

GATOR

FLORIDA

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100

CELEBRATING A CENTURY OF
COVERING THE GATOR NATION





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Orange, Blue & You!

**Your campus.
Your people.
Your weekend.**

Join Gators from every corner of the Gator Nation for a spirited celebration. Reconnect with friends, explore our evolving campus and experience the next chapter of the Gator Nation. From exclusive events to family-friendly fun and unforgettable campus experiences,

**this is your chance to
come back home!**



June 25-27, 2026



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MAIN FEATURE
ROOTS OF A RESEARCH POWERHOUSE

Cows once grazed on the Plaza of the Americas and experimental crops grew where Turlington Plaza now stands. From humble beginnings, UF has pushed science forward, saving lives, improving our food and putting science to work for the common good.



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Although palms and pines greeted the first Gators, it took decades for campus landscaping plans to take shape.



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A team of young alums led by Laila Fakhoury is building a creative community in Gainesville and Florida.



FLORIDA GATOR
The University of Florida's Alumni Magazine
Volume 13 Issue 2

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THE VICTORY YOU SEE BEGAN WITH THE VICTORIES YOU DIDN'T.

Behind every visible triumph is commitment, resilience and countless hours of dedication. Erin Jackson's gold-medal moment was years in the making—from her hard work to become one of the top inline skaters in the country to relearning the sport on ice at the world's highest level with that same relentless determination.

Breakthroughs at UF Health follow that same path. The discoveries that move medicine forward never happen suddenly. They are built from data, rigor and persistent scientific inquiry. When our researchers made a groundbreaking discovery that could potentially lead to a universal cancer vaccine, it was not by chance. It was the result of more than a decade of research into mRNA-based therapeutics and their potential to influence the body's immune response in precise and powerful ways.

These unseen efforts serve as the foundation of progress. Whether perfecting a skating stroke or decoding the immune system, meaningful innovations are created long before the world celebrates them.

Because both Erin and UF Health know that preparation is how we turn potential into something extraordinary.



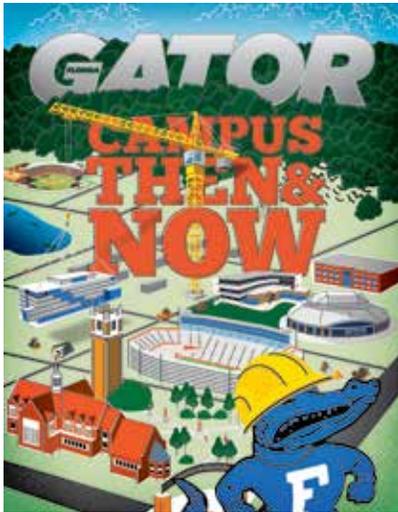
U.S. Olympic & Paralympic
MEDICAL NETWORK

HumanProgress.UFHealth.org

UFHealth
UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA HEALTH

Campus Then & Now

Letter writers comment on our most recent issue



Thank you for the article on the UF campus through the ages.

The picture of the Hub brought back many memories. Yes, it was a bookstore, but it was far more than that. It also was the campus post office, a small bank and a cafeteria that served breakfast and lunch.

In 1952, when I was a sophomore, I met a pretty freshman there who was eating breakfast. She became my wife (of 70 years). Thank you, Hub!

Stephan Fregger (BCE '56)
Tallahassee

Thank you for the great article that included Floyd Hall ("UF's Historic Heart," Fall 2025). I spent much time there studying geology under some wonderful professors and remember trying to concentrate in a first-floor classroom while nearby lab sieve equipment banged away. Also working in basement labs and struggling to finish writing my master's thesis in a cramped third-floor room overlooking Union Road, disturbed late one night as a mob of dozens of naked streakers ran westward.

On a second note, regarding demolished buildings, what happened to the early '70s Poultry Science

administrative building and the poultry buildings, then located where IFAS Research Drive now meets Southwest Archer Road? Wages earned working there immensely aided paying for my degrees.

Donald A. Soper (BS '72, MS '74)
Meridian, Idaho

I am very disappointed that there is not ONE mention of the UF Veterinary school, not even on the map. There are only 33 veterinary schools in the whole United States, and that alone should make the magazine. Everyone loves animals and their stories always bring them joy. We are unique as the first veterinary school that has a Veterinary Forensics Department, which helps identify animal abuse both locally, statewide and nationally. There is a strong link between domestic violence and animal abuse that is finally being addressed.

Betsy R. Coville (BS '84, DVM '88, MS '15)

Editor's note: Ms. Coville, you have hit on the challenge we face with every issue. There are so many great stories that all of them will not fit in our magazine, but we love animal stories, too, and will strive to include them in future issues.

Thank you for sharing the fantastic journey of Dr. Jeffrey Levenson.

I taught ophthalmology at UF 1976-1977 under Herbert Kaufmann, MD.

W. Benton Boone, MD

what
you're
saying

Adrienne Roberts

I am an old Gator alum and when I was a student, there were 12,000 students. Quite a change!

Anthony Fregosi, FAICHe

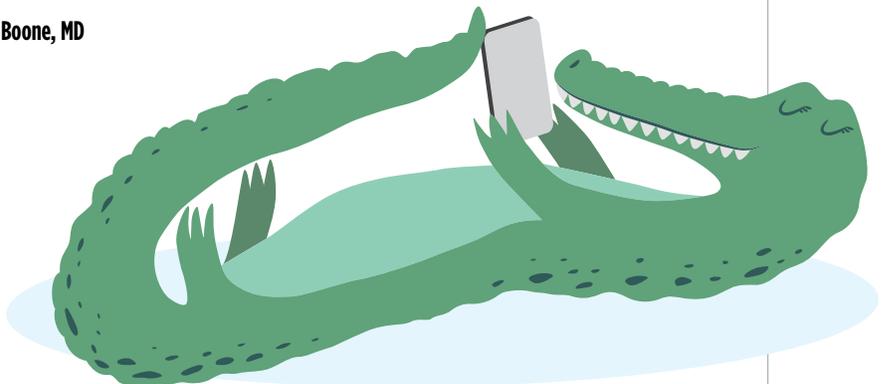
I read this issue "Cover to Cover." I keep promising myself I will visit the campus. It would be the first time since graduating.

4dsfromlhp

I loved this edition!

njm280

Great story! And thanks to @uflib Special collections for preserving the photos and stories shared in the article!



Weigh in on Social

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Letters

Florida Gator welcomes letters from our readers. Please send them to floridagator@ufalumni.ufl.edu. Include the writer's name, graduation year, address and daytime phone number. Letters may be edited for clarity and space.

Flori-DUH

We welcome your corrections. After all, humans still produce this magazine.

The Florida Alumnus

Published monthly, except July and August, by The Alumni Association of the University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida. Edited by the executive secretary. Subscription \$2 a year, 25 cents a copy. Application for entry as second-class matter at the post office at Gainesville, Florida, pending.

Volume I

Gainesville, Florida, September, 1926

Number 1

Presidential Greetings

From President Murphree of the University

WHEN I RECEIVED the news that we are to have an Alumni magazine, having as its purpose the support of higher education in Florida, I marked that day down as propitious. Men of Florida, you can not realize the great influence you are coming to exert, the power that in you lies, needing only a spark to touch it off. The good that can be done through common understanding and unified effort is beyond calculation.

In all the years I have been at this institution I have seen graduates and under-graduates go away from us over-flowing with enthusiasm and a passionate desire to do something for their Alma Mater. And I maintain that practically every man who has ever attended this university carries in his soul the ever-keen desire to repay Florida for what he was given here. You are now getting together. Through the Florida Alumnus, which we must keep alive, you can be kept informed of what is taking place here and what is going on, individually and collectively, among your own numbers. Then when the time comes for you to move, you can act fully informed and with a satisfaction which comes from knowing you are positively making no mistake. No longer need the enthusiastic son of Florida go hungry for a knowledge of what is taking place at his old college.

Plenty You Can Do

I think I have heard enough of the gab that there is no real work for an alumni to achieve through an active association. There is plenty of work, and the need, the great need, is for men with strength and influence and courage. The battle for higher education, and for high school and elementary education, in Florida may be already won, it may no longer be necessary to "sell" the idea of education, but much actual educational work has yet to be done. We may have accepted education, but many of us have yet to actually embrace it. Those of you who have attended the institutions of higher learning in our fair state may find this one means of "squaring" yourselves with the taxpayers. Forever preach the value of learning, of going to school, of education. In the highways and byways, on the streets and in the alleys.

Hundreds, even thousands, of our youth are yearning for a chance to better equip themselves through education. There is

nothing finer or nobler than to give the little lift which may send a deserving boy, or girl, onward and upward to a life of greater service. Many of our alumni have already done this. We probably shall never know all of their names; perhaps credit will never be accorded to all of them for this benevolent service to our youth and to our state. But those men themselves shall have the glorious satisfaction of knowing they have done something, placed their names indelibly upon the

From President Maguire of the Association

THE ALUMNI ASSOCIATION of the University of Florida is in for its greatest year. When another twelve months has rolled by I am sure all will say we have done more than during any other single year in the history of our organization.

This is the beginning of our official publication. And it is the first of our major projects. And through it and by means of it we mean to carry out several others. Every month every man can know every detail of every project of our big program. That is, he can if he will only read the messages we send him herein. Certainly we can depend upon him to do that much.

The University, our Alma Mater, has arrived at the turning point in its history. No one can hardly dispute the assertion that this institution will either go on and upward to be one of the greatest of its kind in America, or it will remain for a time about as it is and eventually dwindle off into secondary importance. We men of Florida, it behooves us, each and every one of us, to rally to our standards and do something today for the old school.

From the Perdido River to the Florida Keys, yes even over the entire country, there is much true Florida spirit and deep-seated Florida loyalty. Apart, a little here and a little there, this spirit and loyalty can not do much. But brought together, as the sun's rays through a glass, we can turn the world over. No true man, no man who has been a student at our Alma Mater and really partaken of all it has had to offer and learned the lessons to be learned here, can say he owes nothing to the campus which he roamed for two, three, four or more years. Surely we number no such men among our ranks. Most assuredly all of us are men of appreciation as well as of depth, vision and courage.

Over the Top Yet

Last spring and early summer our executive council undertook to raise \$150,000 by popular subscription in the State for the purpose of making certain much-needed gifts to the University. The details of that campaign, as conducted, probably will be related on another page of the Alumnus. For reasons known to all of you, that drive had to be brought to a halt. But not permanently!



DR. ALBERT A. MURPHREE
President University of Florida

scroll of good deeds, whether this be a public document or not.

Alma Mater's First Call

A few months ago your alumni executive council launched a drive to raise a sum of money to provide for certain crying needs of the University. This is to be a gift from the people of the State, a clean-cut, free-will hand-out. Though business conditions forced a delay to the

(Turn to page 14)

From the Editor



Cindy Spence

Joining the Centennial Club

Some serious campus can-do spirit was in the air a century ago.

If Red Bull had been around in the 1920s, you'd think a few cases of it had been handed out at Buckman Hall, firing up those gung-ho Gators of yesterday.

Homecoming and Gator Growl, Florida Blue Key, the magnificent Anderson Organ, the lyrics to our Alma Mater, our libraries, all with 100-year-old roots.

It's clear the moment held some urgency, and we know because of another anniversary: Ours.

This year, Florida Gator joins UF's Centennial Club.

In 1926, in Volume 1, Number 1 of Florida Gator's forerunner, The Florida Alumnus, Raymer F. Maguire recognized the watershed UF faced:

"The university, our Alma Mater, has arrived at the turning point in its history. No one can hardly dispute the assertion that this institution will either go on and upward to be one of the greatest of its kind in America, or it will remain for a time about as it is and eventually dwindle off into secondary importance."

The university met the moment, and the magazine has chronicled that journey — on and upward, as Maguire hoped — ever since.

The man of the hour, President Albert Murphree, found himself repeatedly clashing with legislators who wanted a great university but didn't want to open the state checkbook. They were happy to fund buildings — nine new buildings would appear during Murphree's tenure — but not the curriculum and faculty improvements he needed for three new colleges — pharmacy, architecture and journalism — which also are centenarians.

Murphree called the legislative tussle a "battle for higher education ..." and realized he would need some help. Cue the alumni.

We were a tiny Gator Nation, but by the 1920s there were enough of us — 1,200 or so — to create ripples through state politics. Maguire pleaded with alums to lobby their state representatives on UF's behalf.

The alumni association, already 20 years old at the time, had leaned in to an ambitious program to fill legislative funding gaps. The alumni vowed to raise \$150,000 for a basketball stadium, a swimming pool and encasing the brand-new Anderson Organ, UF's first major gift. To that end, Maguire pleaded with readers to please — please, please, *please* — pay their dues, \$5 at the time.

"Naturally, we are all more or less modest when it comes to touching a fellow up for his financial forgetfulness. But we cannot be modest now. We have too much to do."

University Historian Emeritus **Carl Van Ness** (MA '85) says 1926 is one

of the two best years for UF funding in Murphree's tenure. Then the Florida land boom goes bust in 1927, giving Florida an early taste of the Great Depression.

But Murphree and Maguire were on to something, realizing that Gators could be a force to be reckoned with.

In Florida Gator, we'll celebrate a century of progress all year. In this issue, we offer a few stories to highlight UF's research journey. When it comes down to it, science is about hope, from agricultural innovation to pioneering medicine to bringing lab discoveries to life. We've included a link to our friends at Explore, UF's research magazine, for those who want to keep reading.

One of our alumni profiles this issue, fittingly, is on 98-year-old **Carl McCoy**, who has been a devoted Gator for most of his life. Seventy years his junior is **Laila Fakhoury**, building a creative hub to nurture Florida artists into the future. Let us know how you like these stories.

In Volume 1, Number 1, Murphree describes the first issue of the magazine as "propitious." As we've pored back through our archive to bring you stories and photos, we can't help but agree. With the help of our readers, this magazine has told the story of Gator Nation for 100 years. Help us keep it up.

Here's to the next 100 years.

Cindy Spence (BS '82, MA '17)
Editor

FLORIDA
GATOR

Florida Gator Magazine is published by the University of Florida Alumni Association Inc. for its members.

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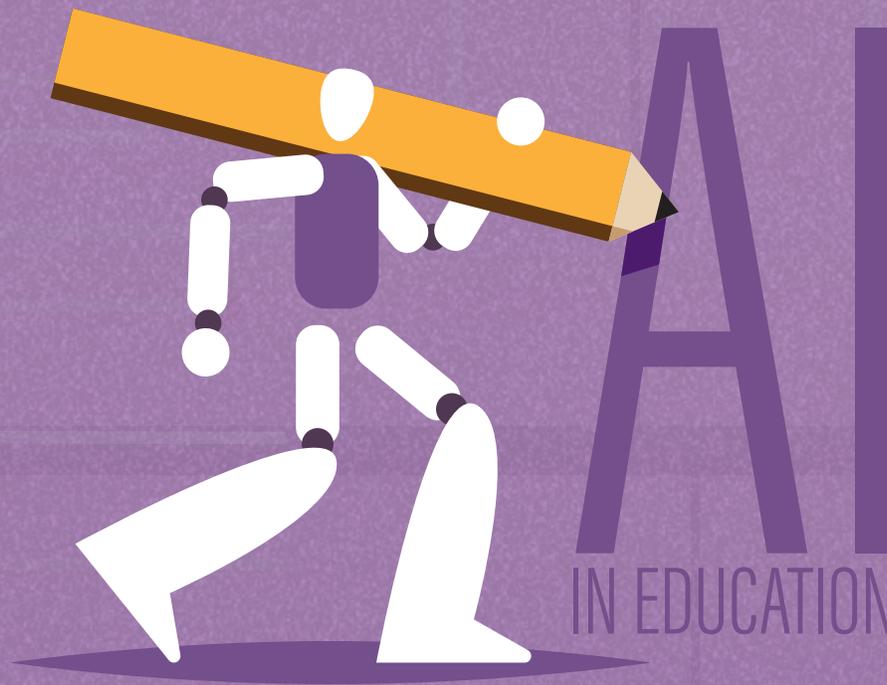
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GAME CHANGER

BY PAIGE FRY (BS '19)

As AI tools have flooded classrooms nationwide, teachers and administrators have struggled to separate hype from opportunity.

A new K-12 AI Education Task Force organized and chaired by UF hopes to help by providing clarity to school district leaders and shaping how artificial intelligence is integrated into Florida classrooms.

“AI integration is happening rapidly across school districts, and there is little guidance to support these efforts,” said Maya Israel, director of the CS Everyone Center. “Our approach of being community-driven for Florida by Florida, I believe, is unique.”

With 250 members from 39 districts, five charter schools, eight industry partners, 14 education associations and five higher education institutions, the task force is developing the nation’s first guidance for teaching and learning with AI. The effort is part of UF’s vision to position Florida as a national model for AI literacy, education and innovation — work made possible by a \$5 million gift from the Griffin

Catalyst, a civic engagement initiative of philanthropist Kenneth C. Griffin, that established the university’s CS Everyone Center for Computer Science Education.

The task force has already curated guidelines around data privacy, infrastructure, teaching, legal and ethical considerations and more.

Jennifer Womble, chair of the Future of Education Technology Conference (FETC), the largest national conference for education decision makers, said there’s an urgent national need in K-12 education to implement AI-related training and professional development for teachers and administrators. There is also a call to teach AI literacy to students so they can be fluent in AI, no matter their career path. Students need to know how AI operates, how their data is used and how to fact-check the information the AI generates. A little over half of the 50 states have a task force or a committee dedicated to AI in education, said Womble, who is a member of Florida’s task force.

“Our goal is to empower students to leverage AI, whether

“AI integration is happening rapidly across school districts, and there is little guidance to support these efforts. Our approach of being community-driven for Florida by Florida, I believe, is unique.”

Maya Israel, director of the CS Everyone Center



it’s building a business or being more effective in their personal life or being more effective in their day-to-day life,” Womble said.

EMPOWERING STUDENTS

Some critics of AI in the classroom may believe the learning process is being bypassed when students use AI to write their homework and teachers use AI to grade it.

The task force has been tackling questions around the proper or improper use of AI and the perceived erosion of human connection, critical thinking and creativity. Their goal is to demonstrate that AI is an impactful learning tool — not a substitute for essential learning and development milestones. The teacher — not the tech — should always remain the central figure in education. Israel said the issue isn’t the tool but the instruction around it. Students need guidance to use AI as a supplement to their learning, not a replacement.

Citrus County school board member Thomas Kennedy said he immediately recognized the value of AI after ChatGPT’s public launch. Kennedy has severe dyslexia and thinks AI will be a game changer for students with learning disabilities as long as critical thinking and problem-solving remain part of the equation. As AI continues to advance, today’s elementary schoolers will eventually graduate and enter careers that don’t yet exist.

“Are we educating students for the world that we’ve come from, or are we educating them for the world that they must be successful in?” Kennedy said.

Miami-Dade school board member Robert Alonso said AI can help

teachers quickly create individual lesson plans even for large classrooms.

“AI is not something that’s going to be taught by itself,” Alonso said. “It’s something that’s going to be integrated across all modalities and all professions and courses that we teach.”

Some urban districts — like Miami-Dade and Broward — have already established best practices for data security and privacy in AI education. Florida is now on the cutting-edge of developing “walled gardens” — an infrastructure that protects student data and isn’t used to train AI learning models. Miami-Dade County prioritized student privacy and protection from the start as it rolled out new tools such as Google’s Gemini for teachers and students, Alonso said.

The task force has adopted the best practices from fast-paced urban districts and implemented them in rural districts, which may have fewer resources and protections that affect broadband capacity and user support.

“We have some heavy lifting,” Kennedy said. “Right now, we’re having to build a plane that’s already flying, and we don’t even have the rules of flight.”

If districts are building their AI planes midair, UF and the task force are writing the flight manuals — helping teachers keep their planes aloft and make the most of this powerful new technology.

FUTURE OF AI

Geri Gillespy, Microsoft Elevate’s North American director of industry, joined the task force as a corporate partner to listen to a collective of voices, bring insights from what she’s seen in other states and

support their mission.

There are essential skills — like creativity, critical thinking and emotional intelligence — that still need to be central to learning, Gillespy said. Those skills make the difference between these technologies and humans.

“We have to step back and remember that it’s a time for us to not only look at how we’re using AI to support teaching and learning, but we also have to learn about what AI is and is not,” Gillespy said. “And then we can look at how we can learn from it.”

The Florida K-12 AI Education Task Force announced at the end of September that it was selected to participate in the EDSAFE AI Alliance Policy Labs, a national network that brings together states and school districts to collaborate on AI integration in K-12 education. Together, they can share insights, best practices and challenges related to AI frameworks.

The task force conducts monthly webinars that are open to the public. Those who would like to join a webinar or help with resource development can reach out to the CS Everyone Center at cseveryone@coe.ufl.edu. 🇺🇸

Join Us

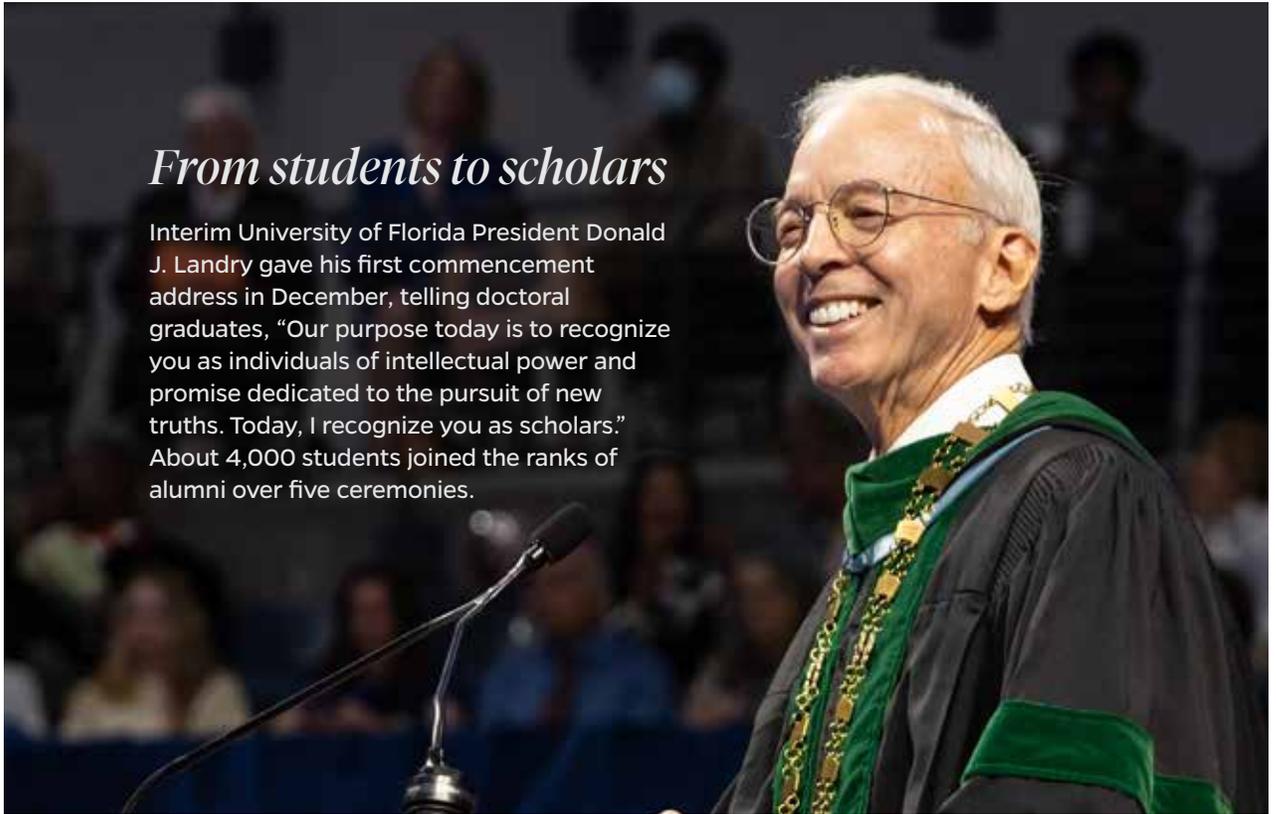
 Investments from partners and stakeholders will help the task force scale its work and strengthen AI readiness across Florida’s K-12 system. To support the task force and the CS Everyone Center, please scan the QR code below:



From students to scholars

Interim University of Florida President Donald J. Landry gave his first commencement address in December, telling doctoral graduates, “Our purpose today is to recognize you as individuals of intellectual power and promise dedicated to the pursuit of new truths. Today, I recognize you as scholars.” About 4,000 students joined the ranks of alumni over five ceremonies.

 To find out how to join the alumni association, scan this QR code:



Gator gratitude

You could feel the gratitude on campus on Nov. 5, when more than 2,000 students, faculty and staff celebrated Grateful Gator Day on the Plaza of the Americas. Albert was on chomp duty and hundreds of slices of pizza fueled the messages. More than 6,000 thank you notes and personalized video e-cards went out to UF donors. Pop-up activities were hosted by 24 colleges and units, which sent an additional 4,000 notes and e-cards.



School spirit was fueled at Honors Village by Division of Student Life ambassadors, left to right, **Keira McGrath, Stella DeFrain, Ketura Pierre Louis.**



Pharmacy student **Ashley Feng** wrote her thank you note at UF Health.



HiPerGator

UF's already robust AI initiatives got a rocket-powered boost with the delivery in October of the newest HiPerGator machinery, 30 times faster than the previous generation and now the fastest supercomputer in higher education.

UF alumnus and NVIDIA cofounder **Chris Malachowsky** (BS '80), a key partner and donor in UF's sweeping initiative to lead the country in creating the next AI workforce, was on hand for the celebration and tours of HiPerGator's home at the data center on the East Campus. The festive occasion called for selfies with the celebrity computer, like this one, with **Ken** (BS '72, MA '73, PHD '81) and **Linda McGurn** (BS '73, JD '78).

With nearly 7,000 users and 33 million research requests processed in the past year, HiPerGator is a formidable computation resource for the state and the Southeast.



TOP Chris Malachowsky was on hand for the tour of the data center after the newest HiPerGator equipment was installed.

BOTTOM Ken and Linda McGurn were among the dozens to snap a selfie with HiPerGator during the celebration at the East Campus data center.

TO THE MAX

UAA Restores Vernon Maxwell's Stats

BY CHRIS HARRY - FLORIDAGATORS.COM

“Mad Max” is back atop the Florida all-time scoring chart. Vernon Maxwell, the electrifying guard who led the program to the NCAA Tournament for the first time in its history but also played a role in an NCAA investigation that placed the Gators on unsanctioned probation, has had his final two seasons of individual statistics restored by the University Athletic Association.

Maxwell now ranks as the No. 1 scorer in Gators’ basketball history, as well as the No. 3 all-time scorer in the Southeastern Conference behind only LSU’s “Pistol” Pete Maravich (3,667 from 1967-70) and Tennessee’s Allan Houston (2,801 from 1990-93). Maxwell totaled 2,450 points in his four seasons (1985-89).

After Florida was forced to vacate three NCAA Tournament victories Maxwell participated in, athletic director Bill Arnsparger took the extra and unique step of stripping Maxwell — and only Maxwell — of all his

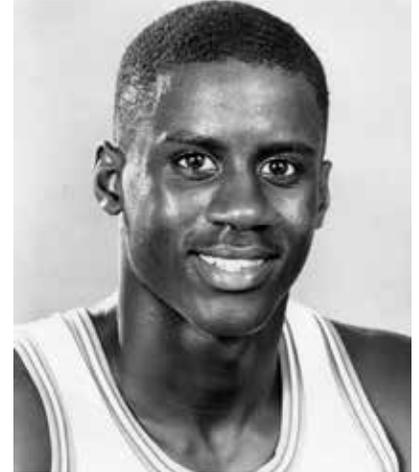
individual statistics for those two years, including 1,404 points over 67 games.

Athletic director Scott Stricklin said Maxwell earned his points: “Vernon Maxwell is one of the greatest players ever to wear a Gator uniform. You could not write the history of Florida basketball without him.”

Maxwell, now 60, said, “I fell on the floor. I was ecstatic.”

At the conclusion of Florida’s 2024-25 national championship season, Maxwell ranked 55th on the program’s all-time scoring list with 1,046 points, even without his junior and senior statistics. Now, the updated record book shows Maxwell — who went on to a 12-year NBA career and won two world championships with the Houston Rockets — atop the chart.

Maxwell looks back at his college days with mixed emotions. Asked what 60-year-old Vernon would say to 20-year-old Vernon, Maxwell said, “I’d tell him, ‘Whatever you’re doing, do the opposite.’”



Honors for Urban Meyer

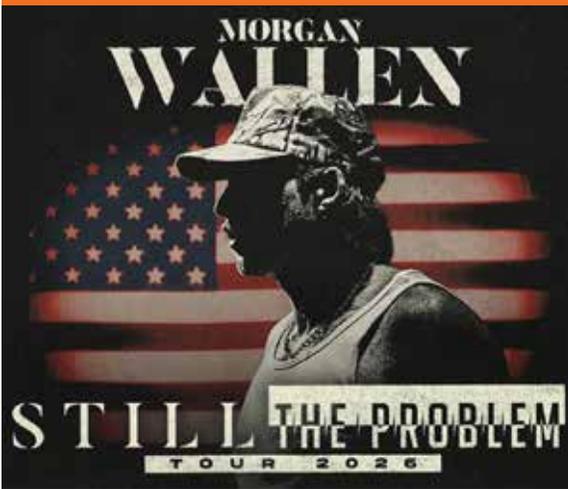
Former UF head football coach Urban Meyer was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in December, the 14th overall Gator and fifth Florida coach to be tapped.

Meyer was head coach from 2005-10, and his overall record was 65-15 and 36-12 in the SEC. In six seasons, Meyer guided the Gators to a pair of national championships (2006, 2008), two SEC championships, three SEC Eastern Division crowns and six straight January bowl games, including three BCS bowl games.

In 2026, Meyer will be inducted into the UF Football Ring of Honor, joining Wilber Marshall, Emmitt Smith, Steve Spurrier, Tim Tebow, Danny Wuerffel and Jack Youngblood.



MAY 15 & 16 @ BEN HILL GRIFFIN STADIUM



Music is back at Ben Hill Griffin Stadium on May 15-16, when country music star Morgan Wallen brings his Still the Problem Tour 2026 to town. This is the first concert in the stadium since Garth Brooks performed in 2019. Prior to Brooks, the Rolling Stones played in 1994. Wallen had us by halftime, as the song goes, but he may need to change that No. 16 jersey for the Florida crowd.

Class acts

The F Club and Gator Boosters welcomed a storied group of Gators into the 2025 UF Athletic Hall of Fame class in October before the Homecoming game.

Inductees are:

<i>Theresa Andrews</i>	<i>Swimming</i>	<i>1981-83</i>
<i>Charlotte Browning</i>	<i>Track & Field</i>	<i>2008-10</i>
<i>Kitty Cullen</i>	<i>Lacrosse</i>	<i>2010-13</i>
<i>Marquis Dendy</i>	<i>Track & Field</i>	<i>2012-15</i>
<i>Lauren Haeger</i>	<i>Softball</i>	<i>2012-15</i>
<i>Kytra Hunter</i>	<i>Gymnastics</i>	<i>2012-15</i>
<i>Maurkice Pouncey</i>	<i>Football</i>	<i>2007-09</i>

This year's class includes a distinguished letterwinner:

Phil Pharr
Football
1978-80



Jon Sumrall



Nick Zimmerman

New playbooks for football, soccer

Jon Sumrall was named the 31st head football coach in program history in November, and Nick Zimmerman was named the fourth head coach for the soccer program in December.

Sumrall, who took Tulane University to the College Football Playoffs, has experience coaching and playing in the Southeastern Conference and joins the Gators after engineering rapid turnarounds at two different programs and guiding his teams to championship appearances in every season as a head coach. Sumrall, 43, currently owns the fifth-highest winning percentage among active FBS coaches (42–11, .792).

“The University of Florida is one of the premier programs in college football, and it’s an incredible honor to serve as the head football coach,” Sumrall said.

Zimmerman leaves Mississippi State after transforming MSU from a team with limited postseason history into a consistent national contender. He helped the Bulldogs earn four straight NCAA Tournament berths, six SEC Tournament appearances and capture the program’s first-ever SEC regular season championship with a perfect 10–0 record in 2024.

“Florida is a place where championships are possible, and I’m excited for the opportunity to help lead this program back to the NCAA Tournament,” Zimmerman said.

Gator go-getters

Students set up shop at the monthly Gator Market

BY TARRYN NICHOLS (BS '26)
PHOTOS BY BRIANNE LEHAN

For Coral Keegan, Gator Market is a side hustle to supplement her Ph.D. stipend. For Senali Perera, a portion of the proceeds from her boutique, the Perera Era, support relief efforts in Sri Lanka.

Keegan and Perera are among dozens of student entrepreneurs who turn out for Gator Market once a month on the Reitz Union North Lawn. Students mix with local businesses to showcase their creativity with handmade crafts, upcycled thrifted clothing, eccentric jewelry, art and food.

Meet a few student entrepreneurs:

Kaitlyn Tapia-Ruano (Nomadic Canvas)

 @nomadiccanvas

Hannah Tapia-Ruano (Sunburst Designs)

 @sunburstdesignco

Kaitlyn Tapia-Ruano, a tourism and hospitality senior, and Hannah Tapia-Ruano are sisters who share their tent and table at the market.

Kaitlyn has traveled to destinations such as Costa Rica, Colorado and Alaska while completing her bachelor's through UF Online. The nature she encounters on her trips inspires her art. She sells custom ornaments, hand-painted prints and linocut cards through her shop Nomadic Canvas. At her first Gator Market, rows of raw wooden disc ornaments were displayed within a tabletop vending machine.

Her sister, Hannah, intends to revive physical media. She makes nature-themed watercolor cards, particularly postcards, for her business Sunburst Designs. What she loves most about Gator Market is hearing stories from her customers. They often tell her where they're from and who they're sending a hand-written message to.



Out of consideration, she stamps and mails the cards for them by the end of the day.

"I think it adds another layer of intimacy and meaning," said Hannah, noting that such gestures have become rare in an increasingly digital world.

Hannah, who graduated with an applied physiology and kinesiology degree, aspires to become a medical illustrator. Though her prints feature the anatomy of blue whales and bright flowers rather than the human body, she dreams of pursuing both callings by running a stationery shop on the side.

Taylor Wade (Taylormade)

Taylor Wade's business card says "only baddies wear Taylormade." Wade says the business started as a way to bond with her great-grandmother. When she was a child, her great-grandma crocheted toys and accessories for her. She taught Wade how to crochet a couple years back and Wade fell in love with the handicraft. She now sells scrunchies, beanies, bows and headbands.

"Everything I make, before I even sell it





goes straight to her to make sure she likes it,” Wade said. “And if she likes it, it must be good.”

Wade, a theater major, has had her hands full weaving classes, performing and a business into her schedule. When she packs up her Gator Market table, she heads to dress rehearsal.

Anneliese Ibanez (Pinkus Banana)

Anneliese Ibanez is a third-generation crafter. Both her mother and grandmother ran their own craft businesses, making creative talent the first-year graphic design student’s birthright. She sells handmade T-shirts, jewelry and UF pennants from her Pinkus Banana table — which rocks a banner she designed herself on Adobe Illustrator.

Much of the art she makes translates from



her classes, which can be intensive and up to three hours long. Still, Ibanez finds joy in the process and plans to sell her creations at future Gator Markets.

“I enjoy doing it,” Ibanez said. “So it’s not really work for me.” 🍌

GATOR BITES

TOP 5 ALUMNI NETWORK Gator Nation, now 500,000 strong, was ranked No. 5 in the Princeton Review’s top alumni networks for public schools. UF alumni can join Gator Clubs® and affiliate groups in the United States and globally. Alumni also have access to programs like 40 Gators Under 40, Grand Guard and Gator100, which recognizes the 100 fastest-growing businesses owned by alumni. Alumni reside in every state and more than 150 countries.

HONORING BOB GRAHAM A new gift to the Bob Graham Center for Public Service will support hands-on experiences for students in public service. The \$5 million gift from the family of the late Florida governor and U.S. senator creates the Governor Bob Graham Family Endowment for Civic Engagement, the largest endowed fund in the center’s history. The contribution also commemorates the center’s 20th anniversary and launches a fundraising campaign to grow the center’s endowment to \$20 million by the end of 2026. Founded in 2006, the center, located in Pugh Hall on UF’s Gainesville campus, has become a hub for civic engagement and intellectual discourse. The family also gifted the center with the governor’s Medal of Freedom, awarded posthumously by Gov. Ron Desantis in recognition of Graham’s lifetime of public service. To support the center, visit bobgrahamcenter.ufl.edu.

NAME CHANGE The UF Health Cancer Center has changed its name to the UF Health Cancer Institute. The designation recognizes that the UF Health Cancer Institute has engaged not only researchers in the health science colleges, but researchers across all 16 colleges at the state’s flagship university, from Agricultural and Life Sciences to Engineering to Medicine to Veterinary Medicine. The change reflects the institute’s upward trajectory, coming two years after it became the only National Cancer Institute-designated cancer center at a public institution in the state.

MBA EXPANSION UF’s Warrington College of Business part-time Master of Business Administration, or MBA, program is shifting some of its locations to Jacksonville in Spring 2026, close to many of the city’s leading companies, from the UF Health campus and the Naval Station Mayport to the freight transportation company CSX, Florida Blue insurance and Johnson & Johnson Vision. The program, which consistently ranks among the top 20 publics, will also offer a master’s degree in management with a focus on AI in Fall 2026. Warrington is also expanding its program offerings throughout South Florida, offering a part-time MBA program in Miami in Spring 2026. Warrington’s top-ranked online MBA program also serves students’ needs from anywhere in the world.

UF TOPS IN NEW RANKING A new higher education ranking system created by the City Journal ranks UF as No. 1 among the top universities in the nation, public or private. The ranking was reported in a Wall Street Journal editorial entitled “The University Elite, Reconsidered.” The City Journal evaluated 100 leading universities across the country on 68 factors. The rankings “look closely at the strength of the general curriculum and whether the university is providing excellence or coasting on a fancy reputation,” The Wall Street Journal editorial stated.



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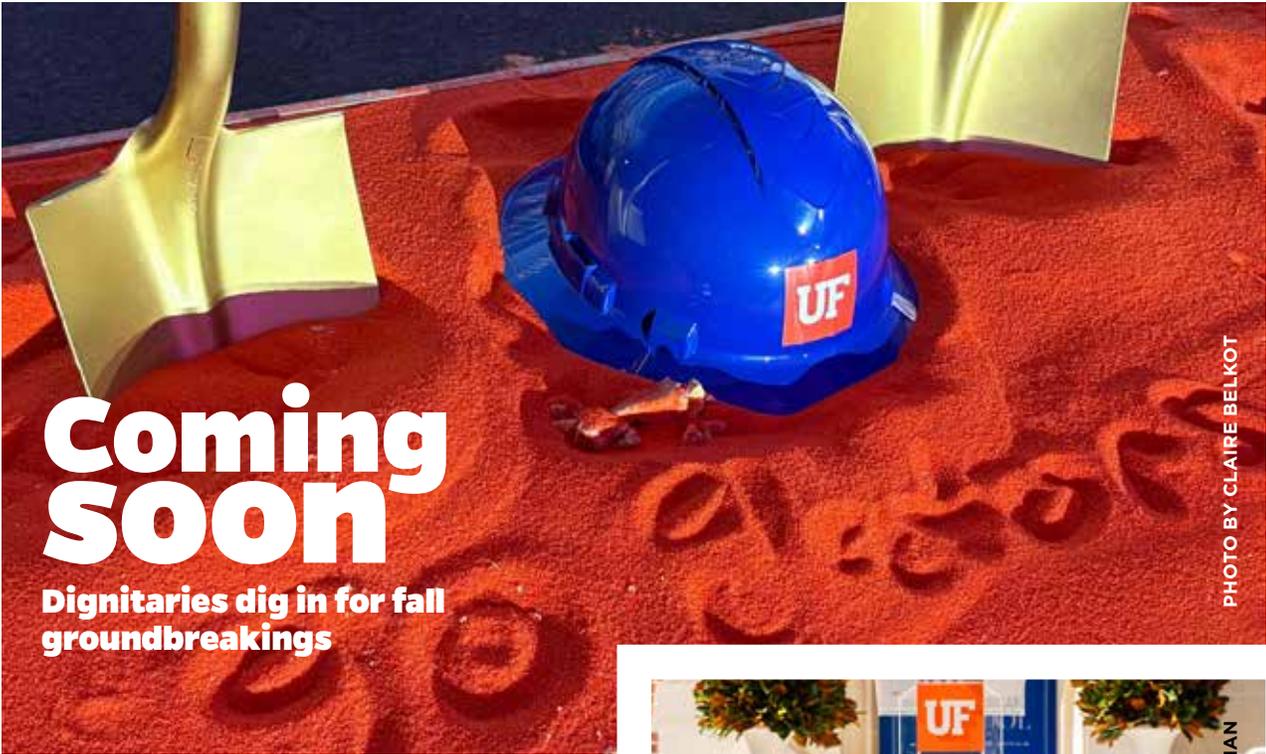


PHOTO BY CLAIRE BELKOT

Coming SOON

Dignitaries dig in for fall groundbreaking

No, the sand on campus isn't really orange, but it's a festive touch for celebrating three major new projects.

In November, Gov. Ron DeSantis helped break ground on the \$55 million renovation of the Infirmery, which will house the Hamilton School for Classical and Civic Education. DeSantis thanked entrepreneur Kenneth C. Griffin for his \$5.5 million gift to support the school's vision. In December, the College of Dentistry broke ground with the support of \$200 million from the Legislature, the largest investment by the state in a medical science building at any university. Also that month, the College of the Arts unveiled the renderings for the new music building, which will break ground this year, no doubt with more orange sand on hand. 🦢



PHOTO BY BRIANNE LEHAN



PHOTO BY BRIANNE LEHAN



College of the Arts MUSIC

PHOTO BY BRIANNE LEHAN

the [big] idea

What's on the sea turtle diet? A lot of plastic.

BY DOUG BENNETT

David Duffy holds up a half-full vial of multicolored plastic shards, each smaller than a grain of rice. In a drawer in his lab, a tray is lined with vials filled with plastic, all from sea turtles.

"It wasn't just one or two pieces of microplastic. Some of the turtles had hundreds of pieces, sometimes one-quarter of their body length," says Duffy, a molecular biologist at UF's Whitney Laboratory for Marine Bioscience.

The lab is entering its sixth decade, and a new \$41.2 million, 38,000-square-foot research facility is nearing completion at its waterfront campus south of St. Augustine.

It's a prime location for sea turtle work, which Duffy describes as urgent. Nearly 93% of post-hatchling loggerhead turtles studied for a 2020 paper had plastic in their guts.

"It was absolutely shocking," Duffy says.

For juvenile turtles, their first haven can also be their downfall. After hatching, they make an exhausting swim to the Sargasso Sea, a floating seaweed mass east of Florida. The microplastic there is especially pernicious. In open water, plastic absorbs other chemicals from the environment as it breaks down into pieces turtles mistake for food. Intestinal ruptures and stomachs crowded with plastic are common among the patients at Whitney's sea turtle hospital.

Having a sea turtle hospital embedded in a marine research lab benefits animals and humans alike. Whitney is the state's only university-affiliated lab for treating turtles' fibropapilloma tumors and the new facility will bring researchers and caregivers under the same roof.

Duffy is interested in the factors driving a prolonged uptick in fibropapilloma tumors, which share some traits with human herpes viruses.

Since 2015, he has been using state-of-the-art genomic approaches from human cancer research and applying it to sea turtles to better understand their tumors. Due to their relative longevity, sea turtles are an excellent, natural model for studying cancer.

Cancer normally isn't common in sea turtles, but they become more susceptible to tumors if their environment gets polluted enough.

"That should be a big lesson for humans, as we continue to contaminate our homes and environments with an ever-increasing amount of diverse contaminants."



 To learn more about research at the Whitney Laboratory for Marine Bioscience, scan this QR code:



OBJECT LESSONS



THE DOE COLLECTION HELPED SAVE BALD EAGLES

BY CINDY SPENCE (BS '82, MA '17)

Charles Doe began collecting bird eggs in the late 1800s, creating a collection that would play a historic role in the 1960s, when scientists would use them to help save bald eagles and other birds from extinction.

An egg is nature's incubator; strong enough to shelter a growing baby bird, but fragile enough for the chick to break free when it's ready to meet the world.

In the 1960s, that life support system went awry when the eggshells in the nests of birds of prey began to crack prematurely, killing thousands of undeveloped chicks and bringing some birds, like bald eagles, to the brink of extinction. In 1963, only 417 nesting pairs of bald eagles were counted in the contiguous U.S.

The culprit turned out to be the insecticide DDT. Scientists of the day compared the bird eggs prior to the adoption of DDT – many from the Doe collection at the Florida Museum of Natural History – to eggshells after DDT's adoption. The post DDT eggshells of eagles, falcons, ospreys and other birds were up to 20% thinner.

DDT was banned for most uses in 1972, and birds began to recover. Today, there are more than 71,000 breeding pairs of bald eagles in the lower 48 states.

Doug Jones, the museum's director emeritus, said the eggs that sat in cabinets for 50 years or more were a key to the scientific riddle. "We knew how thick the shells were supposed to be because we had those eggs."

Doe arrived at UF in 1932, its first curator of a distinct collection, with 10,400 sets of eggs representing 733 species, collected since the late 1800s. His collection represented about 75% of North American birds. Since then, the museum has grown into the third-largest university-based natural history museum, and now houses more than 40 million objects, each with a powerful story to tell about life on Earth.

"These objects are a library of life," Jones says. "We don't know what the technology of the future is going to be, we don't know what new information can come from these specimens. Protecting them is kind of a sacred responsibility."

To learn more about the Doe Collection, scan this QR code:



1. Cooper's Hawk, *Accipiter cooperii*
2. Short-tailed Hawk, *Buteo brachyurus*
3. Northern Cassowary, *Casuarus unappendiculatus*
4. Glossy Ibis, *Plegadis falcinellus*
5. Piping Plover, *Charadrius melodus*
6. California Quail, *Callipepla californica*
7. Greater Rhea, *Rhea americana*
8. Red-tailed Tropicbird, *Phaethon rubricauda*
9. Yellow Rail, *Coturnicops noveboracensis*
10. Osprey, *Pandion haliaetus*
11. Swallow-tailed Kite, *Elanoides forficatus*
12. Parasitic Jaeger, *Stercorarius parasiticus*
13. Turkey Vulture, *Cathartes aura*
14. Bald Eagle, *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*
15. Gray Tinamou, *Tinamus tao*
16. unidentified tinamou, family Tinamidae
17. Wandering Albatross, *Diomedea exulans*

PHOTOS BY KRISTEN GRACE/FLORIDA MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

The museum is closed for renovations, but collection highlights can be seen in "All Things Beautiful: Wonders from the Collections of the Florida Museum of Natural History," available from University Press of Florida by scanning this QR code:





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Volume IV
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early microscope shown being used by a student of the old East Florida Seminary reveals

Fighting the Fruit Fly
In Actual Operation, Extinction Plan Should Not Be So Difficult, Says Dr. Newell, but for Success, Co-operation of All is Necessary



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U. S. Office of Education
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149 Square Feet
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48 Square Feet
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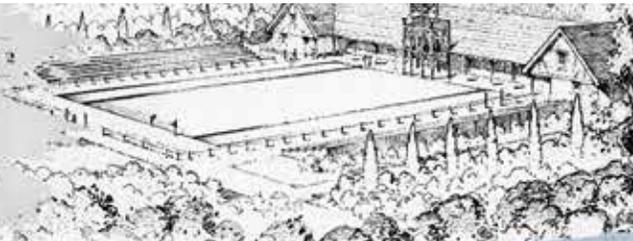
Air Force gets on with its guided missiles



University of Florida

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Graduate Study
Establish First-Class Graduate
Program Says



THIS POOL IS DESIGNED TO BE THE FINISH



Dr. Miss Egan, assistant professor of the department of Chemistry, is shown in her laboratory.

WAR AGAINST CANCER WAGED
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Sholtz Addresses Grads; Launches
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SCOTT M. LOFTIN, president of the Endowment Corporation, receives a \$100 check from C



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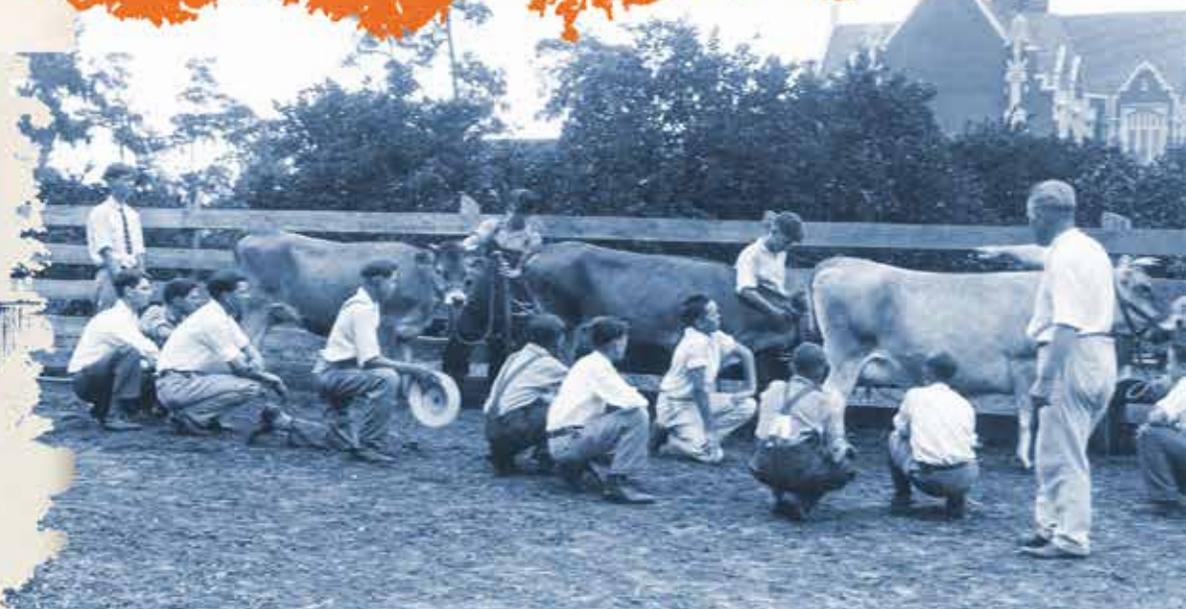
Florida Gator and its forerunners have covered the University of Florida. For the three issues in our 100th anniversary year, we will take a look back at developments in UF's history. In this issue, we look at advances in science. How does a research powerhouse get its start? Read on.



Florida's first research building in Gainesville.



m
ALKS





An Epic Journey

BY CINDY SPENCE (BS '82, MA '17)

The University of Florida's earliest scientists likely had dirt under their fingernails.

Cows grazing on the Plaza of the Americas? Sure. Before it was the campus crossroads, it was a pasture for College of Agriculture cattle.

Rows of experimental crops on the doorstep of Newell Hall? The better to keep an eye on plant breeding trials.

When UF opened in 1906, the research enterprise was not much to brag about.

But as a land grant institution, chartered under the federal 1862 Morrill Act, UF had marching orders to provide studies in agriculture and the mechanic arts, hence the cows on the Plaza and row crops alongside classrooms. Even the early practitioners of the mechanic arts, the engineers, did double duty, helping with the construction plans for the growing campus, says UF Historian Emeritus **Carl Van Ness** (MA '85).

The land grant charter kickstarted research, and the later addition of the Florida Agricultural Experiment Station under the federal 1887 Hatch Act kept agriculture "front and center," says Betty Smocovitis, a scholar of science history, a biologist and a 2009-11 UF alumni professor.

"The history of the land grant mission and what it ends up doing is really epic," Smocovitis says.

The agricultural experiment station was the center of UF's research enterprise for decades, says Van Ness, who wrote "The Making of Florida's Universities, Public Higher

Education at the turn of the Twentieth Century." UF's Citrus Experiment Station, established in Lake Alfred in 1917, quickly grew to become the world's largest research center devoted to one crop, and still is. UF's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, with a footprint in each of Florida's 67 counties and 12 research centers, also grew out of the early agricultural focus.



Nuclear reactor on the UF Campus in 1962.

Research expanded beyond agriculture with the end of World War I, as young men began to return to UF, pushing enrollment over 1,000. Smocovitis says the war highlighted the need for scientific and technical skills, pushing UF and other universities to expand their curricula and develop ties with industries to boost funding. In 1934, Van Ness notes, UF awarded its first two Ph.D.s, one in chemistry and the other in pharmacy.

Another war, World War II, again pointed out a need to invest in science, Smocovitis says. In the post-war era, UF got a health center with the beginnings of a cancer research enterprise. Today, UF has National Cancer Institute status and is conducting studies on a breakthrough in cancer research (see page 26).

Today, UF ranks 15th among all public universities in research expenditures.

In 1959, UF got a nuclear reactor for training as part of President Dwight Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace program. Today, the research reactor is one of the five oldest university research reactors still licensed, a key tool for education in the nuclear sciences and a neutron source for experiments ranging from medical to archaeological.

The federal government realized in the post-war era that science and technology can help win wars, Smocovitis says. It "incentivizes research, and that transforms education."

"If you trace the development of UF against that national backdrop, you'll see that it's keeping pace," Smocovitis says. "And since the 1980s, the university has been in overdrive, with some fits and starts."

In 1988, as she was weighing a job offer from UF,

UF's agricultural roots gave it a strong scientific foundation



The fourth generation of HiPerGator is considered the most powerful AI computer at any university in the U.S.

Smocovitis read "The Launching of Modern American Science, 1846-1876," which said the South missed out on the institutionalization of science seen in Northeast schools. That regional bias was still present in the 1980s (and persists today), but she nevertheless joined UF that year.

"I was reading it and laughing because it said the South didn't have much in the way of science because of the three F's: flora, fauna and fever," says Smocovitis, who is on sabbatical to research and write about Carl Sagan. "We do have excellence in botany, zoology and entomology."

"But take a look. Here's a medical campus, next to museum and natural history collections, next to enterprises like IFAS, next to veterinary medicine, and more," Smocovitis says. "There are only a couple of other places where you can see all of this under one roof, all in one place."

Today, UF ranks 15th among all public universities in research expenditures. The research enterprise that started with rows of plant experiments and cows on the Plaza is now worth \$1.3 billion and growing.

"We've got some bragging rights," Smocovitis says. "It's just taken a little while to get here." 🦎

A REVOLUTIONARY HARVEST

BY CINDY SPENCE (BS '82, MA '17)



Artificial intelligence, robotics, automation, big data analytics, the internet of things. They sound like the tools of a Silicon Valley start-up, but in the midst of the fourth revolution in agriculture, they're the newest tools on Florida farms.

The futurist deploying these tools is UF agricultural engineer Yiannis Ampatzidis, a professor of agricultural and biological engineering in Immokalee at the Southwest Florida Research and Education Center, a part of UF's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, and he says these ultramodern tools are keys to healthy harvests in fields, groves and greenhouses.

"Revolution is the perfect word," Ampatzidis says. "This is no doubt the fourth agricultural revolution."

Agriculture's first revolution was mechanization — tractors, harvesters and such. Its second, chemicals like fertilizers and pesticides, drastically increased crop yields.

The third, hybrids produced by genetics, boosted yields yet again. The fourth, Ampatzidis says, will use AI to harvest the explosion of data collected with new tools:

- Drones fly over citrus groves, counting and categorizing trees.
- On the ground, robotic arms collect pests from leaves to determine which trees need to be treated.
- Multispectral imaging detects diseases like bacterial spot on row crops before entire fields are infected.
- Ground-based remote sensing equipment scours groves, up one row and down the next, to survey for green vs. ripe fruit.
- Machines straddle row crops, sensors spotting and spraying weeds only as they encounter them, saving money and chemicals, helping the farmers and the consumers who buy the produce.

And behind the scenes a cloud-based software developed



Agricultural engineer Yiannis Ampatzidis says AI and other technologies have kicked the fourth revolution of agriculture into high gear.

by Ampatzidis and his colleagues sucks up all the data, analyzing it and synthesizing it into chunks that scientists — and farmers — can use to make better decisions. Agrovieview was named the Invention of the Year by UF Innovate in 2020.

AI and HiPerGator will leverage the capabilities of technologies like mechanization that have been around a long time. For example, a machine has long been able to pick an orange and throw it into a basket. But is the orange ripe enough to pick? Can the machine apply enough pressure to secure the orange but not so much that it squishes the orange? AI can tackle those questions.

AI also will be the great equalizer. Access to more knowledge will lead to better decisionmaking and level the playing field for all farmers, big and small.

Automating chores and adding AI pays off. For example, just creating a tree inventory for a grove is expensive and time-consuming. Manually counting trees on just 1,000 acres can cost up to \$14 an acre. Using drones, the time can be reduced by 90 percent and the cost by 60 to 70 %, Ampatzidis says.

Once the drone images are uploaded into Agrovieview, the grower can access much more than just a tree count. Agrovieview processes and analyzes the images to provide information such as tree height, canopy size, stress condition, and gaps where trees need to be replanted. The grower can also search for specific categories, for example, all the trees less than 7 feet tall.

Agrovieview, a cloud-based application, aggregates data

from drones, satellites, sensors and imaging equipment. Agrovieview can take disparate information and produce maps of fields or groves, showing trees and gaps between trees, tree height, canopy size and leaf density. It can also estimate plant nutrient concentration and — in the near future — predict yield and fruit quality. In row crops, it can also show spacing and overlay data about where pests have been detected, allowing it to create a tool called a prescription map, which offers detailed instructions on where to apply fertilizers and pesticides to best effect. And with 12 UF/IFAS research and education centers throughout the state and 67 extension offices, the advances will quickly get into the hands of farmers and growers and eventually onto Floridians' kitchen tables.

Prescription mapping and smart sprayers are not only good for growers' budgets, they are good for the environment, too, because reducing pesticides and fertilizers means less chemicals seeping into Florida water supplies. Growers will be able to treat tree-by-tree instead of acres at a time.

Ampatzidis says the AI revolution will act as a multiplier effect for all the previous agricultural revolutions.

"The strength of UF is that we have all these faculty from different disciplines that can help us to better develop these AI models," Ampatzidis says.

In the Fourth Agricultural Revolution, soil and water and weather still matter. But data — and data-based decision-making — is king. 🦒



A VACCINE FOR CANCER?

Cancer immunotherapy research yields surprising finding

BY MICHELLE JAFFEE

The look in her eyes and her next words would be etched forever in the mind of Dr. Elias Sayour.

Months earlier, the girl's right leg was amputated, the best chance to rid her body of cancer. But the cancer came back, this time in her lung.

The young teenager understood exactly what this meant.

If you knew the cancer was gonna come back, she asked Sayour, why'd you cut off my leg?

He'd made the best decision he could with the information he had. But such experiences during his pediatric oncology fellowship shifted something deep inside Sayour, cementing vivid memories he retells today. He saw preschoolers with permanent brain damage from radiation or surgery. Kids who died of infections or other complications after chemotherapy.

Framed photos of patients lost began taking up permanent residence on his office bookshelves.

Everything he'd dreamt about and worked toward for years had led to that point, but then, he wasn't so sure about this path and its pain. He viewed the treatments he was dispensing as crude. Even when they cured, the cost seemed too great.

Sayour couldn't stop thinking about what he'd learned during his residency about the gold standard of disease prevention in children, the guardian angel: Vaccines.

"I wish," he told a colleague, "there was a cancer vaccine."

From treatment to research

A career pivot took Sayour to Duke University, where he worked in the lab of Dr. Duane Mitchell, who listened when he talked about the anguish of delivering cancer

treatments with brutal side effects.

For once, Sayour says, "I actually felt seen."

In Mitchell's lab, Sayour first learned about the concept of RNA vaccines for cancer. Soon, he would focus on a type called mRNA — long before those four letters would become a household term during the COVID pandemic.

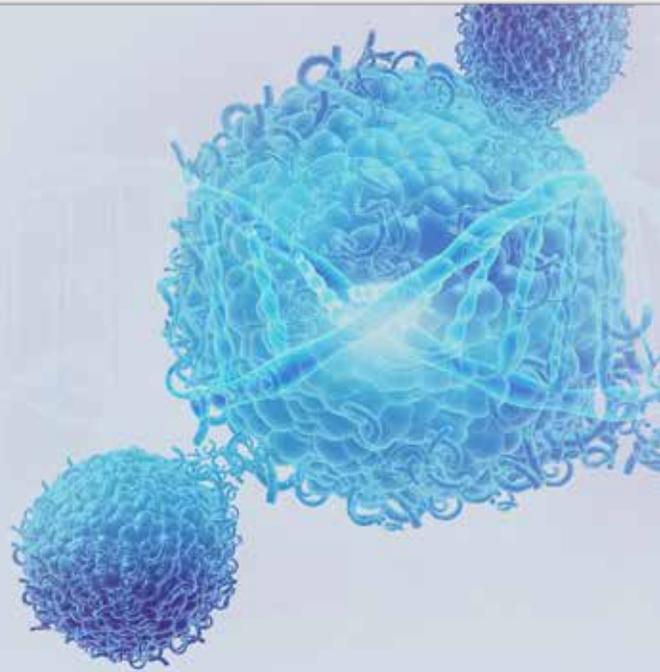
For Sayour, the plan was to spend a year in the lab while continuing to care for patients. But a few months in, he asked if he could stay on and start a Ph.D.

"There are a lot of people who pursue research because they love science, and they like the idea of discovery," Mitchell says. "And then there are a smaller number who really believe that 'if I dedicate my life to this endeavor, we might be able to make a difference for other people.'"

"Elias had that drive."

Mitchell brought Sayour with him to UF to build a new Brain Tumor Immunotherapy Program within the Preston A. Wells Jr. Center for Brain Tumor Therapy. At UF's McKnight Brain Institute, Sayour dove into developing personalized mRNA cancer vaccines, using an individual's own extracted tumor cells to create custom vaccines. Early results in mouse models showed that his high-tech method could quickly reprogram the immune system to attack glioblastoma, the most aggressive and lethal brain tumor.

It was during these preclinical experiments that Sayour stumbled upon an incredible discovery: The mRNA vaccines didn't have to be personalized. To his surprise, completely nonspecific mRNA vaccines, which were used in a control group, could, in Sayour's words, "wake up the sleeping giant that is the immune system to fight cancer."



 To read a longer version of this story, please scan the QR code below to visit Explore magazine.





A UF and MD Anderson Cancer Center team co-led by Elias Sayour, MD, Ph.D. (left), and Christiano Marconi (middle) discovered that cancer patients who received a COVID-19 mRNA vaccine within 100 days of starting an immunotherapy treatment for advanced forms of lung cancer or melanoma lived significantly longer than those who didn't get the vaccine. PHOTO BY JACKIE HART/UF HEALTH

A real-world experiment

For three decades, two main ideas have dominated cancer-vaccine development: to identify a specific target expressed in many people with cancer, or to tailor a personalized vaccine that's specific to proteins expressed within a patient's own tumor.

Sayour's work suggested a third emerging paradigm.

By pairing his patented experimental "nonspecific" vaccine with standard anticancer drugs called immune checkpoint inhibitors, Sayour found he could trigger a strong antitumor response in lab mice. His formulation was "nonspecific" in that it was designed not to target cancer specifically, but rather just to mobilize a strong immune response.

This discovery laid the groundwork for the idea that mRNA vaccines — even those not specific to any tumor or virus — could boost the effects of immunotherapy drugs designed to "release the brakes" of the immune system to attack cancer cells.

In contrast to the significant expense of personalized vaccines, Sayour's discovery would bring the research field one step closer to a universal, off-the-shelf cancer vaccine.

Then a global pandemic provided a natural experiment.

The advent of the mRNA COVID vaccines during Operation Warp Speed sparked a hypothesis from Dr. Adam Grippin, who worked with Sayour's lab as a graduate student and is now at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center.

Grippin asked: If nonspecific mRNA vaccines can wake up the immune system against cancer, what happens to patients who receive the COVID vaccine while also undergoing conventional immunotherapies?

UF and MD Anderson researchers analyzed over 1,000 medical records, retrospectively studying whether MD Anderson cancer patients who received COVID shots lived longer than those who didn't.

Their findings, published in *Nature* in October 2025, made headlines around the world:

- "Study finds mRNA coronavirus vaccines prolonged life of cancer patients" — *The Washington Post*
- "Is this the beginning of the end for cancer? mRNA breakthrough hints at universal vaccine" — *The Times of India*
- "mRNA Covid vaccines may help some cancer patients fight tumors" — *France24*

The researchers found that patients with advanced lung

or skin cancer who received a COVID vaccine within 100 days of starting immunotherapy drugs lived significantly longer than those who did not receive the vaccine. For example, in lung cancer patients, getting the vaccine was associated with a near doubling of median survival, from 20.6 months to 37.3 months.

To back up their observational findings, Sayour’s lab used mouse models to pair immunotherapy drugs with an mRNA vaccine targeted specifically at COVID spike protein. Those experiments showed they could turn unresponsive cancers into responsive ones, thwarting tumor growth.

“Dr. Sayour has made a groundbreaking contribution in how to promote immune responses against tumors, which is the holy grail of cancer immunotherapy research,” says Dr. Eli Gilboa, a pioneer in the field of cancer immunotherapy and director of the Dodson Interdisciplinary Immunotherapy Institute at the University of Miami.

The findings still need to be confirmed, and Sayour and his team are currently designing a large randomized clinical trial, planned to start this year. If effective in a prospective trial, it would mean that a widely available vaccine capable of jump-starting a patient’s response to immunotherapy

already exists — and that scientists could start developing an even better universal cancer vaccine.

The ‘why’ behind research

Sayour and parents of his patients often stay in touch, like Cole Dooley, who lost his 6-year-old daughter Phoebe in 2018 to diffuse intrinsic pontine glioma, or DIPG, a childhood brain tumor with a median survival of less than a year.

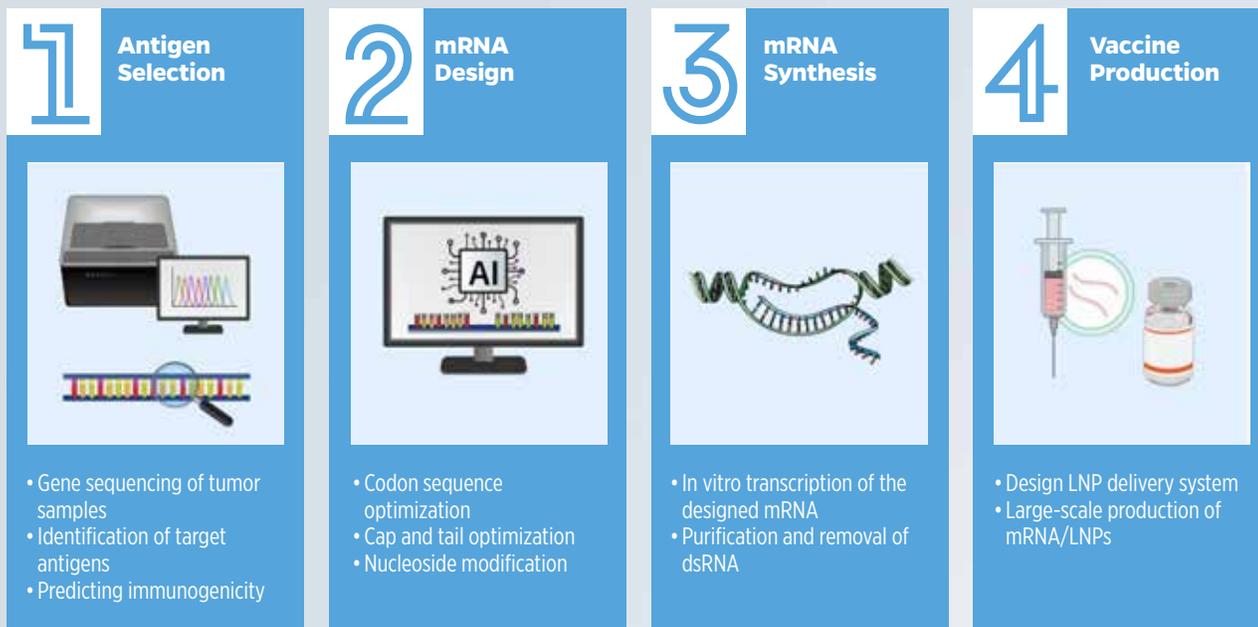
One day last summer, amid changes to funding mechanisms at the National Institutes of Health, Sayour learned that a grant he had anticipated to support a clinical trial for patients with DIPG would not be awarded.

The news was deeply disappointing to him and to the families who turn to him in their darkest times.

“DIPG is such a difficult-to-treat tumor that they think finding out how to treat it could potentially lead to further treatments for many other diseases,” says Dooley.

The next day, Sayour headed back to the lab, his sights set on cures for children who are dying right now. 🦋

Overview of mRNA Cancer Vaccine Production





THE SCIENCE & MIRACLE OF GENE THERAPY

ONCE A NOVEL CONCEPT, NOW A LIFE-SAVING THERAPY

BY CINDY SPENCE (BS '82, MA '17)

Amber Lavoie's "mom gut" was churning. Something was wrong with her newborn baby girl; she could sense it.

It was March 2020. She was on maternity leave but preparing to go back to work just as the world shut down for the COVID-19 pandemic. Home all day with Payton, barely 1 month old, she noticed unsettling things: Payton didn't squirm or fidget, her legs barely moved, she felt almost limp in Amber's arms.

"We couldn't get a doctor's appointment; no one would see her," Amber recalls.

Over the phone, doctors and nurses assured the skittish new parents everything was fine. Still uneasy, the Orlando couple persisted as weeks went by until they finally got a neurology consult. The news was devastating.

"The doctor said, 'mom and dad, sit down. I believe your daughter has SMA.'"

The Lavoies had never heard of Spinal Muscular Atrophy, a rare genetic disorder, and asked the doctor what the diagnosis meant.

"He said to take her home and love her while we could."

SMA is often fatal by a child's second birthday, and after the initial shock, desperation set in. Amber filmed a video of her daughter's awkward movements and posted it on social media, hoping someone might see it and have some advice. A friend who works at the University of Florida saw the post and asked if she could share it.

Soon after, Amber got a call from the UF Powell Gene Therapy Center from a doctor who spent 30 minutes on the phone with her, answering a barrage of questions, but one most of all.

"I asked her if this was really SMA. She said, 'SMA is what I do. Mom, I need you here tomorrow.'"

"We packed up and headed for Gainesville."

Working against time

The Lavoies had spent weeks looking for answers, and all the while SMA was stealing Payton's muscle function, her body becoming ever more still in Amber's arms. Her already limited leg and arm movements deteriorated. She didn't smile.

"Days matter, and we had already lost weeks looking for answers," Amber says. "Time was not on our side."

The family was met at UF Health by a team of doctors, nurses and lab workers. Tests were rushed to confirm the diagnosis, and Payton was treated the next day, a Friday, surrounded by the medical and research team. That Saturday morning, Dr. Barry Byrne, director of the center, came in to do her lab work.

"Probably within 12 hours, we started noticing a change. She could lift her forearms," Amber says. "We felt like we were in the middle of a miracle."

"It seemed like we opened the place and closed the place each day we were there, but we were never by ourselves."

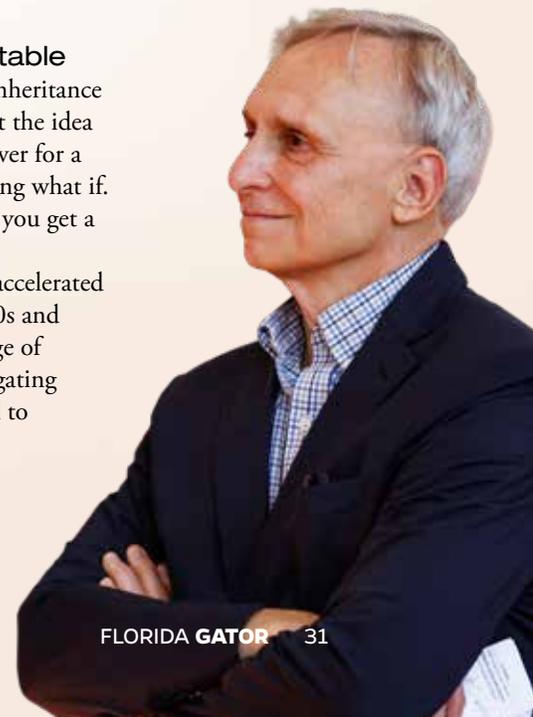
Treating the once untreatable

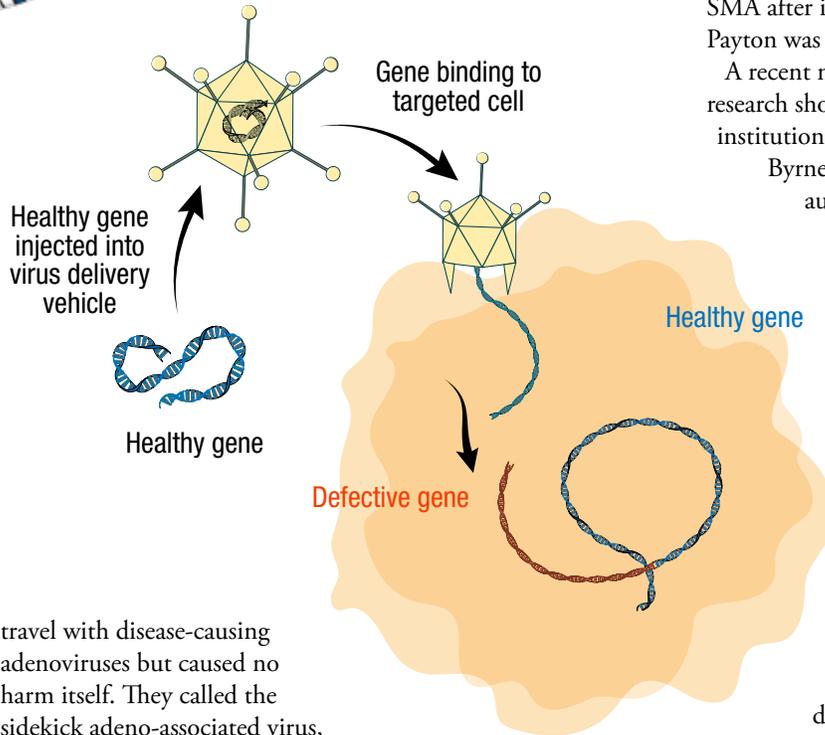
A century ago, the link between inheritance and some diseases was known, but the idea of delivering a new gene to take over for a defective gene was just an intriguing what if. Which gene is defective? How do you get a new gene into the body?

Advances in molecular biology accelerated in the 1970s, and by the late 1970s and early 1980s, a group of UF College of Medicine researchers were investigating an oddball little virus that seemed to

Viruses are notoriously good at entering the human body. The researchers' novel idea: Use the harmless AAV as a vehicle to deliver beneficial genes.

Payton Lavoie, left, listens to her mom speak at the celebration of the 100th gene therapy treatment. A team led by Dr. Barry Byrne, right, shepherded the Lavoie family through the gene therapy procedure. Photos courtesy of UF Health.





travel with disease-causing adenoviruses but caused no harm itself. They called the sidekick adeno-associated virus, or AAV.

Viruses are notoriously good at entering the human body. The researchers' novel idea: Use the harmless AAV as a vehicle to deliver beneficial genes that could silence defective genes or replace them with healthy genes.

In the early days, the researchers would meet most Fridays over pizza and beer and discuss the rapidly advancing science (scan QR, right, for video). Two of the group's leaders, Dr. Kenneth Berns and Dr. Nick Muzyczka, laid a foundation that attracted other scientists, including Byrne, while also educating the next generation of genetic medicine practitioners.

Muzyczka's doctoral student, Jude Samulski, started his studies in 1978, investigating the potential of AAV and detailing in his 1982 dissertation how to clone it, a crucial first step to using it for gene therapy.

Samulski and Byrne were colleagues before Byrne came to UF, and Byrne said for all the potential that the scientists saw in AAV, gene therapies were decades away.

As genetic mapping picked up in the 1990s, the question of finding genes was answered. The Human Genome Project was completed in 2003. As Berns and Muzyczka advanced the basic science of AAV, research began to focus on translating the science into clinical studies, and two clinician scientists – Byrne and Dr. Terry Flotte – came on board.

Today, thanks to the journey begun decades ago, UF is regarded as a legacy hub for gene therapy science and advances, and UF Health was the first institution in the U.S. to administer the gene therapy to treat children with

SMA after it received FDA approval in May 2019. Payton was just the fourth patient.

A recent medical journal review of gene therapy research showed that UF is the world's top-ranked institution for published gene therapy research and Byrne is among the world's most-published authors in the field of AAV gene therapy research and holds 25 patents.

"In the late 1990s, Ken and Nick envisioned a collaborative group of scientists working both on the basic science and the translational work," Byrne says. "This was the only place in the country that had conceived of partnering the basic science and the translational science to further human gene therapy."

From proof of concept to manufacturing

The group confirmed that AAV could, in fact, reach a wide variety of different muscle cell types and correct them, essentially permanently, Byrne says. The next step was manufacturing therapies.

"That took at least 10 years to figure that out," Byrne says.

Early on, researchers realized knowledge alone would not move clinical studies forward or, eventually, help patients, like Payton, with little time to waste waiting on a medical shipment. Byrne said the studies and the patients they aimed to help would both need ready access to therapies that could be infused.

UF solved that roadblock when the McKnight Brain Institute was built in 1998.

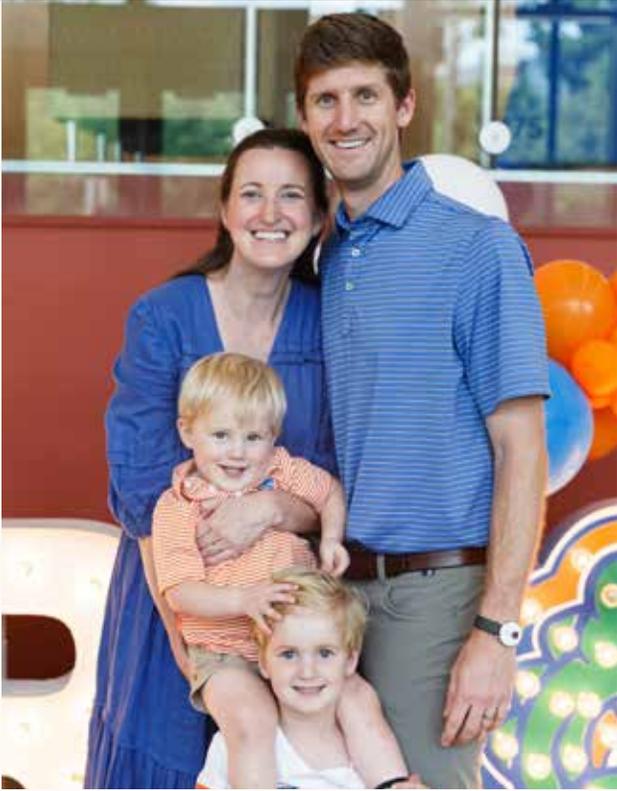
Founding director William Luttge had the foresight to include in the institute's design a facility for manufacturing gene therapy products, a decision that created a unique advantage for work at the Powell Gene Therapy Center.

"Once we knew we had the programs that would be amenable to gene therapy, we had to know how to make gene therapies," Byrne says. "There were no pharmaceutical companies, there were no biotechnology companies doing this, not even any other universities interested in manufacturing products for clinical trials. So, we built a facility."

The American Society of Gene Therapy was founded in 1996. In the early meetings, AAV was pretty much ignored, but that didn't last long.

"Now the majority of what is presented at the annual meeting – there's now about 8,000 participants – is about AAV," Byrne says.

"And it all started here."



How to save a life

During her pregnancy in 2021, Marty Harris and her husband were screened for multiple genetic traits, and she found out she was a carrier for SMA.

“I figured, what are the odds?” she recalls.

Bloodwork in newborn David’s first week of life came back positive for SMA, and Marty started Googling.

“I freaked out. He had this horrible disease,” Marty says.

Through her network of family and friends in her Atlanta community, Marty found a doctor in Utah who agreed to see David – but not for six long weeks, an eternity for a baby losing muscle function by the day. A friend put her in touch with a nurse at UF, who offered hope and an appointment.

“They opened the facility on a Saturday to get David dosed,” Marty says.

As David hit all the milestones for babies growing into toddlers, Marty says she felt she was watching a miracle. And, when she and her husband decided they wanted David to grow up with a sibling, David’s experience with gene therapy gave them the courage to try again.

The UF team set up a suite of appointments around James’ due date, and after his blood work showed SMA, there was no need to Google. The family packed up the car and drove to Gainesville.

“They moved mountains for us,” Marty said at a celebration in May of UF’s 100th gene therapy treatment. “This doesn’t happen at other institutions.”

David, now 4½, and James, now 2½, are typical boys,



ABOVE Parents say the UF gene therapy team became their village. Above, Amber Lavoie with Payton. Left, Marty and Chad Harris with James, top, and David.

with a little sister who did not have SMA, Marty says. David likes to brag that he’s faster than some of the kids in his class, and he loves soccer and baseball. His mom finds wonder in the ordinariness of his and James’ little boy lives.

“We get to forget that they have SMA,” Marty says.

“Our kids shouldn’t be alive, but every birthday, we get to celebrate their lives. They’ll probably never know the significance of that.

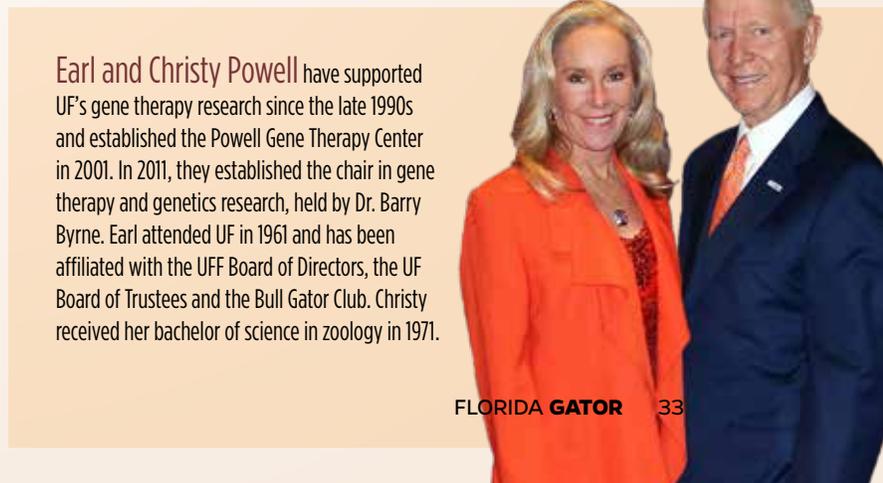
“It’s changed us a lot. Every day is truly a gift we didn’t think we were going to get.”

Byrne says UF’s infrastructure and holistic approach to patient care is important when time is of the essence. Treatments can bog down if a drug isn’t available, or the medical financial system drags, or families can’t stay near the clinic for two months, or even don’t have gas money to travel to Gainesville. The UF team addresses all those things, Byrne says, because “the patient is our true north.”

Amber Lavoie says her experience at UF reminds her of the phrase “it takes a village to raise a child.”

“The team at UF became our village. These people were missing their own children’s soccer games, birthday parties, family dinners and working late so families like ours can have hope, have a future.” 🦁

To watch a video about gene therapy, scan the QR code below:



Earl and Christy Powell have supported UF’s gene therapy research since the late 1990s and established the Powell Gene Therapy Center in 2001. In 2011, they established the chair in gene therapy and genetics research, held by Dr. Barry Byrne. Earl attended UF in 1961 and has been affiliated with the UFF Board of Directors, the UF Board of Trustees and the Bull Gator Club. Christy received her bachelor of science in zoology in 1971.



Touching a Nerve

BY JOSEPH KAYS (MA '02)

University of Florida biomedical engineering Professor Christine Schmidt has spent nearly three decades developing ways to heal damaged nerves so that people like Shirley Pincus could live pain-free lives.

Pincus, who had polio as a child, developed benign masses called neuromas on nerves in her left leg as an adult. For six years she searched for a treatment for pain she described as a 9 on a scale of 1-10.

Finally, she found a doctor who suggested removing the neuromas and bridging the resulting gap with the Avance nerve graft.

Pincus says she awoke from the surgery pain free and, after physical therapy, was able to resume her active lifestyle.

“You do not have to live with pain,” Pincus says. “Find the right doctor, get the right diagnosis, and get the right treatment.”

It’s rare for Schmidt to actually meet a patient who has benefited from her discoveries, so when she and Pincus ended up on the same panel hosted by Axogen in 2016, emotions ran high on both sides.

“She spoke about her fears of amputation of her leg from the painful neuromas, her long quest to find a physician and surgeon who could help and finally learning about the

nerve graft,” recalls Schmidt, who was then UF’s J. Crayton Pruitt Family Endowed Chair in Biomedical Engineering.

“I spoke about my struggles getting funding and facing criticism for working on this research that was not as impactful in the academic world. After the panel, Shirley came up and gave me a hug and told me, ‘You are my hero.’ It was so emotional. I teared up.”

Avance is an allograft, a cadaver nerve from which cells and tissue have been removed. The remaining structure provides a tunnel to guide the regrowth of peripheral nerves, which, unlike the central nervous system, can regenerate. Schmidt developed the decellularization procedure used in the nerve graft with her research group at the University of Texas at Austin. Alachua County-based Axogen licensed her technology and combined it with earlier discoveries by David Muir, a UF professor of pediatrics and neuroscience.

Based on her experience working with Axogen, when Schmidt was asked to lead the expanding biomedical engineering department at UF in 2013, she was quick to accept. The department, she said at the time, had everything her lab needed.

“At UT, I would have to go to Texas A&M to work with

the veterinary school and go to San Antonio to work with the dental school and go to Houston to work with the medical school. Here, everything is co-localized, AND there is a strong innovation component. I know that because my technology got licensed here, as part of a UF startup. This is an exciting place to be.”

The patient stories on the Axogen website are testament to the impact over 100,000 Avance grafts have had on people with a wide array of nerve injuries, like Jeffrey, who suffered severe damage to the ulnar nerve in his left arm when he was struck by gunfire while serving in Afghanistan; Jane, who lost sensation in her chest after a mastectomy; and Madie, a high school sophomore who lost feeling on one side of her tongue when a nerve was damaged during wisdom tooth surgery.

“It is truly humbling to see our laboratory research translate into meaningful advancements that have enhanced the lives of thousands of patients,” Schmidt says. “This type of impact means more to me than any publication or grant.”

Today, back in the lab after 10 years as department chair, Schmidt’s team is turning its attention to solutions for patients suffering from spinal cord injury through work on developing injectable biomaterials that can promote neural regeneration and also be used to deliver cells and therapeutics for spinal cord repair.

“Spinal cord injury affects 15 million people worldwide, with devastating impact on quality of life,” she says. “Our research is focused on analyzing and designing biomaterials that can interface with neurons and specifically stimulate and guide nerves to regenerate.”

Schmidt holds more than three dozen patents, which she says are a natural outgrowth of her basic research in biomedical engineering.

“We do our fundamental research in an academic setting . . . and along the way, we have the goal of hopefully being able to create innovations that could help people,” she says. “With biomedical engineering, the whole goal is to have an application that’s going to help human health.” 🦋



Science you can use

Every time you take a swig out of a bottle of Gatorade — conveniently available in orange and blue — you’re tasting University of Florida research. While Gatorade, now 60, is likely the most visible example of research that has jumped from the lab into the public domain, it’s only one of thousands of advances by

UF researchers, who can turn to a robust innovation and technology licensing apparatus when their what if becomes real.

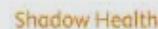
UF Innovate, the umbrella organization that oversees UF’s two business incubators, licensing and tech transfer, helps scientists focus on science while it turns discoveries into treatments and products. And UF is a global leader, setting new records last year with 446 technology disclosures, 339 licenses executed, 455 patent applications and nine startups created.

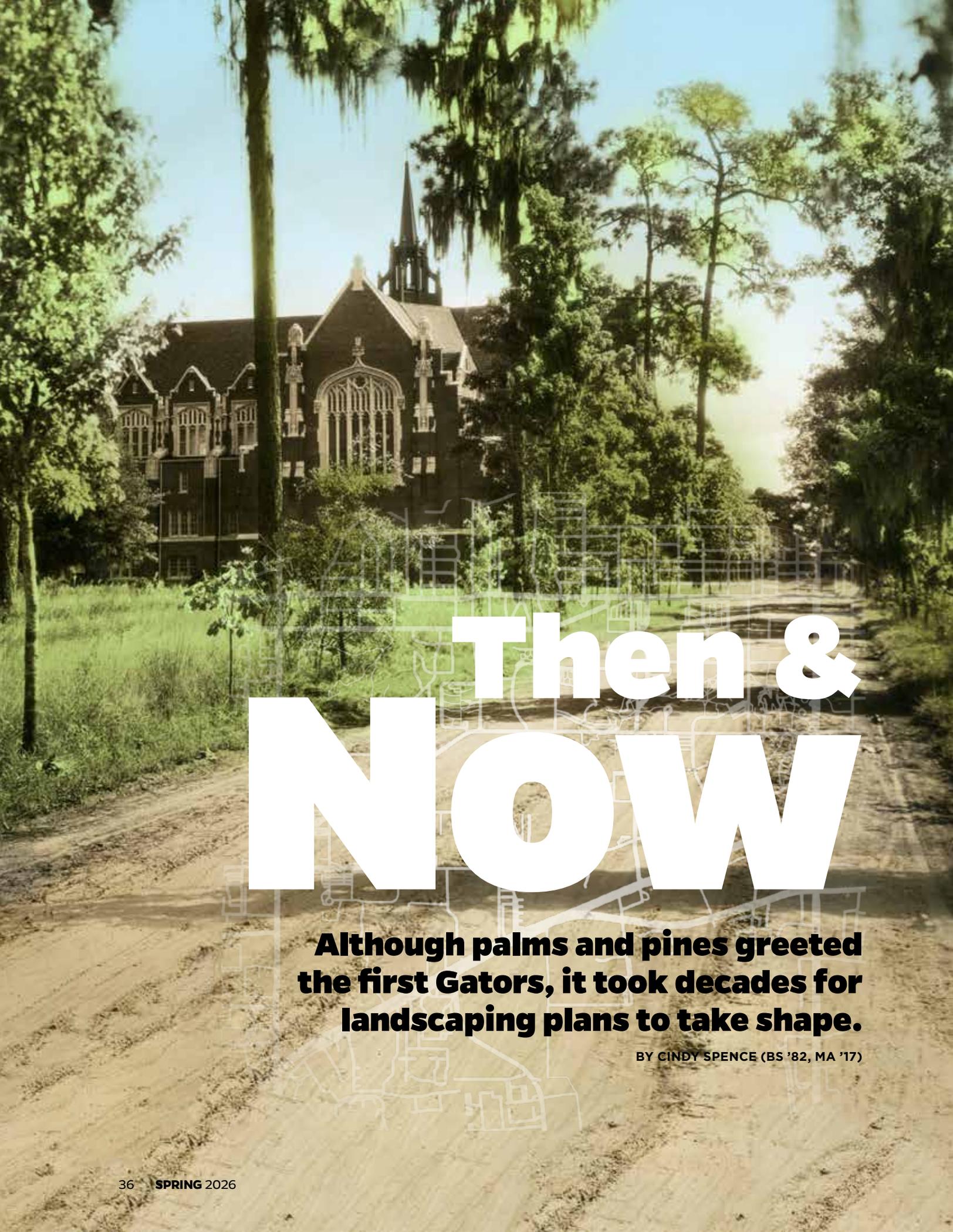
UF research is in places you may not expect. The Statue of Liberty, for example, keeps her robes termite-free by using UF entomologist Nan-Yao Su’s Sentricon Termite Colony Elimination System, which controls the subterranean pests.

Here are a few more examples of UF innovations:

- EnCor Biotechnology, antibodies to detect specific proteins
- Banyan Biomarkers, blood tests to aid in evaluation of concussions; now licensed by Abbott Labs
- Axogen, nerve grafts for nerve regeneration and repair
- Enterade, a glucose free drink to provide select amino acids
- Mako/Stryker, robotic arm-assisted knee and hip replacement surgery
- Sharklet, sharkskin-inspired surface texture to inhibit bacterial growth
- Atsena Therapeutics, a clinical-stage gene therapy company, focused on reversing or preventing blindness
- Matrix Technologies, recycling LCD manufacturing lines for the production of enhanced OLED displays
- Agriculture Intelligence, providing actionable intelligence through AI technologies and data insights
- Shadow Health, health care simulation software for student practice, acquired by Elsevier

“When solutions are ready to move out of the lab and into the real world, our team is there to nurture them, driving economic development and realizing tangible impacts from our groundbreaking research,” said Vice President for Research David Norton.





Then & NOW

Although palms and pines greeted the first Gators, it took decades for landscaping plans to take shape.

BY CINDY SPENCE (BS '82, MA '17)

On his first visit to the University of Florida's brand-new campus in 1906, UF Vice President James Farr surveyed the site and called it "a desolate and forbidding scene."

"My heart sank," he wrote. "I wondered, could we ever attract students to this spot, could we ever obtain the large sums to convert this bare spot into the plan commensurate for our ambitions for the future great university?"

Florida had done the unthinkable, something no other state ever had: It had packed up its land grant institution in one town and moved it to another, says UF Historian Emeritus **Carl Van Ness** (MA '85). Florida Agricultural College, established under the 1862 Morrill Act, took its land grant and moved from Lake City to Gainesville, becoming the University of Florida.

There were more cosmopolitan options for the new school, including bustling Jacksonville. But UF ended up on vacant land no one else really wanted, west of tiny Gainesville, population 4,000. Van Ness says a pine forest stood before falling to make room for the Collegiate Gothic buildings of today's historic district. To the south were fallow fields that had once been farmed. Alachua Avenue was a dirt track, not yet renamed University Avenue. North of there, up to Third Avenue – today's Midtown – was mostly swamp.

Though underwhelmed, Farr stayed, serving 30 years as UF vice president and helping guide the fits and starts of early growth. By 1922, in the first aerial photographs of campus, the canvas is no longer blank; 19 or so buildings have found a place among the trees and the fields.

Today, the roads are paved and you could almost dodge summertime rains by crossing campus from building to building. And on a sunny day, you might be able to travel a shady path across campus, thanks to green spaces that have been preserved.

Plaza of the Americas

By the 1920s, President Albert Murphree saw the need for campus beautification and turned to the firm founded by Frederick Law Olmsted Sr., the father of American landscape architecture, who counts New York's Central Park among his design credits.

The Olmsted firm's relationship with UF was short, just 1925-27, but it encompassed 39 plans, key among them a design for the development of a true campus quadrangle. Out of a patch of land used for ROTC drills and grazing the College of Agriculture's cattle, the Olmsted firm designed a campus green for students traveling from the chemistry and agriculture buildings on the west to Peabody Hall and the library on the east. The firm, unrealistically, asked for 166 live oak trees; had they been planted, the Plaza would have become a forest, not a quad.

By 1931, President John Tigert, hoping to promote

relations with Cuba and Latin America, renamed the quad the Plaza of the Americas and 21 live oaks were planted to signify the countries of the Western Hemisphere. In 1967, the oaks representing Canada and the U.S. had to come down to accommodate Library West. The Plaza witnessed protests on civil rights, the Vietnam War, women's rights and gun reform. In 1971, Krishna lunch started, feeding hungry students. A major renovation in 2016 resulted in new lighting, new benches and tables and new greenery, as well as hammock zones. Nearly all Gators find a reason to crisscross the UF quad, whether it's a scholarly trip to the library (or a caffeine stop) or to string up a hammock or fill a plate at Krishna lunch.

Murphree was on to something, and his statue watches over the Plaza, as iconic as the buildings that surround it, the cultural heart of campus.



LEFT Krishna lunch has been a Plaza tradition since the summer of 1971, serving low-cost meals to hungry students.

BOTTOM The Northeast Gateway invites pedestrians onto campus from University Avenue. It's a popular spot for graduation photos.



Photo by Brianne Lehan

The Natural Area Teaching Lab

Tucked away on the southwest corner of campus is the Natural Area Teaching Lab, a slice of old North Florida. Some say there are parts that look as the campus did when the original buildings went up.

In fact, it was a building boom in the late 1980s that led to the preservation of the lab's 40 acres. The once quiet corner of campus saw construction of the Harn Museum of Art, the Center for the Performing Arts and the Florida Museum of Natural History exhibits hall in short order. Soon, the Southwest Recreation Center was built, then softball and soccer fields. In 1993, entomology Professor Thomas Walker and others began lobbying to preserve the NATL. Green for green's sake was nice, but their argument relied on education: Seven departments in three colleges were already using the land for 28 courses.



Mark Bostick Golf Course

Rivaling Lake Alice's 129-acre preserve in size is UF's Mark Bostick Golf Course, 118 gently rolling acres of palm, pine and southern oaks dripping with Spanish moss. Less than a mile from campus, the course was designed by Scottish golfer and course architect Donald Ross in 1921 for the Gainesville Country Club and taken over by the university in 1963. Golfing Gators are sometimes accompanied by real gators.



Northeast Gateway

Many beautification projects recently finished are designed to create a more walkable campus, such as the Northeast Gateway, which created a new front door, welcoming pedestrians to step off the bustle of University Avenue onto a tree-lined path into the heart of campus. The spot is so beautiful it is one of the most popular spots for graduation photos. More walkable campus projects are on the way, including a plan to turn Union Road into a pedestrian path showcasing the beauty of campus.

A bench here, a pond there

Pedestrians can take a break from the hustle bustle of class change in smaller pockets of landscaped green spaces. Jules Bruck, director of the UF School of Landscape Architecture and Planning, compared UF's green spaces to rooms in a house, with spaces for gathering and spaces for solitude.

"I think it's complementary to have a lot of different scales of green spaces on any urban campus," Bruck says. "So, we have our larger spaces like Plaza of the Americas. Even if you're not part of a group, you're part of a larger community when you're in that space because there's so many people around. But if you stop in a little garden space and sit for a while, it's providing a different scale, like going into your own little area."

The canopy of native trees makes UF's overall landscape

design feel authentic, she said.

"We're lucky to have a very natural landscape around here with a lot of our big native trees," Bruck said. "When I take a walk, I think the trees are the most striking component of our campus. Could you imagine this campus without the trees?"

Orange and Blue and Green

The UF campus has 31 conservation areas covering about 445 acres. Other open spaces like creeks, ponds and wetlands make up another 99 acres. About 183 tree species can be found on campus, along with wildlife like egrets, eagles, osprey, owls, bats, woodpeckers, deer, otters and, of course, alligators. Check the QR code at left to find one. 🦋

Tarryn Nichols (BS '26) and documents in University Archives contributed to this report.

Find all the campus conservation areas on a map. Just scan this QR code



Which campus spot is special to you?

Speaking for the Trees

"I am the Lorax. I speak for the trees. I speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues." - Dr. Seuss

BY CINDY SPENCE (BS '82, MA '17)



As forests go,

McCarty Woods is tiny, just 2.9 acres. The scruffy patch of green stood watch at the northwest corner of Museum Road and Newell Drive for decades, kind of just always there.

So, when it was moved onto a list of future campus building sites in 2021, who knew it would cause a ruckus?

Word of the woods' date with a bulldozer reached **Lucy Frank** (BS '21) and **Vasilios Kosmakos** (BA '22) in their environmental science and ecology classes. Within 24 hours, they were part of a group chat exploding with hundreds of students. A petition drive started with the goal of 500 signatures, in hopes that 500 people who cared would be enough to keep the woods safe. In the Dr. Seuss classic, "The Lorax," the Truffula trees are chopped down. But Frank and Kosmakos and 14,706 like-minded faculty, students and staff signed the petition on behalf of little McCarty Woods.

"A great number of people cared," said Kosmakos. "We could walk out of our classrooms and see and touch the things we were learning about. We didn't want to lose that."

McCarty Woods might have looked unassuming, Frank said, but "people underestimated the emotional connection."

"It was the last thing I did before graduation, and it was the thing I was proudest of."

The students weren't the only champions. Across the street from the woods, in their Laboratory of Molecular Systematics and Evolutionary Genetics at the Florida Museum of Natural History, botanists Doug and Pam Soltis found themselves drawn to the cause.

"Here we are, a natural history museum. We are supposed to be trying to promote conservation worldwide, the study of biodiversity worldwide, and if we can't save a woodland that is right in the center of our campus, right across from the museum, then why are we going all over the world





TOP Visitors to the woods don't have to be students to learn about the species they pass.

CENTER New kiosks tell the story of the tiny ecosystem.

BOTTOM At the work days, helpers remove invasive plants and replace them with native vegetation.

PHOTOS THIS PAGE BY
BRIANNE LEHAN



telling people that they should do it? To me, it's sort of a metaphor for the situation we find ourselves in globally," explained Doug Soltis, a distinguished professor at the museum and in the Department of Biology.

McCarty Woods won a reprieve, in part, thanks to its educational value. At least 20 classes regularly use the woods, sending students from Newins-Ziegler or Bartram-Carr Hall into the woods to examine the species they are studying. McCarty's trees also were incorporated into the American Campus Tree Genomes project and a spring 2025 class used tissue samples from five trees to teach genome sequencing and analysis. Why build a classroom building when McCarty Woods is a classroom in itself?

The Soltises have gone from champions to caretakers, starting a fund for the woods and matching contributions. With collaborators Matt Gitzendanner and **Lucas Majure** (PHD '12), they lead monthly caretaking events at McCarty Woods, attended sometimes by hundreds of volunteers, like **Katya Kasprzak** (BS '25) and postdoctoral researcher **Makenzie Mabry**.

Armed with weedwhackers, hoes, rakes and trowels, the volunteers go to work, ripping out invasive plants like cat's claw and coral ardisia and replacing them with butterfly friendly natives like coreopsis and milkweed. Piles of pine straw are spread out, and new kiosks teach visitors about McCarty Woods' tiny ecosystem.

Today, McCarty Woods sparkles (woods can sparkle, can't they?). The little forest is scruffy no more, thanks to the attention it has received since the first work day in August 2021.





Kasprzak, a regular volunteer, attended one of her final caretaking sessions last spring before graduation and said she hopes the support for McCarty Woods extends to the other 30 campus conservation areas. On that particular day, Mabry monitored an extra credit assignment a mile west on Museum Road at Harmonic Woods, a 10-acre thicket of trees across from Fraternity Row. Hundreds of students turned out, grabbing a doughnut as they entered the woods and turning in black bags of invasive weeds when they came out. Mabry recorded their extra credit, and before long, close to 100 black bags filled with invasive weeds piled up.

“The extra credit is the catalyst that gets them here, but they really enjoy being in the woods. You don’t see this on other campuses,” said Mabry, a botanist who obtained two degrees at other schools before becoming a postdoc in the Soltis lab.

While a student canvassing McCarty Woods for a plant identification class isn’t likely to find any Truffula Trees, there is an abundance of laurel and basket oaks and pignut hickories. A massive sweetgum and a towering swamp chestnut oak are likely the largest examples of their species on campus, although two champion trees — a Florida champion white ash and a national champion one-flowered haw — fell a few years back. Among the 100 native plant species in the understory are guinea-hen weed, satin curls, Florida yam.

There are no Seussian creatures like Bar-ba-loots or Swomee swans darting through the trees, but there are 30 species of birds — cardinals, wrens and woodpeckers galore — and 71 species of butterflies.

And perhaps the most important species traipsing through the little woods? UF students. Who knows? Maybe there is a Lorax or two in training among them, protectors of the trees that call McCarty Woods home. 🦎

Your gifts support long-term conservation and promote biodiversity research, teaching and learning as well as community education and outreach.

 If you’d like to help restore McCarty Woods and other campus natural areas, please scan QR code below.



 To learn more about McCarty Woods or find a work day, please scan QR code below.





Photo by David Whitley

A DIFFERENT KIND OF SION

NAVIGATING A WORLD WITHOUT SIGHT AND LIVING LIFE TO THE FULLEST

BY DAVID WHITLEY (BS '82)

Carl McCoy (BA '50) is arguably Florida's most dedicated football fan, yet he's never seen a game.

In eight decades of rooting for the Gators, McCoy has been in the stands all of one time. That was the first home contest of 1946, when McCoy was a UF freshman.

"I didn't know a damn thing that was going on," he said.

It wasn't that he didn't know football. McCoy was blind, his sight taken in a freak accident 10 years earlier.

Miami beat UF 20-13 on that confusing October afternoon. Approximately 22,000 fans left Florida Field disappointed, but the game sparked the beginning of a beautiful relationship for the guy who didn't see a play.

The next Saturday, McCoy settled next to a radio in his Fletcher Hall dorm room and listened to Otis Boggs call the UF-North Carolina game. As the decades rolled by, Boggs gave way to David Steele, who gave way to Mick Hubert, who gave way to Sean Kelly as the "Voice of the Gators."

As for the coach of the Gators, Wolf eventually gave way to Bob Woodruff, who gave way to Ray Graves, who gave way to Doug Dickey. Through 19 coaches, 15 U.S. presidencies, 39 losses to Georgia and three national championships, there has been one constant with Gator football.

McCoy was listening.

Now, as he approaches his 80th season and UF again tries to crawl out of the football darkness, it might be a good time to listen to McCoy.

"I've had a good life," he said. "Like anybody else, I've had a few rough spots. But basically, life's been good to me."

Rough spots?

Try being raised in the Great Depression, going blind in the third grade and trying to navigate a society largely oblivious to the needs of people with disabilities. Through it all, McCoy focused on solutions, not his problems.

He excelled in school, raised a family and rose to lead the state agency that helps the visually impaired. On the side, McCoy ran a real estate business. He was still flipping houses until a couple of years ago.



Photo courtesy of Carl McCoy



McCoy relished Thanksgiving turkey carving duty, shown here in 1965, when the family lived in Topeka. Mark McCoy looks on with twin sisters Sue and June, across the table from mom, Betty. June says her dad was very handy and took care of many household repairs.

He's looking forward to celebrating his 99th birthday on May 16. If you're a serious history buff, you'll realize McCoy was born four days before Charles Lindberg took off for Paris in *The Spirit of St. Louis*.

Feel free to slap your forehead in amazement.

McCoy lives in a St. Petersburg retirement community. His only obvious concession to age is a hearing aid. He spends 30 minutes a day on his exercise bike.

"Exercise has kept me alive," he said.

CVS won't get rich off McCoy. He may be the only person in Pinellas County that doesn't need or take any medication.

Feel free to again slap your forehead in amazement.

McCoy might accept your admiration. Just don't temper it with sympathy. You might get the reaction he gave to a stranger in the early 1940s.

McCoy was sitting in a Jacksonville bus station, waiting on a bus that would take him to school in St. Augustine. A man walked past and slipped a quarter into the blind kid's shirt pocket.

"I wanted to take that quarter and throw it at him," McCoy said.

The word "victim" has never been in his vocabulary. He was the middle of seven children, raised on a farm outside Tallahassee. His father was a fourth-grade dropout who drilled water wells for a living. After the stock market crash, good times were not flowing for many Americans.

"We were lucky," McCoy said. "We didn't have any money, but we had food. A lot of people didn't have that."

What they didn't have was modern medical care. McCoy was playing a game with friends before school one spring morning. They would yank a string wrapped around a top, get it spinning and bounce it off the floor.

One kid had a top with a spring at the bottom. He yanked hard and the top bounced off the floor and smashed into McCoy's eye.

He spent weeks at home with hot compresses on his eye. His sight never returned, and the infection spread to the other eye. At 9 years old, McCoy's world went permanently dark.

"My family didn't make a big deal out of it," he said. "It was just a matter of doing what I could do."

He still pumped water, shucked corn and boiled sugarcane into syrup. When August came around, members of the Lions and Elks clubs showed up with some donated clothes. McCoy packed them in a suitcase, and his mother kissed him goodbye. He was put on a train to St. Augustine, where he enrolled in the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind.

"It was the other side of the world in those days," McCoy said.

Ray Charles enrolled about the same time. But the school was segregated, so McCoy never met the future musical icon. Not that either could have seen the racial differences that dictated American life.

McCoy spent the next nine years at FSDB. The main goal was to teach students a trade, like making brooms or doormats.

"I was more ambitious than that," McCoy said.

Being blind doesn't take away a person's vision. McCoy got a scholarship through the Florida Council for the Blind and enrolled at UF. Thousands of GIs were returning from World War II, and the campus was a maze of construction projects.

McCoy always had a keen inner GPS, though his sense of surroundings wasn't foolproof. He was taking his usual route to class one morning, unaware a five-foot-deep trench had been dug the night before. He splashed into a foot of water at the bottom.

"Did you fall in?" a passerby asked.

"No," McCoy said. "I live in here."

That sense of humor served him well over the years. Like when he struggled to find a job after graduating with a business degree. McCoy worked in a Tampa mattress factory, sold advertising and ran a vending stand in Fort Lauderdale.



Photo courtesy of Carl McCoy

McCoy led the Florida Division of Blind Services, above, and is the only living charter member of the Florida Council of the Blind, a support organization.

His break came when the Florida Council for the Blind needed an instructor. McCoy started teaching braille and life skills to clients. Five years later, he moved to Topeka, Kansas, to head up a blind rehabilitation agency.

The Florida Council lured him back to run its operation in 1965. In 1978, he became director of the Florida Division of Blind Services, overseeing 12 offices around the state.

McCoy became a leading advocate when Congress was hammering out the Americans With Disabilities Act in 1990. His go-to story was about how whenever he checked into a hotel, he had to put a rubber band around the doorknob to know which room was his.

The problem was that maids would usually remove the rubber bands. McCoy's testimony is a big reason there are now braille room numbers on hotel doors.

"He's helped thousands of people," said his daughter, June.

McCoy lived 100 miles from Gainesville in Daytona Beach, but he never returned for a football game. A radio and a comfortable chair were all he needed. He and his wife did make it to Jacksonville for a Florida-Georgia game, though they never made it to their seats.

"People were partying under the bleachers," McCoy said. "We stayed there with them."

The years and games and players and memories tend to blur, though he can still envision some things.

"Spurrier, of course," McCoy said. "We all thought the world of him as a player and a coach."

Billy Napier called him last May 16th to wish him a happy birthday. McCoy appreciated the gesture, but he didn't want to take too much of the coach's time.

"You've got a job to do," he told Napier.

McCoy has probably endured more droughts than any fan in Florida history. The Gators went 0-9 in his freshman year. They won only 13 games before he graduated and a new coach was brought in. That might sound sort of familiar to today's students.

Good times, bad times, in all kinds of weather, McCoy has remained the Ears of the Gators. What began in a cramped UF dorm room now plays out in a cozy one-bedroom apartment.

McCoy spends a lot of winter nights listening to Florida's basketball games. But football remains his true sporting love.

On Saturday mornings in the fall, McCoy's son, Mark, will call him to discuss the day's schedule. As noon approaches, McCoy will put on a Gators shirt and plop down next to his SiriusXM radio.

He rarely gets up for the next 10 or 12 hours. And he won't budge during the Florida broadcast.

"I don't even go down for dinner," McCoy said.

If all goes as planned, he'll be listening on Sept. 5th when the Gators play Florida Atlantic. McCoy has hope for the new football staff, but he's not making any predictions for the 2026 season.

"It's a lot more fun when they win," he said.

If they don't, McCoy won't despair. Whether it's football or life, he knows one thing for sure.

With the right vision, there is no hole too deep to crawl out of. 🦁

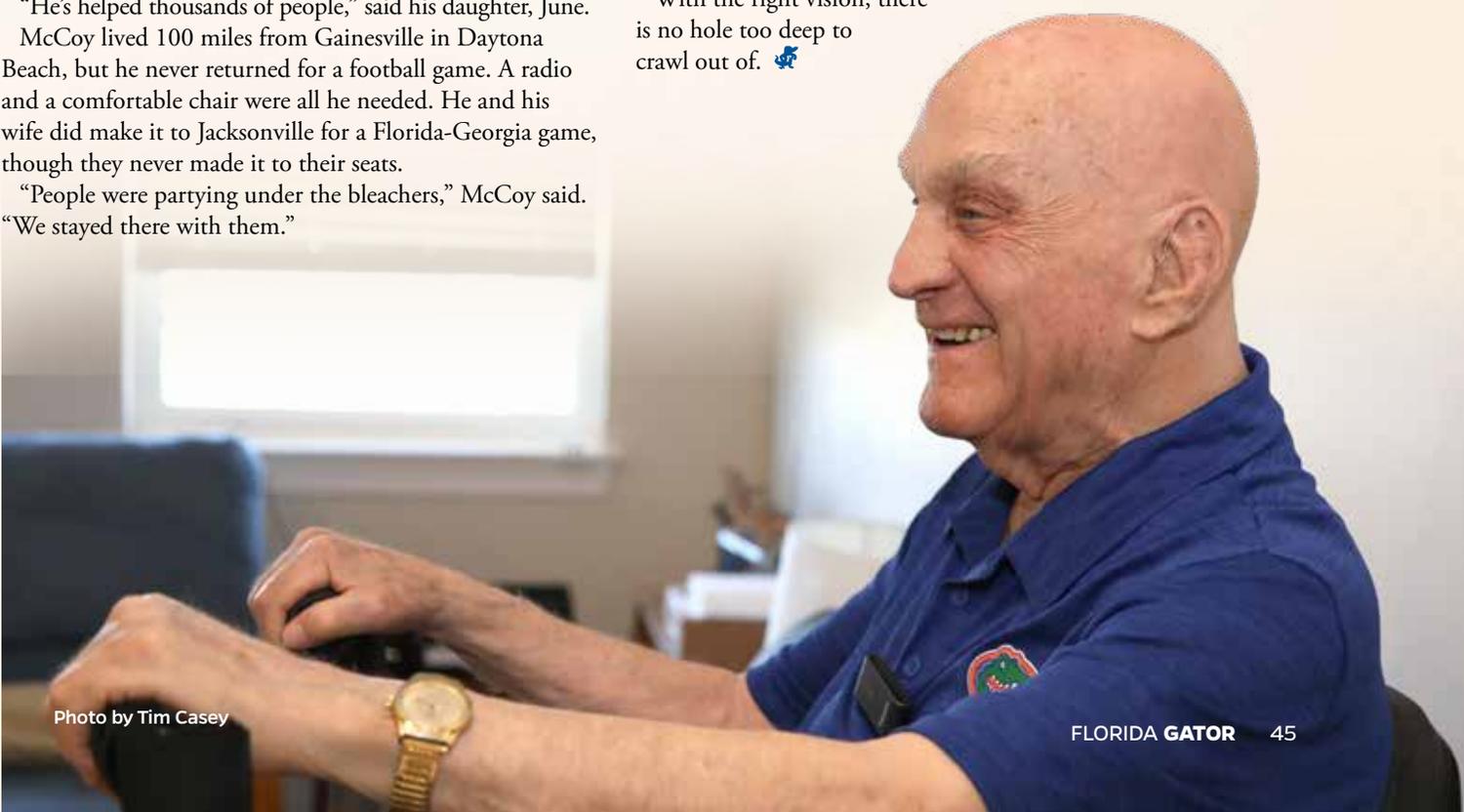


Photo by Tim Casey



PHOTO BY SUZY RODRIGUEZ

Building a Florida art hub

Laila Fakhoury has been laying the groundwork to bring people together and create an economic driver for local arts

BY PAIGE FRY (BS '19)

Laila Fakhoury (BS '20, BA '20) bounced between two lives as a child: one in Ocala as a second-generation immigrant, the other in her ancestors' home country in the Middle East. She quickly learned the differences between the Western world's individualistic nature and the East's collectivism. Those lessons formed her understanding of what a community can do when it's connected.

Even though she was shy and felt isolated from others in Florida, she found solace in music, singing the lyrics to the '60s and '70s R&B songs that taught her father English years earlier. Then she picked up the piano and guitar, setting the stage to combine her passions for the arts with her love of bringing people together.

Fakhoury used this philosophy to create spaces in Gainesville where people can gather through a shared love of music, community and more. Starting in college, she played a large role in shaping the post-COVID era of downtown Gainesville by blending the alternative underground with the mainstream buy-in of the city, which has presented two of her endeavors — a grassroots record label, Dion Dia, and a creative community hub, How Bazar — with the prestigious Business Arts Award in 2021 and 2023.

"I definitely grew up with community around me and my family," Fakhoury said. "And even as you get older, your work and everything should surround supporting and uplifting other people."

Fakhoury is the youngest of five. Her parents' families immigrated separately from Kuwait and Palestine to California, where her parents met and attended college. Her elementary and middle school years were spent traveling between Florida and the Middle East.

In Palestine, she was surrounded by culture and traditions. As a teenager and young adult in Florida, she kept seeking that community, and if she couldn't find it, she created it.

"In Ocala, I was definitely very alone, very much disconnected from the people who are around me because I didn't necessarily fit in," she said.

Fakhoury helped start a volunteer program with the Marion Correctional Institution when she was in high school. She decided to go to the University of Florida so she could commute from classes to the program and care for her grandmother in Ocala.

She majored in family, youth and community sciences because she wanted to continue doing hands-on community work. She later added a philosophy double major because her grandfather used to read works from philosophers as her bedtime stories.



Photo courtesy of Elise Norman

“When I came to college and started to form my projects and my ideas of what I wanted to do with the rest of my life, it really became clear that I didn’t want anyone else to feel the way that I felt growing up, where you feel very much alone,” she said. “You don’t feel like you have community or connection. All of my work started to surround that.”

It was in an astronomy class where she met **Jahi Khalfani**, a Digital Worlds Institute student. They really connected when they ran into each other at a TEDxUF event.

“Laila is Laila, a very sweet person, full of life, full of passion, full of purpose, intent, and that resonated well with me,” Jahi said. “Our working relationship, really, is what I imagine couples who’ve been married for 80 years. It’s like that, where you’re together, you’re committed to a certain thing, a certain mission.”

He introduced Fakhoury to his younger brother, **Khary Khalfani** (BA ’23, MA ’27). The brothers, who ran nonprofit centers in nearby Archer with their parents, related to Fakhoury’s desire to build a strong community through art.

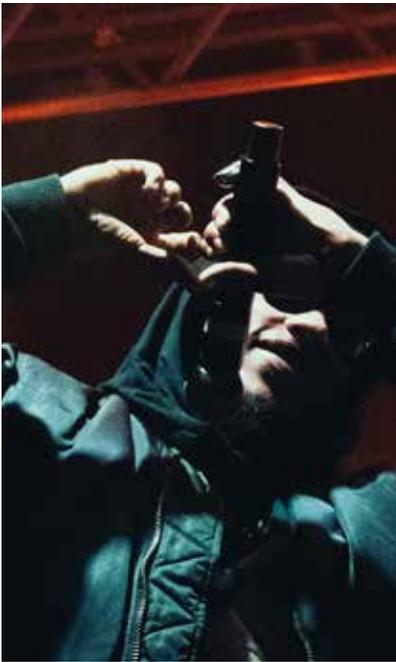
“It felt very natural. We all wanted to work on a project, something social-impact oriented and centered around our love for music,” Khary said. “We just hit the ground running and got straight into it.”

In 2018, the trio founded Dion Dia and began working on initiatives such as recording projects with end-of-life patients at UF Health Shands Hospital and incarcerated people serving life sentences to record their music to preserve their legacy. The label, which started out representing local hip-hop and R&B artists, has since expanded beyond the traditional idea of a record label.

“The purpose of the label was to use music and art for social good and social change,” Fakhoury said.

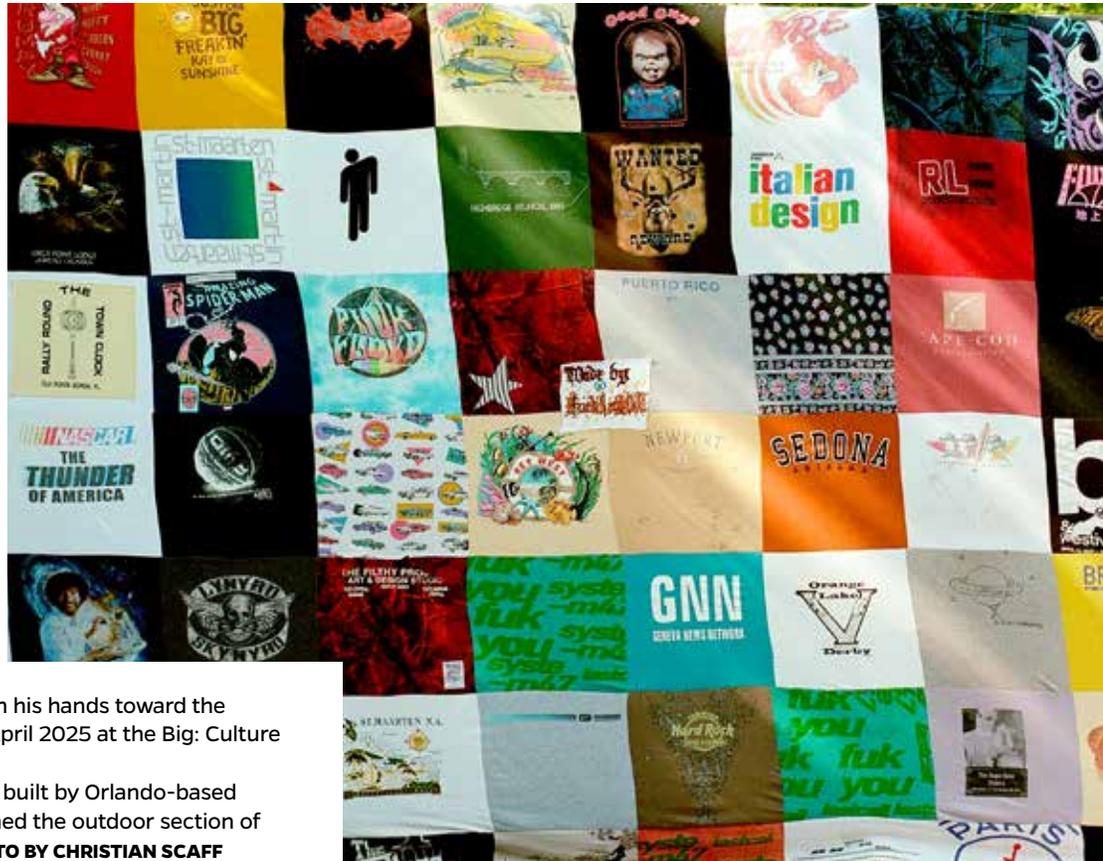
To sustain the record label, they started doing silent discos — a dance party where everyone listens to music from headphones, an idea Fakhoury brought to the others after experiencing one for herself. When COVID-19 happened, they set up a record studio in Fakhoury’s home to record their musician friends.

The pandemic showed them other gaps in the community



ABOVE: Artist Pink Siifu makes a heart with his hands toward the crowd to show his love for Gainesville in April 2025 at the Big: Culture & Arts Festival. **PHOTO BY TIFFANY FANG**

RIGHT: A custom t-shirt wall designed and built by Orlando-based designer Jose Ramirez of Last Call. It framed the outdoor section of the Rhythm Room stage at Big 2025. **PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN SCAFF**



that they could fill. Their friend, Jose Peruyero, who supported Dion Dia and invested in their first headphones for the silent discos, wanted to start a space focused on fashion, Fakhoury said. They also wanted to incorporate a unique worker-owned business model: everyone who owns it works it and vice versa. In 2020, Khary, Fakhoury and Peruyero were three of the five founding members of their brick-and-mortar business How Bazar.

The vibrant, curated clothing store moonlights as a third place and venue, and its orange storefront in the Southwest Downtown Parking Garage on Second Street is branded by a neon sign (in the Gen Z preferred all-lowercase style).

Events often spread into the surrounding area, redirecting traffic with city permits to set up rows of tents that nest local artists and vendors. The market, Bazar À La Carte, went on tour in 2025 with Fakhoury and crew stopping in cities like Miami, Jacksonville and Tampa — an effort to cross-pollinate in Florida cities' unique, but often insulated, art communities. Fakhoury's car broke down en route to one of the last stops, but she still posted a virtual tour video of the market on Instagram Reels while she was stranded.

"We've worked hard to really stay true to ourselves. It's become undeniable and recognizable. And what really helped build some connection with the city is that we're

actually in a city-owned space," Fakhoury said. "... we're doing it right in front of them, and we're doing it on the streets of downtown."

Their goal is to create what Jahi calls "cultural infrastructure" that will attract people to Gainesville.

After years of smaller events and lessons learned, the natural next step for Fakhoury and the Khalfani brothers was to put on a music festival — the Big: Culture & Arts Festival (see next page).

"The festival was always our vision of what we wanted the record label to turn into. So that's already very affirming and fulfilling that we have reached that goal," Fakhoury said. "Also, I feel like it completely incorporates the energy and the openness of How Bazar, which is eclectic and invites people in and includes a lot of different elements of expression and creativity."

They hope the festival and their other ventures not only promote Florida artists but also provides economic support for them, so they don't need to leave the state for opportunities.

"We're 100% authentic. We're transparent; we're open; we're honest; and we're doing what we do out of pure community love and because we are part of the community that we're serving," Fakhoury said. 🦋

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MIKE, a rapper and producer, holding the attention of hundreds of fans at the Big: Culture & Arts Festival in April 2025. PHOTO BY ELISE NORMAN

The third annual Big: Culture & Arts Festival will take over multiple stages, indoors and outdoors, and feature local, national and international acts from April 10-12.

Founded by **Laila Fakhoury** (BS '20, BA '20) and brother-duo, **Jahi** and **Khary Khalfani** (BA '23, MA '27), the festival has hosted artists like The Alchemist, Pink Siifu and Pearl & The Oysters. Attendees can check out art installations and street fashion shows among other unique displays.

“Bringing joy and entertainment to humans is a core priority of the festival. As simple as that, to put a smile on people’s faces and give them something to be joyous about,” Khary said.

Fakhoury and the Khalfanis were hesitant to put on a large-scale festival until they met Zack Fox — a comedian, actor and rapper — who agreed to perform in Gainesville because he loved the philosophy of their work: creating community spaces, worker-owned businesses and an economy for local creatives.

In April 2023, they launched “The Big Sho’,” where Fox and others performed for about 900 people.

The experience was their crash course and proof of concept that would evolve into the Big festival the following year.

“Festivals are integral to society in general,” Jahi said.

“Festivals have always been those standout moments that bring a significant amount of people together.”

The first Big festival in 2024 drew about 1,300 people, but in 2025, attendance jumped to 2,300. This year, after months of statewide outreach and collaboration with businesses and artists, they’re hoping the festival will grow again.

“2026 is going to be a very special year where I think we’ll create what we’ve been looking for,” Jahi said. “Every year has been a learning experience. Every lesson we learned, we put back into the vessel.” 🦢

– PAIGE FRY





PLAZA TIME

Any time is the right time to hang out on the Plaza of the Americas, but spring is especially beautiful. While it was President Albert Murphree who set out to create a landscaped campus quad, there is no word on whose idea it was to plant the azaleas that turn the Plaza pink in the spring. The George A. Smathers Libraries turned 100 in 1925, joining UF's critical mass of traditions, programs and buildings becoming centenarians this decade.

PHOTO BY BRIANNE LEHAN

Alumni Spotlight

‘This is what I’m supposed to be writing’

Finding success by finding her voice

BY PETE CROATTO

More than halfway through **Rachel Khong**’s time at the University of Florida’s MFA program in creative writing, her new story veered. The narrator was very much like Khong — a 20-something tangled in romantic woe — but this character was fully formed. Her stories up to that point featured characters vastly different than her because, well, that’s what fiction writers did.

“I brought it to workshop,” Khong (MFA ’11) says. “I don’t remember what anyone said. But I remember thinking, it actually doesn’t matter what anyone says, because I know that this is what I’m supposed to be writing.”

The character stayed, making her way into Khong’s senior thesis, “Hello, Vitamin.” Life went on. Khong, a skilled cook, was an editor at *Lucky Peach*, the late, beloved food magazine. She edited a cookbook on eggs. What felt true stayed. As the years piled up, recalls David Leavitt, one of her professors at UF, Khong quietly “refined and amplified the manuscript.”

“Goodbye, Vitamin,” Khong’s 2017 debut novel, chronicled Ruth, a heartbroken, adrift 30-year-old finding herself as her father loses his memory. It was a critical and commercial success, landing on numerous best-of-the-year lists. Her follow-up, 2024’s “Real Americans,” was a

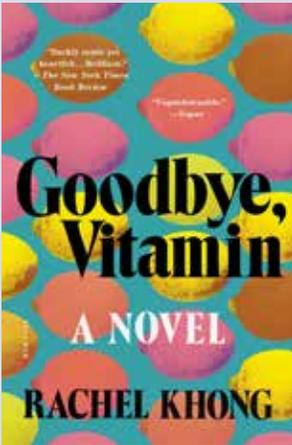


sweeping, multigenerational emotional odyssey that adroitly dabbled in science fiction. That novel achieved a whole other level of success: New York Times bestseller status and the coveted celebrity book club endorsement from Jenna Bush Hager on *The Today Show*. In April, a collection of Khong’s haunting and tender short stories, “My Dear You,” comes out.

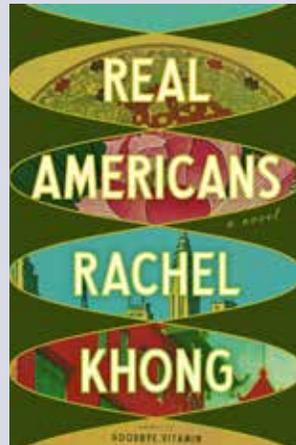
Her work explores identity, the weight of what-if, the lifelong ordeal of facing our truth. The time in Gainesville is on every page. “Florida was where really I got to have the space and time to figure out what my own voice sounded like,” Khong says.

Writing the truest thing

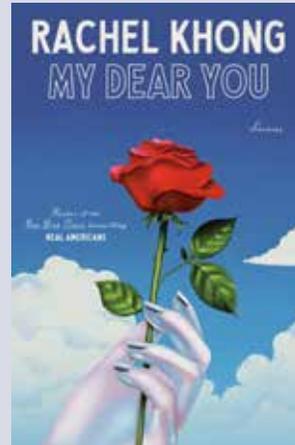
Handcuffed to a thankless, carpal tunnel-inducing content writing job, UF appealed to Khong for many reasons: fully funded, professors whose writing she admired. She wanted to live somewhere besides the East Coast and California, where she grew up.



Khong's 2017 debut novel won the California Book Award for First Fiction. It tells the story of Ruth, a 30-year-old who moves back home with her parents after a breakup.



This New York Times bestseller was published in 2024 and follows a Chinese American family through three generations. It was chosen for Jenna Bush Hager's Today Show book club.



Khong's newest work is a short story collection set for release in April. It explores what it means to be human in an increasingly technological world.

Florida “had always kind of intrigued me.” Khong got more than a sunny escape or an odyssey into the tortured, restless South of American literature and Edna Buchanan stories. UF was an intimate educational environment: four professors for six writing students in an encouraging, supportive community. Since there was no trace of competition or a race to publish, she could write for her own approval.

“There was no aesthetic,” Khong recalls. “There was no preferred way of writing. Everyone was encouraged to follow their own weirdness.” Khong was ready from the start, says Leavitt. “It was obvious that Rachel was a gifted, serious, committed writer.”

Passion was infused with life lessons. The professors invited the students over to their homes. Khong saw that writers were part of the population. “Here’s a person, and they’re a writer and they’re making a life from this,” she realized, “and I could be doing this, too.” She learned how to be an adult and constructed her version of a writing life, which turned out to be a regular life. Khong didn’t have to sequester herself in a room to work. A walk, a staple of her routine now, could yield results. The purpose of writing, as well as the motivation, became clear. It was about wanting to put the words together and write the truest thing. Awards and accolades were nice but not necessities.

Khong compares the success of “Real Americans” to

winning the lottery. That was not an expectation she had at Florida. She expects the balls will not bounce that way again. Which is OK. Khong writes to ask the questions that interest her. Answers come. Writing “Real Americans,” Khong, who was born in Malaysia, realized that we belong because we exist. Restrictions or objections from others are “man-made, artificial constructs.”

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Khong, who turned 40 in 2025, felt the limitations of life setting in. The gleam of endless potential and possibilities promised in youth faded as middle age approached. The stories in “My Dear You” are “about coming up against the limits of a human life and then finding the beauty in that,” she says. “It’s fine that we’re limited and actually that makes life more meaningful.”

Khong knows she can’t be an astronaut, so she’ll keep working on a new book and focus on the teaching collective she formed with friends, The Dream Side. There’s a community of writers who provide counsel. A foundation to sustain a career with words is in place.

The questions that tug at her soul will change. But she can answer them.

“There’s so much that’s vying for our attention, so much that’s trying to buy our attention,” Khong says. “Writing is where I can be alone with my own thoughts and figure out, what do I even care about?” 🌸

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Why I Give

Odile Guinot (MBA '07, DBA '24) Ryan Westphal

BY DAVID FINNERTY

THEN: Twenty years ago, **Odile Guinot** enrolled in UF's South Florida Professional MBA program. She was working full time, and UF was a means to an end: a master's degree, opportunities in corporate America, a nicer life. Until Thanksgiving weekend 2005 — months into her first semester — Odile had never set foot on campus. "My husband said we should see the school you belong to, so we made the trip from South Florida to spend the weekend ... It was such a beautiful campus. I knew I was going to be a Gator for life."

NOW: Before Odile received her Doctor of Business Administration in 2024, the college offered her a teaching job. Today, she teaches marketing and entrepreneurship to UF business students. "I call my career philosophy, 'guided serendipity,'" she jokes. "I didn't always know what I was doing or what I was saying 'yes' to, but they sounded like amazing opportunities. Now, all of a sudden, I'm facing over a thousand students [in my marketing classes]."

THEN: As Odile climbed in a marketing career at tech giants Motorola, Google and Apple, her bond with UF became tight. A seat on the business college's MBA Advisory Board gave her a voice at her alma mater. When trips to Gainesville became too much time in airports and too little in the office, she transitioned from being a volunteer to becoming a donor, with an endowment for the MBA program. "When we moved to California I couldn't visit Gainesville as often, so I decided it was time to switch from giving time to giving money," she says.

NOW: In the latest testament of her love for UF, Odile and her husband, Ryan Westphal, named the Warrington College of Business a

beneficiary of their estate during the college's Centennial Challenge.

THEN: As Odile faced retirement, she decided to become a doctoral student, which was only going to happen at UF. Earning a terminal degree had long been a dream; soaking in the experiences of college life as a scholar a bonus. "My reward for my career in the corporate world was getting a doctorate. But I also wanted to hang out on campus, go to football games, have fun and, of course, find ways to give back," she says. "I love being able to share back with future Gators — there's such great energy here. Even though it hadn't been home before, it felt like coming home because I'm so passionate about The Gator Nation."

NOW: Odile's journey from graduate student to volunteer to donor to doctoral candidate to professor led her to become a benefactor. "I'm a little bit of everything," she says. "I'm an alum. I'm a professor. I'm a donor. And, of course, I'm a huge fan. I'm a very proud Gator. That's one of the things I say when I introduce myself." Odile and husband, Ryan, an honorary UF alumnus, dedicated their planned gift to provide business students with opportunities to participate in global immersion programs and other experiential learning activities. For all they've done, the couple received the college's Golden Gator Award. Supporting the university was an easy decision, she insists. It's her Gator legacy. "We don't have children. For us, being able to donate to causes that are important to us is our way to make sure we're making a continuation. Instead of having one child, we have thousands of students," Odile says.



Alumni Spotlight



Calm under pressure: How a UF engineer found purpose 'Below Deck'

BY AUTUMN WAKS (BS '26)

Lights. Camera. Anchor Drop.

On the most recent season of Bravo's "Below Deck," **Hugo Ortega** (BS '13) stood at the helm of the St. David as cameras captured his every move. The task at hand? Dropping an anchor from a 45-meter superyacht as a captain watched closely amid nervous whispers from the crew.

Only hours earlier, Ortega had made a critical mistake that could have ended his season. Now, this was his chance to prove himself.

When the anchor hit the seafloor and the captain's approval came through the radio, the pressure lifted. For Ortega, a UF engineering-alumnus-turned-yacht-captain and reality star, it wasn't just TV drama. This was a real-time test of the systems thinking and problem-solving skills he learned as a materials science major.

That is to say, this engineering graduate became a reality TV star on "Below Deck," and his success — on TV and in his yacht-school business — is firmly anchored by the foundation he built at UF's Herbert Wertheim College of Engineering.

Born in the Bronx and raised in Orlando, Ortega grew up in a household with roots in the Dominican Republic and Honduras. His parents, who immigrated to the United States in search of opportunity, instilled in him the importance of education and hard work.

Drawn to math, science and problem-solving, Ortega chose UF's top-ranked engineering program.

"My parents always emphasized how important it was to go to college," Ortega said. "I knew UF would offer me a high-quality education, so it was the only school I applied to."

Between scholarships and working part-time jobs at a restaurant and as a lab assistant, Ortega paid his way through school. He spent long nights in Marston Library, joined friends for football tailgates and dove into hands-on engineering projects. His senior design project analyzed the failure of a race-car engine — a study that foreshadowed a career defined by curiosity and problem-solving.

"UF showed me how to juggle it all," Ortega said. "From working to studying and hanging out with friends, I learned how to manage it all."

To his college friend and fellow Gator engineer, **Abhi Seeth** (BS'13), Ortega was always the one dreaming up the next big thing.

"Hugo and I became friends instantly, and it's easy to see why," said Seeth. "Whether it was a philosophical debate or talking through the next billion-dollar startup idea, Hugo always had a strong point of view and was never afraid to engage. That determination and self-belief is no doubt why he's been so successful in every environment, from materials research labs to sailing the high seas."



Hugo Ortega’s yachting career has taken him all over the world and onto the Bravo hit series “Below Deck.” He says his UF engineering education has come in handy on the open sea. Photos courtesy of Hugo Ortega.

After graduation, Ortega took a job in the oil and gas industry in Houston. But when the company was acquired, he found himself unemployed and unfulfilled.

So he bought a one-way ticket to Eastern Europe and set off on a yearlong backpacking trip. Months later, at a hostel in Thailand, he met someone who worked on a superyacht. Intrigued, Ortega began researching the industry. He soon completed his certifications and joined his first vessel.

As he climbed the ranks from deckhand to captain, Ortega found the long days, complex systems and teamwork of superyachting reminded him of his UF days.

“Captains aren’t always mechanically inclined,” he said. “But my background helped me have those technical conversations with the boat engineers and understand the systems beneath the surface.”

When the show’s producers called in 2024, Ortega didn’t think twice.

“I’d always wanted to be on TV as a kid,” he said. “When I got the call, I jumped at the chance.”

Since premiering in 2013, “Below Deck” has become one of Bravo’s highest-rated franchises, drawing more than 1 million viewers per episode and inspiring multiple spin-offs. Joining the show thrust Ortega into a high-pressure crew dynamic in front of an audience of millions.

In one episode, he clashed with a deckhand over teamwork; in another, a mechanical failure stranded the yacht at dock, forcing him to troubleshoot alongside

engineers as guests grew restless. Then came Episode 15 — the night of the tenuous anchor drop — when he forgot to record his watch log, a serious oversight on a vessel that size.

His recovery was swift and steady. By the end of the episode, Capt. Kerry praised his resilience and leadership.

Ortega’s real mission is Superyacht Sunday School, a mentorship platform he founded during the pandemic to make yachting more accessible to people without

maritime backgrounds. The program has helped more than 300 aspiring “yachties” launch their global careers, he said.

“When I started, I didn’t even know how to swim, so I know how intimidating this all can

be,” Ortega said. “If people knew how to do something, they’d do it better. I just want to make the learning curve easier.”

He designed the program as an engineer: Identify inefficiencies, standardize the process and create clear steps for certification and recruitment. Through social media, word of mouth and his “Below Deck” visibility, Ortega’s mentorship network has grown into an international community.

In the end, the same mindset that helped him master materials now helps him master the tides. Guided by his UF education, Ortega proves that the tools of engineering can chart a course anywhere, even across the open sea. 🦢

“When I started, I didn’t even know how to swim, so I know how intimidating this all can be.”

back on campus

For readers who responded to our photo-with-a-Gator-statue challenge, the most popular Gator statue was the Bull Gator outside Ben Hill Griffin Stadium. That's where **Jim Phillips** (BS '80), top right, stopped when he was in town for a meet and greet with Coach Steve Spurrier. **Corrie March Ward** (BS '97) and her family, below left, snapped a pic there, too. Middle, College of Nursing alumni, left to right, **Glenna Venoy** (BSN '99), **Sade Thorpe** (BSN '08) and **Ranata Simmons** (BSN '03) attended the second reunion weekend and banquet for the Association of Military Alumni in the fall. Bottom, drum major alum **Eric Gray** (BS '97) still has the moves to lead the Gator Band alumni onto the field for the Homecoming show.



Pet Portraits

Our furry, feathery members of the Gator Nation

BY TARRYN NICHOLS (BS '26)

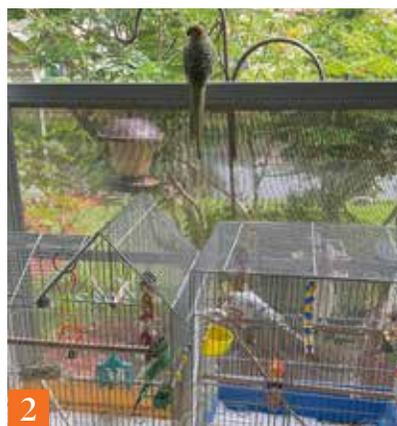
1 Maverick & Daisy

Tuning into the game from Toronto, Canada, instead of Old Florida, French bulldogs Maverick and Daisy are still high-spirited when **Audra Agramonte** and the rest of their family sing the anthem “We are the Boys.”



2 Petie,

one of **Kathryn Willet's** (BS '87) cockatiels, perches triumphantly above his and Pippin's small kingdom of orange and blue.



3 Rex,

a 9-month-old Samoyed likes to play with a tiny football in **Ricardo Cortes Jr.'s** (BS '08) Jacksonville backyard. He loves watching the Gators on TV and always jumps in celebration while his family cheers the team on.



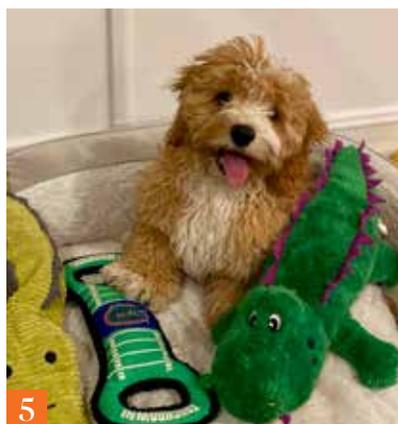
4 Leonard,

a 3-year-old rescue poodle, curls up next to **Andrew** and **Janna Brennan** (BS '85, JD '88) in his favorite jersey while the Gators play.



5 Churro,

a brave Cockapoo with a love of boating and belly rubs, poses next to several recently wrangled gators in **Michael Shifrin's** (BA '06) home.



6 Lucy

When Lucy isn't on the clock guarding **Bryan Morgan's** (BS '05) front door or training with her soccer ball, she's probably watching Gator sports while getting a much-needed belly scratch.





Gators Going Global

Reader-submitted photos from around the world

BY TARRYN NICHOLS (BS '26)



1 Guatemala

Three volcanoes loom over the city of Antigua, Guatemala, blessing the Gator wedding party gathered in their shadow to celebrate the love of **Jared** (BS '10) and **Sydney McNealy**.

2 Slovenia

Josh (BS '06) and **Chris Wirth** (MS '02, PHD '10) bleed orange and blue at Lake Bled as they venture through the Julian Alps on a Slovenia family trip.

3 Austria

Suzanne Leigh and **Scott Elliot** take a cruise down the overcast Danube River to view ruins of Austrian castles.

4 England

Melissa Hagy Snively and husband **David Snively** star in a Gator special of Downton Abbey at Highclere Castle. The English estate was a highlight of their European summer vacation.

5 Cambodia

Crystal (BA '04) and **Leonard Spearman, Jr.** (BA '75) toured the lavish Royal Palace of Cambodia while visiting their daughter in Phnom Penh. The palace grounds house national treasures including the Silver Pagoda, a marble temple inlaid with five tons of silver tiles.

6 Easter Island

Two massive Moai peek over the shoulders of **Stephanie** (AS '73) and **Roger Messersmith** (BSBA '72). The Fairfax Station, Virginia, natives stopped at Easter Island while on a cruise across the South Pacific.

7 Costa Rica

A family of Gators — **Melanie Register Marshall** (BSN '96), **Dale Register** (BSEE '71) **Winkie Wilson Register** (BSMT '71) — rock a banner in front of sunny palms in Costa Rica.

8 Scotland

Sandra (BS '89) and **Sonja Braasch** (BHS '89) hiked the rocky 96-mile West Highland Way in Scotland in just five days.

9 Dry Tortugas

Will Fernandez and his mom, **Kathy Fernandez**, stand near the still blue waters of Dry Tortugas National Park, one of the nation's largest 19th century forts. It can only be reached by boat or seaplane.

10 Denali

Patrick Mims (BA '16, MIB '18) grins at 14,000' camp, level with Mount Hunter. After 20 days of climbing through fierce winds and -20°F temperatures, Mims reached the summit of Denali.



THE GATOR NATION IS EVERYWHERE

Please send your high-resolution photos and captions to

FloridaGator@ufalumni.ufl.edu.

Include names left to right, degree and year, hometown and something interesting that happened on your travels.

Or, share online

[@ufalumni](https://twitter.com/ufalumni)
[#gatortravels](https://www.instagram.com/gatortravels)





The Gator Nation
GOES
Everywhere

GATORS MAKE THE BEST TRAVEL PARTNERS

and you can find plenty of footloose Gators in the UF Alumni Association Travel Program. Explore the world and build lasting memories with fellow alumni.



CURATED ITINERARIES

UF's exclusive travel experiences are designed to showcase the culture and history of each destination — no stress, just unforgettable moments.



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You're traveling with the Gator Nation. Reconnect with old classmates or make new Gator friends.

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Leave the planning to us. Top-tier travel providers oversee every detail from start to finish.

TRAVEL TIP

Be sure to pack your orange and blue gear!



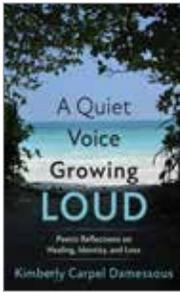
To learn more about 2026 destinations, scan the QR code:





Great Gator Reads

Four recent reads by Gator authors



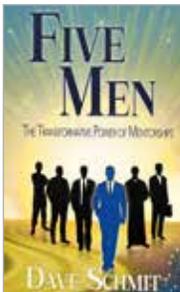
A Quiet Voice Growing Loud: Poetic Reflections on Healing, Identity, and Loss

This deeply personal collection of free verse gives voice to the quiet, complicated emotions often kept tucked away. Raised in Haiti and the United States, **Kimberly Carpal Damessous** (BS '12) writes with honesty and vulnerability about her journey as a young Haitian-American woman navigating the ache of grief, the quiet strength of introversion, and the weight of a world in turmoil. Damessous, a poet, artist and attorney, is the author of the bilingual children's book "Amelia's Pet" (2022).



Beyond Titles: Fearlessly Leading as Your Authentic Self

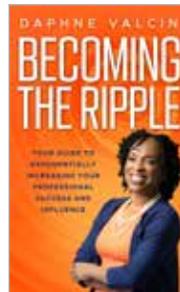
Suezette Yasmin Robotham (BS '03) invites people to ask themselves the question: Who are you when the accolades fade, the promotions pause and the spotlight shifts? Her book explores the identity of the person beneath the surface of a resume and reimagines success not as a collection of credentials but as a reflection of our values, our voice and our vision. Robotham talks about legacy, purpose and personal power and unpacks how we lead when no one's watching, how we love ourselves through transition and how we reclaim our worth in spaces that have tried to define it for us. Beyond Titles is a call to live and lead with intention, anchored not in what we do but in who we choose to be.



Five Men: The Transformative Power of Mentorships

In this narrative based on real-life events, one man reflects on his journey to becoming a thriving family man and business leader. Through his lens, we meet extraordinary mentors representing five areas of life: Values through a parent, relationships through a coach, spirituality through a priest, education through a professor and vocation through a business leader. From lessons on integrity and teamwork to finding purpose and pursuing passion, these men left an indelible mark.

Author **Dave Schmit** (BBC '83, MSBC '83) is a graduate of the Rinker School of Construction Management, a member of the UF Construction Hall of Fame, and a grateful recipient of the lifelong mentorship of Professor Brisbane Brown, past director of the Rinker School and the inspiration behind the writing of Five Men.



Becoming the Ripple: Your Guide To Exponentially Increasing Your Professional Success and Influence

A study by Vantage Circle found that 59% of employees are not fully engaged at work, and another 18% are actively disengaged. Even among those who are engaged, many are not tapping into their full potential. **Daphne Valcin** (BS '06) wants to change that. Her book is a blueprint for unlocking your potential, transforming not only your life but also the lives of those around you. Through the inspiring stories of successful professionals from diverse fields, you'll discover how to fully engage with your work in a way that feels deeply fulfilling and impactful.

Valcin is a keynote speaker, trainer and executive coach who has facilitated leadership and team development programming for over 400 individual clients and for over 200 organizational clients across 4 countries.

In Memoriam



Rhonda Holt

Rhonda Holt (BS '78) died Oct. 30, in Falls Church, Virginia. She was 60.

Holt put her computer science degree to work in positions at IBM, Sun Microsystems, Dell and Turner Broadcasting Systems among others before taking her dream job as chief technology officer for PBS in 2021.

Among her awards were Most

Notable Black Engineer of the Year in 2002, 2012 Multichannel News Wonder Woman Award, 2010 Women In Communications Technology Red Letter Catalyst Award, and 2019 Outstanding Alumna Award for the UF College of Liberal Arts & Sciences. She also served on the UF Foundation Board.

 To read more, please scan the QR code below.



Sonny Tillman

Floyd “Sonny” Tillman, the founder of Sonny’s BBQ and a longtime UF supporter, died Dec. 7. He was 96.

Sonny founded Sonny’s BBQ in 1968 in Gainesville to create a neighborhood restaurant where friends and families could gather over good food. He built Sonny’s BBQ into one of the nation’s premier barbecue restaurants.

Tillman and his wife Lucille were fixtures at Gator athletics events, and the franchise’s head pitmaster and brand ambassador is former Gators football star Shannon Snell.

 To read more, please scan the QR code below.



Lucinda Lavelli

College of the Arts Dean Emerita Lucinda Lavelli passed away in November. She was 75.

In 2006, Lavelli became the third dean in COTA’s 50-year history as an independent college, and she retired in 2018. During her 12-year tenure, Lavelli coupled her attributes as a determined, strategic and thoughtful administrator with

unwavering advocacy for the arts, both at UF and on the national stage, earning the moniker “Wonder Woman of the Arts.”

 To read more, please scan the QR code below.



Gators Doing Good



Chief Change Maker

Laura Bray helps patients find life-saving drugs

BY BRIAN HUDGINS

When **Laura Bray**'s daughter, Abby, needed a critical treatment for acute lymphoblastic leukemia in April 2019, a life-threatening drug shortage prompted questions.

Abby, then 9, asked her parents if she was going to die.

Bray (BS '99) asked herself why a life-saving drug was in short supply.

Bray and her husband **Mike** (MS '00, JD '08) battled through the next eight days and teamed up with medical staff members to locate the drug, Erwinaze. Abby was able to continue the complex treatment protocol that saved her life.

"You are told your child has cancer, but here is the good news: There is a 90% cure rate if you do this," Bray said. "Abby was 9 years old. She was scared of the medicine. We said you have to take it. When the medicine wasn't there, she had hard questions."

The eight-day struggle to find the drug sparked Bray's decision to form Angels for Change. Bray was established in her career and using the principles of her business degree from UF to teach at a local community college.

"I was going to teach business classes for the rest of my life," Bray said.

Instead, she took on a multifaceted economic and social problem and formed a nonprofit to examine the drug shortage. Bray called upon analytical skills gained at UF under the guidance of David Denslow, professor emeritus in the Department of Economics.

"I took all the basic classes on micro and macroeconomics. Everything I learned up to that point prepared me for this challenge," Bray said. "We are at heart patient advocates."





With Abby on the mend, Bray turned her attention to the needs of other patients and their families. Because fewer children get sick than adults, any child with leukemia is considered part of a small patient population. That means a pediatric cancer drug might be made by one manufacturer and distributed by a single supplier.

“There is no buffer supply,” Bray said. “We have not as a country done the work to make sure a backup is in place. We do that with the food supply. We make sure the energy supply is secure. When the drug supply line breaks, there really is no Plan B.”

Pharmacists can’t dispense a medicine if it is not in stock.

“The search can be a needle in a haystack situation, and it’s incredibly cruel to the patient,” Bray said. “All your energy needs to be focused on making sure your child survives. I took that for granted.”

Getting Angels for Change running presented new challenges. Bray sent out emails to Congress and federal agency directors. She started a website in September 2019. Many of her initial meetings with folks in Washington D.C. were extremely disappointing ... except for one.

That meeting was at the Food and Drug Administration. Bray met with the head of the FDA Drug Shortage Office and the main author of a 2019 report titled, Drug Shortages: Root Causes and Potential Solutions. The discussion gave Bray a tremendous amount of hope.

“I was at the FDA, and I had launched the Angels for Change website three days earlier. They said, ‘we have been waiting for someone like you,’” Bray said. “They agreed this is a crisis that was getting hidden.”

The FDA is able to analyze drug shortages in the big picture. Bray’s task: To drill down on how that was harming individual patients and families. She did that by setting up a hotline to give families an avenue to report drug shortages. Project PROTECT enables Angels for Change to provide grants to outsourcing suppliers. STAQ Pharma received a 2025 grant to develop and produce magnesium sulfate, critical in emergency care.

“Partnering with Angels for Change enables us to proactively address critical shortages and ensure medications like Furosemide and Bumetanide remain available to healthcare systems and patients who depend on them,” said Mark Spiecker, president of STAQ Pharma.

Amid the Angels for Change progress, Bray has an upcoming date she knows by heart.

“Abby is doing great,” Bray said. “She is a (high school) sophomore and she hopes to go to UF. February 2026 is a big milestone. Five years cancer free ... they will consider her being cured.” 🦋

Photos courtesy of Laura Bray

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