UF’s CHAMPIONS

GATORS WHO CARE

From young children and college students to whole industries and our country’s economy, these Gators’ investments in UF support a range of people and programs, and are improving lives in your community and around the world. Find out how their gifts help everyone Go Greater.

VINIK FAMILY FOUNDATION

Created by Jeff and Penny Vinik, owners of the Tampa Bay Lightning hockey team, the Vinik Family Foundation strives to enhance Tampa’s destination-city status. The foundation turned to UF’s College of Education for help with one of its goals: improving learning opportunities for young children that promote kindergarten readiness—a proven key to future workforce success. The college’s Lastinger Center for Learning is renowned in this field. Through the foundation’s first three-year, $3 million investment partnership, Lastinger Center faculty teamed up with more than 500 Tampa teachers to influence the trajectories of more than 5,200 Tampa children. The foundation has since extended its partnership with UF for another three years, supporting the Lastinger Center with another $3 million.

ART (BSESS ’91, DMD ’96) AND KIMBERLEY MOWERY (BSESS ’96, DMD ’01)

As a tribute to Scott Powers, world renowned exercise and sports science expert who led UF’s Center for Exercise Science and served as department chair, Gainesville dentists Art and Kimberley Mowery endowed a fund in his name. Powers, who retired from UF this year as a distinguished professor of applied physiology and kinesiology in the College of Health and Human Performance, wrote four textbooks about his field, one of which has been translated into eight languages. The Mowerys, who own Exceptional Dentistry & Sedation Center on Newberry Road, created the fund to “recognize the indelible impact” Powers had on their academic, professional and personal lives. The fund will support undergraduate advising, internships, practicum experiences and other professional development opportunities.

SCOTT FRIEDMAN (BSBA ’01)

As a seasoned leader of a global investment firm in New York City, Scott Friedman, understands the world of investments and high finance. He also recognizes the rapidly changing impact that artificial intelligence (AI) is having on nearly every aspect of our lives and the business world. As a means of paying forward his experiences in UF’s Warrington College of Business that led to his successful career, he funded an endowed professorship in finance to help attract and retain faculty who will teach students how to harness the power of AI tools. This professor will also research how AI, machine learning and analytics applies to business decision making across disciplines and industries.

FEATURES

18 Gators Stand for Justice
Do you know these attorneys whose wins made headlines worldwide? Also, say farewell to the man who elevated UF’s law school.

28 Passing Down Life Lessons
Orlando Gator and attorney Paul Perkins Jr. (JD ’91) touches on his UF roots, his father’s enduring legacy, the power of Gator Nation and how each one of us can help close the racial divide.

32 Discovering Relief
Sleeplessness. Seizures. Intellectual disabilities. For years, anguished parents grappled with a medical mystery. Then, a chance phone call brought a UF scientist into the fold.

38 A Gator Goes to Columbus
Emilia Sykes (MPH ’11, JD ’11) didn’t think she wanted to be a politician. A soul-searching answer to what she could do for her county (and neighbors) changed her mind.

42 Six Years, 600 Scholarships
Find out how Gators from all walks of life — and for a slew of personal reasons — created almost twice the number of scholarships previously available at UF.

46 Water Whisperer
Award-winning author Cynthia Barnett (BSJ ’89, MA ’03) encourages people across the political spectrum to listen to what oceans, wetlands, rivers and rainfall are telling us about our planet.

DEPARTMENTS

5 CONVERSATION WITH PRESIDENT KENT FUHCS
6 UNIVERSITY AVENUE: News about UF
82 GATOR NATION: News about alumni
72 9 MINUTES WITH: Tanaz Salehi (BS ’02)

ON THE COVER

UF’s prowess, breadth and depth have been recognized with a Top 5 rank in the U.S. News & World Report’s 2021 Best Colleges and Universities list, released in September. Find out what this means for alumni and current students on page 6.
Conversation with UF President Kent Fuchs

THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA.

That was the very welcome and historic news that arrived last month with the latest edition of the U.S. News Best Colleges rankings. UF moved up from tied for 6th to tied for 5th — achieving a milestone decades in the making.

I am so grateful to the generations of faculty, staff, students and alumni whose work and support have led to this significant moment. I particularly appreciate the focused effort that has driven UF ever higher through both good times and bad, including during these hard years of the pandemic.

We have worked toward a shared goal of ranking among the nation’s very best public universities for well over a half century. As J. Hillil Miller, UF’s fourth president, put it in his 1948 Inaugural Address, "Anything less than that status for the University of Florida would place the state herself in an inconspicuous place among the great states of the Union."

UF was admitted into the Association of American Universities in 1985, cementing its stature as a top research university. Ensuing decades brought further growth and advancement. But it was a concerned, university-wide push in recent years that paved the way for UF to enter the Top 10 in 2017 — and, just four years later, Top 5.

With the generous support of our Florida lawmakers and the vision of our Board of Trustees, we created more than 500 new faculty positions, a hiring effort without parallel in higher education. Alumni and friends stepped up their support to record levels contributing more than $3 billion over the past seven years. Our faculty excelled in research, steadily closing in on $1 billion in annual research spending. We attracted increasingly accomplished students and found new ways to support their success. UF today is a university with a 17:1 student-faculty ratio where half of all undergraduate classes have fewer than 20 students.

There is no guarantee UF will remain in the Top 5 every single year, and rising even higher will be a huge accomplishment. But I am convinced that our stature as one of the nation’s very best universities is permanent.

W.M. KECK FOUNDATION

Founded in 1999 by Harry and Dorothy “Dotty” Mangurian, the Fort Lauderdale-based foundation targets its support to education, medical research and environmental causes. It has been a strong ally of the UF Department of Neurology in efforts to expand research into Lewy body dementia and improve care for persons with the disease and their families.

The W. M. Keck Foundation was established in 1954 in Los Angeles by William Myron Keck, founder of The Superior Oil Company. One of the nation’s largest philanthropic organizations, the W. M. Keck Foundation supports outstanding science, engineering and medical research. The foundation also supports undergraduate education and maintains a program within Southern California to support arts and culture, education, health and community service projects.

Embedded approach

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I am particularly proud that we are widely recognized as an exceptional university for low-income and first-generation students — and for our affordability and value, with the lowest undergraduate tuition among all AAU institutions, public and private.

Finally, we are a university with our eyes on the future. Our embedded approach shines in so many of our scholars and global solutions — one example being the artificial intelligence initiative bringing in 100 additional faculty members with AI expertise. Our Top 5 status, meanwhile, will be a magnet for even more accomplished faculty and students.

Once more, we owe our rise to many people who came before us and those that currently support us. But I am especially awed by everyone in the UF community who has persisted in their excellence amid the tremendous disruptions and difficulties of COVID. I believe that in the future, when the pandemic finally subsides, we will look back with enormous pride at what our faculty, students and alumni accomplished — including UF reaching its historic goal of joining the Top 5.
SINCE BREAKING INTO THE TOP 10 IN 2018, UF HAS SET ITS SIGHTS ON BEING COUNTED AMONG THE NATION’S BEST PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES. With every successive year UF has ascended another rung, and this fall has reached a level of national distinction that few can match. In September, U.S. News & World Report magazine’s Best Colleges list ranked UF No. 5 among publics and 28th among both public and private institutions.

In addition to making UF degrees more valuable, this ranking increases opportunities for research collaboration and funding. The following statistics offer high-level insights into UF’s rankings. Read the full press release at www.ufl.edu.

UF REACHES THE TOP 5 IN THE LATEST ANNUAL RANKINGS

U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT’S TOP 5 PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES:
1. University of California, Los Angeles
2. University of California, Berkeley
3. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
4. University of Virginia
5. UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA (three-way tie)
5. University of California, Santa Barbara
5. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

KEY FACTORS THAT LED TO UF’S RISE:

ALUMNI GIVING reached an all-time high of 19% last year. Over the past five years, alumni participation has increased by a remarkable 25,000 Gators — directly impacting UF’s rise into the Top 5.

STUDENT-TO-FACULTY RATIO: 17:1
More than half of undergraduate classes have fewer than 20 students. And, 95% of instructors are full-time.

STUDENT RETENTION RATE: 97.3%
Also, UF’s six-year graduation rate is 89%, which is seventh best among public universities. The rate of UF students who received a Pell grant is 86%.

STUDENT BODY QUALITY: More than 80% of students in the last entering class are in the top 10% of their high school class.

STUDENT OUTCOMES: UF is ranked No. 9 among all universities (public and private) for student outcomes. Stanford and Brown are tied with UF in this area.
**SQUIDS IN SPACE**

Under the direction of Jamie Foster, a UF microbiology and cell science professor, NASA launched baby Hawaiian bobtail squid into space to learn how to further preserve aeronautic health during long space missions. About 128 of the tiny animals were sent as part of SpaceX's 22nd resupply mission, which delivered cargo to the International Space Station. Foster is the principal investigator for a NASA research program called UMAMI (Understanding of Microgravity on Animal-Microbe Interactions). The primary goal of her experiment is to understand the effects of spaceflight on the molecular and chemical interactions between beneficial microbes and their animal hosts.

**HEARD IN GATORVILLE**

[Our studies] “showed very clearly and reproducibly that three commonly used antihistamines have direct anti-viral activity against SARS-CoV-2.”

**DR. DAVID OSTROV**, UF College of Medicine immunologist who hopes this UF Health research data provides a rationale for clinical trials that could prove these over-the-counter drugs prevent or treat COVID-19 in people, particularly those older than 61. The antihistamines in question include hydroxyzine, azelastine and diphenhydramine.

**$6.25M**

Amount of a National Institutes of Health grant that will expand a UF study of muscular dystrophy disease progression, specifically involving people with the Duchenne variety (DMD) that affects one in 3,500 males born each year in the U.S. Most people with DMD lose the ability to walk in early adolescence. UF scientists developed a biomarker that can detect muscle damage and inflammation in the early stages of the disease, allowing for faster determinations of whether drugs are effective. The funds will expand the 10-year study by five more years.

**$1M**

Amount of a National Science Foundation grant awarded to UF College of Business eminence scholar Mo Wang, who is studying how to make personnel selection systems used in human resources management fair by looking at biases that exist with the systems. “Automated personnel selection systems have been widely implemented in our society for hiring employees,” said Wang. “However, the automated process is not immune to bias and unfairness. It is time for us to take a careful look at the structural bias that exists in such automatons and figure out ways to eliminate its impact in order to build a more inclusive workforce.”

**4**

New sign language interpreter posts

UF created to support deaf and hard-of-hearing students in classrooms and at on-campus events. When these posts are filled, UF will become the only university in Florida with such accessibility resources. “This is another way to show that we are living our values,” said UF Disability Resource Center interim director Jennia Gonzalez. “this is what we represent on this campus—pioneering access.”

**NUMBERS OF NOTE**

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**GATORS WIN BIG IN THE 2020 OLYMPICS**

From July 23 to Aug. 8, Gator Olympians once again proved their mettle on the world stage. If the Gator Nation was a recognized country at the 2020 Olympic Games, it would have tied for 17th place in the total medal count, winning 17 medals total. Here are some other fast facts that could put you on the Gator fandom podium:

- Gator won gold medals rank 11th among the 93 nations that collected a 2020 Olympic medal.
- Gators won medals in five different sports: baseball, soccer, swimming, softball, track & field. Although UF athletes won more in the 1984 Olympics, 20 of the 21 medals were in swimming. The other was for track & field.
- Across the NCAA, Gator medals (including U.S. and international student-athletes) ranked third, and were only surpassed by those from Stanford (26 medals) and Southern Cal (21 medals).
- Among only Team USA’s winning athletes, Florida shared second place with UCLA (35 medals each).
- The 32 Gators competing were the third most in a single Olympic Games (36 competed in Beijing/2008 and 35 in London/2012).
- Florida ranked No. 5 among NCAA programs with 32 representatives and led the Southeastern Conference.
- Gators’ 17 total Olympic medals this year is the second-highest for Florida in a single Olympics (21 in Los Angeles/1984, 17 in London/2012).

**SPECIALIZED SURGERY AT UF GETS LEO BACK ON THE TRAIL**

Thanks to UF veterinarians at the College of Veterinary Medicine’s Small Animal Hospital, Leo, a 7-year-old Labrador retriever, is once again hiking with his owner. In January, Leo had a total ankle replacement — the first such surgery in Florida. Stanley Kim performed Leo’s operation to address the dog’s chronic lameness, which had developed due to severe ankle, or hock, arthritis. Kim is an associate professor of small animal surgery and one of only 12 veterinary surgeons worldwide — the only one in the Southeast — trained in the surgical technique.

Gator Great Caeleb Dressel led all competitors with five gold medals.

**GATOR GREAT CAELEB DRESSEL**

Courtside at the World Aquatics Championships in Long Beach, Caeleb Dressel competed in all events except diving. Dressel won 100-meter freestyle, 4x100-meter freestyle relay, 200-meter freestyle, 50-meter butterfly, 100-meter butterfly, 100-meter individual medley, 4x100-meter medley relay, and 4x200-meter freestyle relay. His 100-meter freestyle time of 47.02 seconds was the fastest in the world. Dressel brought his total medal haul to 17, making him the most decorated Florida Olympian of all time.
UF Health Shands Children's Hospital is No. 1 in Florida, ranked as one of the nation’s best hospitals in eight medical specialties by U.S. News & World Report. But what truly gives meaning to this accolade is the unmatched care we provide your child. It's why families from every corner of Florida and more than 20 countries around the globe turn to UF Health Shands Children's Hospital for advanced pediatric care.

**BEST OF THE BEST**

UF's athletics program came in at No. 5 in the 2020-21 Learfield IMG College Sports Directors’ Cup rankings. This makes Florida’s 12th consecutive Top 5 national all-sports finish. It is the only program to place among the nations’ Top 10 in each of the last 37 national all-sports standings.

“I have focused my career on helping undergraduates develop career readiness skills and self-efficacy, and I am excited to bring my data-driven perspective ...”

**ERICA STUDER-BYRNE'S**
New assistant dean of UF’s Warrington College of Business
Previously, Studer-Byrnes was the Heavener School of Business (undergrad) associate director.

**650**
UF Health staff who now occupy Professional Park, the former Nationwide insurance building at the corner of Williston Road and 34th Street. UF Health’s acquisition of the building through a gift-purchase agreement expands its campus even more toward the west.

**100**
Age of WWII veteran and former 17-year Warrington College of Business Dean Robert Lanzillotti. His actions to elevate the caliber of faculty, partner with corporate leaders, create an accounting school and secure the first eminent scholar chair in the state of Florida laid the foundation for the college’s prestigious reputation today.

**55**
Years Marsha (BAEd ‘65) and Ron Creese (BSPE ‘65, MPh ‘68), a former UF baseball player, have been married. The couple, who now lives in Columbia, CT, met as UF College of Education students on the first day of a class they shared in Norman Hall. Read about their love story and those of other education alumni on Twitter at @UF_COE.

**Photo by Benjamin Simons**

The UF men's tennis team celebrates its first national title at the 2021 NCAA D1 Tennis Championships on May 22 at the United States Tennis Association National Campus in Orlando.
**THESE LAB-TO-MARKET INNOVATIONS ARE UNDER DEVELOPMENT BY UF RESEARCHERS WITH THE SUPPORT OF UF INNOVATE, THE UNIVERSITY’S TECHNOLOGY INCUBATOR.**

**STOPTING POACHERS**

After 10 years of analyzing poaching data with wildlife rangers in Rwanda’s Nyungwe National Park, UF researchers have honed decision-making tools to help officers around the world protect wildlife. The tools help park managers — tasked with protecting animals on hundreds to thousands of square miles — create maps that show the number of times each area of the park should be patrolled annually. While previous strategies included frequent patrols of past poaching sites, this new tool suggests wider patrolois are more effective. The study is proving applicable to plan patrols of fisheries and climate invasive species or monitor threatened resources, such as coral reefs.

**REPROGRAM CANCER CELLS**

Using their AI platform for identifying gene networks and master gene regulators useful for precision medicine, UF researchers have identified a way to convert cancer cells to dendritic (immune system) cells. The reprogrammed cells, chosen due to their proximity to a tumor, can be used to fight the tumor. This new method is expected to be particularly promising with glioblastoma tumors in the brain.

**SMART DATA STORAGE**

A UF team has invented a computer memory framework that uses artificial intelligence-powered algorithms to process data and optimize storage and maintenance. The system mimics functions of the human brain when storing information because most stored data is often useless and irrelevant, such as the hours of inactivity in a security camera footage. Worldwide spending on data storage units is expected to exceed $76 billion this year.

**SMELLS SO SWEET**

UF researchers have identified a group of naturally occurring aromatic compounds that enhance the perception of sweetness in food and beverages. Products incorporating the compounds, when used along with sugar in consumer products, enhance the perception of sweetness, allowing less sugar to be added. By capitalizing on this connection between smell and flavor, more food manufacturers will have the ability to produce reduced-calorie products, which translates to potentially fewer instances of tooth decay, obesity, diabetes and heart disease.

**BAD DRUG DETECTER**

UF scientists developed a handheld chemical analyzing device that rapidly identifies counterfeit drugs or illegal substances. So instead of having to send samples off to a lab for analysis, this device performs nuclear quadrupole resonance detection in the field. What’s more, the device’s parts are easily replaceable, and one computer can connect to multiple handheld devices to support simultaneous analysis of multiple samples. The World Health Organization estimates that counterfeit drugs cause more than a million deaths annually.

**NEXT LEVEL 3D PRINTING**

UF scientists created a medium that allows for the 3D printing of microscopic, detailed silicon parts, such as those used in personalized implants, point-of-care devices, biological machines and tissue/organ-on-a-chip devices. This method allows for features as small as 8 microns (the size of a red blood cell). Printing with liquid silicone has been challenging up until now because the microgels in the support medium often lead to the disintegration of intricate details.

**SMART FILMS THAT STOP COUNTERFEITING**

Fake Gucci bags, Air Jordan shoes and LG electronics: The global increase in selling counterfeit products is expected to become a $106 billion industry by 2024. Addressing this issue, UF researchers have developed a process to inscribe specific photonic crystal micro patterns into a nanoscale shape memory polymer film. This process allows patterns, messages or symbols to be imprinted in the film, which can lead to the identification of authentic — and counterfeit — products.

**STOP FLINCH**

UF researchers developed an ergonomic hand stabilization device that provides comfortable support and stability for surgeons while performing micro-surgery and supermicro-surgery, while allowing for maximum range of movement. Most surgeons experience some degree of hand tremor, but this convenient tool reduces fatigue and strain on stabilization muscles.

**BETTER BANDAGES, LABELS, TAPES**

UF researchers have invented reusable dry adhesive films. The strength of the film’s stickiness varies based on the size and number of microscale pores within its shape memory polymer. The pores can open and close in response to multiple external stimuli, allowing for the removal and replacement of the adhesive films without leaving any residue behind. The application for such gecko feet-mimicking adhesives include technologies such as bionics, soft robotic fingers and body-tissue interfaces, as well as in more common commercial products such as wall hangers, bandages, labels, tapes or automobile trim components.

**GO, GO GADGET SURGEON**

A new UF-designed wearable tool is expected to drastically improve surgeries. Customizable with multiple devices, such as suction, an electroad undertaking blade and fluorescence detection, the tool eliminates the need for surgeons to reach for different tools during a procedure. This is critical since many surgeons use their hands to examine, especially when visibility is limited. When surgeons are ready to start an incision, they must remove their hands and bring their incision tool back to the desired location. In addition to losing time and potentially losing track of a specific location during this maneuver, some surgical tools cannot always fit into small areas.

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50 YEARS OF KRISHNA LUNCHES

In late July, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness celebrated the 50th anniversary of a UF visit by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the founder of the organization. His 1971 address at the Plaza of the Americas sparked the Krishna Lunch tradition, which continues today. The free Krishna Lunch is served Monday through Friday at the Plaza of the Americas and at the Krishna House on northwest 14th Street.

ABOVE: Krishna Lunch is served on the Plaza of the Americas.

TOP LEFT: A ceremony in late July honored A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (represented by this statue of his likeness at right), who advocated for acts of compassion, such as free lunches for hungry people.

IN MEMORIAM

Dr. Leon Haley, CEO of UF Health Jacksonville and dean of UF’s College of Medicine-Jacksonville, died in July as a result of a watercraft accident. Haley was at the forefront of COVID-19 efforts in Jacksonville, and spent the day before his death administering vaccines to staff, department by department.

“Dr. Haley was such an incredible leader and colleague to all of us at UF Health, but he was also a good friend to so many, an amazing advocate for equality in health care, and most importantly, a man of integrity who always wanted to do the right thing,” said Dr. David Nelson, senior vice president for health affairs and president of UF Health. “This is not only a tremendous loss to Dr. Haley’s family, friends and the people he led at UF, but also to our communities in North Florida and elsewhere around the country. His leadership and friendship will be missed, but we will come together and continue his vision.”

Haley was 57.

Age of Dr. C. Franklin Karns when he died Nov. 2 in Pensacola. He was a UF associate professor of speech and communications from 1964-1971. After his time at UF, the former Christian minister taught preaching, speech and philosophy and held many other educational and leadership posts at several colleges before his retirement in 1992. He was named an Outstanding Educator of America in 1973. He and his wife, Arlene, were married for 73 years.

“We need to use our food sources logically since the human population increases faster than food sources do.”

SENEIM GUNER (MS ‘12, PhD ’16), former UF/IFAS doctoral student whose study shows that antioxidants from onion skins can preserve food. She proved that the shelf life of salmon, for instance, can be increased by a few days, aiding the seafood industry and extending quality for consumers. Guner is now an assistant professor of food chemistry at Afyon Kocatepe University in Turkey.
Years College of Education
Associate Dean Thomasemia Adams has taught UF students in the College of Education. This year she was appointed to the U.S. National Commission on Mathematics instruction in recognition of her contributions to the field on a global scale. She literally wrote — and edited — books on best teaching practices for PreK-12 math skills.

On Aug. 12, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published two field guides aimed at helping public health professionals partner with artists and arts and cultural organizations to increase COVID-19 vaccine confidence.

UF Center for Arts in Medicine Director Dr. Jill Sonke served as subject matter expert to the CDC.

Some of the artwork created by artists nationwide to promote U.S. vaccination efforts include these posters above (from left): “Get Your Ticket Back into the World,” “Let’s Unite” and “Vaccines For All.”

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UF Center for Arts in Medicine Director Dr. Jill Sonke served as subject matter expert to the CDC.

Some of the artwork created by artists nationwide to promote U.S. vaccination efforts include these posters above (from left): “Get Your Ticket Back into the World,” “Let’s Unite” and “Vaccines For All.”

On Aug. 12, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published two field guides aimed at helping public health professionals partner with artists and arts and cultural organizations to increase COVID-19 vaccine confidence.
In 1909, a growing Florida and nation were desperate for lawyers and judges. UF, as it so happened, had an answer in the making: a brand new law college.

In the more than 100 years since it opened, UF Law has grown to become one of the legal profession’s most respected colleges. Its alumni and professors have had a hand in some of the country’s biggest cases and have shaped — and reshaped — laws and policies that transformed how companies do business, lawmakers govern and people live.

The following pages are a tribute to those Gator lawyers.

UF LAW IS A SPRINGBOARD INTO POLITICS.
Spessard Holland (LLB ’1916), George Smathers (BA ’38, JD ’38) and Lawton Chiles (BSBA ’52, JD ’55) all went on to Washington, D.C., as U.S. senators. Another 15 alumni served in the U.S. House of Representatives. And four — Chiles, Chiles, Rubin Askew (JD ’56) and Buddy MacKay (BSBA ’54, JD ’61) — were Florida governors.

From Iran-Contra to the Casey Anthony trial, UF-trained attorneys are linked to the high-profile cases that riveted America.

By David Finnerty

UF LAW ALUMNI HAVE STARRED IN SOME OF AMERICA’S BIGGEST AND MOST MEMORABLE REAL-LIFE COURTROOM DRAMAS — from gripping murder trials to a congressional hearing to a fight that determined a U.S. presidential election.

Four decades ago, when mid-level government employee Oliver North was caught in an international scandal that rocked the Reagan administration, he told reporters, “I’m trusting in the Lord and a good lawyer.”

Unfortunately for him, UF Law alumnus Terry Smiljanich (BA ’69, JD ’72) was on the team prosecuting him and his fellow Iran-Contra conspirators, and North ended up being convicted of three felonies in what was one of the nation’s most famous legal cases in the 1980s.

It wasn’t the first (or last) time a Gator litigated a case that tested the law and captivated the public. As evidence and in recognition of UF Law’s 112 years training generations of legal eagles, we submit eight high-profile cases where Gators stood up for justice.

IRAN-CONTRA
It was a political scandal that could have ended Ronald Reagan’s second term. The Iran-Contra affair, as it came to be known, involved secret arms sales, a revolution and a White House cover-up. In 1981, the Reagan administration defied a U.S.-backed embargo to sell weapons to Iran behind Congress’s back. What made the deal even more corrupt was some of the profits were quietly — and illegally — sent to Central America to help right-wing Contra rebels overthrow the Nicaraguan government. The clandestine activities were uncovered in 1986, and to complicate congressional hearings documents were destroyed or withheld. Smiljanich, at the time counsel to the U.S. Senate, investigated potential crimes inside the State Department and White House and questioned senior officials during nationally televised hearings. During one tense exchange with White House chief of staff Donald Regan, Smiljanich charged: “You and the president understood that Hawks [missiles] were involved … But that oil-drilling equipment was a cover story?” In the end, dozens of Reagan administration officials were indicted and 11 convicted.

It wasn’t the first (or last) time a Gator litigated a case that tested the law and captivated the public. As evidence and in recognition of UF Law’s 112 years training generations of legal eagles, we submit eight high-profile cases where Gators stood up for justice.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

W. George Allen (JD ’62) was UF’s first black graduate. He turned down Harvard University and the University of California-Berkeley to attend UF. “I’m a native Floridian, and I felt that somebody had to integrate the University of Florida,” he said years later. “The racists told me I didn’t belong there and I’d never graduate … but I never considered quitting.”
DESEGREGATION

America's Deep South was in a civil rights crisis in the 1950s. "White Only" water fountains, public bathrooms and community pools were common. In Alabama, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give her seat to a white man on a city bus. When the U.S. Supreme Court ruled to end school segregation, federal troops had to be called to Arkansas to protect Black students from mobs.

It was under that cloud that Virgil Hawkins applied to UF’s law college — and was denied because of his race. Hawkins twice brought his case to the nation’s highest court. In 1958, he agreed to withdraw his UF application under condition that the university desegregate, and, despite reluctant politicians and threats from the Ku Klux Klan, George Starke Jr., became UF’s first Black student when he enrolled in law school that year. "The campus here was more like a prison than a university," Hawkins said at the 60-year anniversary of that historic moment. "You didn't feel the pressures law school that year. "The campus here was more like a prison than a university," Hawkins said at the 60-year anniversary of that historic moment. "You didn't feel the pressures law school that year."

Mickle

The man convicted and put to death for the Gainesville student murders was brought to justice by a Gator.

UF LAW IS ONE OF THE NATION’S LEADING LAW SCHOOLS. U.S. News & World Report magazine ranks the college No. 6 among public law schools and No. 23 among all law schools. Individual programs that also received high marks among public universities are: Tax law (No. 1), environmental law (No. 8), dispute resolution (No. 10) and business/corporate law (No. 10). UF Law also scored in the Top 10 among all law schools for low student indebtedness.

BUSH V. GORE

In 2000, America’s presidential election came down to 537 controversial Florida votes. Without them, Al Gore — and not George W. Bush — would have been president of the United States. At first, it looked like the race wouldn’t be close. Not long after voting ended that November Election Day, the Associated Press and major networks (Including Fox) were calling it for Gore. But as hours passed and votes were counted, the outcome became less clear. And in the early morning of the day after, the projected winner was switched to Bush.

Judge Robert Rosenberg of the Broward County Canvassing Board uses a magnifying glass to examine a punch card ballot on November 24, 2000 during a vote recount in Fort Lauderdale.

RIGHT TO DIE

On Feb. 25, 1990, Terri Schiavo’s heart stopped. The suspected cause? A self-imposed mostly liquid diet. Paramedics responding to her husband’s 9-1-1 call were able to resuscitate the then 26-year-old bookkeeper, but lack of oxygen had caused massive brain damage.

Schiavo was in a persistent vegetative state. Years of occupational, physical, speech and experimental therapies all failed to help. So in 1998, arguing that his wife would not want to continue to live in that condition, Michael Schiavo petitioned Florida’s courts to remove her feeding tube. Her parents disagreed, insisting their daughter’s Catholic beliefs opposed euthanasia. What followed was a seven-year right-to-die legal battle. Presiding over the case starting in 2000 was Pinellas County Judge George Greer (JD ’66). Greer sided with Michael Schiavo through a series of appeals, petitions and motions. “All of the credible medical evidence this court has received over the last five years supported the verdict, he said at the time. On March 31, 2005 — 15 years after collapsing in the hallway of her St. Petersburg apartment — Terri Schiavo died.
UF LAW IS FLORIDA’S OLDEST PUBLIC LAW SCHOOL. It was created in 1909 — just three years after the University of Florida opened its Gainesville campus. No other law school in the state has produced as many lawyers and judges, including five U.S. Court of Appeals judges, 37 District Court judges, 13 Florida Supreme Court judges and five presidents of the American Bar Association.

BIG TOBACCO

The lawsuits started in the 1950s. Doctors and accusers insisted that Big Tobacco knowingly endangered smokers. For the first 40 years courts ruled over and over again in favor of the tobacco companies. Things changed in the 1990s when states began arguing that it was more than individual smokers who were harmed; the public health systems dealing with the costs of treating smoking-related illnesses were also affected. In Florida, Fred Levin (BSBA ’58, LLB ’61) rewrote a state statute that made it possible for Medicaid to recover billions from tobacco companies to cover those costs. When the new law passed the state Legislature, one expert called it “the single biggest blow against the tobacco industry and for the public health that’s ever been done in the United States.” Levin would go on to give UF Law one of the largest cash donations ever in all of higher education, and the school would be renamed the Levin College of Law in his honor. (See next page.)

BLACK FARMERS

The discrimination had been going on since the Great Depression. Struggling white farmers could get disaster relief grants and USDA farm loans. Black farmers, especially in the South, not so much. It was routine for the USDA to take three times as long to process applications from Black farmers. Paperwork would be “lost.” Approved loans would be delayed until planting season was over, and even then for just a fraction of the request. The unfairness took its toll. America’s Black-owned farms declined to near extinction. Greg Francis (BA ’91, JD ’94), not long out of law school, took on the USDA to make things right in what would become the largest civil rights settlement ever. Francis demanded justice for 33,000 Black farmers who had been treated unjustly in the 1980s and ’90s, and, in time, the USDA admitted its long history of discrimination. “It has been both rewarding and fulfilling to be able to have a part in helping these hard-working Black farmers achieve some measure of justice from the USDA,” Francis said afterward. In the years since, there’s been a 9% upswing in the number of Black-owned farms.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Casey Anthony, left, talks with attorney Dorothy Clay-Sims during opening statements of her murder trial at the Orange County Courthouse in 2011.

CASEY ANTHONY

Casey Anthony’s trial was must-see TV in 2011. Her alleged crime: killing her 2-year-old daughter and hiding the body in a laundry bag in Orlando woods. Evidence was aplenty. In 2008, the summer little Caylee Anthony went missing, Anthony didn’t report the disappearance to police. Instead, after not seeing her granddaughter for a month and Anthony giving various excuses for the toddler’s absence, it was grandmother Cindy Anthony who called 9-1-1. Casey Anthony’s car smelled of death. She repeatedly lied to police. Prosecutors and pundits believed it to be an open-and-shut case. Anthony’s lawyers, however, called it “fantasy forensics.” The six-week trial ended with a “not guilty” verdict. Working pro bono for the defense was Dorothy Clay Sims (BA ’79, JD ’81), a renowned expert in medical expert cross examination. “I liked Casey Anthony. I came to trust her,” Sims said after the trial. Caylee Anthony’s murder has never been solved.

THE CHAMPION

Fred Levin hit hard, won big and made enemies along the way. But the controversial, scrappy, generous and kindhearted namesake of UF’s law school never backed down from a fight to balance the scales of justice.

BY DAVID FINNERTY

YOU WOULDN’T HAVE PEGGED FRED LEVIN AS A BOXING GUY, ONCE A BIG-TIMER IN A BRUTAL GAME. He lacked the brawn and footwork to be a prizefighter, the nastiness to be a promoter, the spit and hiss to be a trainer.

To look at him late in his life, it would have been easier to imagine Levin stooped over an accounting ledger or a cauldron of chili — steam rising to fog his glasses and dampen his mop of thick, dark hair.

UF’s law clinics provide free legal services to clients and communities in need. Current clinics: UF Law’s Veterans and Servicemembers Legal Clinic, Gator Team ChildJuvenile Law Clinic, Immigration Clinic, Conservation Clinic, County Court Mediation Clinic, and Intimate Partner Violence Assistance Clinic.
LAW

Levin was 83, and went out swinging.

life of the UF College of Law’s namesake.

to Fred."

in America, and it could only happen once said of him. “It could only happen

career that could be every bit as ruthless as

It made sense that sooner or later he’d find

unusual life shouldn’t have been a surprise.

comfortable in a boxing arena as in

manager of the year and then made a chief of Ghana. He sues me, twice,

A Jewish trial lawyer from a small Southern town is national boxing

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LACING UP THE GLOVES

Sports fans of a certain age will remember Jones from the “rigged” 1988 Olympics in

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Dad had a very difficult time even understanding how someone could be prejudiced and never hesitated, in any capacity, to speak up against the majority."

A CHIEFDOM IN GHANA

Levin totaled that sense of justice into his law career. He argued the wrongful
dead child of a case who’d been prescribed the

Law students presented Fred Levin (right center) with this signed photo as a gesture of thanks.

two became lifelong friends. Decades later, Levin made a large donation to UF’s Association of Black Alumni in Starke’s name.

It was classic Levin.

“Regardless of the criticism, Fred was never afraid to speak up for his beliefs,” Starke said when his friend died. “It was often to my benefit that he would say or do the right thing under any particular set of circumstances.”

"We of the Congressional Black Caucus wish to join with the distinguished world citizens and other leaders in congratulating you on your designation as a Ghanaian Chief,” the letter read. "But more specifically, we wish to honor your lifelong contributions to bettering the lives of the people of Ghana and the people of America. Long before we became aware of your outstanding contributions in Africa, we knew of your work as a lawyer fighting on the side of underprivileged people in America. We thank you for that rich legacy. We are proud that the world community is now beginning to recognize your valuable service to it as well."

At the final bell ending Levin’s long career, he’d notched more than 25 verdicts in excess of $1 million for his clients — almost all of them “little guys.” It was his fight with Big Tobacco that brought Levin national fame and his heftiest settlement: $13 billion. The tobacco case alone, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. said, is “likely responsible for saving 100,000 American lives each year.”

The Lancet, a weekly medical journal, wrote in December 2014: “Levin often met with controversy because of his relentless fight for justice against big companies. Love him or hate him, Fred Levin has enhanced the lives of many who needed help, and lived a life that only could be emulated in a Hollywood movie.”

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Roy Jones Jr., center, celebrates winning the fight against James Toney at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas in 1994 with manager Fred Levin, far right.

“Up to that point, I hadn’t thought much about racial issues,” Levin told a

UF Law dean emeritus Jon Mills said. “To say he did it his way is absolutely true.”

The work was good for his clients and made a fortune for Levin’s law firm. The Republic of Ghana — so impressed with Levin’s record of helping minorities — made him a chief at a United Nations ceremony.

“The honor is only conferred on individuals who have demonstrated they care for humanity,” Ghana’s ambassador said. A citation from the U.S. Congress followed.

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For Levin’s law firm.

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For Levin’s law firm.
The shuffle

It wasn’t only George Starke who students “shuffled” that first semester of law school. Levin, too, got the treatment. He was an outsider, a partner whose grades were lousy and committed to the law questionable.

Law school, for him, was less a calling than an excuse to remain in Gainesville after earning his UF undergraduate degree in business administration. To get in, he attended summer school to bring his GPA above the required 2.0. Once enrolled, however, Levin proved doubters wrong, as he so often did. He finished third in his class and, in time, became one of the nation’s best trial lawyers.


But what mattered most to Levin was doing right by his clients. “Fred Levin does not say a lot about the people he has helped. That’s the problem,” Ireland’s Nobel Peace Prize winner Betty Williams once said. “Unjustly, the warm, loving and giving man was bruised sometimes by his critics. But I know the true Fred Levin, and he is, and always will be, a superhero in my mind.”

As years passed, Levin quietly shared his wealth with charities, hospitals and colleges — none more so than his alma mater. His no-strings $10 million gift to UF Law in 1999 was the second largest cash donation ever to a public law school. With it came a new name: The Fredric G. Levin College of Law. “I was glad to give to a school that had played such a big part in shaping my life,” Levin told his biographer.

But, as with so many things in Levin’s life, there was controversy. Some believed Levin was too unconventional for the college to bear his name. Controversies rolled into the offices of the president and dean. One letter summed it up: “You degraded the image and prestige [of the law school] by selling its good name to Fred Levin, a lawyer who has been castigated by the courts for abusing the rules, and is notorious for commercializing courts for abusing the rules, and is notorious for commercializing the practice, thumbing his nose at the bar, and otherwise manipulating the system.”

The outrage didn’t bother Levin in the least. “Two hundred years from now the great, great, great grandchildren [of my critics] will be getting their law degrees from a school with my name on it. It’s a good feeling,” he told the paper. “When their great-grandchildren go up to that stage to get the law degree, they’ll know that, dadgummit, that Jew’s name is up there on the damn diploma. It’s just gotta eat at them.”

He ignored the criticism and kept giving. Levin gave $2 million for the Martin H. Levin Advocacy Center, named for his son. Another $1 million went to UF’s Lubach-Chatbud Student and Community Center in 2013 to honor his wife’s memory — and to help improve UF’s academic reputation. Also, Levin donated 300,000 shares of stock worth $6 million to UF Law. And he still wasn’t done. When he died earlier this year, Levin remembered UF in his will with a bequest valued at $40 million, bringing the Levin family’s lifetime investments to more than $60 million. He did all that, Levin insisted, because the world needs good lawyers. “Fred pushed me to take the law school to new heights,” Dean Rosenbury reflected. “We’ve made a lot of progress these past few years, but we still have a ways to go. Fred’s amazing career will continue to inspire us as we move the Levin College of Law forward.”

Photograph courtesy of the Levin College of Law

Photograph courtesy of the Levin College of Law

The Levin family’s Gator tree sprouted more branches with the next generation and the one after that — wives, children and grandchildren (and sometimes their spouses, too) all share the UF connection. Like their spouses, too) all share the UF connection. Like

Levin College of Law Dean Laura Rosenbury celebrated her sixth year at UF in July.

10 questions for law dean Laura Rosenbury

It seems like America’s laws and norms are being challenged more than ever. What impact does that have on your profession? We must continue to educate lawyers and leaders who understand and value the rule of law, be able to engage in respectful and productive dialogue, are willing to question the status quo, and eagerly embrace a rapidly changing world.

Who inspires you? Martha Minow. She was my 1L civil procedure professor and later became the dean at Harvard Law School. She is tough yet kind and creative yet humble as she seeks to continuously improve the lives of individuals and their communities.

What three traits do you most admire in leaders you’ve worked with? Persistence. Self-awareness. Integrity.

When you reflect on your life so far, what makes you proud? When I joined UF Law, we were ranked 40th in the nation and 24th among public law schools. I’m now the dean of a Top 10 public law school and a Top 25 law school among all law schools in the nation. We’ve reached this goal thanks to the strategic and collaborative efforts of our faculty, staff, students and alumni.

Who or what inspires you? Dean Laura Rosenbury

One of your top goals is to recruit more students of color. Why is that important? The world needs more lawyers who understand the complexities of society and the needs of all clients. We must therefore recruit students who come from different backgrounds and walks of life. Our classrooms — and future boardrooms and courtrooms — should reflect the diversity of our world.

What’s your message to students considering careers in law? Law school opens doors to so many types of careers — legal and otherwise. We offer an exceptional legal education that provides a foundation for careers in law or in business, politics and so much more. Our alumni are working around the globe and tackling some of the most pressing issues of our time. Graduates entering the workforce today, and in five and 10 years, will be navigating even more complex issues, especially at the intersection of law and technology. It will be exciting to see what they do.

When you reflect on your own law school student experience, what kept you going? Lawyers play a critical role in furthering the rule of law and promoting justice. We know that our job is never done: We must continuously strengthen our democracy and engage in creative problem-solving.

If you could give all UF students one piece of life or career advice, what would it be? Don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

If you could spend an hour with anyone (living or dead) who would it be? The late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. I deeply felt her passing last year. An hour would not be enough time. Her impact and legacy will last a lifetime.

The Levin family's Gator tree sprouted more branches with the next generation and the one after that — wives, children and grandchildren (and sometimes their spouses, too) all share the UF connection. Like
Passing Down Life Lessons

Orlando Gator and attorney Paul Perkins Jr. touches on his UF roots, his father’s enduring legacy, the power of Gator Nation and how each one of us can help close the racial divide.

STORY BY LIESL O’DELL (BSJ ’92)
PORTRAIT BY AARON DAYE

ROWING UP IN THE 1970S IN Orlando — the area where Parramore, Pine Hills and Carver Shores neighborhoods stand today — Paul C. Perkins Jr. (JD ’91) had a unique view of the world as compared to other young men in his community. After all, his father and namesake was a local attorney whose legal prowess was so well known that the late Thurgood Marshall once asked for his partnership on a landmark civil rights case called the Groveland Four.

Perkins later followed his father’s example and became an attorney who also practices in his hometown, Maitland, at the Paul & Perkins firm. Perkins is a plaintiff’s trial lawyer, specializing in personal injury, wrongful death and first-party insurance. He recently took some time to talk about his love for the Gators, his profession, his community and his recent UF project that can help bridge the racial divide with your help.

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN JUST A FEW WORDS.
An advocate for those who feel they have no voice. A Morehouse man. A Gator. A son of two phenomenal parents, husband to an amazing woman and a father to wonderful adult children.

WHAT WAS LIFE LIKE FOR YOU GROWING UP IN ORLANDO?
My dad was 49 when I was born in 1966. He was a solo practitioner serving our African American community by doing everything: wills, criminal cases, civil cases. He started a bank, the oldest African American savings and loan in Florida, and started the Washington Shores Association for Recreation with his best friend, Dr. James Smith. I had a big brother, Byron, who also went to Morehouse and UF law school. Everyone knew who we were. I had a pretty privileged life. We lived in an all-Black neighborhood, Black church and social clubs, etc. But I went to Trinity Prep for grades 6 through 12. I was one of 12 Black students on campus. We didn’t lock our doors back then. As far as racial strife, I didn’t experience that.

WHY UF?
I went to Morehouse College for my bachelor’s, political science with a minor in history. My older brother went there, too.
In the Atlanta University Center there were about 10,000 Black students. It was a mecca. Every year there was a large recruitment event at Morehouse and Spelman for all the top graduate schools in the country. I was talking to a recruiter at Emory Law — a classic Southern guy — about going there. He said if I were to stay in Atlanta, I should go to Emory. But if I planned to go back home, I should go to UF. My dad died of cancer the summer after my freshman year at Morehouse, so I didn’t have the benefit of his advice. I had always dreamed of working with him. I decided to come home to Florida to be closer to my mom, who was living alone. Then I was offered the Virgil Hawkins scholarship at UF’s law school, which made my decision easier.

**DESCRIBE YOUR UF EXPERIENCE.**

Back then all Black law students started during the summer before law school, which made my decision easy. It was also an incredible social experience to meet each other. Everyone did fine. Intramurals for guys were phenomenal. I had a classic Southern upbringing. I had done anything and everything, and I enjoyed it. I was interested in everything, and I enjoyed it.

**WHAT MAKES YOU SUCCESSFUL?**

I have figured out how to use my strengths in my everyday life. I enjoy looking at a difficult case and trying it. I like it when a client appreciates the hard work we’ve done. I’m one of those people who find out what he wanted to do with his life, and I get to get up and do it every day. We’re the only ones who are comfortable being one of only a few Blacks. I’m a natural lawyer. I’m comfortable in that role.

**WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR BUDDING LAWYERS?**

Figure out what you want to do, and do only that. When another type of case comes in your door, refer it to a friend who does only that and ask them to do the same. That way you build an area of specialization.

**WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES?**

Getting to know other students in college is all about walking a mile in their shoes. At Morehouse, I was like a white person in the sense that everybody was like me. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) nurture young Black people, and you come out really confident and better prepared for the challenge of graduate school or professional life. I noticed my friends who went to primarily white institutions (PWIs) didn’t have that confidence. But also, I had been to Trinity Prep where I was comfortable being one of only a few Blacks.

**AFTER GRADUATION, DID THE GATOR NATION NETWORK HELP YOU LAND GOOD JOBS?**

Yes, my first job experience was a summer clerkship. You forget how immature you are and how little knowledge you have about the way the world works. Every lawyer whom I knew up to that point was a sole practitioner. At UF I was exposed to summer clerkships. Then I went home to a place where my father had a great reputation, and the local Black Bar Association was named after him. I’m sure it didn’t hurt being a Gator, but I had name recognition. I had my foot in the door in Orlando already.

**WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO HELP CREATE THE UF LAW SCHOLARSHIP FOR HBCU GRADUATES?**

Yolanda Cash Jackson (BS ’00, JD ’90) came up with the idea for the scholarship. It’s a brilliant idea. It’s much easier for a recruiter to go to HBCUs and talk to their top 10% of students than it is to go to PWIs and say, “I want to talk only to your Black students.” Education is huge — really important to me.

So when I heard about Yolanda’s deal and how she’s pledging $25,000, I said, “Yeah, I’ll do that.” Education is my deal. It’s the kind of philanthropy that fits my way of thinking.

**WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO ENCOURAGE MORE YOUNG BLACK PEOPLE TO PURSUE LAW?**

For anyone who is serious about equality in America, education is one of the most important things, period, that contributes to leveling the playing field. Then when you think about the problems with the criminal justice system, having more Black lawyers and Black judges involved is part of the solution. Florida has the third-highest African-American population in the country. Job opportunities for Black residents are better here than other areas of the country, yet our state has very few Black lawyers.

**WHAT DO YOU WANT THE SCHOLARSHIP TO DO?**

Provide an opportunity for African Americans to get a law degree and serve their communities and the greater community through their positions, from prosecutors to judges to managing partners at the top law firms in the state.

**WHAT DOES PHILANTHROPY MEAN TO YOU?**

I don’t consider it philanthropy. Rather, I’m pragmatic. If it’s something that will help address an issue, and they need money, I’ll give money.

**WHAT MESSAGE DO YOU WANT THIS SCHOLARSHIP TO SEND TO ITS RECIPIENTS?**

It’s a pay-it-forward type of thing. [Use] your law degree [to strengthen your community]. When people need your help, help them. It’s not about being beholden to people.

**WHAT DO YOU WANT THIS SCHOLARSHIP TO SAY TO UF ALUMNI?**

Anyone who is considering giving to this fund is concerned about equality. It’s a money-where-your-mouth-is-type of deal. We can do it here at the medical school, at the vet school and elsewhere, too, if alumni will get it started. Education is the pathway. It’s the most effective way to get there and least controversial way to get there.

**WHAT MAKES YOU SUCCESSFUL?**

I have figured out how to use my strengths in my everyday life. I enjoy looking at a difficult case and trying it. I like it when a client appreciates the hard work we’ve done. I’m one of those people who find out what he wanted to do with his life, and I get to get up and do it every day. We’re the only ones who are comfortable being one of only a few Blacks. I’m a natural lawyer. I’m comfortable in that role.

**WHAT'S THE GREATEST COMPLIMENT SOMEONE COULD GIVE YOU?**

That I’m like my father. He’s who I’ve been trying to be for a long time. I appreciate the hard work we’ve done. I’m one of those people who find out what he wanted to do with his life, and I get to get up and do it every day. We’re the only ones who are comfortable being one of only a few Blacks. I’m a natural lawyer. I’m comfortable in that role.

**WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR BUDDING LAWYERS?**

Figure out what you want to do, and do only that. When another type of case comes in your door, refer it to a friend who does only that and ask them to do the same. That way you build an area of expertise and a group of referral lawyers simultaneously.

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Discovering Relief

Sleeplessness. Seizures. Intellectual disabilities. For years, anguished parents grappled with a medical mystery. Then, a chance phone call brought a UF scientist into the fold.

BY LIESL O’DELL (BSJ ’92)

JACK GROSECLOSE was 15 YEARS OLD when his parents received the news. They had waited all that time for any insights into Jack’s many symptoms. After all, this condition didn’t even have a name — Smith-Kingsmore Syndrome (SKS) — until their son was 11.

It was December 2018 and Jack’s sleep doctor in Cincinnati, Ohio, had just read a research article by Andrew Liu, a University of Florida biochemistry and molecular genetics scientist credited with discovering which gene controls humans’ circadian rhythms (sleep/wake cycles). After talking with two other doctors — Jack’s geneticist and neurologist — the sleep doctor picked up the phone, found Liu in his lab at UF and asked if Liu’s recent discovery could help Jack, who had only slept a couple hours a night since birth.

Their sleep deprivation over the years was a drain on the whole family. They had been tracking Jack’s sleep with a FitBit, since Jack often taps one hand with the other when he’s awake, which the device tracks as steps. Their son, said Kristen Groseclose, Jack’s mother, was sometimes logging more than 20,000 “steps” a night.

His tapping, along with an inability to communicate, resulted in a diagnosis of severe Autism early on. But in 2013, SKS was officially recognized as a mutation in the mTOR gene that causes a wide range of challenges, the most common being intellectual disability, developmental delay, large brain size and seizures. Only about 100 children, including Jack, have been officially diagnosed with SKS so far in the U.S. Just as Autism is measured on a wide spectrum, SKS-affected children also range from high-functioning to severely affected.

Liu told Jack’s doctor he hadn’t heard of SKS, but he wanted to help them find the answers they and Jack’s family needed. In the two years since that phone call, Liu’s research has proven vital to everyone in the SKS community around the world.

WHEN A CHILD HAS DISABILITIES

For Jack’s parents, living without answers has been their normal. They knew something “wasn’t right” with Jack at his 1-year-old checkup, recalls Kristen, who lives with her husband, Mike Groseclose, in a Cincinnati suburb. But their doctor advised they forgo any genetic testing because “the science isn’t there yet,” she recalls.

Instead, the parents grew to rely on what they know: Jack is a loving, caring child with special needs. He has a strong sense of humor and a deep sense of gratitude. Strangers can see all of this, too.
“Once when we were at the mall at Starbucks, we were laughing about something,” Kristen said. “A woman came up to me and said, ‘Everyone is looking at you and is enjoying the way you interact.’ … Situations like that make us feel like special needs ambassadors.”

While Kristen says her family has lots of positive interactions with strangers, their public outings also include plenty of challenges.

“The world is not set up for people with disabilities,” Kristen explained. “We have to pick our battles. Would Jack love to go to watch a ballet? Sure, but he makes verbalizations and in a quiet environment that can be disruptive. People look.

“We have to think ahead, too. He wears diapers, so we can’t take him anywhere with a Port-A-Potty. We can’t be out too long,” she said. “But there’s nothing unique in the challenges we face with SKS. Anyone who has a child with significant needs knows.’”

Eric and Nazira Kelly in Fayetteville, N.C., agree with those sentiments. Their 4-year-old son, Ezra, was diagnosed with SKS in August 2019 after three rounds of genetic tests. Non-invasive prenatal screenings hadn’t shown any abnormalities, but at 2 weeks old, Ezra developed light-colored splotches on his skin. When he was 4 weeks old, Eric and Nazira noticed that his head started to grow disproportionately larger. And when Ezra started having grand mal seizures at 6 months old, doctors intensified their search for possible causes.

Nazira, a labor and delivery nurse, says despite her medical experience she and her family felt overwhelmed when they entered the world of SKS — a menagerie of medical terms and acronyms, physical therapy, occupational therapy, tests and more tests. They found comfort, she says, in the small SKS Foundation community on Facebook. That’s about the time Kristen and Mike Groseclose launched the Smith-Kingsmore Syndrome Foundation.

“Kristen serves as president. At the conference, Nazira, who has developed a strong friendship with Kristen Groseclose, says her whole family has adjusted to their new normal with Ezra. That means managing Ezra’s special needs and his seizures.

Nazira and Eric now understand that the seizures, which happen while Ezra is asleep, are triggered when his brain shifts from one sleep stage to another, usually during the first or last hour of bedtime. During his seizures, each family member has a task. Even Ezra’s 6-year-old sister, Zara, knows her job: stroking Ezra’s hair and telling him calmly and sweetly, “Don’t be afraid.”

Ezra’s seizures typically last five to seven minutes, but he’s had a couple that have lasted 20 minutes and required ER intervention. No matter the length, Nazira says each seizure is scary.

“I’ve seen some of my adult women patients have seizures due to pre-eclampsia,” Nazira said. “But the first time Ezra had a seizure it was a terrifying event. Everything I knew about being a nurse went out the window. It was a grand mal seizure. That’s our big challenge [with Jack] is sleep.”

**WHAT IS SKS?**

Smith-Kingsmore syndrome (SKS) is a rare condition, first described in 2013.

**CAUSE:** Mutations in the MTOR gene (mechanistic target of rapamycin), found at chromosome location 1p36.

**SYMPTOMS:** Specific genetic changes can vary, so the symptoms vary too, and can cause a wide range of medical, intellectual, and behavioral challenges. The most common findings are intellectual disability, developmental delay, large brain size (megalencephaly) and seizures.

**TREATMENT**

A “central clock” exists in virtually every cell in the human body. For Liu and his research team, learning about SKS has enhanced his initial understanding of the MTOR gene. Whereas he once understood that the gene modifies that internal clock, resulting in sleep pattern disturbances, seizures and other health issues, Liu’s research team now understands that the gene modifies the internal clock, resulting in sleep pattern disturbances, seizures and other health issues.
Andrew Liu took a phone call from doctors in Ohio and found himself part of a team dedicated to studying a rare genetic disorder. He and his team are building an SKS knowledge base, which could improve the precision of treatments on an individual patient.

issues, he has since learned that the gene influences each cell’s nutrient and energy status, cell growth and division, cancer predispositions, aging and more.

“The mutation of this gene changed the fundamentals of cell biology,” said Liu, an associate professor in the Department of Physiology and Functional Genomics in UF’s College of Medicine. “Think of it as an energy balance that affects every cell. When it’s tipped off balance, it affects many things … We’re looking into the biochemistry of how the mutations change the activity of the protein and the cell’s behavior.”

While a medicine developed to help correct sleep patterns has worked for some SKS children, it has brought about extreme sleep in others. Jack went from sleeping only a couple hours a night on his own to about 15 hours per day on the medicine.

“Jack had fewer headaches with that medicine,” Kristen Groseclose said. “But when he was sleeping 14, 15, 16 hours a day he was more unhappy than when he pulls all-nighters.”

Liu and his UF research team were able to find a happy medium that Jack and other families needed by tailoring the medicine dose to specific gene mutations. At the time Liu got involved, about 20 different mutations were known to science; today, more than 60 have been identified.

Liu’s team has developed a pipeline to test the biochemical activities of the mutated proteins and their impact on cell behavior. This pipeline means future testing will happen faster. Liu says his team aims to test all the mutations currently known, and others as they are discovered.

“All the mutations are not the same, and some children have more than one,” Liu said. “They respond to drugs and nutrients differently, too. That’s a lot of possible variations.”

To speed up Liu’s dosing guidelines project in 2020, the SKS Foundation raised about $60,000 in donations and created a fund at UF. Liu used the gift to support a full-time post-doctorate researcher in his UF College of Medicine lab. The fund also fuels work that aims to improve the quality of life for children with SKS. This year, the SKS Foundation pledged to duplicate its efforts, aiming to raise $60,000 by December to support Liu’s post-doc again. At the time of this article, the foundation received $46,000 of that goal.

“So many families from around the world pulled together to make this possible,” said Kristen Groseclose, “because without their efforts, we couldn’t have accomplished any of this — in addition to Dr. Liu and his team of course!”

HOPE FOR MATERNITY SCREENING

For Liu, his research has become personal. He’s met with scores of patient families so far and knows many by name. He talks about SKS children who have died for unknown reasons, the families who struggle because they’re functioning on little sleep, and the other scientists who, like himself, are working to find SKS solutions as fast as they can.

“I don’t know how these parents lead their lives, to be honest,” said Liu, who with his wife, Haiyan Xu, a UF College of Medicine researcher, has three daughters — two in college and one in 7th grade.

“There is no inherited gene mutation from the parents. This is a mutation in the early stages of fetal development that results in children who can’t communicate well, some who can’t eat by themselves, who have intellectual disabilities. It’s just a lot.”

Liu says he and his team are building an SKS knowledge base, which could improve the precision of treatments on an individual patient or mutation. They also aim to one day provide a maternity screening test that will alert doctors to early gene mutations so babies can be treated early, possibly in utero, before SKS’s most severe symptoms — seizures and Autism — develop.

“If we know … we can treat them in the early neonatal period before the horrific damage occurs,” Liu says. “We’ve seen this in many other disease models in mice. The earlier damages are more crucial.”

Liu says he is building a case that he hopes to present to the National Institutes of Health and other funding agencies and governing bodies to advocate for such early detection and treatment.

Until then, the Kellys and Grosecloses say they and other SKS families will continue to love and care for their precious children, raise funding and awareness, and advocate for more research.

“When I met [Liu] it was like I was meeting a rock star,” Kristen Groseclose said. “His paper changed our lives. [At the conference] he took an interest seeing each child personally. What he’s doing matters.”

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE SKS NETWORK AT: smithkingsmore.org

SUPPORT SKS RESEARCH AT uft.to/m710xs

TOGETHER, WE GO HIGHER
Emilia Sykes didn’t think she wanted to be a politician. A soul-searching answer to what she could do for her county (and neighbors) changed her mind.

BY DAVID FINNERTY

EMILIA STRONG SYKES WAS ADAMANT. Politics would not — no way, no how — be her calling. She knew its toll all too well. The burdens. The frustrations. The wear on the soul.

The fare had been paid over and over and over again for 30 years while her parents took turns serving in Ohio’s state House of Representatives. Noble as their work was, Sykes (MPH ’11, JD ’11) was determined to find another way to make her mark on the greater good.

“I watched my parents, who are the consummate public servants, dedicate their lives to serving our community,” she explains. “It’s difficult for family members to watch how the work wears on your loved ones. They worked so hard, and still do, without fanfare and going up against unsurmountable challenges.”

But in 2014 when term limits ended Vernon Sykes’ tenure in the state legislature, his daughter — then 27 and not long out of UF’s law school — nevertheless found herself picking up the baton. It made sense. Either her father or mother, Barbara, had been representing their northeast Ohio district since 1983. The 100,000-plus people there liked having a Sykes on the ballot.

“While there were several other people who expressed interest in running for the seat, I felt they wouldn’t be able to represent the community that raised me the way it deserved to be represented,” Sykes confesses. “So I decided to run.”

Akron born and raised, Kent State taught, home nurtured to watch over neighbors — deep Ohio roots and values made her a perfect fit for the job. Other than her years in Gainesville earning advanced degrees at the University of Florida, Sykes had spent almost every minute of her life in the Buckeye state.

Voters overwhelming approved of her. That year at the ballot box, Sykes got almost 72 percent of the vote. Two years later, in 2016, her total grew to over 77 percent; more than 78 percent in 2018. Six years after first entering politics, Sykes thumped her general election opponent by 53 points.

Term limits in Ohio kick in at eight years. For Sykes — the once-reluctant legislator who is now her party’s House leader — that means she’s approaching her last months in the statehouse. She’s barely had time to look back.

“I did everything I could to not follow in their footsteps,” she says of her parents. But she’s glad she did. “It has been an incredible experience.”

A GATOR IN BUCKEYE LAND Ohio leans to the political ruby red. With just enough blue to keep things in the state’s House of Representatives colorful. That can make it tough to govern, Sykes admits.

But not impossible.

“In my first year as [minority] leader, our caucus passed more bills than Democrats had passed in the previous four years combined,” she points out. “This was certainly due to being able to find commonality with Republicans, but also not backing down from our core principles and values. We don’t always find common ground — but where we can, when we can, we take the opportunity to do so.”

Ties to the University of Florida have made her job in Ohio’s capitol a little easier.

“I learned a lot at UF — not only academically but about myself and the world,” she says. “I was able to meet incredible people and learn about different cultures that have made me a more well-rounded person and legislator.”

That’s been a good thing for Ohioans. One of her biggest political wins, a new law protecting victims of dating violence, has a direct link to the university. In 2018, the year it became the rule of the land in Ohio, her bill was designated that term’s most important piece of legislation.

A GATOR GOES TO COLUMBUS

Emilia Sykes, this year’s Ohio House of Representative’s minority leader, hasn’t ruled out running for higher office when her current term ends.

Civic service runs in the Sykes family. Emilia Sykes became her district’s representative when her father, Vernon, stepped down.
“By the time I was in the legislature, Ohio was one of only two states in the country that had not extended [civil] protections [to victims of date violence],” Sykes says. “I was able to pull from my experience at UF Law and the College of Public Health and Health Professions to pass that bill.”

“During my first term, capital police would give me a hard time when I tried to enter the statehouse. I was stopped, searched and questioned regularly about why I was there and even told I didn’t look like a legislator.”

Victories like that have made her a rising political star in Ohio. Even so, her affection for Florida brings a twinkle to her eye. Gators feel the same about her. This year, Sykes was named one of UF’s “40 Gators Under 40” to watch.

“The Gator Nation is everywhere, and I’m proud to be a part of the network of scholars and professionals who have changed the world,” she says. “It’s exciting to meet alumni, especially being in Ohio, and have an instant connection with a stranger because we experienced this university.”

STATE OF THE NATION

Americans just can’t agree. Vaccine or no vaccine. Police or protesters. More guns or fewer. Walls or welcome mats. Tougher to vote or easier.

That side-glance suspicion toward each other has crept into Sykes’ life in Columbus, too — despite her being one of the most recognizable women in Ohio’s capital city.

“My age, gender and race are always an issue for me,” she says. “During my first term, capital police would give me a hard time when I tried to enter the statehouse. I was stopped, searched and questioned regularly about why I was there and even told I didn’t look like a legislator.”

The national split along political views, race and religion, and the distrust it brings, concerns Sykes.

“We have to spend more time listening, and empathizing with people who are not like us,” she says. “It’s a continuous and intentional act we all must engage in. The pandemic has made this much more difficult and pushed people further into their ideological corners, but we must resist the urge to remain in echo chambers, and be willing to learn something new and challenge our own biases.”

There’s really no option, she insists. There’s too much that needs fixing. The good news, she believes, is the list of things most Americans would be willing to work on together is long: health care, affordable housing, clean water and air, poverty, job training, food security, criminal justice reform and on and on.

In 2022, the year her term ends, all Ohio’s statewide offices are up for grabs. So is a U.S. Senate seat. Redistricting might also open opportunities in the U.S. House.

That, however, doesn’t mean Sykes will be a candidate for any of those offices. But, then again, it doesn’t mean she won’t be, either.

“I’m not sure,” she says. “The most honest answer is I want to be helpful, useful and happy in whatever role I ultimately choose. I’ve never been interested in being in elected office just to say I’m in elected office, so whatever I pick will have to at least check those three boxes.”

ONE LAST QUESTION, PLEASE

If you could hang out for an hour with any three people (living or dead), who would they be and what’s the topic of discussion?

My grandmothers. I never had the chance to meet my paternal grandmother, Vallie Sykes. I would like to get to know her and who she was. I’ve heard beautiful stories about her and I’d like to get to know her for myself. My maternal grandmother, Nokomis Strong, was just so interesting. She died when I was in high school and I never felt I got the chance to truly appreciate how unique and interesting she was.

I’d spend the time asking them about their lives, my parents and our family. As Black women who were born and lived in the South they experienced racism and misogyny in ways I couldn’t imagine and I would love to soak up their perseverance, strength and wisdom.

Vice President Kamala Harris. She once said in regard to her position as VP, she would be the first but not the last. I’d like to hear about her story and what it’s like to be the vice president of the most powerful country in the world. I identify with her for many reasons, but as my sorority sister of Alpha Kappa Alpha and a Black woman in politics I’m sure we’d have a great conversation.
Expanding scholarships allows UF to retain incredible, talented students.

The donor-established scholarships offered at the university. Now six years into the eight-year campaign, Gators have raised $3.3 billion so far for UF programs, projects and people. Prior to Go Greater, there were 655 scholarship funds in all.

Those scholarships and the new ones, UF officials say, can sometimes tip the scale for cash-starved students weighing whether to drop out of college or enroll in classes.

“Expanding scholarships allows UF to retain incredible, talented students,” says D’Andra Mull, UF’s vice president for student life. “Scholarships give our students opportunities to explore their passions and gain valuable experiences that can change their entire professional path.”

The fact that it’s fellow Gators reaching into their own bank accounts to create many of those scholarships isn’t lost on scholars who receive them.

“Honestly, I don’t know where I would have been without a scholarship,” Machen Florida Opportunity Scholar Lyset Ignacio-Simons (BSEHED ’21) admits. “I’m so grateful.”

An Investment in People
Tribute. Memorial. Gratitude. The reasons scholarships are created are as personal and varied as the people who fund — and receive — them.

- Geoffrey Stirling (BSBA ’95), for instance, established the Rivers-Stirling Family Scholarship to honor his parents and support first-generation Machen Florida Opportunity Scholars.
- UF’s reputation for caring for animals convinced self-proclaimed “animal lover” Sharon Walton, a retired government worker with no previous connection to UF, to fund a scholarship in the College of Veterinary Medicine.
- Angelique Xenick (BS ’92, EDS ’95, MED ’95) started the Kent Batchelder School Counselor Scholarship in the College of Education in memory of her friend and classmate.
- Wanting to prepare student researchers for careers in the natural sciences, retired UF Health professor Louis Gapenski (MBA ’81, PhD ’87) and his wife, Jane, created a fellowship at the Florida Museum of Natural History.
- When popular ESPN reporter Edward Aschoff (BSJ ’08) died unexpectedly on Christmas Eve 2019 — his 34th birthday — shocked former classmates, acting to do something to recognize their friend, came together to fund a scholarship in his name for students studying sports journalism.
- In appreciation for their own University of Florida educations, Dennis (MD ’79) and Barbara Williams (BS ’71, MD ’75) endowed scholarships in the College of Medicine to give other aspiring doctors the opportunity to earn UF medical degrees.

Despite the myriad motives, the bottom line intent for all donor-created scholarships is the same: to make the climb into careers a little easier for students who might not otherwise have that chance.

“I know the value of higher education,” says Art Moore (BSE ’68, MED ’71), co-creator of the education technology scholarship. “Lucy and I sincerely hope that our gift will enable young men and women to prepare for a lifetime of teaching and, in practicing their vocation, to utilize technology to enhance the experiences of their students.”

And it’s not just students that those scholarships are meant to help. Some go much, much deeper.

The John and MaryLou Kohler LGBTQ+ Scholarship in the College of Nursing is one of them. It’s specifically for students who demonstrate, through advocacy and action, a clear understanding of the health care needs and concerns of the LGBTQ+ community.

Nursing student Tess Tumorlin describes the scholarship as an “integral first step” toward her career.

“This scholarship felt very validating and powerful — both as someone who identifies as a member of the LGBTQ+ community and through organizing with students and faculty to advocate for social justice changes in the college,” she says. “It’s such an honor to receive the gift of scholarship.”

It’s that validation that makes Gator-created scholarships even more important, Mull believes.

“It reaffirms that students are in the right place and at the right university,” she says. “[The Gator Nation] sees them and values their educational journey as global citizens.”
FROM BUSINESS TO ARTS, engineering to law, and agriculture to humanities, student scholars across disciplines have a huge collection of new scholarships within reach thanks to the generosity of their fellow Gators. Here are six new scholarships to give a taste of the more than 600 that have been created during the Go Greater campaign:

HBCU Pathway to Law Endowed Scholarship
Walking in the footsteps of civil rights leader and “Conscience of Congress” U.S. Rep. John Lewis is a rugged road to follow even under the best of circumstances, the scholarship’s creators know. Their scholarship makes the journey less bumpy for UF Law students who earned undergraduate degrees from historically Black colleges and universities. So far, in addition to founders Yolanda Cash Jackson (BSJ ’80, JD ’90), Paul Perkins (JD ’91) and Greg Francis (BA ’91, JD ’94) 117 donors have made “good trouble” by contributing nearly $1.3 million for John Lewis Scholars, as recipients will be known.

Robert Curry and Steve Russell Scholarship
Robert Curry (BSTEL ’02, MESS ’06) had big dreams. Never mind his cerebral palsy or navigating life from a wheelchair. At UF, he was involved in sports broadcasting at WRUF and befriended Steve Russell, sports director of ESPN Gainesville. When Curry died in 2019 at the age of 42, his parents, Whit and Ruthanne, created a scholarship for students with disabilities who are pursuing sports journalism. The scholarship honors their son’s courage, tenacity and friendship with Russell.

Dr. Sergio F. Galeano Endowment
Sergio Galeano (MSE ’64, PhD ’66) was an unlikely Gator. For 20 months in the 1960s — after failing to overthrow Fidel Castro — he was a Cuban political prisoner. Banishment to Miami changed his life. Galeano found his way to UF, earned master’s and doctorate degrees, and went on to become one of the world’s most respected environmental engineers. Forever grateful to have a UF education, one of his last acts before his death at age 85 was to establish a fund to support UF environmental engineering students.

Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Scholarship in Memory of Scott Beigel
In less than four minutes on Valentine’s Day 2018, a shooter at Parkland’s Marjory Stoneman Douglas High in Broward County ended the lives of 14 students and three adults. Teacher Scott Beigel was one, killed unlocking his classroom for students trying to escape gunfire. Almost 1,300 miles north, news of Beigel’s heroics reached Robert Yormack (BSBA ’95), whose children attended the Pennsylvania summer camp where Beigel was also a counselor. Their scholarship is a tribute to Beigel and that day’s other victims.

Green Family Achievement Scholarship
Vince (BSBA ’84) and Val Green (BSA ’84) know that pasts laced with good fortune — loving parents and supportive teachers — paved the way for their own successful lives. To clear for others the path to a brighter future, the Greens created the Green Family Achievement Scholarship, administered through the Association of Black Alumni, to support students who have demonstrated, among other traits, academic merit, leadership skills and involvement in UF or the Gainesville community.

Michael D. and Laura Sutterer Florida Opportunity Scholars Endowment
Mike (BA ’96, MBA ’99) and Laura Sutterer (BS ’95) know how difficult it can be for students from less well-to-do families to pay for college. Their scholarship in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences reflects Mike Sutterer’s firsthand experiences as a working student. After moving to Gainesville from Minnesota, he worked a year to become a state resident, enrolled in community college and then, finally, transferred to UF — and graduated — all while holding a job.
In tones not strident or shrill, an alum and award-winning author encourages people across the political spectrum to listen to what oceans, wetlands, rivers and rainfall are telling us about our planet.

Native Floridian Cynthia Barnett vividly recalls the magic of collecting seashells as a child, combing the beaches with her two grandmothers. “When I showed them even the tiniest coquina, they’d act like I’d found Blackbeard’s treasure,” she recalls. “We’d listen to the conchs and try to hear the sea.”

Now an award-winning author and, since 2016, Environmental Journalist in Residence at UF’s College of Journalism and Communications, Barnett (BSJ ‘89, MA ‘03) is still fascinated by seashells — not just on listening to the urgent messages echoing in their beautiful, but increasingly fragile, forms.

She shares those messages in her latest book, “The Sound of the Sea: Seashells and the Fate of the Oceans” (2021). Weaving cultural history and science, Barnett traces humanity’s long love affair with seashells and the hidden lives of the animals that make them, marine mollusks.

“Seashells were money before coin, jewelry before gems, art before canvas,” she writes, transporting readers to the pre-Columbian Americas, where indigenous peoples created shell-based monetary systems and extensive trade routes. The Calusa people of Florida built great “cities of shell,” most since flattened for roads and farms. Even after modern coinage replaced shells as currency, the human passion for seashells as coveted objects lived on. It reemerged in late-17th-century Europe as “conchylomania” (shell-collecting madness), when the Dutch East India Company began returning from Indonesia with shells that no westerner had ever seen before. Collectors spent exorbitant sums for rare specimens, a commodification of seashells and other natural resources that persists to this day.

The Water Whisperer

STORY BY BARBARA DRAKE (MFA ‘04)
PORTRAITS BY AARON DAYE
If we are content merely to admire the loveliness of a queen conch or a lightning whelk, Barnett warns, we overlook the dire messages seashells are now sending.

But if we today are content merely to admire the loveliness of a queen conch or a lightning whelk — or the ocean itself — Barnett warns, we overlook the dire messages seashells are now sending. Some shells are becoming dangerously thin from the increasing acidification of our oceans. Others are vanishing due to habitat loss, pollution and other factors.

It is a complex environmental crisis demanding systematic solutions that require us all, says Barnett. She first began thinking about seashells as harbingers for the plight of the oceans after visiting the Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum, on Sanibel Island, in 2015. The museum's science director and curator, José Leal, explained how climate change was making it more difficult for some mollusks to build their shells. “When I first learned that some of the tiniest shells are beginning to dissolve in the acidifying sea — that’s what led me to write this book,” she said in a recent interview.

At the time of her visit, a survey of museum visitors revealed 90% of respondents didn't know that a shell is made by a living animal. That statistic and the disconnect it revealed “floored” Barnett. “Many people thought they were some sort of rock or stone,” she said. “I started thinking what a perfect metaphor that is for the ocean itself. We’ve loved seashells for their beautiful exteriors, while ignoring the fascinating animals that build the shells. Similarly, we’ve loved the oceans like a postcard — as an idyllic backdrop of life, rather than the very source of life. “You look at this huge, beautiful sea, and you don’t understand what’s happening beneath the waves.”

NEW YORK YANKEES AND FLORIDA FARMERS

Barnett’s path to becoming an environmental writer began with her Florida childhood. She spent her earliest years in LaBelle, a small inland community in southwest Florida. Her paternal grandfather, Ovid Barnett, farmed watermelon and bell pepper there. Her mother’s father, Karl Drews, was a Major League Baseball pitcher from New York who moved his family to southeast Florida in 1951 after several trips down for spring training. “My grandparents had promised their families they would return to Staten Island after spring training, but my grandmother (Nancy) refused — she fell in love with the climate and the wilds of Florida,” she explained.

Barnett grew up in Florida and California, and her families’ contrasting backgrounds would enrich her as a writer and as a unifying voice for the environment, she said. “I have this duality that helps me understand different perspectives,” she said. “If you ask me about climate skeptics, some of my insights come from my own family.”

“On my Barnett side, I’m a fifth-generation Floridian, and my children are sixth generation, and we really feel and appreciate that Florida heritage,” she explained. “The Barnetts know the water and land very well because they have been farming it for a long time. On my mom’s side, the Drews, they were more urban and Yankees — literally my grandfather pitched for the New York Yankees — and I am infused with that heritage as well.

“What the two families had in common was their love for nature.”

REVISITING THE SOURCE

Like many in her profession, Barnett’s “depths of feeling” about injustices in the world led her to major in journalism at UF, she said. After earning her bachelor’s degree in 1989, she embarked on a 25-year-long career as a journalist, becoming an editor at Florida Trend magazine and later writing for National Geographic magazine, The Atlantic and other national publications.

Barnett said returning to UF in the early 2000s to earn a master’s degree in American history was key to her becoming an author. At the time, UF had no degree program or faculty in environmental history, her desired area of study, so she reached out to then-Provost David Colburn, a presidential historian with a special interest in Florida history.

Colburn forged a curriculum expressly for Barnett, creating independent study courses based on seminal works about the environment by trailblazers such as Rachel Carson and Marjory Stoneman Douglas.
When Colburn died in 2019, Barnett went searching in her computer files to write her former mentor’s obituary and gained a newfound appreciation for his guidance.

“I found the list of books Dr. Colburn had me read the first semester, and it just makes me cry because Rachel Carson’s ‘Silent Spring’ [1962] was on the list, and I had never read her as an undergrad,” remembered Barnett. “Looking back, I’m so moved because he wasn’t a blazing environmentalist, it wasn’t what he studied, but he saw my keen interest in the topic, knew what I needed to read and pointed me in the right direction.

“I’m still a journalist — I’ll always be a journalist — but I attribute my success as a book author to Dr. Colburn and my history degree.”

She deepened her knowledge by spending 2004 and 2005 as a Knight-Wallace Fellow at the University of Michigan, researching freshwater history and science.

Barnett’s UF master’s thesis became her first book, “Mirage: Florida and the Vanishing Water of the Eastern U.S.” (2007), which won the gold medal for best nonfiction in the Florida Book Awards and was named by The St. Petersburg Times (now The Tampa Bay Times) as one of the top 10 books every Floridian should read.

“In the days before the internet,” the Times said, “books like Rachel Carson’s ‘Silent Spring’ and Marjory Stoneman Douglas’ ‘River of Grass’ [1947] were groundbreaking calls to action that made citizens and politicians take notice. ‘Mirage’ is such a book.”

In training the next generation of environmental journalists, Barnett goes back to her early family experience of straddling two cultures and finding common ground. She urges students to avoid targeting conservation-minded audiences exclusively and to reach instead for what she calls “the Caring Middle.” That begins with writers being mindful of their word choices.

“Tampa Bay Times

She credits Diane McFarlin (BSJ ’76), former publisher and, more recently, retired dean of the journalism college, for her return to UF. “Her whole career — she was an editor at Florida newspapers before she became dean of the college — she was a champion of environmental reporting,” Barnett says. “Part of it is because her [newspaper] audiences cared so much about it. She understood the importance of water and climate and place to Floridians.”

“I love teaching, and the students are doing amazing work,” she added. “They are really inspired to work on climate change.”

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“I usually don’t use the word ‘climate deniers,’” she said. “There is a difference between these cynical, well-funded doubt campaigns (like those with cigarettes and DDT) that have been part of our world for a century … and the skepticism of people who, unfortunately, often see things through a political lens. And that is what bothers me. I wish water and climate hadn’t been politicized to the extent they have been.”

“I see my work as helping people come together around the values we all share,” she stressed, “like clean and abundant water, healthy ecosystems, a beautiful Florida — all those things we can come together around for the future.”

“One hundred thousand years ago, a human cousin walked a rock-rilled beach along the Mediterranean Sea, her head lowered and her large eyes scanning the shoreline. Now and again she stopped, bent her strong body, and picked up a seashell. Among the polished whorls and sturdy half-shells washed ashore a couple miles from her cave, the Neanderthal girl knew precisely what she was looking for: cockle shells of a certain size and shape — about an inch across, perfectly round, and with a natural hole in the top.

She was picky about the hole, too. She collected those shells with eyelets she deemed best for threading. Her appreciation for seashells beyond food, and her imagination to string them together for a necklace or some other intention, would help scientists overturn nearly two centuries of assumptions and poorly conceived science that Neanderthals were dim-witted brutes.

The cockle shells gathered in Neanderthal times were discovered fused into the maw of a sea cave overlooking Spain’s Cartagena Harbor. Several other shells found in the cave from the same era had been harvested live, for eating. Archeologists could tell from their undamaged contours that they’d never bumped along the rocky shore.

The cockles had tumbled into the beach empty. Someone collected them intentionally, but not well. One kept a seashell, from a bittersweet clam, had been painted red. Another, from a thorny oyster, had a long second life as a cosmetic case. It still held a reddish pigment hand-ground from bits of hematite, pyrite, and other minerals, none found naturally in the cave.

These erosions later, the powder still sparkles. And the girl’s human cousins are still picking up seashells.
When Scott Smith (MSMEng ’85, PhD ’87) looks at a machine tool, he thinks not about what the powerful equipment used to shape metal can do — he’s imagining what it could do with the right added parts and strategies. As Oak Ridge National Laboratory’s Intelligent Machine Tools Group leader, his guidance has led to innovations in machining equipment and improvements in manufacturing processes (making them more efficient and affordable), which supports U.S. manufacturers and the economy.

In recognition of his many efforts, Smith received this year’s prestigious M. Eugene Merchant Manufacturing Medal from the American Society of Mechanical Engineers and the Society of Manufacturing Engineers. Smith’s selection was based on his numerous research contributions that improved the productivity and competitiveness of the automotive and aerospace industries. For instance:

- His work streamlined many of the parts used commercially in the airline industry. “You used to have to bend sheet metal, drill holes in it and attach pieces by rivets to build the structures for planes out of the sheet metal pieces,” he said. “We got rid of the rivets, all of the assembly tools, and we reduced the weight of the piece. It turns out, it was possible to make these really exquisitely thin monolithic aluminum components.”

- Any machine tool operator who has used a device called the Harmonizer has Smith to credit for it. His doctoral work led to the development of the device that stops the vibration or chattering in a machine tool. “I captured the sound of the machine tool with a microphone and then [developed] the piece of software that tells you what speed to change the machine to in order to stop the vibration,” he said.

- Smith also deployed tap testing technology, developed a way to measure the cutting performance of machine tools, improved the productivity of the existing installed machine tool base and invented machine tools for new applications.

- In addition, Smith developed online courses to train new generations of machinists.

With nearly 2 million unfilled manufacturing jobs projected by 2026, Smith’s contributions to training and continuing education, in particular, are expected to have a significant impact on future U.S. economic stability.

— JENNIFER BURKE, OAK RIDGE NATIONAL LAB
SOLUTION-MINDED

Dustin Pasteur (BDES ‘06, MARCH ’08), director of design and construction at Tampa General Hospital, has been recognized for his innovation and quick response during the pandemic. When isolation rooms quickly filled to capacity last year, Pasteur led his team to modify buildings, which immediately more than doubled the number of isolation rooms from 83 to 188. Then they added an additional 59 rooms, and later, another 34 rooms. His team equipped each room with its own filtered air units, too. Pasteur says his team was never supposed to exist. He was originally hired as a temporary employee for a month to reorganize an old drawing room. After realizing what he brought to the hospital, a “project architect” post was created for him. Soon after, he was promoted to manager of design, where he began building an in-house design team. Pasteur saved the hospital $600,000 the first year, $850,000 the second and more than $1 million annually by year three. Pasteur is now helping the hospital embark on a $550 million master plan, the majority of which will be designed in-house over the next few years.

TRIVIA CENTRAL

Kathleen McHugh (BSJ ’77) is a retired legal assistant from Lake Worth who competed on the “Jeopardy!” trivia game show on July 26, guest hosted by actor LeVar Burton. See McHugh fight to the finish in season 37, episode 236.

WELCOME TO ABBY’S PLACES

Abby Wambach (UF 1998-2001) is hosting a new show on ESPN+, called “Abby’s Places” through which she aims to show the world why “soccer is love.” In the first episode, the international soccer giant takes on fellow SEC sports star Peyton Manning and explores what makes her game more beautiful than his and other sports.

In other episodes, Wambach explores the evolution of goal keepers, great announcing moments, how the game took hold in the U.S. and how the ’99 World Cup team (she’s joined by Julie Foudy, Brandi Chastain and Briana Scurry at the Rose Bowl Stadium) elevated the prestige of women’s soccer “and made America a soccer country,” Wambach said.

Through competitive challenges and conversations with stars such as Jarrett Payton (son of NFL star Walter “Sweetness” Payton), former U.S. men’s national soccer team captain Brian McBride, the “face of U.S. soccer” Landon Donovan, former New York Cosmos defender and Pelé teammate Tony Picciano, Wambach recreates famous plays and celebrates the power of legendary moments in soccer history.
HE’S GOT THE SPIRIT

Thomas Philpot (RSPR ’06) is president of the National Conference of State Liquor Administrators. He is chief of staff of the Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation. Formerly, he served as the department’s acting deputy secretary for business regulations, in several leadership roles at the Division of Alcoholic Beverages and Tobacco, as a private practice regulatory compliance attorney and on the media staff for governors Jeb Bush and Charlie Crist.

FOR THE PLANET

Ken LaRoe (JD ’92) opened Climate First Bank in St. Petersburg. As its name indicates, the bank is the national’s first climate-focused bank that aims to reverse the climate crisis by providing green loan options for everything from rooftop solar to EV auto loans to LEED building retrofits.

ART THAT ACCURATELY REFLECTS LIFE

Photographer Aundre Larrow (BSJ ’13) is a former Adobe Creative resident in Brooklyn, NY, who wrote “Equity through Editing” for Adobe Create. His photos and his stories are challenging media outlets to take more care in the ways minorities are presented in print, digital and video stories. His latest work (pictured on this page), “Nation of Newcomers,” tells the stories of immigrants in New York.

“My goal, whatever I do, is to make sure [my commercial work] doesn’t step too far outside my vision. I want to be able to help a brand sell things without changing my core tenets,” which he says include a commitment to diversity, inclusion and respect for the voices of marginalized groups.

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IN THE NEWS

Jonathan Rodriguez (BSFES ’13, MSFES ’18) is a Miami-Dade County Fire Rescue Captain (far left) who led firefighting and rescue efforts at the condominium collapse in Surfside in late June. He has been a firefighter with MDFR since 2008.

HELPING THOSE WHO SERVE

David Winchester (BS ’00, BA ’00, MS ’11) is president of the American College of Cardiology’s Florida chapter. He is also an associate professor of medicine and radiology at UF and a senior medical adviser for the Veterans Health Administration’s Access office, developing programs that maximize veterans’ ability to access health care promptly, either within the VA or in the community.

CHANGE MAKER

The Florida Bar has appointed Michael Gelfand (JD ’82) of West Palm Beach and seven other attorneys to a task force that will review all aspects of Florida condominium law, development, construction, associated operations and maintenance. The team will determine if changes or additions to legislation and regulations could prevent or minimize the likelihood of another tragedy like the Champlain Towers South collapse in Surfside. The task force comes under the bar’s real property, probate and trust law section.

READY FOR TAKEOFF

Carlos Mendoza (BSEng ’21) designs airports at Hanson Professional Services in Sarasota. In his role, he assists design and construction services for general and commercial service airports across Florida. At UF, Mendoza was an undergraduate researcher for the Transportation Institute and a member of the Sigma Phi Delta engineering fraternity.

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ALWAYS TIMELY
Martha Bireda (EdS ’80, PhD ’87) wrote “A Time for Change: How White Supremacy Harms All Americans.” Bireda is a Florida Humanities speaker and the volunteer director of the Blanchard House Museum of African American History and Culture of Charlotte County in Punta Gorda. She is also working on a follow-up to this book.

CULTURAL INSIGHT
Vania Smith-Oka (MA ’01) wrote an ethnography called “Becoming Gods: Medical Training in Mexican Hospitals.” She is an associate anthropology professor at the University of Notre Dame.

FOR THE GIRLS
RoKeshia Renné Ashley (BSPR ’13) wrote “SunFlower Child” to celebrate Black girlhood and to change the narrative of colorism. She is a multicultural marketing assistant professor at Florida International University, who researches health communication in body image and modification, as well as maternal health.

LOVE LETTER
Jason Pratt (BSTell ’99) wrote the children’s book “Three Squeezes.” Originally from Jacksonville, he now teaches middle school social studies in Tampa.

STRAIGHT FROM THE HEADLINES
Marie Crandall co-wrote “Why We Are Losing the War on Gun Violence in the United States.” She is a professor of surgery at UF Health Jacksonville. She directs the general surgery residency program and is associate chair for research in the Department of Surgery. She is nationally known as a traumatic injury and gun violence expert.

A CULTURAL TALE
C. D’Angelo (BSPsy ’00, EdS ’02, MEd ’02) wrote “The Difference.” She is a psychotherapist and lives in Winter Garden.

FICTION ON FIRE
Robert Redick (MA Tropical Conservation and Development ’95) wrote “Sidewinders” and the second book in his fantasy trilogy, “The Fire Sacraments.” The first in the trilogy is “Master Assassins,” which was a finalist for the 2018 Booknest Award for best fantasy novel of the year. He also wrote the fantasy series “The Chathrand Voyage Quartet,” which has been published in five languages. He lives in Western Massachusetts.

MUSICAL HISTORY
Michael Ray Fitzgerald (MAMC ’07) wrote “Jacksonville and the Roots of Southern Rock.” He is a media historian, musician and former journalist who lives in Jacksonville. He once taught journalism at UF, the University of North Florida, Flagler College and College of Coastal Georgia.

INSIDER’S INSIGHTS
Michael Cohen (BStell ’92, MAMC ’93, PhD ’96) wrote “Modern Political Campaigns: How Professionalism, Technology and Speed Have Revolutionized Elections.” Cohen, a UF Hall of Fame member, is CEO of the Cohen Research Group, a political, public affairs and corporate research firm. He and his wife, Lisa Herzog Cohen (BA Polisci ’97), live in the Washington, D.C. area with their two children.

BEHIND THE MUSIC
Steven Bergsman (BSJ ’71) wrote Chapel of Love: The Story of New Orleans Girl Group the Dixie Cups. He is a journalist and travel writer, living in Mesa, AZ, who has published 10 books about musicians or real estate.

FLORIDA HISTORY
Rick Kilby (BA Design ’86) wrote “Florida’s Healing Waters: Gilded Age Mineral Springs, Seaside Resorts and Health Spas.” He is a graphic designer in Orlando. He also wrote “Finding the Fountain of Youth: Ponce de León and Florida’s Magical Waters.”

ARTIST’S TRIBUTE CHOSEN FOR A MET SHOW
Julie Miller Torres (BA ’02, JD ’05, LLM ’08) of Atlanta created a print entitled “Super Diva!” that celebrates the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Surrounding her figure are notable quotes from her arguments and interviews, including statements in favor of women’s rights and “I dissent.” This artwork has been included in an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Called “Revolution, Resistance and Activism,” the exhibition features 79 works of art from the 1700s to present day.

FLORIDA GATOR | 61
GATORS AREN’T THE ONLY ONES WHO CHEER FOR FLORIDA. MANY OF THEIR BEST FRIENDS ALSO ROOT FOR THE OLD ORANGE-AND-BLUE. MEET THESE FURRY AND LOVABLE FANS.

Penny
Pamela Dickrell (BSME ’00, MS ’03, PhD ’05) of Gainesville is a mechanical engineer whose best friend, Penny, likes to visit Albert and Alberta. Dickrell teaches in UF’s Engineering Education Department.

Brody
Daniella “Dani” van der Merwe (BSMSE ’13) of Chicago says she and her dog, Brody, are proud members of the Windy City Gator Club. Van der Merwe is an interoperability analyst at Lurie Children’s Hospital.

Meeko
Brittany Hagen Quintero (BSPR ’12) says her buddy, Meeko, is a 10-month-old rescue from Puerto Rico, who now has his own Instagram, @MeekoFromRico. Quintero lives in Delray Beach where she is a data analyst.

Rinker
Ashlynn Martin (BSAppPhyKin ’19) said she named her puppy Rinker after UF’s Rinker School of Construction Management. She is an occupational therapy student who lives in Bradenton with her boyfriend, Ryan Hyatt (BSCM ’19). Hyatt is an assistant project manager at Willis Smith Construction, a Gator-owned company, in Sarasota.

Oreo
Dori Jo Gugliemini of Manahawkin, NJ, says this is Oreo, whom she rescued from the Humane Society of North Central Florida. Her son, August Gugliemini, is a UF animal science senior this fall.

Rosie
Laura Slinkman says this is her “sweet girl, Rosie,” a Pugiler, part pug and part cavalier King Charles spaniel, but all Florida Gator.

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FloridaGator@ufalumni.ufl.edu
Include your name, occupation, town and your pet’s name.
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DO YOU HAVE A CREATIVE WAY OF SHOWING YOUR GATOR PRIDE ON THE ROAD?

Enjoy these reader-submitted photos from their past and present adventures.

GATORS AROUND THE WORLD

Indian River State College chief of staff Andy Treadwell (BA ‘03) chomped through Badlands National Park, SD, with this Gator troupe. From left, back row, are Andy and his wife, Kathryn Frazier Treadwell (BSA ‘04), a OneCause regional sales director; dietitian Kimberlie Gorman Rumsy (BSA ‘05) and David Rumsy (BSSE ‘03), a CEMEX senior sales manager from Timnath, CO. Front row: Harper Treadwell, 9, Lucy and David Rumsy, 9 and 7, and Lochlan Treadwell, 11. The dads are UF Sigma Phi Epsilon brothers.

Denise Simpson (BA ‘99) of Columbia, S.C., sported her Gator gear at Mount Rushmore in South Dakota during Memorial Day Weekend.

Judd Koenig (JD ‘01), his wife, Jennifer, daughter, Mia, and son, Brady, from Boynton Beach, said they showed this Santa Cruz Island tortoise some Gator love during their trip to the Galapagos Islands, Ecuador, this summer.

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JAZMINE & MARQUISE MICKEY

“GAINESVILLE AND UF HOLD A SPECIAL PLACE IN OUR HEARTS. It is where we met and also where we got engaged (on the 50 yard line!) Your college town is always there for you and what better way to give back than to be a part of the UF Alumni Association. We also want to express the importance of college camaraderie to our own baby Gator, Mars, who celebrated his first birthday in August.”

— Jazmine Mickey (BA ’12) is a medical fraud investigator, and MarQuise Mickey (BSTel ’12) is a Language Arts teacher. They live in Lakeland and make regular trips to Gator Nation’s capital.

25% of UF DBA students and graduates used GI BENEFITS for the program

“The UF DBA program has helped me be an innovative problem solver that is capable of generating new research ideas, acquire advanced research skills which have sharpened my business acumen, and hone my skills in research, writing, and presentation. My dream is to one day be a Chief Executive Officer of a major corporation, and attending the Warrington College of Business is helping me realize my dream.”

PAUL CLARK
Product Line Manager, Caterpillar Inc.
U.S. Army

Membership does not support alumni programs, student scholarships and UF’s ranking as a top public university.

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CHEERS TO A GREAT YEAR

The Association of Black Alumni’s South Florida chapter gathered in July for the group’s annual board dinner, celebrating the end of another successful year of club events and friendships. From left (clockwise) are: President Joyvancia Gaines (BSTel ‘07) of North Lauderdale, Outreach Vice President Melissa Forgas (BA ‘04) of Pembroke Pines, PR and Marketing Vice President Gloria Docilait (BSBA ‘12) of Deerfield Beach, Treasurer Catricle Ackerman (BSN ‘08) of Plantation, Scholarship Vice President Chanda Scott (BSAg ’03) of Miramar, Immediate Past President Anja Williams (BA ‘04, JD ’06, LLMT ’12) of Sunrise, Secretary Rolana “Merissa” Edwards (BSR ‘13) of Hollywood, and President Elect Shantrell Jenkins (BSAg ‘13, MEd ’16) of Davie. Not pictured are Membership and Special Events Vice President Merline “Merle” Malcolm (BSHSE ‘88) of Cutler Bay, and Special Events Vice President KeAiria Gumble (BHS ‘10) of Miramar.

SUCCESSFUL LAUNCHES

The PINELAS COUNTY GATOR CLUB was pleased to award $10,000 in scholarships again this year to local UF-bound students. The scholarships were announced this summer at the club’s awards banquet at the Clearwater Yacht Club.

WELCOME TO GATOR NATION

For more than 15 years, the SARASOTA COUNTY GATOR CLUB has given scholarships to UF-bound high school graduates. This year, club President Ryan Chase (BA ’06, MEd ’07) and his fellow club board members presented checks to four such students, and gave a Junior Book Award to Brennan Halcomb, an “outstanding junior” among all local public high schools in Sarasota County. Brennan is pictured here with Pine View School Assistant Principal Kate Marcotte.

ALL FORE THE GATORS

Dozens of Gators got together in April to attend the UF Association of Black Alumni — Gainesville chapter’s one-of-a-kind Topgolf experience in the Swamp. The day began with a Bar-Then-Par brunch with live music by DJ Tele301 at Grub Burger, hosted by Greg Frances (BA ’91, JD ’04), his Osborne & Francis Orlando law firm and 100 Black Men of Greater Florida Inc. The group then headed to Ben Hill Griffin Stadium for the main golf event. Attendees said they enjoyed connecting with each other, competing and giving back to support efforts that celebrate Black achievement at UF. Learn more about the event at uff.to/kIrme3.

— LA KENDRA GARRISON (BSBA ’17)
ABA-GAINESVILLE SECRETARY
Why did you choose UF?
I was in love with UF from first sight. But a conversation with the late, great Professor Richard Pierce Haynes clinched the deal. I was interested in philosophy and called the department chair’s number. He actually called me back. He asked me questions. … He was so invested, so genuine, true, authentic. Moments like that never escape me. I was ignited. I am aware that Professor Haynes passed in 2014. I just hope his family and friends know that he set a fire under so many of us. He is a legend.

Describe your UF career.
As a philosophy major, the idea was to either go to law school or attain a doctorate in philosophy. But after my first semester, I fantasized about ways to slow down my degree. I relished every class, and I did not want it to end. I remember fall days under the trees in Turlington Plaza, reading Kant or Wittgenstein or Spinoza. In those days, the Architecture Lab (the only 24-hour computer lab then) was the place to be. I worked at Outback Steakhouse on Archer Road, so after work, I would rush over to the lab, type up my essays, print them out, edit and re-edit them. I had a second job at Oakbrook Walk as a leasing agent. So between those two jobs, I made ends meet and had time to study.

Who did you connect with most?
After sharing so many classes together, a few of us female students gathered regularly to review our material. My family had moved out of the country already at this point, so it was my college friends who became my family. We would study together, travel together and learn from each other. We … sharpened each other. That kind of collaboration helped me later in life, not only in law school but also with my law firm. We cannot grow alone. We need each other to do great things.

Why did you major in philosophy?
I was a kid and had too many questions. My father was generous enough to sit with me and genuinely engage. We would linger over odd topics ... until neither of us knew where to go with the conversation. — TANAZ SALEHI

“ My father was generous enough to sit with me and genuinely engage. We would linger over odd topics ... until neither of us knew where to go with the conversation.” — TANAZ SALEHI

My father … led me through logical, ethical, linguistic and metaphysical mazes. For example, the origin of certain words in English and Farsi. Why is the word for female, “she”? Why did they just add an “s” in front of “he”? Does that hold any meaning? Those conversations made me feel OK with questioning everything. He instilled that confidence in me to ask why before complying, to inquire why certain people had authority, or why something was the status quo. When it was time to choose my major, I wanted more brain training. Philosophy forced me to write long and complex essays every week, read complicated treatments, advocate a position, work on logic puzzles and build cogent arguments from scratch. A degree in philosophy is like a master chef class for lawyers. I gained an invaluable advantage from my college education.

Favorite professor? Class?
Professor Marilyn Holly and her seminar on environmental ethics. Her passion came from within. She radiated grace, wisdom, a certain style, attitude and confidence that everyone admired. When I was in her class, I felt like I was in a different country, a different era, and she was timeless. The course material changed my mindset and ethics for the rest of my life.

Why did your family leave Iran?
My father was both a math professor at the University of Tehran and a top-level employee for the exiled Shah. Once the Shah left the country, the Ayatollahs stepped in, and the streets of Iran melted into a river of destruction, dictatorship and oppression. The country my parents knew and loved had turned into a horror movie. We had to flee and leave everything behind. We escaped to Turkey to hide and to allow time for my parents to decide their next steps. I remember being huddled in a small apartment in the city center in Istanbul with my family. My mother tried to keep us in great spirits. She hand-stitched our dolls and clothes, made us delicious food, sang us songs and read us stories. She was the light of our lives when times were dark.

One time, I woke up in the middle of the night and saw my parents sitting in the living room, listening to Persian songs, specifically Hayde. These were the songs they fell in love to, the songs they danced to, and now all of this was outlawed by the new regime. There they were, heads bowed, under dim light, crying, sobbing, holding hands, remembering their country, their lives, the possibilities that were now foreclosed. They sobbed quietly so as not to wake us. After hiding their sorrow all day from the kids, it just got too heavy, and this was their special time to unload, decompress, remember and to feel. I wasn’t supposed to see that moment, but it still lives within me. They were lost people in a stranger’s land but had to carry on as if it was just another day.
“Both my parents valued my perspective, sought my input, came to me for advice. As a young woman, God, how that can change your whole life.”

— SALEHI

Describe your childhood in the U.S.

When we arrived, we traveled from state to state [by car] from the West to the East Coast and back. I remember the pit stops, the hamburgers and fries, the fields and changing landscapes. My father had close friends in Newport News, VA, Bob and Lana Bolton, whom he had met while he was stationed in a military base in the U.S. They knew my father, but they’d never met us, and yet they welcomed our entire family, a foursome of soaked immigrants into their sacred space. That kind of generosity is the stuff you only hear about in Jimmy Stewart movies. My mom continued to knit our dresses and dolls, she learned English beautifully from Lana, who also taught us all about Christmas cookies and American holidays. I still remember the fall leaves in autumn, being fascinated with the way the leaves lit up at in December, and how their home always smelled like cinnamon or broth or fresh baked goods.

My father applied for [and didn’t land] a position with NASA in Cape Canaveral... [and] brought us to Florida. My childhood was spent learning the American way in a very suburban neighborhood. We celebrated every holiday and dressed up for Halloween. My heritage and the new culture blended over time. I had parents who allowed me to morph and grow, who allowed me to morph and grow, who allowed me to morph and grow. My father, still a Middle Eastern man, raised me to be a fighter. Both my parents valued my perspective, sought my input, came to me for advice. And as a young woman, God, how that can change your whole life.

When did you feel you belonged in the U.S.? My father and uncle started an old-school rancher steakhouse in Kissimmee. My father, an academic, suddenly learned how to run a restaurant, butcher a perfect porterhouse and hang with the local ranchers. He was featured in the Kissimmee newspaper because the story was so unique: Two Persian exiles, living in the middle of cow town, making steaks for the townspeople. Kissimmee Weekly Co., became a Saturday night staple. There were lines out the door every weekend. The regulars and the staff became extended family. We finally purchased a home. After searching for where we belonged, we found our place.

You were on your own at age 16. What was that time like for you? It’s still hard to talk about. We built a home in the U.S. My mother was not happy about the decision to return to Iran — she started to lose her hair from the stress. She silently cried when she was washing the dishes or doing the laundry. I always caught her in the midst of it, washing the dishes or doing the laundry. She silently cried when she was washing the dishes or doing the laundry. She silently cried when she was washing the dishes or doing the laundry.

Second, embrace discomfort with open arms. Ask the questions you need to ask. I’ve learned more from an intern’s questions than from a judge. Look for a job where you can really learn and grow.

Third, hone your Zen method. It may not involve meditation and mindfulness. When I was younger and worried about the outcome of a certain situation, I’d imagine the worst-case scenario and work backward.

We have a family again.

Who is your hero? James Baldwin, Rosa Parks, Sojourner Truth, Malala Yousafzai. On a micro scale, the first person who comes to mind is Fary Salehi, my mother. She was also ripped from her family when she was young. When she escaped Iran, she was a young mother, a young wife. Her parents had to leave in a heartbeat amidst the terror, chaos and revolution. My mother had no choice to but to think of us and my father. My father could have been arrested or executed, and there was no possibility we could stay. I was very young but certain memories from this period of my life are as fresh as yesterday. I remember my mother grabbing me to catch the flight, leaving my doll under the bed as we dashed to the airport. I recall my mother’s tears, her arms draped around her father, sobbing. This was likely the last time she would ever see them. And yet, she got on the plane and transformed from a heartbroken daughter into my mother. We rarely saw her tears, but I know she suffered. She nurtured us with a full and open heart. Her resilience is a power I have never known or seen in anyone else. After my father died, she had to find her purpose and create a new life for herself. She finished schooling, attended a career for the first time at 60, and now she wakes up every day ready to spread the purest joy and do the most good in this world. She takes care of patients for a living, and I have never seen anyone adore and care for her clients the way she does.

What do you value? Passion. Nothing is more important. Albert Einstein said, “I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious.” Passion drives me to want the best for my clients, to share the best experiences with my family, to hone my skills, to be the best partner.

Outback Steakhouse, I made sure to only out any what I needed, and to save as much as possible. I also learned that friends can become family. The friends I made at UF and Outback Steakhouse are my closest friends today.

Why start your own law firm? My legal career started with federal civil rights cases and hefty appellate briefs. Weekends and late nights were spent poring over voluminous files. It’s true that most law firms feel like a factory warehouse. Eventually, I was lucky enough to develop clients. I do the work because it is absolutely fascinating and fun, all the time, every day. Every single case is new, unique and interesting. I like to find the golden nuggets in cases. My clients understood this, which led to more cases and opportunities. At our prior law firm, Oscar Lombana (JD ’74), Donald Lavinigue (BA ’12), Scott Boyer (BSEE ’97, JD ’08), Salehi and Oscar Lombana (JD ’14), Donald Lavinigue (BA ’12), Scott Boyer (BSEE ’97, JD ’08) and I developed a mutual trust, respect and care that transcended the big-law culture of blood, sweat and billing. We relied on each other, cared for one another, celebrated our mutual successes and commiserated our losses. These guys — now my partners — were the best lawyers I had ever met. I wanted to forge a lifelong alliance with them.

Advice for young professionals? Care. John Maxwell said, “People do not care how much you know until they know how much you care.” When you speak and act from passion, everything sounds and feels more beautiful — difficult tasks seem doable, unreachable goals are within arm’s length. It’s generous, and it will help you succeed.

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ONE OF THESE DAYS.

Right? One of these days soon we’re going to be able to put this all behind us. Visit friends and family. Go places. It doesn’t really matter where as long as we can ... just go.

And when we do we’ll take our Gator pride with us. Your UF license plate tells everyone on the road — and at the concerts, festivals, restaurants and other places where we plan to come together again — which school has your heart. And what’s really sweet? Proceeds generated support millions in scholarships, which means you keep the good going.

WHEREVER YOU GO - GO GATOR!

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