public. That led to her full-time job, a joint position



with the Botanical Gardens Conservation Initiative, a London-based network.

“The moral of the story is, whenever a professor asked for help with something, I said yes,” Ramirez said. “My advice to students is become involved. You never know when you’re going to get an opportunity that could connect to something else.”

For her, that something else is coordinating conservation initiatives with the garden’s partners in the Caribbean and Central America, where botanical collections and arboreturns have climates and soils similar to Naples. These collaborators share research, living plant material and conservation strategies to safeguard the future of threatened species. One recent project involved collecting seeds from fungus-ravaged native cacti in Puerto Rico so they could be conserved for the future.

“Protecting the environment isn’t just about science. It’s also about communication, education, relationship building,” said Ramirez, whose family emigrated from Colombia when she was 5. “I knew I wanted to do something where I could utilize the different skills I have in environmental science and communication. I speak Spanish and have gained a lot of cultural knowledge from traveling. I didn’t know how to coalesce it all together until this position came along.”

Ramirez wasn’t sure what her dream job was when she started her practicum at the garden. “Now I know,” she said.

## ERIC FOHT

2003, *Environmental Studies*  
**Director of Natural Resources**

A little more than half of the Naples Botanical Garden’s 170 acres is dedicated to native Southwest Florida flora and habitats threatened by climate change, invasive species and land development throughout the state. The Preserve, as this part of the garden is called, is home to 257 species of native plants, many of them rare, including 41 that are not known to exist in any other collection. These 90 acres showcase diverse ecosystems, including marsh, coastal scrub and pop ash swamp, and it’s Eric Foht’s responsibility



Lina Ramirez

to ensure their survival.

“It’s difficult to protect one plant – a plant is part of an ecosystem,” said Foht, whose typical day may include hand-pulling invasive weeds or monitoring the garden’s stormwater-management system. “The real message is to protect habitats as a whole, or else what’s the value of having one plant?”

Scrub land, for instance, is becoming rare in Southwest Florida, he said, particularly because this higher, drier coastal habitat appeals to developers. Visitors to the botanical garden can explore a few acres of scrub that conserve typical plants such as myrtle oak, Florida rosemary and sand spikemoss.

“The name scrub doesn’t sound very glamorous, but I happen to love the look and the feel of the habitat,” Foht said. “It’s worth protecting. A lot of these species only occur in this habitat, and if no one is saving the seeds anywhere, this habitat will be lost.”

“Backing up” certain species in seed banks here and around the world is a critical part of the botanical garden’s work. In fact, another FGCU alum, Jessica DeYoung (’18, Environmental Studies), has played a vital role in developing, testing and cultivating seeds since she joined the staff in 2018.

When Foht was hired in 2009, the first phase of garden construction was still underway, so he helped cultivate some of

the original plantings. His previous job was at Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, a frequent collaborator with the botanical garden. Rookery Bay also was the location of a particularly inspiring excursion he had taken as an undergraduate with FGCU faculty.

“Some of those field trips were really influential and impactful,” he said. “Part of the point of the environmental studies program is that it gives students the experience of being in these places they’re reading about in their books.”

## KAITLYN DILLARD

2017, *Environmental Studies*  
**Education Programs Coordinator**

Along with conservation and research, education for all ages is key to the mission of the Naples Botanical Garden. After completing a student internship there in 2017, Kaitlyn Dillard joined the staff as youth programs director and was promoted to education programs manager – a career path that seemed destined since her youth.

“I grew up outside,” she said. “Our family had an interest in gardening and the environment. Having that type of lifestyle developed my own interest in caring for the environment, understanding where food comes from and how food production





Eric Foht



Kaitlyn Dillard



Miralny Marante







impacts the environment – different facets of environmental studies.”

Now, Dillard helps cultivate knowledge and connections to the environment by leading a team of educators who present observational and hands-on programs geared to children and adults, individuals and groups. She works with school districts to develop interactive activities that help students meet plant science benchmarks that are challenging to meet in classrooms. “Budding Botanist,” for example, gives visiting fourth graders the chance to dissect flowers, examine seeds to understand how they’re dispersed and learn about pollinators.

Many elementary school students have never been to a local beach or a park near their homes, Dillard said. Getting them outdoors and engaged in fun learning opportunities helps them develop scientific observation and writing skills.

“I like connecting people in the garden and giving them an experience that further creates a positive behavior change for the environment, for the greater good,” she said. “You see a look in their eyes when they learn something new they can incorporate in their lives. Making an impact like that is really rewarding. Honestly, this is the best job I’ve ever had.”

## MIRALNY MARANTE

*2019, Marine Science*

**Horticulturist**

FGCU’s “University Colloquium” class provided Miralny Marante’s first connection to the Naples Botanical Garden. Not long after that field trip, she began volunteering in the horticulture department – planting the seed for a full-time opportunity that came to fruition in 2020 after the COVID-19 pandemic forced her out of another job.

“Before I was hired, I didn’t know a lot about plants, but I have learned so much in two years about different species, pests, herbicides – basically garden maintenance,” she said. “I’m still learning things every day, and some of the biology and environmental courses I took at FGCU, even marine science, are still helping me here.”

Marante is deepening her education by pursuing a Florida Nursery, Growers and Landscape Association certification. She enjoys sharing her knowledge with visitors while working in the Karen and Robert Scott Florida Garden – one of several dedicated gardens within the property. Some days they find her knee-deep in a stream, pulling weeds. Other days she mulches and grooms plant beds, prunes trees and shrubs and inspects plants for problems like leaf scorch or nitrogen deficiency.

“What’s that plant?” is a question she answers a lot. Every day. She especially enjoys talking up the Florida wildflowers blossoming around her.

“I love the dune sunflower. A lot of people don’t know we have a native sunflower in Florida,” Marante said. “Our native wildflowers are sometimes the tiniest little things. You have to have an eye for them because when you’re on a hike, it can feel like you’re in a jungle.”

The best part of her job, though, is just being outdoors every day, Marante said, noting the birds, reptiles, otters and other wildlife she spots. The Florida Garden sits at the property’s highest point, so she has a panoramic view in all directions.

“I get a lot of satisfaction from taking care of this garden,” she said. “I feel like I’m on vacation every day.” ■









# HURRICANE HEROES

## Eagles reach out to aid communities hit hard by Ian

BY KAREN FELDMAN

**H**urricane Ian's rampage through Southwest Florida Sept. 28 left few people untouched. Its relentless winds, immense storm surges and plodding pace tore apart lives, homes, businesses and bridges.

And, like Irma five years earlier, it also ripped a two-week hole in Florida Gulf Coast University's fall semester.

As the region faced the overwhelming job of recovery, many FGCU students had time on their hands. They could have escaped the discomforts of power and internet outages, the undrinkable water and the lack of readily available food. They could have headed to some untouched east coast beach for a carefree week.

Instead, many stayed or felt moved to return from safer locales, becoming their

own force of nature.

As soon as the storm passed, they ventured out of their safe places, met up and began helping. They checked on family, friends and colleagues. Then they reached out to countless people they didn't know but about whom they knew this: Virtually all had just been through a devastating event and needed assistance.

They waded through flooded streets and homes, hauling off tons of ruined furniture, sodden drywall, downed trees and debris. They distributed water, food and blankets. Perhaps most important of all, they listened to people who needed a sympathetic ear. Whatever the need, there were FGCU students and personnel figuring out how to help.

ON THE  
**WEB**  
FGCU360.com  
SEE MORE  
POST-STORM  
STORIES

Immanuelle Pongo and others volunteering on Make a Difference Day cleared brush in south Fort Myers.



## Plan in place

Senior Ben Hermiston, an Iowa native, knew he'd be helping even before the storm arrived. The Lutgert College of Business finance major, member of the men's cross country team and president of FGCU's Student Athletics Advisory Committee, said he and some friends planned that in advance.

His rationale: "Most of us aren't from here. But we've been here now for two or three or four years. We call it home, but you don't really know it's home until you go through something like this and help."

Before the winds died down the day after the storm, he and those friends connected by phone, targeted some communities and set out. What began as a group of five grew throughout the week to about 150 volunteers.

They ran into Mary Voytek, associate professor of art, at a hardware store. Her house had been inundated and she needed help.

"FGCU student volunteers were amazing," she said. "I had them for three days, and they moved mountains of

ruined possessions to the street and filled infinite wheelbarrows with muddy flood water. Their wonderful spirits beaming with concern and kindness will always be remembered. It gives me hope for our future at a time when my world looks pretty bleak."

The group grew so large it split into teams of 10 and went to different places to maximize their efforts.

"We were basically a full-on demo repair team for the homeowners," Hermiston says. "We were also talking to people just to calm them down."

They were a cross section of student-athletes – members of the cross country, volleyball, beach volleyball, swimming and diving, baseball and softball teams. There were physical therapy students and members of the Dirty Birds fan club and anyone else who answered the call.

He estimates they worked on 300 to 400 houses over 10 days. At night, they'd plan for and post the next day's schedule on various social media sites to alert volunteers.

"Some of the people we helped tried to

pay us," Hermiston said. "We said, 'That's not what we're here for.'"

"It was an eye-opening experience," he reflected about two weeks after the marathon effort ended and classes resumed. "I wish I could still be doing it every day but with school, practice, competitions, studying... I wish I could just keep doing it."

## Leading from the floor

Student Body President Grace Brannigan could have spent the hurricane and its aftermath in Orlando with her family. Instead, she claimed a piece of the Alico Arena floor to sleep on and stuck it out with the 278 students who found themselves with few other options.

"You can't claim to lead a community, especially in a crisis as visible as a hurricane, and flee the scene," she said.

President Mike Martin and Director of Emergency Management Ruth Rodrigues visited the arena after the storm, and Brannigan stepped up to help.

She landed the job of organizing students to help at the FGCU Emergency



Operations Center and FGCU Campus Food Pantry for the next week. After that, “I made sure I was there to provide a student perspective when decisions were being made,” she said.

She helped create informational videos, wrote communications to students and “tried my best when they were making decisions involving students to answer questions I felt would come up.”

The senior with a double major in history and political science and a minor in philosophy said she “learned more about leadership in the last month than in all the time before. At the end of the day, it was far more than I’d bargained for as (Student Government) president, but that’s not to say I regret it.”

Now back in her apartment in West Lake Village, she’s proud of the FGCU community and how so many people stepped up to help one another and the people of Southwest Florida.

### A proud but weary president

President Mike Martin hadn’t been here long when Hurricane Irma struck in 2017, and he found himself overseeing an emergency effort. Now, as he prepares to leave in December, he was once again sleeping on the floor of the Campus Support Complex to be close by throughout the storm and its aftermath.

He, too, is proud of how university personnel responded, ensuring the campus and students were safe and seeing to the larger community’s needs.

“I’m getting a lot of calls about students, faculty and staff helping out community members,” he said. “It’s indicative of our commitment to service learning. It’s baked into the culture of the place. A lot of the students here are from the region or have adopted it and feel a responsibility to serve. The staff and faculty do, too. Everyone wanted to do it for the right reasons.”

**AT LEFT:** FGCU students turned out in force for Make a Difference Day in October.

**PHOTOS AT RIGHT:** Students helped clear debris after the storm. At bottom, JJ Dourm, left, and Riley Houle collected supplies in Crystal River.







Miral Babiker, right, helps haul debris in south Fort Myers on Make a Difference Day.

## Social work skills come in handy

Tom Felke, associate dean of Marieb College of Health & Human Services and a social work professor, maintains close connections to the area's social services network. He started monitoring social networks to see where there might be help, which groups were operating, which needed volunteers.

He quickly assembled a map of services — where to get food, housing, help from United Way, and locations of disaster assistance. He also included agencies that needed volunteers. The map was published on the university's Hurricane Ian resources webpage.

"People started sharing it, searching for whatever resources they needed," Felke

said. Several of his current and former students called to ask where they might be useful.

He and Marieb Interim Dean Shawn Felton contacted students and faculty. Some were ready to help and others needed help. Three occupational therapy faculty members lost their homes.

Felke deployed those who could help to places they were needed — the Lee County Emergency Operations Center, Community Cooperative, Salvation Army — and the others to places where they could find assistance.

"It was really awesome to see the faculty, staff and students working alongside one another and to see them extend out with alumni into the community," Felke said.

With the immediate crisis passing,

there remained many needs to be met. Some students had internships at places too damaged to return, so they are working to place them with the agencies dealing with the storm's aftermath.

"These students keep churning away," Felke said. "This is what we train them for. These are the moments that health care and human service professionals get called on. They really answered the bell and stepped up in a big way."

## Heading in the wrong direction proves right

Assistant professor Kevin Minner moved to the area and started teaching occupational therapy at FGCU in August. When he and his fiancée, Lindsey Stiefvater, learned the storm was approaching Tampa, they decided to head north to help Stiefvater's parents in Tarpon Springs.

Things turned out differently, and they found they were in a position to help their Lee County friends once the storm passed. Stiefvater sent out a

Facebook appeal and in two hours had \$2,000 in donations in her Venmo account. The pair loaded up cases of water, peanut butter, bread, granola bars, diapers, sanitary wipes and batteries and headed south.

"We met Tom (Felke) at the Lee County Emergency Operations Center and handed him what we had," Minner said. "Then we helped take censuses and dropped off cat litter and dog food at the Lee County Humane Society."

When classes resumed, Minner was impressed that his students continued to want to help.

"They aren't just volunteering, they are also putting their OT minds to work, creating adaptive-ready hurricane kits for people with disabilities, thinking about how to teach people ergonomic ways

to lift boxes, evacuation protocols for communities with a high proportion of people with wheelchairs who might not get out because of it,” Minner said.

“And we are taking a look at organizations that evacuated really well. Why didn’t others do as well? We want to shift ideas so it’s better next time.”

## Special mission for Salvation Army

Sarah Rafiq, who earned a bachelor’s degree in psychology in 2015 and a master’s in social work in 2019 at FGCU, directs the Bonita Springs service center of The Salvation Army. The Florida native has lived through hurricanes before, but “this was a terrifying experience. It was the scariest one so far,” she said.

When she got to the service center, which had no power and little cell service, she called volunteers to help distribute food, water and necessities because only one of her two employees could work. The other had lost her home.

“The number of volunteers from FGCU

made a huge difference,” Rafiq said. “We could not have done it without them. We probably had 15 or 20 for three or four days.”

Sarah Margolis, a third-year student in the doctor of physical therapy program at Marieb College, was among the volunteers.

“They didn’t have power but had a palette of produce that would go bad, so we created a ‘free food’ sign and stood at the side of the road,” Margolis said.

“I’ve never been to that area and seen such poverty,” she said. “Most were on bicycles or came by foot. Rather than having them juggle a box of prepackaged meals on bicycles, we gave them bags and stocked those.”

When Rafiq asked the students if they would like her to sign service-learning forms so they could get credit for volunteering, “none of them wanted me to sign anything,” she said. “It came from the heart. They belong to this community, and they were in it to help other people who were less fortunate. You could see they were affected by what they were seeing.”

## Fraternity brothers lend a hand in Naples

Naples business owner Krista Bazzard-Jones was helping at a condominium complex in Naples when she ran into a group of FGCU students doing the same. It turned out to be a group of Sigma Phi Epsilon brothers.

“We chose Naples because we felt everybody was headed to the Fort Myers area,” said Hector Zerbo, a senior from Fort Lauderdale majoring in criminal justice. “This is the community we live in. It’s devastating to see a hurricane hit that hard and impact so many people.”

They helped at the condo complex, and when Bazzard-Jones received a request from a man asking for help for his brother, they headed to Old Naples to the 100-year-old home. Zerbo said they ripped out the moldy drywall, removed trash and helped tidy things up.

“The boys took so much care,” Bazzard-Jones said. “I’m blown away. I’m a mom myself and found this so impressive.”

## First-year students aid community

Freshmen Riley Houle and JJ Dourm were friends when they lived in Crystal River and are roommates at FGCU. The pair returned to their hometown for the hurricane and saw what had happened in Fort Myers on television.

They talked to the Crystal River High School principal, who helped them promote a drive to collect supplies during a football game. People donated blankets, toiletries, canned food and hygiene products.

“It was definitely more than we expected,” he said.

They loaded his mother’s GMC Yukon and drove south, leaving the donations with an American Red Cross group to distribute.

“It felt really good,” Houle said. “This is our home now. It was really nice to give back to a place that’s done well for me. ■

**FGCU volunteers hauled off tons of sodden drywall and ruined home furnishings in the community.**





# ALUMNI

CLASS OF 2010, 2014

## Behavioral health alumnus links current students to real-world experience

BY BILL STUDENC

**A** TWO-TIME FLORIDA Gulf Coast University graduate working in the behavioral health field is now nurturing future mental-health professionals by helping FGCU students secure internships and clinical experience at the Naples-based treatment and rehabilitation center where he works.

Alex Conrad, who received his bachelor's degree in psychology in 2010 and his master's in clinical mental health counseling in 2014, was a team leader supervisor at David Lawrence Centers for Behavioral Health before accepting a promotion in October. He's now associate clinical director for acute care and the partial hospitalization program for children.

The nonprofit organization provides mental health, substance use and integrated healthcare solutions for clients of all ages at multiple locations in Collier County. Conrad joined the team in 2019 as a supervisor of the access center helping link clients with the agency's services. For the last 2 1/2 years, he has overseen the centers' Forensic Assertive Community Treatment (FACT) Team.

FACT provides intensive, community-based treatment, rehabilitation and support services for adults with severe and persistent mental illness. Many of those served have histories of repeated

hospitalizations, admissions to state hospitals, multiple emergency room visits, homelessness or incarceration. Some individuals the team works with are in jails, hospitals or community settings. They may receive psychiatric care, medical referral and follow-up, individual supportive therapy, crisis assessment and intervention, substance use aid, work-related vocational assistance, support in activities of daily living and case management.

Student interns from FGCU are important members of the team, getting real-world professional experiences while providing individual and group therapy, crisis intervention, treatment planning and assessments for clients.

Naples resident Tiffany Ketis, who completed her social work master's degree at FGCU in May, is among the many students who have benefited from an internship under Conrad's supervision. "FACT was extremely hands-on learning, which allowed me to grow as an individual to better help and understand the client population," said Ketis, now working toward becoming a licensed clinical social worker.

"From my experience at FACT, I will take with me the knowledge that I gained, the confidence that appeared within me with the support of Alex Conrad and his team, and the dedication Alex puts toward each employee and client to better them as an individual and a team," she

said. "Alex has played an important role in my social work education path. He is a supervisor who I hope every student has an opportunity to learn under. He will motivate, provide support and help each individual grow."

Conrad said he knows firsthand the value of internships and clinical learning opportunities from his own time as an FGCU graduate student. "I learned it is important to experience a variety of internships throughout your time as a master's student in order to discover more about the populations with which you enjoy working and also the theoretical approaches you feel most comfortable practicing," he said.

"For example, I had reservations about working with the substance use disorder population while in school. However, my first job out of school was working with that population, and I absolutely loved it. If I had not had the exposure during my internships, I don't know that I would have gone that path."

Prior to joining David Lawrence Centers, Conrad spent five years working in the area of substance use disorders at the Gabel Center, which became Isle of Palms Recovery Center.

Conrad points to his childhood experiences as the genesis for his educational and professional path. "I have always had an interest in the field. As with many other eventual therapists, I



“ I think it is important for people to know that we all struggle with challenges in our lives, and there is no shame in reaching out for help when you are having difficulty managing it by yourself. ”

ALEX CONRAD, '10 AND '14 M.A.,  
CLINICAL MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELOR



had struggled with mental health issues as a youth and wanted to learn more about the field,” he said.

“Even once we are licensed and have been practicing for some time, there are still periods where we need that extra support. I am glad that the stigma associated with mental health has begun to slowly fade. I know that mental health professionals sometimes have a hesitation in seeking out services. They may feel they are supposed to be ‘experts’ helping

**Alex Conrad stays connected with FGCU in a variety of ways.**

others work to more successfully cope with their problems and should be able to do so themselves. I think it is important for people to know that we all struggle with challenges in our lives, and there is no shame in reaching out for help when you are having difficulty managing it by yourself.”

Conrad remains connected with his

alma mater in ways beyond mentoring current students. A member of the FGCU Alumni Association’s Forever an Eagle group, he is a season-ticket holder for the men’s basketball team and sits on the advisory boards of both the Department of Counseling and the Alumni Association.

And, his days as an FGCU student are not done yet. Conrad started classes again this fall working toward a certificate in relationship and family counseling. ■

CLASS OF 2020

## Alumna nails down a niche in male-dominated construction field

BY RICK WEBER

**L**EGENDARY BOXER Mike Tyson once famously opined, “Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.”

Well, Hannah Vogel had a plan. She would graduate from FGCU in May 2020 with a bachelor’s degree in legal studies. She would go to law school. She would become a lawyer and follow in the footsteps of many family members, including uncle James Vogel and grandfather Dick Vogel, who opened Vogel Law Firm in Naples, and cousin Jamie Vogel.

And then she got punched in the mouth. It was a haymaker that hit a lot of people in March 2020. Coronavirus. She hadn’t been accepted by any law school, and even if she had been, she questioned whether she wanted to attend online.

“From a young age, I was thinking about becoming a lawyer because a lot of my family members are in law,” she says. “But I did have a feeling I would have a nontraditional job and would end up doing something completely different. I felt like I would have my own business like my dad (Joel)

did. He started Midwest Reprographics and specialized in doing the blueprints for different local construction projects such as

RSW, Naples Bay Resort and Ave Maria.” “He’d take me to work sometimes and show me how the business worked. I think he kind of wanted me to own my own business. He didn’t go to college. He still wanted me to, but he always taught me, ‘This is an option, too.’ ”

So if she was to start her own business, what would it be? She consulted good friend James Hartney, a structural engineer who had his own engineering company, National Catastrophe Engineering, LLC, and produced engineering reports for attorneys involved in cases where roofs were in litigation for storm damage.

“He said, ‘Look at it like this: What is a need?’” Vogel says. “He asked me, ‘What about roofing? Florida residents need roofers, and it’s a profitable industry.’ ”

Vogel was intrigued and captivated, and just three months after she graduated from FGCU, Vogel and Hartney opened Vogel Construction Group with licenses for general contracting and roofing.

Within two years, the company completed about 100 re-roofs, including a project that didn’t make any money but was far more meaningful to Vogel. Through the Wounded Warriors of Collier County,





her company built a new roof for Bravo House, which provides long-term supportive housing for senior veterans in Collier County who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Vogel donated the \$10,000 worth of labor in addition to used roofing materials acquired with a grant from a Naples Home Depot through the Home Depot Foundation.

“That was really a big moment for us,” she says. “We were in a spot financially where we could do that and had resources. I was born in Naples, and Southwest Florida is a special place. That felt like success to me more than all the other roofs we’ve put on – just being able to give back to the community I was born in. All these gentlemen were older, and some didn’t have any family left.”

Just as her young company managed to build a solid foundation for success, Vogel faced another major blow this summer with the sudden death of Hartney, her

friend and mentor.

“He was such a big part of the original journey,” Vogel says. “It’s going to be hard doing this on my own, but I want him to always be remembered and have credit for the business’s success.”



**James Hartney**

In an interview last spring, when this story was published online, Hartney had praised her dedication, ability to network, connect with customers and stay organized – skills he said were not often found in the construction industry. “In an industry typically characterized as masculine, Hannah navigates with poise and finesse. Her skills have allowed us to better serve our community, grow and take on more rewarding projects,” he said.

As she carries on her career in the wake

of personal and professional loss and the massive challenges of Hurricane Ian recovery, Vogel hopes to encourage more women to venture into industries that are not known for being female friendly. After all, they’ve come a long way in STEM fields, law and medicine, she says.

“In the beginning, it was difficult for me, especially when I was trying to build the company early on when I literally would knock on doors, introduce myself and offer free roof inspections to get business,” she says. “I think people were a little taken aback. But now, two years in, I have knowledge and experience. People are pleasantly surprised instead of confused like they were in beginning.”

Vogel plans to continue in construction and encourage women to enter the industry, to help the Southwest Florida community through philanthropy and to continue honoring the legacy of her partner. ■

## TURNING IDEAS INTO IMPACT

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**Paolo Bagaindoc**  
Nursing student

## CLASS OF 2017

## Alum's nonprofit opens access to LGBT-themed books

BY BILL STUDENC

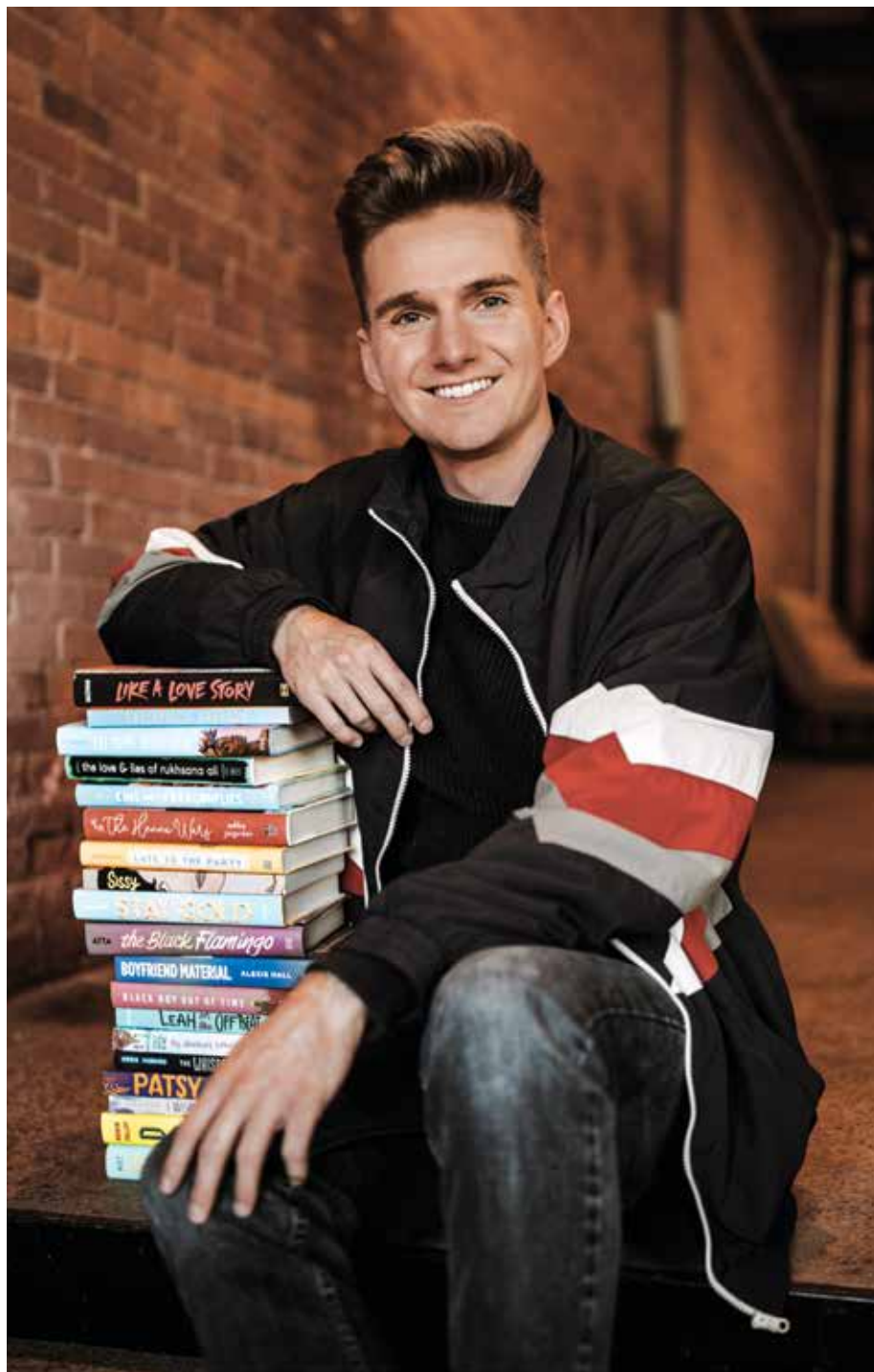
**A**S A YOUNG GAY MAN coming of age in a small New England town, Florida Gulf Coast University alumnus Joshua Lambert struggled to find reading material featuring characters to whom he could relate. Today, the 2017 resort and hospitality management graduate helps others who face similar challenges by providing them with a source of literary options aimed at gay, lesbian, transgender and other queer audiences.

In 2020, Lambert founded Project Open Books, a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving access to age-appropriate books and stories for readers across the country. He characterized the nonprofit as “a project birthed from a bundle of ideas” centered around his desire to affect positive change.

“In high school, I found it difficult to connect to anything I read in class or at home. I often avoided reading because the material I had access to made me feel insecure about being different,” he said. Lambert eventually turned to the internet for information and literature.

“I would read stories on Tumblr and Twitter and follow accounts where people shared their experiences. It was what I could relate to,” he said. “When I turned 16 and had a car plus a debit card, I would pre-order LGBTQIA+ coming-of-age novels at the nearest Barnes & Noble. Those stories and characters helped me tremendously before I was ready to accept who I was as a young person in this confusing world.”

Lambert said he decided to pay it forward by providing people with free access to stories to which they can connect and that provide a sense of empowerment. “I want people to know they are not alone



COURTESY PHOTOS



in their journey. I want to help young people in communities that don't have a Barnes & Noble or a public library with diverse offerings," he said.

"I want to reach people who struggle in their own skin. It's my goal to create a sense of community through reading. It's

and grassroots fundraising to influence changes within a variety of communities – including those experiencing this surge in book bans."

Lambert credits his time at FGCU with helping him in his nonprofit work, especially his experiences in Eagle View

Joining Lambert in Project Open Books are two alumni who also served as orientation leaders and both graduated in 2019 with communication degrees. Michael Rybak, who is a career development coordinator at Appalachian State University, serves as vice president;

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**"I want to reach people who struggle in their own skin. It's my goal to create a sense of community through reading. It's my hope that this project can help change lives, spread love and promote wonderful stories from writers who dedicate their lives to providing us with such content."**

JOSHUA LAMBERT, FOUNDER OF PROJECT OPEN BOOKS

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my hope that this project can help change lives, spread love and promote wonderful stories from writers who dedicate their lives to providing us with such content," Lambert said.

Through donations, Project Open Books maintains a library of approximately 150 titles ranging from children's picture books through middle-grade stories to novels for young adults. Readers select books from the nonprofit's website, and volunteers mail the books free of charge to addresses across the continental U.S. The organization has sent out more than 1,200 books, valued at more than \$17,000, supporting hundreds of individual classrooms and school libraries.

Those efforts are ramping up as schools nationwide have been pulling books from shelves because of so-called inappropriate content. "What we've seen in the last few years is a significant uptick in book bans and a growing attack on the LGBTQIA+ community, specifically affecting young readers," Lambert said. "While Project Open Books challenges those opinions as a champion for access to queer-affirming books, the nonprofit is a nonpolitical organization focused on micro impact

Orientation. "It was beyond a pleasure to be an orientation leader," he said. "I think that experience really led me down this path of approaching all pieces of my life with a more inclusive lens, one where I'm able to



celebrate our differences and have a genuine interest in where people come from, what they've experienced and what I can learn from them."

and Sierra Stevens, a senior associate campus recruiter for J.P. Morgan Chase, is secretary.

"Young people will always have a need for representation, especially folks who identify with historically underserved communities," Rybak said. "When I was growing up, I didn't have a queer role model, which was a direct reflection of my development and inability to sustain self-confidence for many years. By connecting young people with stories and characters that they can relate to, we are giving them a gateway toward becoming the most authentic versions of themselves or, in the least, an opportunity to escape a current reality that may not be extremely affirming or validating."

When he's not running a nonprofit, Lambert spends his days as a remote account executive for tourism marketing agency MMGY Global, serving the Lee County Visitor and Convention Bureau. In a full-circle professional move, it's the same bureau where Lambert completed his FGCU internship and where he landed his first job after graduation. ■

CLASS OF 2006

## Alumna becomes doggedly devoted to new career after new pup changes her life

BY KAREN FELDMAN

A TRIP TO A NORTH Carolina flea market proved transformational for Erica Kovacevic ('06, Communication).

Not only did she come home with a furry bundle of unconditional love she purchased from a woman selling puppies there, but her life also changed in ways she did not anticipate.

"I became a crazy dog mom," she says of the change that took place after the shih tzu/poodle/bichon frise puppy she named Chico became a family member.

Kovacevic had been working as an education consultant with a digital online company, Discovery Education, supporting K-12 schools with STEM implementation and professional development. But her new acquisition stirred more than puppy love within her.

Today she is the founder and CEO of Chico's Mafia Tough Dog Apparel, a clothing company for dogs. She officially launched the company May 1, 2021.

"When I got Chico that sparked the desire for entrepreneurship," she says. "I became the crazy dog mom. I'd see all the same dog clothes online. He'd wear them once, and they'd rip. There was nothing creative in my eyes."

That wasn't good enough for her special boy.



"I decided to make some clothes," she said. One thing led to another.

"I thought, 'Why don't I take this opportunity to create a small business that focuses on him with an element of giving back.' I wanted to create collections where you buy a shirt or bandanna,

and a portion of the proceeds goes to a local shelter. It's a unique niche of custom dog wear. Urban comfort wear. You can pick a color, like pink glitter, that you can't find in stores."

Never mind that Kovacevic had no background in fashion. She did know she needed her own heat press to create the clothes. She went online to a site run by Stahls, a manufacturer of the machines, and found they offered a scholarship and machine to help promote small businesses. She applied and won the scholarship, which turned out to be just what she needed.

"I'd been looking into manufacturing, but the limitations were too much," she says. "I knew nothing about heat press, but winning the business scholarship was monumental. And the business development support helped get me up and going."

That helped her with marketing and redesigning her website and social media pages. And that led to the exposure she needed to get some attention from

See more fashions at  
[chicosmafia.com](http://chicosmafia.com)



magazines and other news media.

Although she may not have had any background in fashion, she did have some in business, having earned an MBA at Wake Forest University School of Business and an Entrepreneurship Essential Certificate from Harvard Business School, among a variety of postgraduate degrees and courses she's taken.

It's a good thing, too, because she's basically a one-woman company. She takes the orders, designs the clothing, creates them on the heat press, keeps track of inventory and ships products to expectant customers. She handles the social media, answers emails and puts out a weekly newsletter. All of this is done within the confines of her home. Her lone helper is Chico, who serves as the quality inspector.

The name of the company is no accident. Chico's Mafia is, of course, named for her beloved pet. But Kovacevic also plays on Mafia as an

acronym for Modern Active Fun Inclusive Apparel and, secondarily, My Animal Family Is Awesome – not to mention fashionable when wearing the company's wide array of doggy duds.

There's the Camo Collection, with bandanas and harnesses in a camouflage

pattern. Shirts come emblazoned with canine philosophy: "Diva in training," "I'm a lover not a biter," "Play hard nap harder" and "I don't give a fluff!"

Are you looking for tropical? Consider the blue palms or sharks options or a white hoodie with two red paw prints and a couple of palm trees emblazoned on the back. There's a rainbow shirt, Halloween-appropriate ghost, pumpkin and vampire prints and sports shirts for canines who are doggedly devoted to the New York Yankees or Atlanta United, the city's soccer team.

Sales of some items generate revenue for charities, another of Kovacevic's goals when she founded the company. Her fashions are the official dog wear of the Paws Atlanta runway show, and sales benefit the not-for-profit animal welfare organization.

Now, some 654 designs later, she has a thriving company, a well-dressed dog, loyal customers and even some

consumer testers in the form of a playgroup of eight dogs and their owners – dubbed the "Dog Mafia" – that gathers weekday afternoons for an hour of frolicking in a dog park near her Atlanta home.

"The response from people has been great," Kovacevic says. "I have 'Dog Mafia' parents that give me ideas. Their ideas really provide me with creative help. They are like my focus group. I knew I'd have fun with it, but the support of so many people has been surprising." ■

**TOP:** Erica Kovacevic and her inspiration, Chico.

**LEFT:** Chico shows off his urban chic bandanna and original Mafia tee.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** The popular Love, Chico tee.



# SPORTS



## MEN'S GOLF

### Men's golf seizing opportunities under coach Andrew Danna

BY SETH SOFFIAN

**F**GCU MEN'S GOLF coach Andrew Danna had a simple message for his players when the first round of the program's debut team appearance in NCAA postseason play didn't go as they'd hoped last spring:

Tomorrow is a new day and new opportunity.

In a sport known for its many mantras meant to both calm and focus the mind, Danna's enduring optimism and proven results are as central to Florida Gulf Coast University's recent meteoric rise as anything else. Entering his fourth season at

FGCU, Danna has taken the Eagles from a lowly national ranking of No. 257 into the top 50 in the country. That follows his eight wildly successful seasons in Division II, including winning the national title at Lynn University.

Even with some impressive individual and team successes in FGCU men's golf





**Golf is already hard as it is. I like to think that they have a good outlook on the world, and they understand the realities they're going to face. Our program helps you prepare for that step.**



ANDREW DANNA, FGCU MEN'S GOLF COACH

**LEFT: Van Holmgren with coach Andrew Danna at the NCAA Regional in Kingston Springs, Tennessee in 2021.**

in the past, last year's NCAA Regional appearance not only was its first as a team, it also was the school's first at-large berth into NCAA postseason play for any of its perennially successful squads.

"He's pretty simple. It's high energy, goal driven," said former FGCU player Van Holmgren, who won the 2021 ASUN Tournament as a transfer from North Dakota State and is now in his first season on the PGA Tour Canada. "He's been around, so he knows what has to go into it to get results.

"He's just a trendsetter. He came from a winning culture. He brought that with him."



**Andrew Danna**

Born and raised in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Danna's coaching exploits start with him taking Georgia Southwestern State to No. 1 in the D-II Golfstat national rankings while earning Peach Belt Conference Coach of the Year in 2012. Then in six stellar seasons at Lynn, the program finished eighth, third and runner-up three times in the D-II NCAA tournament before finally winning the title in 2018, when Danna also was named the National Coach of the Year. After one season as an assistant coach at Louisiana State University, Danna wasted little time turning FGCU into a winner.

Following a rebuilding campaign in 2019-20, when the Eagles finished the season ranked No. 257, FGCU placed second in the ASUN Tournament, won individually by Holmgren, and surged to

a then-best program ranking of No. 65 to finish the year.

Last season, the Eagles couldn't overcome a slow start in the ASUN Tournament and finished second for the second consecutive year. But a program-best national ranking of No. 47 during the season helped FGCU earn the school's historic first at-large NCAA Tournament invitation.

A slow first round handcuffed the Eagles again in the regional in Columbus, Ohio. But Danna's enduring optimism helped FGCU inch forward in round two, then post a final-round score only one shot off eventual regional co-champions Oklahoma State and Georgia Tech.

"That's something I live by and I think you use every day," said Danna, pointing to the professional golf and other life aspirations held by his players. "Golf is already hard as it is. I like to think that they have a good outlook on the world, and they understand the realities they're going to face. Our program helps you



**Austin Cherichella**

prepare for that step."

Optimism and a strong work ethic are not unique to coaching. But Danna's own authenticity in those arenas helps him identify when such traits are genuine in recruits, players say.

"He's a good judge of character," said Holmgren, who turned down offers and interest from SEC and Big Ten schools to transfer to FGCU midway through his junior year. "He's got a great eye on personality. It's hard to second-guess him because he's been right so many times."

At Lynn, one of those many success stories was Tomas "Toto" Gana, a Chilean who won the 2017 Latin America Amateur Championship to earn a berth in golf's hallowed Masters Tournament. Gana's younger brother, Lukas Roessler, is a freshman on this year's FGCU squad.

FGCU's most recent success story came in July, when sophomore Lucas Fallotico won the Italian Amateur Championship, shooting 67-65 the final two rounds of the 72-hole tournament to win by five strokes. Fallotico and fellow returnees Jon Hopkins, Pierre Viallaneix and Thomas Salanito also all qualified for the U.S. or British amateur championships over the summer, more evidence of a program with the talent, genuine belief and work ethic to keep seizing opportunities.

"Everybody, they just want it so badly, and they love golf so much that they want to get better," said junior Austin Cherichella, a former ASUN All-Freshman selection who was named First Team All-Conference last year after leading FGCU with a 71.94 scoring average. "I can see many great things coming out of this program in the future. We were ranked (257th) in the country. Now we're top 50 in just two years. If we can do that, imagine what we can do in the next two years or even the next five to 10." ■



## BASKETBALL

## Aspiring chef turns up heat in the kitchen as well as the basketball court

BY DREW STERWALD

**K**IERRA “KIKI” ADAMS may wield a competitive edge over her peers when she follows her dream into the heated atmosphere of culinary school and restaurant kitchens. As a guard on FGCU’s women’s high-flying basketball team, she is already conditioned to hustle, spend long hours on her feet and use all of her 6-foot height to her advantage.

“I would say my height is an asset, as I feel like it is in everyday life,” the resort and hospitality management major said. “Being able to reach the top shelves (in a kitchen) is always a plus. I have good hand-eye coordination, and that does help with my ability when handling pots and pans.”

Adams had lots of practice firing up sauté pans last school year, in addition to firing passes to teammates on the court. Amid a thrilling 2021-22 season that saw

the Green and Blue win its ninth ASUN Championship and advance to the NCAA Tournament’s second round, Adams shouldered added pressure to perform. She completed a two-semester internship as a line cook in a restaurant at Hyatt Regency Coconut Point Resort & Spa in Bonita Springs. The internship required for her degree had Adams jumping from four-hour practice sessions at Alico Arena to eight-hour shifts tossing fruit salads and

PHOTO BY JAMES GRECO



frying up calamari at the resort's Tarpon Bay restaurant.

During peak season, the restaurant sat 150-200 patrons a night, she said.

"It's very fast paced," Adams said. "You have to have good communication with the people you work with. You want to make sure you're on the same page when the tickets start coming in, and you have to get everything in the order out at the same time."

A restaurant kitchen career seems like a recipe for success for someone who savors the pressure-cooker of collegiate sports and Food Network competition shows. Jennifer McGurk, who coordinates internships in FGCU's School of Resort & Hospitality Management, didn't have to talk to Adams long to figure out a placement where the aspiring chef could hone her knife skills while fulfilling the 1,000 hours of interning she needed.

"I soon realized that the Hyatt Regency would be ideal for Kiki's personality and career goals," McGurk said. "They brought her in for an interview and agreed that she would be a great fit. They loved her warm personality, interest in culinary, and that she was part of the basketball team."

Cooking has long been on the front burner for Adams. She grew up in Vancouver, Washington, and moved to Lawrenceville, Georgia, just before starting high school. Watching her grandmother and her father prepare Southern classics like fried chicken, collard greens and cornbread as a youth inspired her to learn how to cook.

"They make me cook quite often when I come home," she said.

With a full plate of academics, including an entrepreneurship minor, athletics and work, Adams doesn't have much time to cook for pleasure. Her go-to dish when she does? Fettuccine Alfredo with

shrimp or chicken. Another recipe she picked up from work: fried Brussels sprouts with gochujang aioli and cashews.

"I've made them for my teammates," she said. "Everyone's like, 'no, Brussels sprouts are gross.' But if they try them, they usually like them."

Turns out Adams may have a bit of the food influencer in her game already — before she's even started her formal culinary education. At FGCU, she's been focusing academically on the business of hospitality while taking food and beverage courses offered by chef-instructor James Fraser. "Kiera was an outstanding student," he said. "I really appreciate and admire our student athletes and recall how exciting it was when I saw her in a brief game highlight on a national news clip."

Basketball and academics are the main

focus in her final year, she says, but she did squeeze in an appetizing adventure over the summer: a four-week study abroad program in Florence where she learned about Italian culinary and cultural traditions.

"We learned about the sort of food they make in different regions and climates," she said. "Only certain places are allowed to produce certain products, like Parmesan cheese from Parma. It's inspected and gets a special seal."

Although she added some dishes to her game, like Bolognese sauce and tiramisu, Adams didn't make her signature Alfredo in Italy. ■

**LEFT: Kiera Adams shows off her chops in the Tarpon Bay kitchen.**

**BOTTOM: Kiera Adams faces off against Ava Maria.**





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Mike Martin is planning to retire soon after five years as FGCU's fourth president.

