

FALL 2024

# SDSU

WILLARD R. ABBOTT  
PUBLIC SCHOOL

MAGAZINE



**PLUS:**  
What the  
Pac-12 move  
means for  
SDSU

## SDSU On Set

Heard of the Emmy-winning show **'Abbott Elementary'**? Then you know **Riley Dufurrena's** ('13) and **Justin Halpern's** ('03) work.



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## ON THE COVER

Meet 'Abbott Elementary' story editor Riley Dufurrena (left on cover) and executive producer Justin Halpern.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY  
MATT FURMAN

STORY BY  
MICHAEL KLITZING

# SDSU

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## FROM THE PRESIDENT

**WE'RE SO PLEASED TO BRING YOU THE FALL EDITION OF SDSU MAGAZINE, HIGHLIGHTING SOME OF THE INCREDIBLE NEWS AND ACHIEVEMENTS FROM ACROSS THE SDSU COMMUNITY.**

From joining the Pac-12 Conference to shattering the school record for external research funding, the rise of SDSU on the national and international stage continues. And importantly, the impact goes far beyond just our athletes and researchers; it extends to every part of our university.

It's been said that, because of their visibility and popularity, athletics are the front porch of an institution. We'll share with you how SDSU's move to the Pac-12 will enhance the success of our student-athletes and our university, and also open the door to new opportunities for partnerships and impactful growth for our region.

Meanwhile, SDSU's strategic plan is explicit about our commitment to becoming one of the nation's elite research universities. In the past year, SDSU's faculty—from across our colleges and academic disciplines—secured more than \$229 million in research grants and contracts from federal, state and local agencies, along with nonprofit foundations and industry partners. That's almost 64% more than just three years ago! It symbolizes a flourishing belief from our community and partners in SDSU's ability to deliver on ambitious research goals with impactful results.

You will read about research being done in the Arctic by SDSU biology professor Donatella Zona and her team that includes ecology Ph.D. students Francia Tenorio and Macall Hock along with local Indigenous partners. Their work in Alaska is documenting climate change across the tundra, and it shows that the Arctic is warming faster than any other ecosystem on Earth.

Our research growth is important given who we are as a university and a community. While some top research schools have become minority-serving institutions due to shifting demographics, SDSU stands to be a rare example of a minority-serving institution that achieves preeminence in research. Our cutting-edge researchers are also the faculty members who bring that expertise to the classroom. And research provides undergraduate and graduate students with hands-on experience that translates directly into exciting careers.

Together, the elevation of our athletics and research enterprise raises the value of an SDSU education for all students. It boosts the stature of every SDSU degree and intensifies the demand for our graduates by employers—something to be celebrated by our more than 500,000 living alumni and generations of future graduates to come. ●

ADELA DE LA TORRE, PH.D.

PHOTOGRAPHS (LEFT AND RIGHT) BY SCOTT HARGROVE



# SDSU

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATT FURMAN

## UNMASKING A COLLECTION

THROUGHOUT MEXICO, the streets come alive every year with performances of traditional folk dances like “El Danza de los Viejitos.” Dancers dress in colorful traditional garments and wear Indigenous folk art masks. Now these masks have made their way to SDSU, thanks to a donation from the estate of Janet Brody Esser, the former associate director of the SDSU Center for Latin

American Studies. She had acquired the artifacts directly from artists and other sources since the 1970s. The new Mesoamerican Mask Collection contains more than 300 handcrafted cultural items made in Mexico from the 1940s to the 1990s. Now Irene Gonzalez, a master’s student in Latin American studies, is digitizing the impressive collection for all to enjoy. —Leslie L.J. Reilly



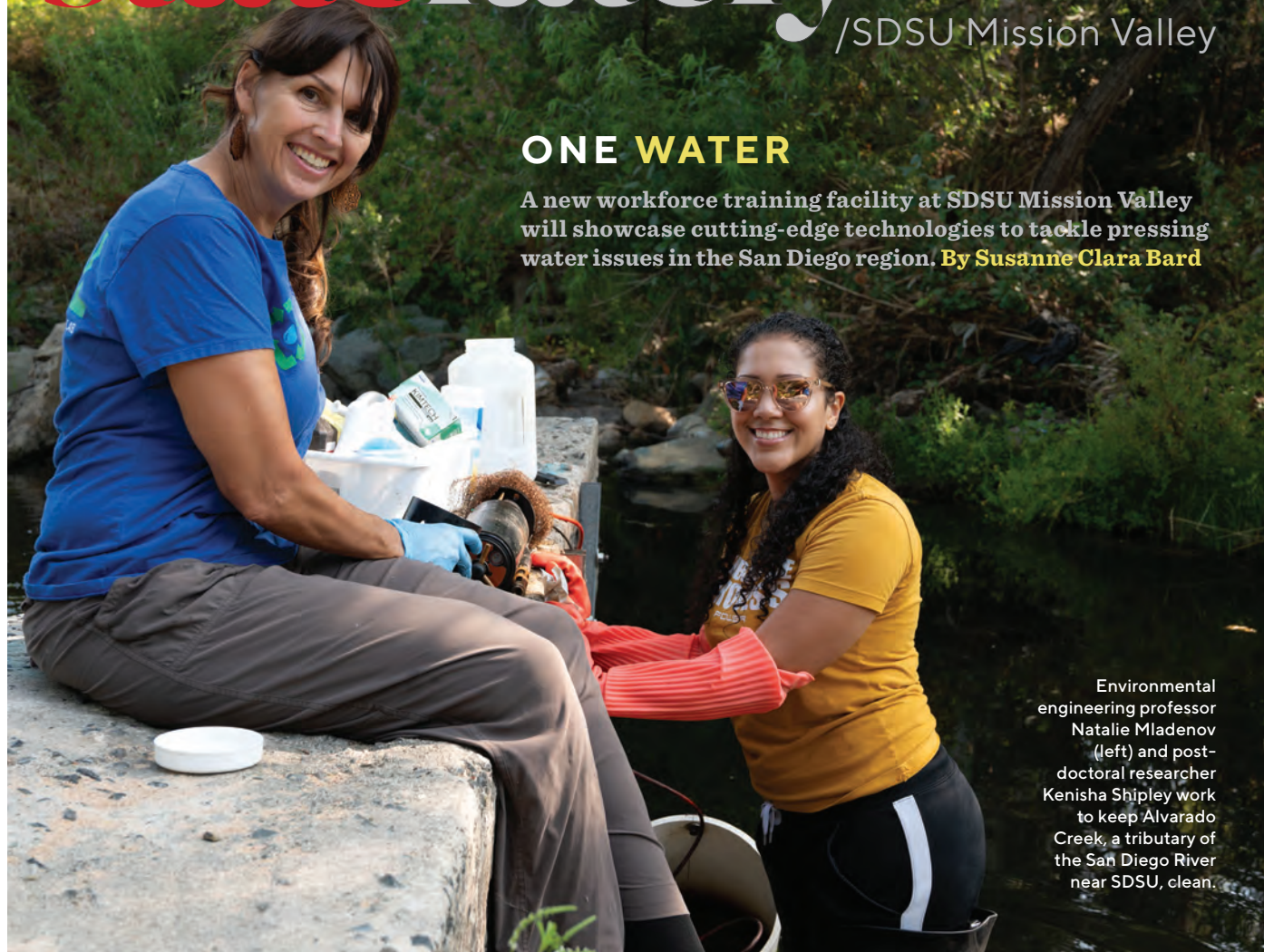
View the collection.





## ONE WATER

A new workforce training facility at SDSU Mission Valley will showcase cutting-edge technologies to tackle pressing water issues in the San Diego region. **By Susanne Clara Bard**



Environmental engineering professor Natalie Mladenov (left) and post-doctoral researcher Kenisha Shipley work to keep Alvarado Creek, a tributary of the San Diego River near SDSU, clean.

**NATALIE MLADENOV GREW UP IN NEW YORK CITY,** a metropolis flanked by the Hudson, Harlem and East rivers. When she was a child, her parents took her to see the Danube River while visiting relatives in Slovakia. But she didn't fully appreciate the vital role rivers play in ecosystems—and human lives—until she had the opportunity to conduct water quality fieldwork on Botswana's Okavango River as a graduate student at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

"All of the rivers I experienced as a kid were very urban and modified by humans," says Mladenov, a professor of environmental engineering at SDSU.

The Okavango, by contrast, and its vast delta teeming with biodiversity and iconic wildlife solidified her commitment to building a career around the health of rivers. Now nearly 10,000 miles from that river in Botswana, Mladenov shares her passion with students in her Water Innovation and Reuse Lab as they investigate the health of the San Diego River and other local waterways. And soon the One Water Living

Learning Laboratory will open in SDSU Mission Valley with the goal of tackling water issues with innovative technologies.

Stretching for 52 miles from the Cuyamaca Mountains to Mission Bay, the San Diego River was once the lifeblood of the Kumeyaay village of Nipaquay. Despite having been transformed by more than a century of engineering projects, population growth and contamination, it combines features of both urban and natural waterways. Mladenov says some segments of the river, such as in Mission Trails Regional Park, and its tributaries, including Alvarado Creek near SDSU, still move organically through a riparian landscape that seems removed from the urban area around it.

Still, the ecosystem services provided by its riparian zone—from water filtration to flood control—aren't obvious to many San Diegans. Mladenov hopes to change that.

With the development of the SDSU Mission Valley river park, which opened in March, she and her colleagues saw the perfect opportunity to create a training ground for

future water professionals that could also educate the broader community about the river's importance and about innovative water technologies.

Mladenov now serves as principal investigator of a \$2 million grant to build the One Water Living Learning Laboratory, a 900-square-foot facility in the river park. The funds are from the San Diego River Conservancy, whose goal is to restore all of the watersheds connected to the river and to support educational opportunities related to the river and other San Diego watersheds.

The One Water Living Learning Laboratory will allow SDSU students to deepen their understanding of watershed science and hydrological systems while gaining hands-on experience with cutting-edge technologies for studying water quality, stormwater treatment and wastewater reuse. Mladenov says the lab also aims to incorporate Indigenous water conservation knowledge and practices.

The planned facility, scheduled to open in 2026, will provide a staging area for SDSU research teams conducting fieldwork and water sampling nearby. Gina Jacobs, associate vice president for Mission Valley Development, says the laboratory will offer a unique opportunity for researchers to tap into the infrastructure of SDSU Mission Valley.

The river park's design incorporates a bioretention basin that captures and filters stormwater runoff from paved surfaces for study before it returns to the river. What's more, Snapdragon Stadium's sanitary sewer system will provide a direct source of wastewater for water reuse research.

This fits into the "one water" concept at the heart of the laboratory's vision: treating all water as a valuable resource.

"We have the technologies to treat all water types, including wastewater or stormwater, to make clean water that's safe enough for

### BY THE NUMBERS

# 37

Number of sensitive or endangered wildlife species in the San Diego River watershed. These include 25 animal species such as the arroyo toad and the Least Bell's vireo (a songbird), and 12 plant species like the clarkia, a rare annual herb in the evening primrose family.

drinking," Mladenov says.

The lab will also showcase technologies that go beyond eliminating harmful microbes and toxins. These can remove microplastics and so-called "forever chemicals" (substances that are very hard to break down), treat gray water from showers and sinks, monitor wastewater for potential outbreaks, and harvest valuable resources from water while also addressing climate change.

"As one of SDSU Mission Valley's first active research and training facilities, the construction of the One Water Living Learning Laboratory will reflect SDSU's commitment to preparing the workforce with the skills that will be required to navigate the region's water challenges in the future," says Hala Madanat, SDSU vice president for research and innovation.

Being located in the family-friendly river park will facilitate community outreach as well as learning opportunities for K-12 students.

"Water issues hit home in so many ways for San Diegans," Mladenov says. "We want to provide a space where community members and students can have a chance to interact with different technologies and

better understand the value that water has."

The laboratory fits into SDSU's larger vision for community engagement in the river park, according to Jacobs. Interpretive signage throughout the park's expansive recreation fields and trails showcases local biodiversity and native plants, explores the land's Kumeyaay origins and water management practices, and explains how the park's bioretention basin acts as a "green sponge" for stormwater.

"The river park was really built for San Diego and for the public," Jacobs says. "There are going to be kids playing who can watch SDSU research taking place, and that is a great opportunity for them and for us." ●



The U.S. Geological Survey recently installed new flow gages, which Shipley is analyzing, at Alvarado Creek to study the effects of droughts, water resource impacts and more.



For updates on SDSU Mission Valley, scan this QR code.



Nevin Harrison is a third-year biology major at San Diego State University—and a two-time Olympic medalist. This summer, she earned silver at the 2024 Paris Olympics in the C1-200m canoe sprint, narrowly missing in her attempt to repeat as a gold medalist in one of the closest finishes during the entire Games. Harrison returns to school after taking a sabbatical to focus on her Olympic career and is excited to pick up where she left off at SDSU.

## BACK TO RED AND BLACK

BY NEVIN HARRISON  
AS TOLD TO AARON BURGIN

**BEING A TWO-TIME OLYMPIC MEDALIST IS AWESOME,** and having two medals at all, even if both aren't gold, is unbelievably special and incredibly rare.

The Paris Olympics were a really interesting experience because it was so different from the Tokyo Games, which were postponed to 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. I was in such isolation in Tokyo, and I wanted to make sure that wasn't going to be the case in Paris. This time my family and friends came—and that made all the difference.

After I placed second in the final event, I definitely got yelled at by security because they wanted me to speak to the media before seeing my family, and I was like, "Absolutely not." I went out to the stands and gave them all a big hug, which was so special to me. Security wasn't about to keep me from saying hi to my family first.

We'll see about the 2028 Games in Los Angeles. Right now, I'm focused on school and kick-starting my career. I'm not making any official announcements; I'm just waiting to see



how the next year or so goes and what it has in store. But maybe I have one or two more Olympics in me.

For now, I'm glad to be back at SDSU after taking so much time off. My first two years at SDSU were such a positive experience, so I'm looking forward to things like revisiting old friendships—especially my old roommates from my freshman year, when I lived with four guys and two girls. It was the most fantastic experience ever.

I'm ready to finish my degree and finally become a college graduate. Growing up, I was always drawn to the medical field, and that's something that still rings true to me. But I'm going to use these next few semesters to rediscover what still interests me and what might have changed. I'm leaving that open to my own discovery. ●

## Ask a Researcher

**MARTA MILETIĆ, PH.D.**

Assistant professor of Civil, Construction and Environmental Engineering

BY JEFF RISTINE



investigation is required to assess its durability and resilience once we start printing and manufacturing processes on a larger scale.

**Your students must be really jazzed to be working on something like this.**

When I ask students, 'Hey, do you think you can work for NASA?' They respond, 'No, NASA is space stuff.' However, civil engineers are about to become very much needed by the governmental space agencies and private enterprise to build on the moon and Mars. All the preliminary designs are made by rocket scientists and mechanical engineers. There is a critical gap that needs to be bridged to bring the civil and construction workforce into the space.

**SINCE THE FIRST SUCCESSFUL LUNAR LANDER IN 1966,** all spacecraft sent to the moon and Mars have touched down onto fine-grained lunar regolith or Martian soil. Under a NASA grant, Marta Miletić, Ph.D., and her research students, in partnership with New Mexico State University, are working on innovative approaches to use 3D printing to construct sturdy launch and landing pads for permanent space bases.

construction instead of transporting them from Earth.

**What are you using here in your lab to replicate the lunar soil?**

We partnered up with a couple of quarries in New Mexico, where the rock there has the same mineralogical and chemical composition as the ones from the Apollo missions. So we actually developed our own lunar regolith simulant.

**What have you learned so far?**

We've gained significant insights into the behavior of this material under extreme temperatures and vacuum conditions. However, further

**Q: How would you describe your work and what NASA is asking you to do?**

**A:** NASA has tasked me to come up with different materials and designs of the lunar launching and landing pads. With the upcoming NASA Artemis mission, the U.S. is planning to have a long-term presence on the moon. They're planning to build a scientific base camp, to put

scientists and engineers there, to test the living situations before they move to Mars. We want to make sure that we can go to the same spot back and forth, the same as on Earth.

We are trying to develop different additive manufacturing and construction technologies to build in extraterrestrial environments. The idea is to use materials already on the moon and Mars for

**There's been talk of permanent moon and Mars colonies for more than 50 years, and you and your students may see the day when it actually happens. How cool is that?**

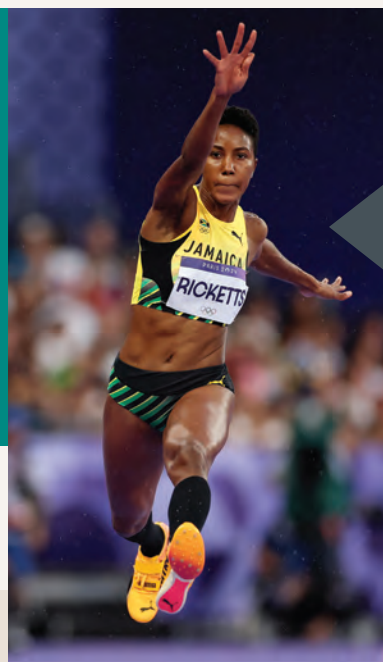
What I like the most is that we are making history.

**Do you think you'll ever personally...**

No. I'm made for this Earth. ●

## 2024 AZTEC OLYMPIANS

Olympic sprint canoeist Nevin Harrison wasn't the only SDSU athlete at the Paris Games. Meet three others.



**Kayla Canett ('24)**  
Two-time Olympian (2020, 2024)  
Women's rugby, USA  
FINISH Bronze

**Shanieka Ricketts ('14)**  
Three-time Olympian (2016, 2020, 2024)  
Triple jump, Jamaica  
FINISH Silver

**Xander Schaufele ('15)**  
Two-time Olympian (2020, 2024)  
Golf, individual men, USA  
FINISH 9th in Paris (gold in Tokyo 2020)



Read more about 2024 Aztec Olympians on NewsCenter.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIK GOOD (TOP) AND CHARLES MCQUILLAN/GETTY IMAGES; MICHAEL STEELE/GETTY IMAGES (BOTTOM)

PHOTOGRAPH BY KYNAN MARLIN



## NAVARRO COFFEE CO.

**Emely Navarro ('18) grew up visiting her family's coffee farm in El Salvador, but she had other career aspirations. A stop at a farmers market changed all that. By Noah Lyons**

**AS A YOUNG GIRL, EMELY NAVARRO HAD HER FIRST** taste of what would eventually become her future.

After school was out for the day, Navarro fondly recalls visiting her aunt Ethel's home in El Salvador. Together, they watched her aunt's favorite soap operas—often against her mother's wishes. As they settled in for the show, Aunt Ethel would tear off a piece of a bread roll for Navarro and fill a quarter cup with coffee and sugar to dip the bread in.

These sweet samples weren't Navarro's only early exposure to coffee. Her family owns a coffee farm, Finca Monte Cielo, in El Salvador—a place where Navarro lived with her family until she was 5 years old.

Despite the coffee farm's near constant presence throughout her formative years, Navarro never considered expanding the family's coffee pursuits. Growing up in the San Fernando Valley, she had her sights set on working in the broadcast industry. She was part of The Daily Aztec from 2014 to 2017, and today she's a digital video producer at "Access Hollywood," a daily entertainment news show and one of her dream jobs. Navarro was never a barista or a coffee fanatic; she saw it more as a means to an end.

"In college, I would drink coffee because I needed to be awake," she says.

That changed in late 2021. A chance conversation with a coffee vendor at a farmers market opened her mind to the possibility of going into the family business. After all, Navarro's father had always hoped to bring their coffee to the U.S.

Navarro and her friend listened as the vendor talked about his experience importing coffee beans from his home of Honduras, roasting them and selling them at the market. Navarro immediately identified with his story.

"I remember trying some [coffee] and thinking, *This is such good coffee*," she says. "And then looking over to my friend and saying, 'I can literally do this.'"

And she did. Navarro started researching the coffee industry, sending cold emails to importers and learning about the farming side of the business from her parents. About two years later, she launched Navarro Coffee Co.—and sold her



Emely Navarro ('18) is using her journalism degree as a digital video producer in Los Angeles, but earlier this year, she added a side of coffee.

first bag of coffee in March. But not without some challenges.

Navarro soon realized that her mission of importing her family's coffee beans wasn't immediately feasible due to the farm's size and the smaller quantity her business demanded. She pivoted to buying beans through an importer from El Borbollon, a family-owned business in El Salvador, and chose City Bean Roasters in Los Angeles to roast the beans.

"The goal is to sell coffee from my parents' farm," Navarro says. "But I think the bigger picture and bigger goal is to educate people about coffee from El Salvador as a whole."

Erika Crenshaw and partner Patricia Torres own

## AZTEC-OWNED COFFEE GUIDE

**Who doesn't love coffee?**  
Here's a collection of coffee businesses owned by SDSU alumni, and if we missed one, email [magazine@SDSU.edu](mailto:magazine@SDSU.edu).

### Buddha Beans Coffee Co.

AZTEC OWNER  
Marc Lewis Narrie ('18, M.S.)  
[buddhabeanscoffee.com](http://buddhabeanscoffee.com)  
*Hemp-infused coffee*

### Catalytic Coffee

AZTEC OWNER  
Joseph Charlonis  
@[catalyticcoffee](https://www.instagram.com/catalyticcoffee) on Instagram  
*Specialty coffee roaster*

### HOB Coffee

AZTEC OWNER  
Andrew Itaya ('06)  
[hobcoffee.com](http://hobcoffee.com)  
*Coffee shops and roaster*

### East Village

1068 K St.  
San Diego, CA 92101  
(619) 269-2887

### Hillcrest

3752 Park Blvd., Suite 104  
San Diego, CA 92103  
(619) 677-2242

### Sabre Springs

11385 Poway Road, Suite 110  
San Diego, CA 92128  
(858) 883-0019

### Ignite Coffee Co.

AZTEC OWNER  
Tyler Whitehead ('20)  
[ignitecoffeecompany.com](http://ignitecoffeecompany.com)  
*Coffee shop and coffee bean delivery*  
605 Mission Ave.  
Oceanside, CA 92054

### ShedLight Coffee Roasters

AZTEC OWNER  
Heather Jones Calatrello  
[shedlightcoffee.com](http://shedlightcoffee.com)  
*Coffee roastery and delivery*

### Talitha Coffee

AZTEC CO-OWNER  
Jake Jiron ('15)  
@[talithacoffeeroasters](https://www.instagram.com/talithacoffeeroasters) on Instagram  
*Coffee shop and roaster*  
1622 National Ave.  
San Diego, CA 92113

### VendiBean

AZTEC OWNER  
Teal Cooper ('16)  
[vendibeans.com](http://vendibeans.com)  
*Beverage tech company revolutionizing office coffee*

El Sereno Greengrocer, a store built on serving "culturally convenient" organic food to communities of color in Los Angeles. They were struck by Navarro's ability to market her budding business on social media. Navarro posts videos to her company's Instagram and TikTok, explaining the roasting process, giving tours of her parents' farm and pulling back the curtain on Navarro Coffee Co.'s origins.

"Emely's storytelling was key in learning about her cultural influence, her family influence [and] her generational influence on her actual partaking in starting a coffee business," Crenshaw says. "Not only is the storytelling the hook, but the taste of her coffee was surprisingly exquisite."

While Navarro was born into the coffee business, she wanted it to be done in her way—inspired by her family's work but distinctively hers. Navarro also sets out to create a brand that emphasizes education and friendliness.

"It's important to do something that feels authentic to me, and that's super inclusive and inviting, and that my family can be proud of," Navarro says.

In addition to El Sereno Greengrocer, the coffee is available on [navarrocoffee.com](http://navarrocoffee.com) and at pop-up events. Navarro's ultimate goal is to open a coffee shop in the San Fernando Valley, but she's in no rush. As Navarro continues to work as a video producer in Los Angeles and develop her business on the side, she's confident things will eventually align.

"Everything will work out with my coffee when it's meant to work out, and it will grow the way it's meant to grow," Navarro says. ●



Jake Jiron ('15), co-owner of Talitha Coffee







# Inside 'Abbott Elementary'

SDSU ALUMNI **JUSTIN HALPERN ('03)** AND **RILEY DUFURRENA ('13)** ARE PART OF THE ULTRA-TALENTED WRITING TEAM THAT CREATES THE HIT SHOW ON ABC. THEY TAKE SDSU MAGAZINE BEHIND THE SCENES.

BY MICHAEL KLITZING  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATT FURMAN

Justin Halpern (front) and Riley Dufurrena





**It's a sizzling July afternoon in Philadelphia, the kind where heat radiates off the asphalt and pedestrians tuck inside the long shadows cast by the city's ubiquitous rowhouses.**

Around the corner, construction workers hammer away on a building project. You can imagine their lunch-pail conversations about Eagles QB Jalen Hurts or Phillies trade rumors.

Just then, the illusion is shattered by the approach of ... a golf cart?

"And here we've come to the set of 'Abbott Elementary,' our hit ABC sitcom," announces a Warner Bros. Studio Tour guide to a group of starry-eyed tourists.

On this day, we are not in steamy Philly after all but in sun-baked Burbank, California—specifically Warner Bros. Studios,

a densely packed collection of soundstages and external sets in the shadow of the iconic WB water tower.

The tourists smile as they snap photos of the Willard R. Abbott Public School facade, the iconic focal point of the show's intro.

Justin Halpern ('03), one of "Abbott Elementary's" showrunners—a top executive producer in television parlance—smiles too. A big benefit of working on a hit, he points out, is that your show becomes part of the tour, which means the sets stay in place. Or can even be expanded, hence the construction crew.

By any measure "Abbott" is unmistakably a hit. The mockumentary-style sitcom, created by and starring Quinta Brunson, follows the experiences of a group of teachers, administrators and staff at a fictional Philadelphia school. As it embarks on its fourth season, the show has delivered steadily strong ratings, a score of 99% on Rotten Tomatoes and haul of 24 Primetime Emmy nominations, with four wins.

Few know of the San Diego State University influence in the writers room.

**OUR GUIDES TODAY** at Warner Bros. are Halpern and story editor Riley Dufurrena ('13), both graduates of SDSU's Television, Film and New Media program. The two are part of a growing number of Aztecs finding success in an entertainment industry long dominated by grads of the University of Southern California, Northwestern University and the Ivies. A notable example is writer-director Destin Daniel Cretton ('11): His indie filmmaking chops caught the eye of Marvel Studios.

In recent years, students have been supported by alumni like producer Mort Marcus ('77), whose Aztecs to Hollywood fund provides micro grants to students looking to make industry connections. Meanwhile, the TFM Advisory Council has offered mentorship and organized student trips to Los Angeles.

But right now, it's time to get out of the heat.

Behind the wheel of another electric cart—this one decorated like a school bus—Halpern drives us to the comfortable office he shares with creative partner and "Abbott Elementary" co-showrunner Patrick Schumacker. Action figures adorn both their desks, fitting given their other major project, the Max animated comedy "Harley Quinn."

As we recover in the air-conditioning, Halpern shares his "Abbott" origin story, one that began with a pilot that never got off the ground.

In 2017, he and Schumacker cast Brunson for a project on the network The CW. Brunson was a rising star, gaining fame for the viral Instagram comedy series, "Girl Who Has Never Been on a Nice Date," which she parlayed into a video producer role at BuzzFeed and her own YouTube Red comedy series "Broke," which lasted one season.

Halpern says the character they created, a ditzzy Valley Girl, wasn't a fit for Brunson. But there was something about her.

"Quinta has this preternatural ability to connect with people in a scene," Halpern says. "Then, as I got to know her better, I realized she also has an encyclopedic knowledge of sitcoms. She's 10 years younger than me, yet every show that is a cultural touchstone for me is also a touchstone for her. So, she has such a deep understanding of what an audience wants because she's such a good audience herself. That is a rare talent."

The pilot flopped, but Halpern and Schumacker were eager to work with Brunson more and asked if she had anything in mind. Turns out she was mulling over a project—a story based on the experiences of her schoolteacher mother. A year later, the stars aligned and Halpern and Schumacker helped her pitch and sell the show, initially called "Harrity Elementary."

The rest is sitcom history.

Like Brunson, Halpern gained fame in an unconventional manner. A former Aztecs baseball pitcher who quit the team to pursue his passion for film, Halpern started the Twitter feed @shitmydadsays when he was living at home with his parents in San Diego's Point Loma neighborhood in 2009.

The account, which documented the witticisms of his no-nonsense father, caught fire. It garnered more than 2 million followers before being greenlighted as a sitcom starring William Shatner that lasted 18 episodes before CBS pulled the plug in 2011.

Halpern and Schumacker collaborated on several other projects, but none were hits. After seven years in Hollywood, Halpern hit a wall.

"I remember saying to Patrick, 'I am so [bleeping] sick of making shows that I would never in a million years watch,'" he says. "We



Dufurrena (left) and Halpern have more than comedy writing in common: They're both avid SDSU sports fans, especially men's basketball.





## How does ‘Abbott Elementary’ land with teachers?

Here’s SDSU School of Teacher Education lecturer Emily Watson’s take.

BY MICHAEL KLITZING



When “Abbott Elementary” debuted in 2021, Emily Watson was skeptical. The longtime elementary school teacher had no interest in coming home to watch a sitcom about her day-to-day life.

And, perhaps more significantly, she didn’t want to watch an inaccurate depiction. Three years later, Watson, now a lecturer in the San Diego State University School of Teacher Education, is a devoted “Abbott Elementary” fan. We sat down with her to learn what changed her mind.

**Q. You mentioned being resistant to watching. What eventually hooked you?**

A: In my opinion, they nail what elementary school teaching is. This show is funny, but you can tell they seem to have a sense of what’s going on in elementary school, even the behind-the-scenes stuff.

**What rings most true to you?**

The teacher archetypes, definitely. You’ve got the fresh newbies who are excited and try all kinds of the new-style teaching methods. And then you’ve got the veterans with the ‘I’ve been there, done this’ mentality. That was me. Then there’s the staff lounge and the complaints—even what people eat. It’s those little things.

**Do you appreciate how they tackle issues in education?**

Oh yes. There was one episode where they talked about changing the name of the school after learning who [the namesake] Willard R. Abbott really was. That’s very current right now. Then [in Season 3] Janine, the teacher, takes a position at the district office, but she really missed being in the classroom. I see that a lot.

**Have any Hollywood depictions of teaching made you cringe?**

Oh yeah, the white savior movies, where there’s a white teacher that goes into the inner city. On ‘Abbott,’ it’s cool to see Black teachers—especially Black men—on campus interacting with the students. That’s very refreshing to me.

**Do you have a favorite ‘Abbott’ character?**

Ava, the principal, is so over-the-top and hilarious. I’ve never had a principal like her before, but the fact that she’s kind of checked out from what’s really going on—that can be typical.

INTERVIEW HAS BEEN EDITED FOR LENGTH AND CLARITY.

The cast of “Abbott Elementary”



have to make a rule: We’re only going to make shows we’d watch.”

Their next project was “Harley Quinn,” which is about to start its fifth season. Then “Abbott Elementary.”

It seems he was finally on to something.

**AMID THE HEAT IN BURBANK,** Dufurrena isn’t breaking a sweat. Perhaps it’s his upbringing in Spring Creek, Nevada, a mining and farming community known for extreme temperatures.

Despite a recent promotion from staff writer to story editor and with “Written By” credits on three episodes under his belt, success hasn’t gone to Dufurrena’s head. After standing for the cover photo shoot, he helped break down and carry the equipment, unprompted.

“From a young age I knew I wanted to do TV or film,” he says. “I wanted to go to a prestigious film school in LA, but I couldn’t afford it. I had an aunt who went to San Diego State, and I wanted to be in SoCal. I got in.”

During a TFM course his senior year, there was a guest speaker in class one day: Halpern.

“I remember he seemed like a funny, cool guy,” Dufurrena says. “I thought it would be great if I could graduate and get the opportunity to work on the same show as him.”

But Dufurrena blazed his own path first. After graduation, he quickly found work as a writer’s production assistant—a junior position that supports the writing team—on the long-running ABC sitcom “The Middle.” To his delight, television comedy felt like home.

“Once I saw that writers room, I was like, ‘That’s it. It’s the best job in the world,’” Dufurrena says. “You get to do storytelling, but you get to laugh the whole time.”

One day at work for “The Middle,” Dufurrena was wearing SDSU gear when one of the writers took note. The writer happened to play basketball with a guy who went to San Diego State.

The guy in question was Halpern, and the two soon met for coffee.

“I just kept pestering Justin,” Dufurrena says. “Every few months I would email him. I would keep up with San Diego State basketball and football and send him an article here and there.”

After “The Middle” ended in 2018, Dufurrena was tapped to be a script coordinator on a spinoff that was ultimately not picked up. In March 2021, Halpern emailed out of the blue and invited him



Quinta Brunson, creator and star of “Abbott Elementary,” pictured with Halpern on the left, has won two Emmys for her work: Outstanding Writing for a Comedy Series (2022) and Outstanding Lead Actress in a Comedy Series (2023). Halpern, executive producer and co-showrunner, and story editor Dufurrena, on right during his SDSU film days, have been with the show since its premiere in 2021.

to interview for “Abbott” as a script coordinator.

After an interview with Brunson and Schumacker, he got the job.

**ON THIS JULY AFTERNOON,** the “Abbott Elementary” team is hard at work on Season 4. Today was a table read—a structured read-through of the script with the show’s actors.

“If there are jokes we don’t think landed, we’ll all come up with our own punch-ups,” says Dufurrena, who particularly loves writing for the character Mr. Johnson, the show’s hilariously offbeat custodian. “We’ll read them together, and whichever get the most laughs make it into the scripts.”

Leading the writers room alongside Brunson, Halpern likes to start off each day with what he calls “host chat,” where writers casually shoot the bull. The idea is to create a space for funny people to be funny. It is not uncommon that things said during this warm-up period end up somewhere in the script.

One unwritten rule of the writers room: Always remain on your toes.

“For me it’s a lot of, ‘I have a good idea for a joke,’ followed by, ‘No, that’s not very good, Riley,’” Dufurrena deadpans. “‘Try harder.’”

Halpern interrupts: “We do make fun of Riley a lot. Everybody makes fun of everybody a lot—it’s the best part of the job.”

Indeed, cutting it up with the writing team is the half of the showrunner job Halpern loves. The other half—wrangling budgets and supervising people—he equates to managing a Macy’s. But it’s all for one common goal.

“My job is to make sure that Quinta’s vision for the show is what’s on TV,” Halpern says.

Brunson, via an email from her publicist, expressed appreciation for what Halpern and Dufurrena bring to the show.

“Justin I simply couldn’t do my job without: He’s my right-hand man in almost every sense. Without him, our room doesn’t run,” Brunson writes. “Riley is meticulous in a big-picture way. I know

it stems from his background as a script coordinator, but it’s also a part of his character to think about the big picture, and that’s very helpful in the writers room as well as on set.”

Of course, Halpern and Dufurrena are aware that there are some contributions they just can’t make. As two white men on a show with a diverse writers room and a majority-Black cast, they both say they’re mindful to stay in their lanes.

“The thing that I’m always aware of is that it is a show about a place where I am not from and an experience I didn’t have,” Halpern says. “So there is a healthy amount of just listening. But I think the unifying thing is storytelling. It’s what connects us all, and it’s why ‘Abbott’ has a giant, diverse audience.”

**AS THE INTERVIEW WINDS DOWN,** the two proud Aztecs remember their time in SDSU’s TFM program as formative. Both mentioned the influence of professor emeritus Greg Durbin, known for putting cameras in the hands of his students and letting them sink or swim, as a particularly influential faculty member.

“That’s the ultimate gratification for any teacher, to see their students succeed like this,” says the recently retired Durbin, by phone. “I’ve taught at many places, and I can tell you that SDSU students were hungry. They had to make a virtue of necessity, and they were energetic and persistent.”

As a showrunner, Halpern sees it too.

“Every time I’ve hired anyone from San Diego State, they’ve always done a really good job,” he says. “I think that’s my little way of pushing back against what can be a very insular environment here.”

Soon, we pile back into the whimsical yellow cart, and Halpern drives us back across the Warner Bros. lot to the gate.

The shadows are longer now. The construction workers have gone home. The heat on the streets of faux Philly is finally beginning to break. ●

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF MICHAEL KLITZING (TOP LEFT) AND ABC ENTERTAINMENT; EVANSVESTALWARD/WBTVG AND RILEY DUFURRENA (TOP RIGHT)



# Photos OF THE Year

Choosing favorites can be tough. That's especially true when the options, in this case photos from across the SDSU community, are so good. This collection is a sampling of some of SDSU Magazine's favorite moments from 2024.

(In order from top left, clockwise)

**In the Shadows**  
**Photographer: Ken Jacques**  
 The University Dance Company, a part of the SDSU Dance Program

**Clear Skies Ahead**  
**Photographer: Matt Furman**  
 Margo Thornton ('24), a recent graduate of the astronomy master's program, at SDSU's Mount Laguna Observatory

**Slam Dunk**  
**Photographer: Derrick Tuskan**  
 Former Aztec guard Micah Parrish for two crowd-pleasing points

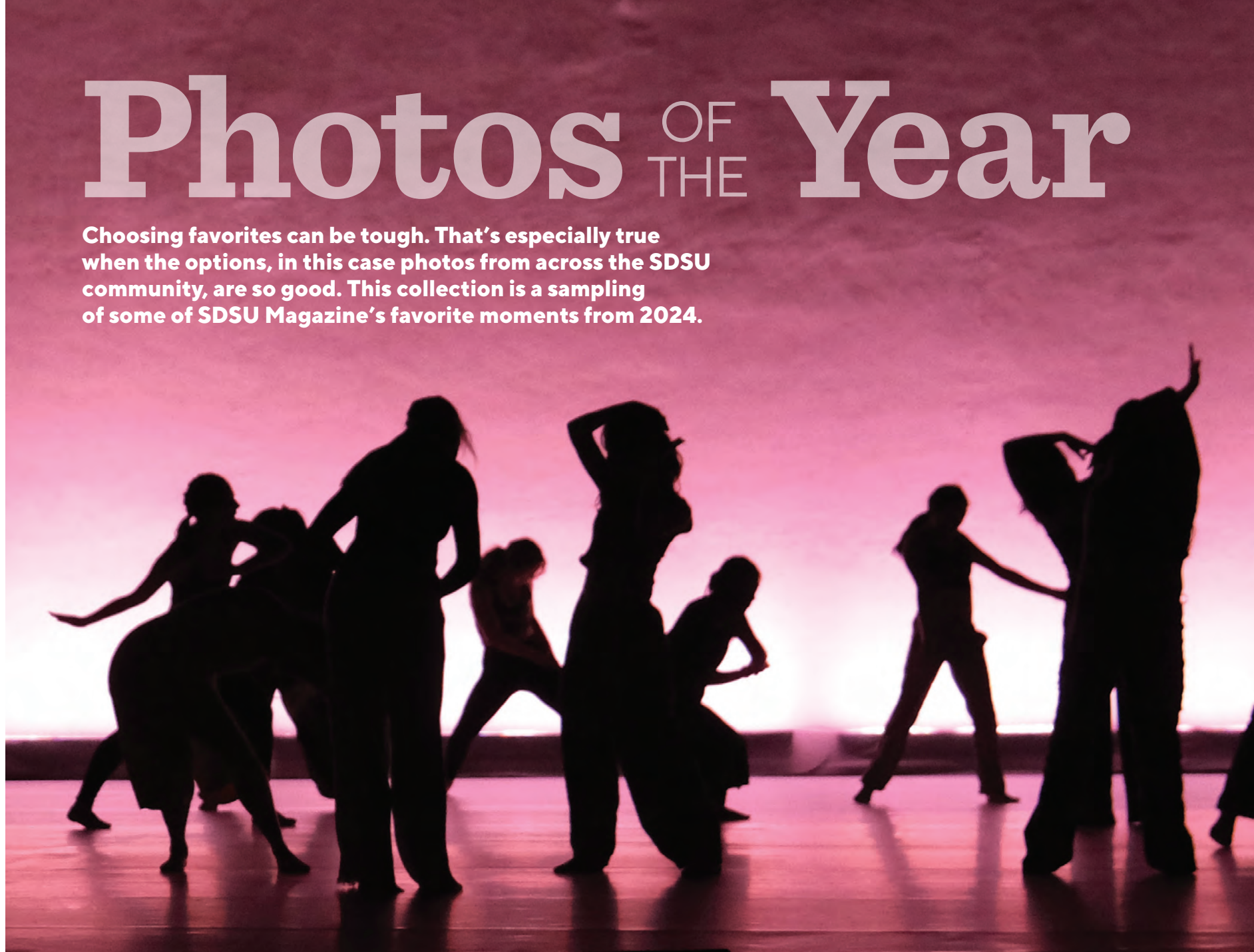
**All Net**  
**Photographer: Derrick Tuskan**  
 Alumna lacrosse defender Courtney Anderson ('24)

**Dogs of SDSU**  
**Photographer: Rachel Crawford**  
 University Police Department Sgt. Paul McClain and K-9 partner, Kira

**Pep Band in Action**  
**Photographer: Derrick Tuskan**  
 Percussionist Chase Bentley, Ben Freeman (back row from left), Emma Barrow, Abby Donaldson and Nick Flores at March Madness

**Year of the Wood Dragon**  
**Photographer: Erik Good**  
 White Dragon of East County performs at the Lunar New Year event hosted by the Asian Pacific Islander Desi American Center

**Pitch Perfect**  
**Photographer: Derrick Tuskan**  
 SDSU President Adela de la Torre delivers the first pitch at a softball game, as head coach Stacey Nuvevan Deniz looks on.





# The TIME MACHINE

**SDSU BIOLOGISTS HAVE COLLECTED SPECIMENS FROM EVERY CORNER OF THE EARTH FOR DECADES: IT'S ALL IN THE BIODIVERSITY MUSEUM.**

By Bryana Quintana

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATT FURMAN

**FOLLOWING A PATH OUTLINED BY RAILROAD TRACKS,** Marshal Hedin found himself deep inside a dark, cramped tunnel in a remote part of North Carolina. He examined the sides of the tunnel and, with the aid of a headlamp, spotted what he came looking for. Suddenly, he heard a whistle in the distance. The sound echoed through the hollow cavity, a warning that grew louder as the ground began to tremble. In a split second, Hedin pressed himself against the curved wall of the tunnel, motionless as the train barreled by. He clutched a precious vial in his hand.

The veteran field researcher quite often finds himself in precarious situations such as this. He braves each bold adventure with the same seemingly simple goal: to find spiders.

Hedin is a biology professor who joined the faculty of the College of Sciences in 1999. A year ago, he took on the role of director of SDSU's Biodiversity Museum, a veritable natural history museum that houses more than 100,000 specimens that have been collected and acquired over the past 127 years. While Hedin's speciality is arachnids, the museum's shelves, drawers, cabinets and even ultracold freezers are filled with plants, insects, birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians from around the world.

"It's important to preserve these samples because they provide a window into the past," Hedin says. "I see biologists as stewards of the planet, including biodiversity that has been collected and preserved. It is our job to maintain this diversity, actively using specimens now but also carrying them to the future."

This practice has become a dying art, as many universities and organizations have dissolved their collections due to a lack of resources. SDSU

is the only university in San Diego with a museum of its kind. Over the years, curators have obtained specimens through the San Diego Zoo, SeaWorld, the San Diego Natural History Museum, donors and fieldwork like Hedin's. Stored across several climate-controlled rooms in the Life Sciences South building, the specimens are safeguarded by Hedin and four other curators to ensure they can be used for research, teaching and public outreach in perpetuity.

SDSU alumnus Eric Ekdale (M.S., '02), the mammals curator and a biology lecturer, started his career in the Biodiversity Museum. He now manages a collection that includes the skulls of an orca and an endangered Sumatran rhino, pelts from tigers and arctic foxes, and preserved bats and gophers, among hundreds of other samples.

"When I was a master's student, my desk was actually right here," Ekdale says, gesturing to the skull of a young Indian elephant. "We have a really wonderful collection to show San Diego State students the great diversity of life on Earth and hope that this fosters a real appreciation of the natural world."

The collection helps students learn how to identify organisms, providing tangible examples to supplement lessons taught in class.

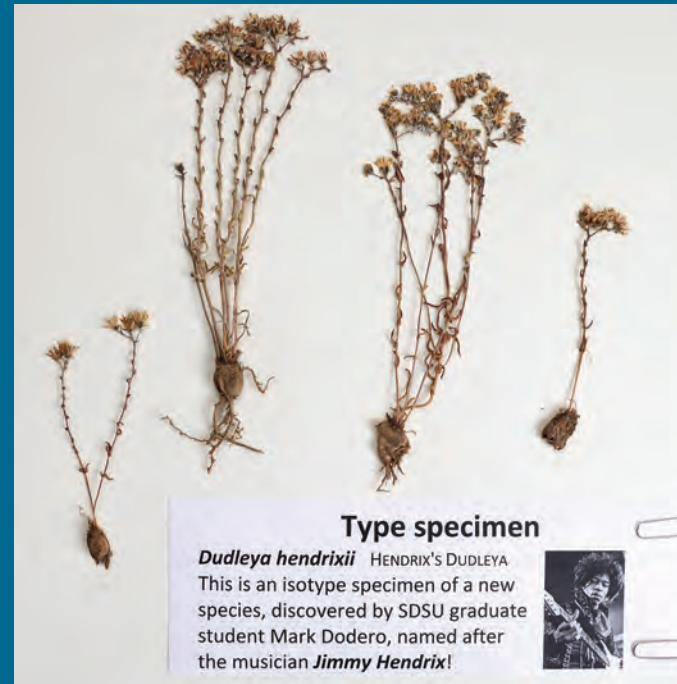


Learn more about the Biodiversity Museum here.



The Biodiversity Museum's collection includes butterflies and plants, which are used for inspiration in SDSU art classes, the flipper bones of manatees (top), which resemble a human hand and arm, false killer whales and dolphins, and countless jars of preserved reptiles and amphibians, among other specimens.





Biology professor Marshal Hedin (top left), has discovered and named about 100 new arachnid species over his 30-year career. As the director of the SDSU Biodiversity Museum, he and biology department faculty and students, including first-year master's student Alyssa Head (below), are working to make all of the specimens searchable via digitization. "Every specimen has its own story," Hedin says. And the museum is tasked with preserving those stories for future use.



Through research experiences facilitated by faculty, students have the opportunity to directly contribute to the museum's repository. In 1995, grad student Mark Dodero was in Baja California searching for various plants when he stumbled upon a new species. He called the herb *Dudleya hendrixii*, after the legendary musician Jimi Hendrix. Dodero just happened to be listening to him at the time.

Discovering new species is just one way research promotes conservation in San Diego and beyond. Specimens, including cases of delicate blue Sonoran butterflies, provide insight into what life was like in the past, but they also act as a gauge for the current state of global ecosystems.

"We're losing species at an alarming rate, 100 to 1,000 times faster than normal rates of extinction," Ekdale says. "If we want to know what we're losing, we have to know what we have and where to prioritize spending our time and money and resources."

Assistant professor Kinsey Brock, who serves as curator of the reptiles and amphibians collection, is doing that in her own backyard. Over the summer, she jarred her first samples of non-native urban lizards in San Diego. By comparing these newly collected Italian wall lizard specimens to their ancestors back in Italy, she and her students hope to understand how organisms adapt to swift environmental change.

"Historically, we haven't sampled cities too often because we think of them as these unnatural places that are only for humans, but nothing could be more untrue," Brock says. "My goal is to start collecting extensively across California cities so we have historical records of urban biodiversity in the future."

Work like Brock's also calls attention to species that are threatened. Inside the museum's insects and arachnids collection are the few known samples of *Hypochilus bernardino*, a lampshade

spider, that was gathered by Hedin. With an abdomen the size of a pencil eraser and legs that stretch out the circumference of a half-dollar, this species has been found only in a single small creek drainage in California's San Bernardino Mountains.

"They prefer cool, shaded places, but the forest they live in is drying out and burning," Hedin says. "They have nowhere to go. That is the only place they live."

The lampshade spider isn't alone. The Guam rail, a small terrestrial bird, is now extinct in the wild. SDSU professor

Roger Carpenter studied the species in the '60s and brought several back to campus from Guam, long before the bird was endangered. While conservationists are now attempting to boost the population's numbers through captive breeding programs, the specimens remain as key witnesses to the effects that human and natural forces can have on entire species and their habitats.

"We have the time machine, the archive of biodiversity to inspire students," says Kevin Burns, the museum's birds curator. "If we're going to get past the biodiversity crisis we're in, we need that sort of education."

Using this time machine, researchers are sometimes able to bring the past back to life, so to speak. One "resurrected" species, found by professor emeritus and herbarium curator Mike Simpson, is *Cryptantha wigginsii*, or Wiggins's popcorn flower. After studying the taxonomic literature, Simpson realized this plant species, previously thought to have been collected only once in 1931, was actually present among the university's collection. After an in-depth investigation by colleagues at other California herbaria, Simpson realized that Wiggins's popcorn flower, although rare, was still living in parts of California and Baja California.

"We thought it had never been collected elsewhere or at any other time after that initial find in the '30s," Simpson says. "Since then, now that we have a search pattern for it in the field, we have found several other populations, and now we know the general habitat where it grows."

Having a suite of information available online was key to enabling this discovery, demonstrating just how vital digitization is to preservation. Nearly 100% of the university's herbarium is digitized and imaged on the Consortium of California Herbaria, thanks to an instrumental National Science Foundation grant spanning from 2018 to 2022. Now, researchers can better locate and study the habitats of endangered species and notice key patterns such as plants flowering earlier due to warming caused by climate change.

In addition to the herbarium, collection data of all the museum's specimens are in the process of being transcribed and will be available online. DNA sequence data may be linked to that collection information as well. This will allow people worldwide to explore the museum collections more easily than ever before.

"Collections are only great when more people have access to them," Burns says. "We're getting everything online now so that if someone wants to see a particular species or use data or get DNA, they know to come to us."

The Biodiversity Museum isn't available just to biologists: It's open to anyone with the curiosity to experience it. Individuals, small groups or even classes from local schools can arrange a visit by reaching out to Hedin at [mhedin@sdsu.edu](mailto:mhedin@sdsu.edu). And if asked, he just might have a story to share about one of his expeditions. ●



For decades, San Diego State University researchers have traveled to Utqiagvik, Alaska—occasionally packing their own portable toilet along with muck boots and bear spray—to document the dynamics of climate change in the frigid tundra. SDSU students, under the guidance of biology professor Donatella Zona and local Indigenous partners, spend months monitoring seasonal fluctuations in greenhouse gases, frozen soil depth and plant growth. Their work has shown that the Arctic releases large amounts of methane, partially explaining why the region is warming faster than any other place on Earth. Accessing new locations, like the tundra beyond traditional Arctic hunting routes, can provide insight into lingering questions about what can be done to protect ecosystems and people.

BY SARAH WHITE  
Photographs by Scott Hargrove



**From the helicopter,** Francia Tenorio (right and below, left), an SDSU ecology Ph.D. student, scans the horizon for migrating birds, polar bears, brown bears and caribou before the pilot safely lands in the open tundra, Tenorio's lab for the day.



**With only a few structures** taller than two stories in Utqiagvik, a 360-degree turn provides a mile-wide view of the area, including Point Barrow, aka Top of the World, the northernmost point of the U.S. The area is so remote that items, including groceries, appliances and cars, are delivered via barges and planes.



# AT THE TOP OF THE WORLD

As summer neared its end, a group of SDSU researchers traveled around Alaska to gather samples from areas so remote that few modern humans have set foot there. **This is their story.**





**Researchers use satellite imagery** and other sensor data to identify the most promising remote sites to gather information about prominent factors in global warming. Their selections require:

- 1) elevated mounds with both plant growth and unvegetated soil and
- 2) locations with streams from previously drained lakes to track the full spectrum of greenhouse gas emissions. These areas are reachable only by helicopter—and only when the weather cooperates.



**When ecology doctoral student** Macall Hock (above and below) arrived in Utqiagvik in June, sea ice still dotted the coastline. Since 2021, she has spent her summers living in “the Nest” research dormitories (top right) with intermittent internet, trekking out to the tundra almost every day to track seasonal changes in carbon emissions in streams. Enduring initial snowmelt, mosquito-infested heat waves and rainy Augusts, Hock frequently repaired and recalibrated her sensors, deploying them inside of a floating chamber—a metal mixing bowl taped to a pool noodle—on the stream surface.



“**Research in the Arctic isn’t glamorous, but studying climate change in Alaska, especially with a focus on local and Indigenous communities, has been so transformative for my work and can inform solutions for ecosystems and people facing the effects of warming everywhere.**”

—Jacqui Vogel, SDSU geography Ph.D. student



**Placing a chamber** that flows into a “Ghostbuster” gas analyzer, Tenorio measures differences in nitrous oxide emissions between barren and more vegetated patches of remote, thawed tundra. Back in the labs in Utqiagvik and San Diego, she and her peers will collaboratively analyze the role that the gases from these permafrost landforms play in the ever-changing Arctic climate.



**Above the Arctic Circle,** Utqiagvik (named for the Iñupiaq word for where snowy owls are hunted) is home to fewer than 5,000 people. Point Barrow is 9 sandy miles north of town and can be accessed only by foot, 4x4s or ATVs. Here, subsistence hunters pile bowhead whale carcasses to lure polar bears away from the populated areas. Whale bones often adorn the beaches and the city streets, and locals enjoy chewy bits of whale blubber and dark meat as frozen delicacies.





# whywegive



Catherine M. Stiefel ('92) and J. Keith Behner ('71)

## THE DONORS

SDSU Aztecs for Life and philanthropists **J. Keith Behner** ('71) and **Catherine M. Stiefel** ('92) focus their philanthropy on education, environmental sustainability and social justice.

## THE GIFTS

Named the **Behner Stiefel Center for Brazilian Studies** and the **J. Keith Behner and Catherine M. Stiefel Endowment** in SDSU's College of Arts and Letters; established the **Catherine M. Stiefel Scholarship** in the Charles W. Lamden School of Accountancy in the Fowler College of Business.

**J. KEITH BEHNER AND CATHERINE M. STIEFEL** are a couple with a global perspective. Throughout their lives, both have lived and traveled extensively outside the continental U.S.

Although Stiefel grew up mostly among the mountains and valleys of upstate New York, her father's business took the family abroad, where they lived for a time in Puerto Rico and London. She is conversational in Spanish and credits the international experience with broadening her worldview through exposure to

different cultures.

Similarly, Behner, a Southern California native, spent part of his childhood in Hawaii and most of his high school years in Rio de Janeiro. He served two deployments in Vietnam with the Navy Seabees in support of Marine Corps and Army combat operations.

Their similar backgrounds and shared interests led the couple to establish San Diego State University's Behner Stiefel Center for Brazilian Studies in the College of Arts and Letters in 2014. Their goal, according to Behner, was to create "the most comprehensive Brazilian studies program in the United States of America."

In a decade, the Behner Stiefel Center has become one of the premier centers for Brazilian studies among American colleges and universities. In fact, it was selected by the international Brazilian Studies Association to host its BRASA XVII 2024 Biennial Conference in April.

Coinciding with the conference, Erika Robb Larkins began her two-year term as president of BRASA. Larkins is an SDSU anthropology professor, endowed chair of the Behner Stiefel Center and the center's director.

With Behner and Stiefel's support, which includes a gift establishing its endowed chair, the center is realizing the potential the couple had envisioned.

In 2022, the couple made a gift to the center to support the study of climate change and sustainability in Brazil, South America's largest country. Its intent was to link SDSU faculty from multiple disciplines with scholars from Brazil to enhance sustainability research and provide resources for student research experiences.

With the rapid destruction of Brazil's Amazon rainforest, research opportunities abound and are becoming increasingly important.

"My focus from a philanthropic perspective is on the environment because of the loss of habitat and the loss of animal species, and just the loss of health of the planet, which is the loss

of human health," Stiefel says. "That's a worry about the future—and that's probably how I got started in philanthropy."

Behner and Stiefel say their philanthropic focus has narrowed through the years to the connections among education, environmental sustainability and social justice. "What we have found is these things are inextricably linked together: You can't separate one from the other, and they encompass so many

**"WITH THEIR EXTRAORDINARY GENEROSITY, KEITH AND CATHY ARE PROPELLING SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY TO NEW HEIGHTS OF EXCELLENCE. THEIR VISIONARY GIFTS DRIVE DISCOVERY AND ENRICH THE LIVES OF COUNTLESS STUDENTS, FACULTY AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS."**

—ADRIENNE VARGAS

*Vice President for University Relations and Development*

other things," Behner says, adding that sustainability is the main focus of the Behner Stiefel Center and an overarching priority at SDSU.

"The fact that San Diego State, the whole university, has come to focus so much on the issue of sustainability is really a great thing. Making people understand, through education, what the realities of things are and moving them to focus attention and directions will ameliorate some of these difficult and intractable problems that we have."

Behner and Stiefel view SDSU as a resource and an ally. They are discerning when deciding where and how their gifts should be allocated, which institutions and organizations will maximize the impact of a donation.

"We want them to be efficient," Stiefel says, "which means that we think SDSU handles our money well."

Stiefel holds a B.S. in accounting from the Fowler College of Business, where she established the Catherine

M. Stiefel Scholarship. She and Behner support Fowler Scholars, a program that develops ethical business leaders.

They've also worked to create a relationship between the Fowler Scholars program and the Barrio Logan College Institute. The BLCI helps prepare underserved students from elementary through high school to become the first in their families to earn college degrees.

The couple created the Stiefel Behner Charitable Fund at BLCI to help make students' higher education dreams become reality. Three former BLCI students have enjoyed recent success at SDSU, where two have already earned degrees, including one from the Fowler College of Business, and the third is a senior. Stiefel and Behner have known them since they were very young.

"It's absolutely splendid," Stiefel says of the students' success. "University leadership has just been enormously supportive of BLCI graduates, so it's been a productive and very gratifying relationship."

The students' success is tangible proof that the challenges and the problems can be met and solved.

"I can feel like I'm contributing," Stiefel says. "A frustration with giving is feeling like you're making a difference when the problems that you're trying to influence are huge. So I try to do things that make me feel like I am accomplishing something."

Behner adds: "These are very serious and troubled times, and it's difficult to keep your balance and your perspective, but that's what you do. You figure out where you can make the difference, and you do it. You try and change the things that can be changed, and you have to live with the ones you can't.

"When you get to be my age, you focus on your kids and your grandkids and on everybody's kids and grandkids. So we're using our resources in a way that we believe will help [their] future. That's what we're about." — *Tobin Vaughn*



# classnotes

## /Alumni Spotlight



The versatile **Emily Vizzo** ('06, teacher education) has been a journalist, a teacher and a poet. She can now add "published children's book author" to her C.V.

In 2023, Vizzo and co-author J. M. Farkas published "Starflower," a lyrical picture book biography detailing the tumultuous childhood and familial relations of renowned feminist poet and playwright Edna St. Vincent Millay. A graduate of SDSU's teaching credential program who taught middle school in Chula Vista for three years, Vizzo said she was inspired to tell a story that could serve as scaffolding for teachers using the text in their classes.

As a former education reporter—with bylines in the Los Angeles Times and The San Diego Union-Tribune—she chose to become a teacher as a means of deepening her understanding of systemic issues in schooling. "One thing that attracted us to the story was the challenge



of telling a children's story in an emotionally truthful way—one that didn't look away from the darkness but also didn't try to be overbearing about it," says Vizzo, who now teaches creative writing at the University of Denver. "We were really thinking about the audience of the adult and child reading the story together." —*Michael Klitzing*



**Jackie Reed** ('15, MBA) never envisioned becoming a CEO.

From humble beginnings, Reed was born in Hawaii and grew up in San Diego. After some time in Los Angeles for college, she decided it wasn't the right time to pursue higher education. She moved back to Hawaii with her family and began her journey working for T S Restaurants, a family-owned business with locations in Hawaii and California, including Duke's, Jake's and Sunnyside.

Starting as a hostess, Reed moved up quickly in the company. With the encouragement of mentors, she completed her bachelor's through the University of Phoenix and earned an MBA at San Diego State University. Her time at SDSU was fueled by her love of learning and the practical application of her work. After graduating with her MBA, she assumed the role of CEO with T S Restaurants, a position she's held since 2015.

Recently, Reed was elected as the 2024 president of Sports San Diego, the non-profit that operates the Holiday Bowl. The long-held college football game will return to San Diego in December, and Reed will play a crucial role in helping to boost the local economy when thousands of fans flock to Snapdragon Stadium. Her success stems from her passion for her work, urging students to find what they love and pursue it wholeheartedly. —*Gema Deleon*



While **Bruce Rogow** worked toward his bachelor's degree in business administration ('01), he had a couple of side projects.

One was founding the Suntrækker Solar Car Project in 1990. He and his team designed and built a solar-powered car and eventually raced it in the 1993 World Solar Challenge in Australia—a journey that was featured 30 years ago in SDSU Magazine. Rogow led another team in building a second car a few years later.



In 1995, Rogow joined KPBS as an assistant chief engineer for the radio station, ultimately becoming the chief technology officer. Now, after three decades at the organization, Rogow is retiring in June from a career full of learning.

"I didn't get here all by myself," says Rogow, who earned a master's in business administration and management in 2009 and has participated in the SDSU Mentor Program. "I had all kinds of help, and San Diego State University was a big part of that. The two degrees I earned, sitting in those wooden desks and buying all those books, were a significant part of my experience. What I learned at SDSU enabled me to achieve most of what I have in life."

—*Paulina Castellano Wade*

### 1960s

'60 **Victor Bianchini** (B.A., political science) won gold in the 80s division saber competition as the oldest competitor in the USA Fencing North American Cup in January.

### 1970s

'73 **Curtis Brown** (B.A., political science) is the author of the memoir "Confessions of a Wall Street Warrior: My Revelations and Reflections," published in December. Brown describes it as an African American's journey to the boardroom of Merrill Lynch.

'73 **Bruce Wood** (B.A., journalism) was named Rotarian of the Year by the Rotary Club of Lake Houston Area in 2023. The honor recognizes his volunteer work with the club.

'77 **Georgianne Irvine** (B.A., journalism) serves as the director of publishing at the San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance and just celebrated 46 years with the organization. She also writes its nonfiction Hope & Inspiration children's books. Her latest works, "Teaching Tornero: The True Story of a Sloth Superstar," won the 2024 Gold Benjamin Franklin Award for Best Nonfiction Children's Book, and "Amazing Omeo: A Baby Koala's True Story of Survival" won silver in the same category.

'77 **Charles Myers** (B.A., journalism) is retiring after a nearly 40-year career in higher education and sales management. As a former sports editor at The Daily Aztec, Myers is writing a memoir titled, "A Tip of the Hat: Fathers to Sons and Back," a collection of several dozen stories about father-son relationships.

### 1980s

'82 **Mark Hamilton** (B.A., M.A. '90, English and comparative literature) is the author of "Lake, River, Mountain," published in January.

'85 **D. Wilson Ochoa** (B.A., music and dance) celebrates 10 years as the principal music librarian with the Boston Symphony. In addition, the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra performed Ochoa's arrangement "Ariadne auf Naxos Symphony-Suite" in April in Houston. Two more of his arrangements were accepted for publication this year: orchestration versions of Aaron Copland's "Duo" and Ronald Lo Presti's "Elegy for a Young American."

'85 **Kenneth Sherman** (B.S., electrical engineering) has joined J. J. Keller & Associates, Inc. as vice president of software engineering for its Technology Solutions division. Sherman will oversee a team of more than 130 development and quality assurance professionals in the technical design and development of J. J. Keller's software solutions and connected devices line.

### 1990s

'93 **Katherine Zacharias** (B.A., international business) received the 2023 Community Enrichment Award for her volunteer work with the Rotary Club, combating human trafficking in San Diego. She's also been nominated for the Pioneer Award in the finance category.

'92 **Kate Walker** (B.A., speech communication and political science) is the author of "A Candid Conversation: Lessons in Life, Love, and Leadership," released in October.

'94 **Daniel Goldstone** (B.A., political science) assumed the newly created role of chief people officer at Riboli Family Wines on the Central Coast last year.

'94 **John Peters II** (B.A., international business) is the author of "From Sarria to Santiago: A 10-Day Camino with Family and Friends," chronicling his journey walking 115 kilometers across Spain with his family.

'95 **Binh Tran** (M.S., mechanical engineering) has been appointed the new chief academic officer at Marian University in Indianapolis. Tran previously served as the founding dean of the university's School of Engineering.

'98 **William Nolde** (M.S., accounting) was promoted to chief accounting and tax officer at DraftKings in 2023.

### 2000s

'00 **Naomi Shibles** (B.A., psychology) debuted "Counterblow Clemency," a young adult science fiction novel published in January.

'09 **Serena Pariser** (M.A., learning design and technology) released the second edition of "Real Talk About Classroom Management." This book is used in university classrooms to guide aspiring teachers on how they can feel confident and make students feel valued.

### 2010s

'10 **Emily Cunningham** (B.A., journalism) was promoted to partner at Hawkins Parnell & Young in January. Cunningham, who obtained her law degree from California Western School of Law, was recognized for her expertise in commercial litigation in the 2024 edition of The Best Lawyers in America.

'10 **Brittany Dandridge** (B.A., sociology) has emerged as a leading figure at Ready Real Estate, LLC, a brokerage based in Dallas-Fort Worth, with more than \$15 million in transactions in 2023.

'10 **Ruben Velazquez** (B.A., journalism) started a position in private practice at the California Integrative Counseling Center.

'16 **Zachary Brody** (B.S., computer engineering) died in April; he was 31. Brody had worked at CourseKey, Smashtech and Classy, which was acquired by GoFundMe.

Submit Class Notes through SDSU Alumni's online form at [sdsu.edu/classnotes](https://sdsu.edu/classnotes) or scan the code.



### SDSU ALUMNI

2024–25 Alumni Board of Advisers

#### EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

President: **Denise Zellmann** ('89, '04)  
 President-Elect: **Brianna Bennett** ('10)  
 The Campanile Foundation Alumni Representative: **Chiloh Baty** ('08)  
 Liaison to Past Presidents: **Sam Brown** ('96)  
 Vice Presidents of Alumni Engagement Metrics: **Dylan Aste** ('06) and **Kevin Decker** ('00, '13)  
 Vice Presidents of Revenue: **Chanelle McNutt** ('13, '17) and **Martin Bridges** ('87)  
 Vice Presidents of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging: **Brandon Kyle** ('11) and **Yolanda Apalategui Lugo** ('05, '15)  
 Vice Presidents of Finance: **Mark Emch** ('84) and **Scott Robert** ('99)  
 Vice President of Special Projects: **Victor Alfredo Lopez** ('20)  
 Administrator: **Caitlyn Smiley** ('19)

#### OTHER ELECTED ADVISERS:

**Brian Avera** ('12, '15), **David Baron** ('87), **Risa Baron** ('91), **Whitney Bond**, **Greg Chew** ('03), **Dan Denham** ('99, '02), **Dirk Epperson** ('06), **Carey Fernandes** ('99), **Richard Gonzalez** ('97), **Keith Harris** ('91), **Maria V. Kachadoorian** ('87), **Tom Karlo** ('75), **Kelli Kedis Ogborn** ('07), **Martin Lang** ('97, '09), **Brian Moffitt** ('10), **Cesar Padilla** ('95), **Corey Polant** ('15, '20), **Gabriella Penaloza** ('04), **Humberto Peraza** ('97, '16), **Justin Quis** ('97), **Ashley Rodriguez Thompson** ('11), **Marlene Ruiz** ('75), **Scott Summerfield** ('80), **JR Tolver** ('02), **Alberto Velasquez** ('07), **Krystin West** ('06), **Gerry Widmer** ('90)

#### PAST PRESIDENTS:

First President: 1931  
**Vesta Muehleisen** (1907)  
 Visit [sdsualumni.org/pastpresidents](https://sdsualumni.org/pastpresidents) for a full list.

#### NONELECTED ADVISERS:

President: **Adela de la Torre**  
 Vice President, University Relations and Development: **Adrienne Vargas**  
 Senate Chair: **Nola Butler-Byrd**  
 Associated Students President: **Katarina "Kat" Hernandez**

#### SDSU ALUMNI STAFF

Executive Director: **Stephanie Dathe** ('95)  
 Director, Alumni and Community Engagement: **Malerie McNeill** ('03, '07)  
 Director, Marketing: **Gema Deleon** ('11)  
 Associate Director, Parma Payne Goodall Alumni Center: **Marian Lim** ('15)  
 Assistant Director, Membership & Alumni Support: **Blaire Chapman**  
 Alumni Relations Specialist: **Jan Ranallo**  
 Alumni Events Specialist: **Caitlyn Smiley** ('19)  
 Communications Specialist: **Taylor Harris** ('23)  
 Data Control Technician: **Robin Breen Rust**  
 Parma Payne Goodall Alumni Center Events Coordinator: **Cierra Ross** ('23)  
 Parma Payne Goodall Alumni Center Events Coordinator: **Lily Martinez**



# THE CAMPANILE FOUNDATION TURNS

# 25

In 1999, influential philanthropists, including alumni and community leaders, gathered around a table for the foundation's first board meeting—and what they built is thriving and growing today.

BY TOBIN VAUGHN

In 1998, San Diego State University's then vice president of University Relations and Advancement, Theresa Mendoza, was tasked with assembling a philanthropic board for SDSU.

With state funding shrinking and the need for resources growing, Mendoza's job was to persuade audiences both internal and external that SDSU was worthy of their support. She explained to potential board members that a stronger SDSU could strengthen San Diego.

"I had to build a case for people to invest in the good work that the university does and the economic benefit that this community receives from it," Mendoza said, intentionally invoking banking terminology. "It's an investment thing. It's not the tin cup thing anymore."

Now The Campanile Foundation is celebrating a quarter century of investing in SDSU and all it has to offer. Here's a look at some of the many milestones from the people who helped make it a reality.

## 1999 MILESTONE

### The First Board Meeting

The inaugural Campanile Foundation board of directors first met Nov. 11, 1999, in a KPBS studio on the SDSU campus to record the event for posterity. Ron Fowler ('05, LHD), the board's founding chair, called the meeting to order.

Fowler remembers taking in the sight of a veritable who's who of San Diego philanthropy. "I'm sitting there looking around the room, and these are all SDSU and community icons," Fowler said. "It was a little bit intimidating."

In the 1998–99 fiscal year, SDSU's endowment stood at \$30 million. TCF board members were counted on to supply financial support, grow the university's endowment, fund student scholarships and new facilities, and endow professorships and academic chairs.

"The Campanile Foundation's biggest role is to provide money that allows SDSU to do things that they couldn't otherwise do," Fowler said. "And if we're not going to invest in ourselves, then who's going to invest in us?"



**Back row** (from left): Ron Fowler, Jeff Glazer, Jack Goodall, John Moores, Leon Parma, Bob Payne, Ralph Rubio and Celinda Vasquez; **front row** (from left): Malin Burnham, Lilly Cheng, Theresa Mendoza, Betty Hubbard, Bernard Lipinsky and Maurice Kaplan; **front:** late SDSU President Stephen L. Weber

## IN MEMORIAM

The Campanile Foundation Board at San Diego State University recently experienced the profound loss of two esteemed members. Their dedication, wisdom and unwavering support of the foundation's vision were invaluable to the organization.

"Peter Shaw [left] and Fred Pierce ['84, '88] were more than just board members; they were passionate advocates for The Campanile Foundation and its role in the university's history and future. Their contributions will be deeply missed, and their legacy will continue to inspire us as we strive to preserve and promote the foundation's significance," said Adrienne Vargas, president and CEO of The Campanile Foundation.



The Campaign for SDSU kickoff event



## 2007 MILESTONE

### Creation of the Campaign for SDSU

The university officially launched The Campaign for SDSU in July of 2007 with a goal to raise \$500 million to benefit students, faculty and staff. The initial goal was soon eclipsed and then increased to \$750 million in 2014.

In February 2014, the university received what was then the largest gift in its history: a \$20 million donation from Conrad Prebys, a San Diego philanthropist. At a March 7 dedication ceremony of that year, the university's newly opened student union was named the Conrad Prebys Aztec Student Union.

On Oct. 26, 2016, SDSU announced another groundbreaking gift: a \$25 million endowment and challenge pledge from Fowler and his wife, Alexis Fowler ('93). In gratitude, university leaders renamed the College of Business Administration the Fowler College of Business, marking the first, and so far only, time in SDSU's history that a college has been named.

"Ron has always believed in the potential greatness of SDSU," said former TCF President Mary Ruth Carleton, who helped orchestrate the campaign as SDSU's vice president of URAD, at the 2016 naming ceremony. "This gift is his and Alexis' way to inspire and encourage the university and our donors to believe and to build a top-ranked business school and university."

The Fowlers' gift pushed the campaign past its \$750 million goal. At its end in 2017, SDSU had received 138 gifts of \$1 million or more and raised more than \$815 million.

## 2016 MILESTONE

### Vision for SDSU Mission Valley

Current chair Steve Doyle ('80, '21) joined the board in 2016 just as SDSU alumni and supporters of the university were forming the Friends of SDSU, an independent advocacy group promoting passage of Measure G, the ballot initiative authorizing the city of San Diego to sell its Mission Valley stadium property to SDSU for campus expansion. It passed in November 2018 and gave SDSU the right to negotiate with the city to purchase the Mission Valley property, which now includes Snapdragon Stadium, a river park and the forthcoming innovation district, among other developments.

Doyle, like many other TCF board members, was a contributor to the Stadium Excellence Fund, created to help pay for Snapdragon Stadium's construction. He points out that Measure G's passage grew SDSU's physical size by 50% and increased the potential for student population growth by 33%.

"We are now able to increase the value of our students' education, the value of research for our faculty, and from that perspective alone, I think SDSU Mission Valley is one of the biggest, if not the biggest, changes at San Diego State in its history," Doyle said.

## 2024 MILESTONE

### Endowment Growth and Sustainability

Both The Campanile Foundation and SDSU have come a long way in 25 years. The university's endowment that stood at \$30 million when the foundation was formed has now grown to nearly \$460 million.

According to SDSU Vice President of University Relations and Development Adrienne Vargas, who is TCF president and CEO, fundraising over the 25-year time period has reached \$1.8 billion. Leading by example, TCF board members have personally contributed \$192 million to SDSU since the board was founded.

**"IT TOOK A LOT OF WORK FROM A LOT OF PEOPLE, BUT IT'S A SUCCESS THAT'S BEEN A DIFFERENCE-MAKER FOR THE UNIVERSITY."**

—Ron Fowler, Campanile Foundation Board of Directors founding chair, on the creation of the foundation



"The Campanile Foundation board has been a big part of our success," Vargas said, "and what the board has succeeded in doing is showing everyone that they're on our team and they have a role to play."

For founding TCF chair Fowler, it was a role he enjoyed playing.

"I think this fundraising tied to The Campanile Foundation has really created a foundation for the university that they can grow from in the future," Fowler said. "A lot of people in the first years were seriously questioning what we were doing and [if] we were ever going to get it done. I think anybody who was there Day One—and unfortunately we've lost some folks who were integral in getting this done—I think if they could look down on us and give us their take, it would be, 'Yeah, we did it.'" ●





On left: When quarterback Danny O'Neil and the Aztecs face Oregon State in 2026, it will be a Pac-12 Conference game.



## THIS IS 'CHECKMATE'

For many Aztec fans like Akbar Gbajabiamila ('01), also a former standout linebacker, SDSU's move to the Pac-12 Conference was a long time coming—and a big moment of celebration. It will bring more opportunities for national recognition and success for athletics, students and the university.

By Wayne Drehs

**T**O LABEL FORMER SAN DIEGO State University football star Akbar Gbajabiamila an Aztec superfan grossly undersells his fanaticism for his alma mater. Host of "The Talk CBS," "Good Morning Football" and "American Ninja Warrior," the 2001 graduate works SDSU into most any conversation he can. He beams over the academic and athletic growth and boasts that the opportunities SDSU provides far outweigh those of its in-state rivals. So you can imagine the jolt of excitement that raced through Gbajabiamila early on the morning of Sept. 12, when his "Good Morning Football" colleague Sherree Burruss

leaned over on set at the NFL Network studio with breaking news: SDSU was joining the Pac-12 Conference. Gbajabiamila feverishly pulled out his phone and, for the first time, saw the unforgettable image: the familiar logo of the Pac-12 next to that of his beloved university.

"We've always been a school that people overlooked, like some sort of underdog. That always irritated me," he says. "To me, this validates who we are and what we've done. This legitimizes San Diego State as a West Coast force."

The Aztecs will officially become a part of the Pac-12 in July 2026. They and fellow Mountain West Conference schools Boise State, Colorado State

and Fresno State will join Oregon State and Washington State. The conference must have eight football-playing schools at minimum to maintain its Football Bowl Subdivision status and qualify for the College Football Playoff.

SDSU President Adela de la Torre and JD Wicker, SDSU director of athletics, both say this is the perfect time for SDSU to make the move.

"Obviously we recognize that it's not the same Pac-12, but having that brand was something that I preached from day one," Wicker says. "It's a recognizable, 108-year-old brand. You say 'Pac-12' in the Midwest or on the East Coast and people know what you're talking about. That carries a ton of weight."

It was no secret that the Pac-12 had long been the sought-after destination for SDSU athletics and the university itself. Over the years, SDSU put forth a detailed strategic plan to reduce student achievement gaps and attain the Carnegie Foundation's highly competitive "R1" research status, built Snapdragon Stadium, and invested in the growth of its academic and athletic programs. In doing so, SDSU built an athletic and academic powerhouse that has won the most Mountain West Conference championships each of the last three years, had the highest combined football and men's basketball winning percentage (.727) in the country since the fall of 2010, and received nearly \$230 million in nationally competitive grants and awards for research, scholarship and creative activities. It all adds up to a university that saw a record 119,000 students apply during the most recent application window. "The Stanford of the South," Gbajabiamila calls it.

Stacey Nuvean Deniz understands

what the Pac-12 name means as much as anyone. The SDSU head softball coach and reigning Mountain West Coach of the Year won a national championship as a catcher for UCLA in 1999. It was her dream to coach in the Pac-12. To be able to do it at the school she has loved for 16 years without having to uproot her life is "a dream come true. I guess I can have all the things," she says with a laugh.

The day after the Pac-12 announcement, Nuvean Deniz and her staff hosted softball recruits for previously scheduled visits. Almost immediately she saw the impact of the Pac-12 news.

"They're excited," she says. "To bring that to them is phenomenal. There's something special about being part of the Pac. There's a power it carries, especially with athletes on the West Coast."

While much of the buzz is around Aztec athletics, just as critical are the opportunities the new Pac-12 will bring to SDSU as a whole. Sonja Pruitt-Lord, SDSU's interim vice provost, believes

the move will lead to a boost in student excitement and engagement, research funding, community partnerships, and student and faculty recruiting.

"We have been working so hard the last 18 to 20 years to get San Diego State to a place its students and faculty and staff and alumni deserve," says Pruitt-Lord, who joined the SDSU faculty in 2006. "We know how great we are and what we're now offering, but being a part of the Pac-12 will give us the opportunity to market and tell our story on a national level."

During his playing days, Gbajabiamila remembers the vision of former Aztec football coach Ted Tollner, who scheduled opponents like USC, UCLA and Ohio State in an effort to build a belief that SDSU could be a big program.

"And now, when you think about all these chess pieces that were moved around to bring us to this moment, to even make the Pac-12 a possibility?" Gbajabiamila says, "I think you have to say 'checkmate.'" ●



Infielder Lala Macario, now a senior, looks for a double play against Boise State, another newcomer to the Pac-12.



**Address Corrections:**

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**Be there on Sat., Oct. 26**  
when Aztec football takes on  
the Washington State Cougars  
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