

# USF

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA  
MAGAZINE

The OFFICIAL MAGAZINE of the  
USF ALUMNI ASSOCIATION  
WINTER 2023



The HOT  
**BAND**  
turns

# 25

## INSIDE

- AI: Super power or super threat?
- Life under the Golden Arches



# *Congratulations to the Fast 56!*

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# USF

UNIVERSITY OF  
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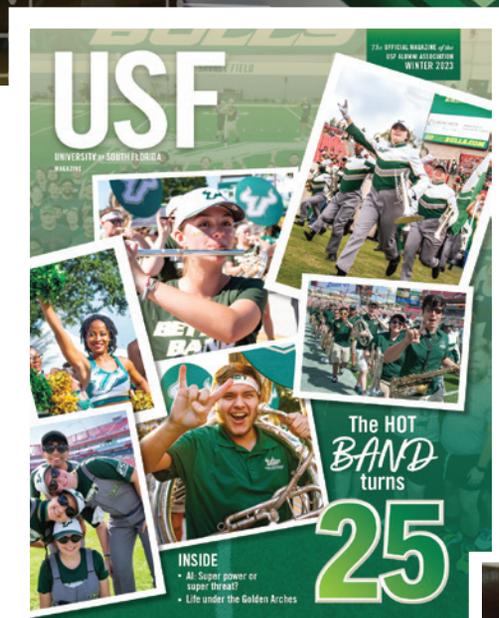
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Illustration: JOHN PELEROSI / USF Advancement



#### ABOUT THE COVER:

Clockwise from top right: 2018 charge into RayJay (photo: SoFloBulls-Strictly South Florida Athletics); Gaetano D'Anna, '15, alumni reunion 2016; Kyle Fernandez; from top — Jonathan Galivanes, Emily Morris, Sarah Dematos, Emily Towner; Raegan McNealy; Rachel Paul

COVER DESIGN: Anne Scott, University Communications



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# From the President



## Dear alumni, friends and supporters of USF

THE FALL SEMESTER HAS BEEN FILLED with incredible accomplishments that continue to fuel our university's remarkable trajectory.

Among the highlights are USF's highest ranking ever — No. 89 — among all universities public and private, and our fifth consecutive year ranked inside the top 50 among public universities, in U.S. News & World Report's Best Colleges rankings. This is a point of pride for us because over the past decade, USF has risen an impressive 43 spots among public universities and 72 spots among all universities. As you will see on page 5, USF also was recognized as the “best value” among all public universities in Florida, and the USF Health Morsani College of Medicine is the nation's fastest-rising medical school for medical research and primary care. What sets this achievement apart is that no other medical school in the nation has experienced such remarkable improvements in these two critical rankings simultaneously.

USF has come a long way in a short period of time. Along with USF's recent invitation to join the Association of American Universities, our rise in the rankings will help us attract more bright minds — both students and scholars — to our institution. It will spark more groundbreaking research by our faculty, and bring more entrepreneurs and promising companies to our region because they will want to access the strong talent available through our university.

Also this fall, we were thrilled to announce two significant gifts from Tampa General Hospital, which has been a valued partner of USF for more than 50 years. A \$25 million gift will name the Center for Athletic Excellence, an operations facility that will be included as part of USF's new on-campus stadium project. The gift — the largest ever to USF Athletics — will also name the university's athletics district. We are also extremely grateful for TGH's commitment of \$4.4 million to support the planning, construction and implementation of the Tampa General Hospital USF Health College of Nursing Simulation Lab. You will find more details about these gifts on page 25.

Speaking of the stadium, we were very pleased to receive the Florida Board of Governors' approval of our financing plan, which signals state support for this transformational facility.

As I have said many times, the on-campus stadium will greatly enhance the USF student experience and provide a compelling reason for our alumni, Bulls fans and community members to visit our Tampa campus and come together in support of our university. It also will help grow the national visibility of our athletics program, boosting the reputation of USF's brand along with it.

Like many of you, I am a big fan of USF's marching band, the Herd of Thunder. We have been enjoying the HOT band's lively performances at Bulls' home football games for 25 years, and its members are in many ensembles that perform at various other events on- and off-campus. But, as you will learn in the story on page 34, that's just the public face of the band. During the week, these incredibly dedicated students juggle rehearsals, classes, part-time jobs and other responsibilities. Yet, despite the demanding schedule, the popularity of the HOT band among students has only continued to grow. The inaugural band had 160 members; today, there are more than 350.

Also in this issue are stories on generative artificial intelligence, which has taken the world by storm in the little more than a year since it became available to the public. Generative AI — ChatGPT and Bing Chat are among the best-known of these tools — presents many opportunities and challenges in higher education and throughout society. On the positive side, it can help us become more efficient and innovative. At the same time, generative AI poses a variety of risks, including biased responses and inaccurate information, and it could impact data privacy and security. At USF, we want to ensure we are being as thoughtful as possible about this amazing technology, and I appointed a Generative AI Strategic Planning Group, composed of faculty, staff and administrators, to develop guidelines for its use in teaching and learning, as well as in our operations, such as in human resources, admissions, and business and finance. These stories begin on page 26.

I was delighted to see so many of you during our Homecoming celebration in October. One of the highlights of the week was the presentation of the 47th annual USF Alumni Awards. This year's recipients include three Distinguished Alumni with extraordinary professional accomplishments, and one graduate and one non-alum who have made significant contributions to USF and the Tampa Bay area. Congratulations to Distinguished Alumni J. Michelle Childs, Nicholas B. “Nick” Cox and Steve Presley; Stephen Fessler, recipient of the Donald A. Gifford Service Award; and Paulette C. Walker, recipient of the Class of '56 Award. You can read about these very deserving individuals on page 44.

Another of our wonderful fall traditions is the presentation of the USF Fast 56 Awards. The 11th annual ceremony celebrated the 56 fastest-growing businesses owned or led by alumni, and the recipients come from all areas of the university. Learn more about these innovators and their businesses on page 54.

Thanks to your support of our students and our university, this has been an extraordinary year for USF. I can't wait to see what 2024 will bring! I wish you all a wonderful holiday season and a new year filled with peace and good health.

**RHEA F. LAW, '77**  
**LIFE MEMBER #976**  
**PRESIDENT**

# Green and Gold Points of PRIDE

• NEW HONORS •



Photo: PATRICK JOSEPH KRUG

## Naming honor

*Cyerce piercei*, a recently discovered sea slug species, was named after **Sidney “Skip” Pierce**, emeritus professor of integrative biology.

## 4 inducted into the Academy of Science, Engineering and Medicine of Florida

- **Norma Alcantar**, professor and associate dean, College of Engineering
- **Robert H. Bishop**, distinguished university professor and dean, College of Engineering
- **Subhra Mohapatra**, professor, USF Health Morsani College of Medicine; research career scientist, James A. Haley Veterans’ Hospital
- **Robert Weisberg**, distinguished university professor emeritus, College of Marine Science

• NEW RANKINGS •

## No. 89

Among **all universities public or private**, USF’s highest-ever overall position

— *U.S. News & World Report*

## No. 45

Among U.S. public universities; fifth consecutive year in the top 50

— *U.S. News & World Report*

## No. 1

In Florida for social mobility and No. 16 nationally

— *U.S. News & World Report*

## No. 15

Among U.S. public research universities for new U.S. patents; No. 36 among universities worldwide

— *National Academy of Inventors*

## Fastest rising

The USF Health Morsani College of Medicine is the nation’s fastest rising for medical research (No. 50) and primary care (No. 46).

— *U.S. News & World Report*

## “Best value”

Among all public universities in Florida

— *U.S. News & World Report*

## 31

Graduate programs ranked in the top 100

— *U.S. News & World Report*

## 10

Graduate programs ranked in the top 50 among all public and private institutions, including industrial and organizational psychology (No. 3) and public health (No. 22).

— *U.S. News & World Report*

USF magazine is published three times a year by USF Advancement and USF Communications & Marketing for alumni, friends and members of the USF community.

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# Capital idea!

In the largest ever non-athletics USF gathering outside of Florida, Bulls and university friends met on a Washington, D.C., rooftop for a social evening with President Rhea Law and other USF leaders.

About 200 enthusiastic alumni and supporters heard updates on USF's recent achievements — chief among them, membership in the Association of American Universities and top 50 for the fifth consecutive year in U.S. News & World Report's public university rankings. They also had the opportunity to share their ideas about USF's future.

"It was wonderful to see so many proud alumni and friends of USF come together in support of our university," Law says.

The October cocktail reception was held at 101 Constitution Roof Terrace.



# First Look



# Painting the town

Graphic design students light up the street near USF St. Petersburg's University Student Center with "Fluid Structures" for the October SHINE St. Petersburg Mural Festival.

The ninth annual event brought together artists who turned 17 buildings and streets into canvases to showcase the power of art in revitalizing public spaces and getting people talking. USF St. Petersburg has been a festival site for three years.

USF Graphic Arts visiting faculty member Jay Giroux and 10 students created "Fluid Structures," which melded geometric figures with an imaginative marine ecosystem setting. The project was sponsored by Rebecca Ramsey, MA '00, and David Ramsey.

Hosted by the St. Petersburg Arts Alliance, SHINE is a weeklong event that draws thousands of art lovers to the city.

# First Look



# University Community

## FOUNDER HONORED

### Building renamed for college's revered founding father, Sam Bell

THE NATIONALLY TOP-RANKED COLLEGE OF PUBLIC HEALTH is now housed in the Samuel P. Bell, III Building, a tribute to the man who created the college in 1984 and enthusiastically supported it for nearly 40 years.

Bell, who died March 14, was also a longtime champion of USF and Florida residents.

"There would be no College of Public Health, no building to name, without a Sam Bell," Donna J. Petersen, USF Health senior associate vice president, said at the Oct. 10 dedication. "He was a huge presence in this building. Students benefitted from his generosity in the scholarships he supported and from his wisdom when he guest-lectured in the classroom.

"We know and love Sam inside the college. Naming the building proclaims to the outside world how much Sam meant to us."

As a state House representative from Volusia County from 1974 to 1988, Bell identified the nation's growing need for public health professionals. He sponsored legislation to create the college at USF due to its urban setting and medical school.

"He would have been humbled and honored knowing his legacy will live on through his beloved college because of the students, faculty and patients he cared about so deeply," said his wife of 34 years, former USF President Betty Castor.

As a lawmaker, Bell spearheaded numerous groundbreaking, health-oriented initiatives, including laying the foundation for Florida Healthy Kids, a government-subsidized insurance plan that became the model for the national Children's Health Insurance Program. In conjunction with the tribute, Florida Healthy Kids gave \$100,000 to establish an endowed fund for scholarships benefiting College of Public Health graduate students.

Bell's contributions were felt throughout USF. He served on the advisory boards for WUSF Public Media and the Center for Strategic and Diplomatic Studies, the USF Foundation Board of Directors, and along with Castor, endowed scholarships for USF's College of Public Health, School of Music and women's athletics.

## ALUMNI

### This singer is rocking her second calling

NONE OF THE CAREFREE CONCERTGOERS in St. Petersburg a decade ago could have predicted that the lead singer on stage would be a force for battling human trafficking.

But that's what Mikayla Simeral has become.

Simeral had a full-time music career, singing and playing tenor saxophone. As a member of the rock band Anchor Atlantic, she joined Panic! at the Disco at the 2011 97X Backyard Barbeque in St. Petersburg and Avril Lavigne at the event in 2014. She had several on-camera auditions for NBC's "The Voice."

She found her second calling during a mission trip to Berlin, Germany, when she partnered with a nonprofit working with young sex trafficking victims. Their stories, the suffering they endured and the ensuing damage moved her. She loved her music career, but realized she could have a bigger impact.



**Now I have a bigger reason to sing and write music. It's for these kids I work with.**

— Mikayla Simeral

"I took it as a sign that I needed to stop chasing glory for myself and figure out how I could help others beyond my music," she says.

A 2011 USF music education graduate, Simeral also has two advanced music degrees from Liberty University. This year, she added a USF master's in social work to her resumé. She's a manager at the nonprofit Shared Hope International, where she educates people about the impact of sex trafficking and how to prevent it.

And, yes, she's still on stage, still entertaining.

"I'll never stop singing," she says.

Human trafficking affects 27.6 million people in the United States each year, according to the U.S. Department of State. Traffickers exploit people of all ages, backgrounds and nationalities through force, fraud or coercion for labor or commercial sex acts.

"I've talked to a lot of parents who say, 'Oh, I tell my children to stay away from white vans,'" Simeral says.

"That's the 1990s version of it. The white vans now exist on Instagram. The white vans now exist on Snapchat. Kids



From left: President Rhea Law, former President Betty Castor, Life Member, and College of Public Health Dean Donna Petersen admire the newly renamed college building.

JOHN TIPTON / USF Advancement



Left: In her role at Shared Hope International, Simeral develops training programs to raise awareness about sex trafficking and prevention measures.



Left: In her first career, Simeral performs as a singer and saxophonist with the rock band Anchor Atlantic.



Right: Simeral, who graduated with a Master of Social Work in 2023, says the online program's flexibility allowed her to continue to work and care for her family.

and predators are living online. We must teach parents how to keep their kids safe without taking the phone away because it's not an option."

Simeral realized that her music degrees limited her professional growth.

"It was pretty evident what I needed to do."

USF's fully online master's program stood out. Simeral liked the curricula, interactive online activities and the high-quality production created by the School of Social Work in partnership with learning designers from USF Innovative Education.

The program also offered the flexibility she needed to balance her responsibilities, which had grown to include

a new full-time job and motherhood. She started the program in 2021 during the pandemic and moved to San Diego midway through it. She balanced work with helping teenaged trafficking survivors and singing on weekends.

"I couldn't slow down my life," she says.

Today, Simeral is a frequent speaker and trains social workers on recognizing signs of human trafficking and working with vulnerable youth.

"I'm still a performer and a singer," she says. "Now I have a bigger reason to sing and write music. It's for these kids I work with. It's for these families I'm trying to help through the darkest moments of their lives."

- LORIE BRIGGS '88 and MA '13 / Innovative Education

# University Community



**Above: Project participants Mary Maisel and Sarah Hassam carefully dig out pieces of a headstone in the Mount Carmel Cemetery in what was once New Ehren in Pasco County.**

## COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCES

### Team works to preserve historic Black cemetery and share its stories

IN THE MID-19TH CENTURY, Black settlers, including many formerly enslaved people, moved to Pasco County and established a thriving community just north of Land O' Lakes.

They built the Mount Carmel African Methodist Episcopal Church, a cemetery and a school on the south side of the Orange Belt Railroad tracks, dubbed New Ehren, according to historians' accounts. Whites lived on the north side of the tracks — Old Ehren. Many of New Ehren's residents worked at the Ehren Pine Co. Sawmill, where they earned \$1 a day.

A fire destroyed the mill and surrounding buildings in 1920, and Ehren eventually all but disappeared.

But the Mount Carmel Cemetery remains. It is the final resting place of 14-year-old Edward "Eddie" Lewis, son of Robert and Jane, who buried him in 1906, and T. and M. Horton's baby daughter — born, lost, or both, two days before Christmas 1903.

A team led by Antoinette Jackson, anthropology chair for the College of Arts and Sciences and director of USF's Black Cemetery Network, aims to preserve those and the other graves in the one-acre plot.

"The goal of the Black Cemetery Network is to showcase and put forward the history and more human aspects of the stories associated with these often erased and marginalized Black cemeteries," Jackson says.

It's part of a nationwide effort to reclaim a vital part of American history. In the segregated South, Black cemeteries didn't receive the same legal protections and resources as those for whites and, as a result, many were neglected or paved over, often erasing individual and community his-

tories. In December 2022, the federal government signed into law the African American Burial Grounds Preservation Act, authorizing the National Park Service to establish a \$3 million annual grant program to aid in preserving those sacred sites.

Jackson coordinated with the college's director of the Institute for Digital Exploration, history professor Davide Tanasi, on the project which also includes archaeology students Jonathan Rodriguez, '19 and MA '21; Mary Maisel, MA '23; and Kerri Knigge Klein, '14 and MA '18.

In April, they spent two days at the cemetery, joined by members of the Black Cemetery Network and USF's Living Heritage Institute, also directed by Jackson. They cleared away brush and cleaned the 13 or so tombstones — most

of which are in pieces. Many of the graves originally had wooden markers, which have long since returned to dust.

Using a variety of 3D digital imaging techniques, including terrestrial laser scanning, structured light 3D scanning and digital photogrammetry, the team went to work preserving the cemetery, Tanasi says.

In some cases, they reached deep into their technological arsenal. One tombstone's inscriptions had been almost completely erased by time.

"We used a special photographic and visualization technique, Reflectance Transformation Imaging, to digitally enhance readability and obtain more information," Tanasi says.

The group also worked with Pasco County government officials to protect and care for the cemetery.

Next, says Jackson, they'll host workshops to share what they've learned and show other groups how to preserve Black burial grounds through digital imaging. They'll also continue learning more about the people and stories buried at Mount Carmel.

"The Black Cemetery Network is facilitating projects and partnerships like these in order to make Black cemeteries and their histories part of the public record and available for all of us to learn from," Jackson says. "Digital preservation is another way of telling, or adding to, the story."

- ANNA MAYOR, '09 and MA '12 / College of Arts and Sciences

**Below left: The gravestone of Eddie Lewis is just one of about 13 remaining in the cemetery.**

**Below right: A team led by Department of Anthropology Chair Antoinette Jackson spent two days painstakingly cleaning and documenting graves in the cemetery.**



**The goal of the Black Cemetery Network is to showcase and put forward the history and more human aspects of the stories associated with these often erased and marginalized Black cemeteries.**

— Antoinette Jackson



# University Community



## COLLEGE OF THE ARTS

### Free tickets, big payoff

ON OPENING NIGHT OF “RIDE THE CYCLONE,” a musical performed by students in the School of Theatre and Dance, the line of people waiting to get in snaked through the lobby of USF Theatre 2, out the doors, over the broad veranda, down the steps and across the lawn.

The Sept. 28 performance drew such a large crowd, about 70 fans couldn’t get seats.

“It was a very exciting run — a full house every night!” says Karen Frank, ’01, MS ’07 and PhD ’14, Life Member, assistant dean for the College of The Arts. “We actually, sadly, had to turn people away.”

A year earlier, Dean Chris Garvin announced a sweeping change to the college’s policy on ticket prices: Effective immediately, no charge. For anything.

“The arts are integral in our lives, and part of our responsibility is to invite the public onto our campuses to join our arts communities,” he said at the time. “Engaging with every generation, from children to retirees, is an important part of how we serve as a pillar of engagement for the arts in Tampa Bay.”

The price cut has had the desired result — and then some. Students say performing for large audiences creates a whole new experience.

“When the crowd of people burst into applause and cheers, I felt like my eardrums were bursting at the pure



force of everyone coming together to receive my song!” says Jalyn King, who played Jane Doe in “Ride the Cyclone.” (Watch her performance: [usf.to/4](http://usf.to/4))

The musical, which has developed a cult following since its world premiere in 2008, is about high school choir members seeking a return to life after being killed on a roller coaster called The Cyclone.

Sam Lipsey played Ricky.

“When we first performed with a packed house it helped me so much to keep focused and energetic,” he says. “It almost felt like I was able to stay in my character better because the audience was reacting to the show in all the ways I would if I were watching.”

It’s hard to overstate the impact of an enthusiastic audience, says Jenny Kokai, director of the School of Theatre and Dance.

“The confidence this production gave students will be a wonderful foundation for the rest of their careers.”

Free admission is on a first-come, first-served basis. Visit [usf.edu/arts/events](http://usf.edu/arts/events).

- PENNY CARNATHAN, '82 / USF Advancement



Above: Hopeful theatergoers line up for a free seat to opening night of “Ride the Cyclone.”

Inset: Sam Lipsey, right, performing with Kalysto Williams in Cyclone, says playing to a full house helps his focus and energy.

Right: Sophomore Natalia Chersia De Leon has applied for a two-bedroom apartment in the new residence hall, under construction behind her. “Being among the first to live on campus is super cool because you’re making history,” she says.

## CAMPUS LIFE

### A chance to live at Sarasota-Manatee? Students say ‘yes!’

LIVING ON CAMPUS at USF Sarasota-Manatee will make a world of difference for Natalia Chersia De Leon, and not just because she won’t have a 40-minute commute from Palmetto.

A sophomore, she spends a good part of her days at school — classes, of course, but also as a peer mentor, orientation adviser and member of the Campus Activities Board. So she jumped in line when USF Housing opened applications for USF Sarasota-Manatee’s first residence hall, scheduled to open in fall 2024.

“I really like the community here a lot. Everyone knows everyone,” says Chersia De Leon, a psychology major from Miami.

The top four floors of the six-story building will be home to 200 students. The first two floors will house a student center.

“Both are designed entirely to help our students create a new type of experience, a new type of community on the Sarasota-Manatee campus,” says Regional Chancellor Karen Holbrook.

Isabelle Sorensen and Lauren Pellegrino hope to share a double suite — two beds and a bathroom.

“I’m already here from 9 to 5 every single day, so it would be nice to be here all the time and start building more of a community,” says Sorensen, a sophomore biomedical sciences major.

Pellegrino, a junior biology major, looks forward to a new experience in her senior year.

“I love the campus. I love the community feel. I love being here,” she says. “Going from a commuter campus to having students live on campus is a really big change and a really exciting change.”

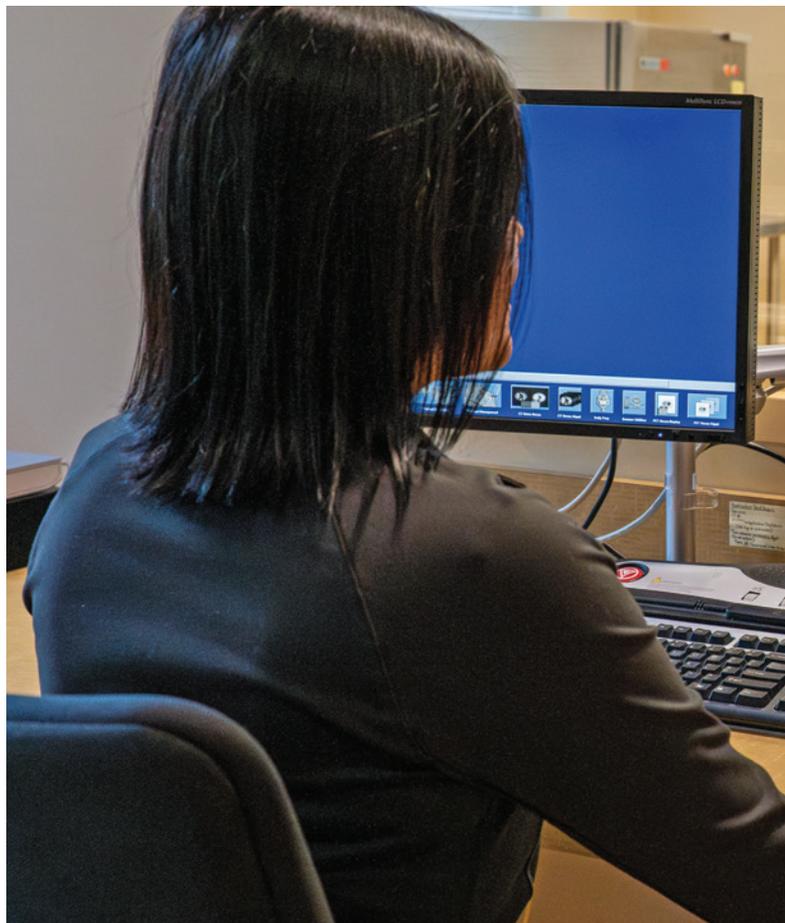
Accepting housing applications was a milestone for the \$42 million, 100,000-square-foot project — the first major expansion of the campus since it opened in 2006. The student center will offer new dining options and an on-campus bookstore, among other amenities.

For more information, visit <https://www.sarasotamanatee.usf.edu/housing/>

- MARC R. MASFERRER / University Communications and Marketing



# University Community



**Above:** Dr. Amanda Smith, professor and director of clinical research at the USF Health Byrd Alzheimer's Center and Research Institute.

**Right:** A Byrd Alzheimer's Center technician analyzes data from a PET scan, which allows doctors to see the early markers of Alzheimer's before patients develop symptoms.

## USF HEALTH

### New treatments offer promise for Alzheimer's patients

NEW ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE TREATMENTS rolled out over the past year may be changing the relentless course of this progressively debilitating neurological disorder.

"It is an exciting time when we can make a meaningful change during (patients') lives," says Dr. Amanda Smith, professor and director of clinical research at the USF Health Byrd Alzheimer's Center and Research Institute at the USF Health Morsani College of Medicine.

A drug that effectively slowed cognitive decline in Alzheimer's patients during clinical trials was recently approved by the Food and Drug Administration. Patients who took Leqembi for 18 months experienced a 27% reduction in memory and thinking decline. Leqembi, the brand name for lecanemab, also showed promise in reducing the accumulation of beta-amyloid plaques in the brain, a hallmark of Alzheimer's.

The Byrd center participated in the drug's pivotal clinical trials.



**We hope to have a generation of people who never develop cognitive issues from Alzheimer's while at the same time not abandoning the people who already have dementia."**

**— Dr. Amanda Smith**

"I have people who were among the very first in the country to start with Leqembi, which was the first monoclonal antibody that came on the market last year," Smith says. "When I see them at visits 15 to 18 months later after starting the medicine, there is not any change in their cognitive testing. ... That is the best place we have ever been in terms of having to deal with this disease."

Leqembi is expected to receive widespread coverage under Medicare, which will ensure more people in the



disease's early stages will have affordable access to it.

Alzheimer's disease affects more than 6 million Americans, robbing them of memory and reasoning abilities. It is characterized by the accumulation of amyloid plaques in the brain, which has long been a focus of research at the Byrd center.

The center achieved a significant breakthrough when it developed the ability to detect amyloid plaques using PET scans. Now, the presence of amyloid plaque can be identified in people who don't yet display memory problems, allowing for early intervention.

"There are now two and, hopefully later this year, a third drug that uses the immune system to remove plaque and significantly slow the progression of symptoms," Smith says.

"We hope to have a generation of people who never develop cognitive issues from Alzheimer's while at the same time not abandoning the people who already have dementia and continuing to work on new treatments for them."

- RYAN ROSSY / USF Health Communications

- **Alzheimer's disease affects more than 6 million Americans, robbing them of memory and reasoning abilities.**

- **The Byrd center achieved a significant breakthrough when it developed the ability to detect amyloid plaques using PET scans.**

Above: PET scans taken at the Byrd Center are used to detect amyloid plaques.

# 'I'm here to be ELITE'

## New men's basketball coach brings clarity to the court

By JOEY JOHNSTON, '81

IF YOU WANT TO KNOW what's ahead in this new era of USF men's basketball, just follow the program mantras.

Gritty ... Not Pretty.

Coach Amir Abdur-Rahim says his Bulls will keep playing hard.

E.D.G.E. — Everyone Dedicating Great Effort.

And they will play together.

For Abdur-Rahim, these aren't just slogans. They represent a way of life, a path for the Bulls to become annual contenders for the American Athletic Conference championship while earning postseason tournament bids.

Abdur-Rahim, in his first USF season after guiding the Kennesaw State Owls to the Atlantic Sun Conference championship and an NCAA Tournament appearance, has brought in 12 new players (including three from Kennesaw State) to join holdovers Sam Hines Jr., Selton Miguel and Corey Walker Jr.

"We have a Power Five (conference) job with Power Five resources," Abdur-Rahim says. "I want us to have an edge in everything we do — from the classroom to the study hall to the practice court. I'm not here to be good. I'm not here to be great. I'm here to be elite. And that's how we're going to approach every day in every aspect of our program."

When it comes to players leaving for other Florida universities, he says, we want to be in that conversation.

"I respect all of the programs and coaches in this state. But we're going to keep the best of the best, especially for the state of Florida, right here at home. We are going to compete."

As the fourth-oldest in a family of 13 siblings from East Point, Georgia, it was always about competing for Abdur-Rahim, whether at the dinner table or in sports.

"You learn to get over yourself real fast," he says with a laugh.

After his playing career at Southeastern Louisiana University, Abdur-Rahim worked as a Murray State basketball graduate assistant with the goal of getting his master's degree in

business, then killing it in real estate. Somewhere along the line, he realized his love for being in the gym, teaching the game, building a team and conquering obstacles.

A colleague recognized his coaching talent and told him, "You can be great at this, but you can't have one foot in and one foot out. You've got to commit to it."

"I think I have the instincts to know when something is right and when the path is worth following," Abdur-Rahim says. "God's plans are different than our plans. I'm in the right place. Sometimes, you just know that in your gut."

Abdur-Rahim met his wife, Arianne, through mutual friends at a Fourth of July party in Atlanta. The next night, their "unofficial" first date, they hung out at a Waffle House. Four months later, he began shopping for an engagement ring and proposed during a Thanksgiving meal with his family.

Married for 11 years, they have two daughters, Laila and Lana, and a son, Ayden.

"Amir is a good man with the right values, and you're going to see that in the character of our players and what our program stands for, even beyond basketball," USF assistant coach Ben Fletcher says. "He's a hard-working man with a caring heart who is very genuine with all his relationships."

Hines appreciates Abdur-Rahim's straight-forward style.

"You're never wondering what you're doing wrong or what he expects from you," Hines says. "It's spelled out and the communication is very good. As players, we appreciate that from him."

Abdur-Rahim's transition has been aided by the presence of the three former players from Kennesaw State — senior guards Chris Youngblood, Brandon Stroud and Kasen Jennings. They're intimately familiar with how the Owls rose from a one-win team (2019-20) to a 26-win conference champion and NCAA Tournament contender last season.

Youngblood was Kennesaw State's leading scorer (14.7 points per game) and an Atlantic Sun Conference first-team all-conference player. Stroud was the team's leading rebounder (6.5)



**Abdur-Rahim with his wife of 11 years, Arianne, and their children, Laila, Lana and Ayden.**

**For more with Abdur-Rahim, go to [usf.to/AbdurRahimPodcast](https://usf.to/AbdurRahimPodcast).**

and the A-Sun Defensive Player of the Year.

"Coach is truly one of a kind," Youngblood says. "When he left Kennesaw to come to USF, there was no question I wanted to follow him. I want to play for him my whole career. He's very intentional with his relationships and very transparent. You're never guessing about anything. When you operate that way with basketball — or in life — that's how you reach your potential. I think the USF fans will figure out really quickly that this is a man of sub-

# Athletics



stance. I know I'm excited about what we're going to accomplish with the Bulls."

The Bulls were 14-18 last season, then-Coach Brian Gregory's sixth. Abdur-Rahim praises Gregory's work, saying it laid a strong foundation that can be built upon so the program can go to places it has never been.

Abdur-Rahim promises a fast-paced offense and an aggressive defense, a free-flowing, unselfish look. His lineup, which he describes as "position-less," will be versatile

with an emphasis on smart shooting, crisp passing and confident ball-handling.

"It's not about perfection, it's about progression, and we are getting better every day," he says. "I'm a guy who's comfortable being uncomfortable. That's where you get growth. That's where you get special things — like pearls, diamonds, gold. Those things are buried. You have to dig them up.

"I think our program will be a direct reflection of our campus and our community. Look

at the Tampa Bay community. Look at this campus. It represents hard work and blue-collar toughness. It's about the right things. It's not always about the most talent, but it's about who's the most connected team. That's what you're going to get from the University of South Florida Bulls."

The Bulls will be gritty ... not pretty.

They will play with an E.D.G.E.

Catchy slogans, yes. But for Abdur-Rahim and his Bulls, they're also a way of life.



Above: Men's golf took their second win at the USF Invitational in October, tying Stetson for first place at the Southern Hills Plantation Club in Brooksville.

## FALL REVIEW

### Three teams score fall championships

BULLS TEAMS CLAIMED a division conference title, five golf championships and a women's sailing championship this fall, with some teams' season still underway at press time.

**Women's soccer** took down Florida Atlantic University 2-1 in front of the third-largest crowd in program history — 1,431— at Corbett Stadium on Oct. 26. This was the first year the American Athletic Conference had divisions for women's soccer, and USF claimed the first-ever East Division title.

It proved a memorable last home game for head coach Denise Schilte-Brown, who is departing after 17 seasons to lead the Tampa Bay United Soccer League's Super League team. The Bulls pursued their seventh conference title under Schilte-Brown in the final week of October at the AAC Tournament.

The **men's golf** team captured back-to-back tournament victories with wins at the Quail Valley Invitational, where Brock Healy recorded his first individual win as a Bull, and at the USF Invitational, where Sam Nicholson claimed his first career individual win. The Bulls won back-to-back tournaments for the fourth time under head coach Steve Bradley and had consecutive individual champions for the fifth time in his tenure. It also won team and individual championships in two straight tournaments — a first.

**Women's golf** saw senior Melanie Green lead USF to a 13-shot win in the Badger Invitational. She was named the AAC Women's Golfer of the Month for September.

**Women's sailing**, based at USF St. Petersburg, finished the season Oct. 28 by taking the South Atlantic Intercollegiate Sailing Association's fall conference championship. With just one race to go in the two-day competition, USF and College of Charleston were tied at 40 points each behind Jacksonville University with 41 points. USF finished that race in first and took the conference based on combined scores for division A sailors Emma Shakespeare and Jewel Kelly and division B sailors Kay Brunsvold and Kalea Woodard.

The **football** team under first-year head coach Alex Golesh won four of its first eight games to tie for the second-best year-to-year turnaround in program history with a three-win improvement to that point. It did that by winning a pair of road games for the first time since 2019. Freshman quarterback Byrum Brown was on pace for one of the best total offense and passing seasons in program history as the Bulls looked to finish strong and reach their first bowl game since 2018.

In **volleyball**, senior outside hitter Marta Cvitkovic recorded her 1,000th career kill and sophomore Buse Hazan logged 13 straight matches with double-digit kills as the Bulls got off to a 13-9 start (7-4 AAC), the team's best start since 2018.

In **men's tennis**, Alvin Tudorica was the runner-up in singles action at the Intercollegiate Tennis Association's Southeast Regional, qualifying him for the ITA National Fall Championships. Tudorica and teammate Erik Grevelius, ranked No. 24 by the ITA in the preseason, also advanced to the semifinals in doubles play.

Bulls **Baseball** coach Billy Mohl, one of the most productive pitchers in Tulane history during a period that saw the Green Wave reach the College World Series, was inducted into the Tulane Athletics Hall of Fame. Former Bulls pitcher Orion Kerkering made a meteoric rise through the Philadelphia Phillies' minor league system and made appearances in the 2023 Major League Baseball postseason.

- BRIAN SIEGRIST / USF Athletics

## SPRING PREVIEW

### Women's basketball ready to run

THE MEDIA HAVE HIGH EXPECTATIONS for **women's basketball**, picking the Bulls to win their third conference title in four seasons in a preseason poll.

"I like expectations," says head women's basketball coach Jose Fernandez, Life Member. "We're expected to be good. We're expected to win our conference. And we're expected to get into the NCAA Tournament. That's the type of program we've built here at USF."

Coming off a 27-7 season, American Athletic Conference regular-season title, and a National Collegiate Athletic Association Tournament second-round appearance last year, the Bulls will look to replace the loss of USF royalty, two of the best performers in program history — Elena Tsineke, '23, and Dulcy Fankam Mendjiadeu, '22, the co-AAC Players of the Year and WNBA draft picks.



**I like expectations. We're expected to be good. We're expected to win our conference. And we're expected to get into the NCAA Tournament. That's the type of program we've built here at USF."**

— Jose Fernandez

Three-point shooting ace Sammie Puisis, who averaged 15.5 points and 4.1 rebounds per game and finished fifth nationally in three-point field goals made (109) last year, was named an AAC Preseason All-Conference First Team selection. She was also placed on preseason watch lists for the 2024 Ann Meyers-Drysdale Award for the nation's best shooting guard and the Becky Hammon Mid-Major Player of the Year.



"I truly think Sammie is one of the best shooting guards in the entire country," Fernandez says.

In **men's basketball**, first-year head coach Amir Abdur-Rahim brings the fast-paced and aggressive style that led Kennesaw State to the Atlantic Sun Conference championship and an NCAA Tournament appearance last year.

He has brought in 12 new players to the Bulls program, including three transfers from Kennesaw State. Chris Youngblood led Kennesaw in scoring and was a first-team all-conference selection and a career 1,000-point scorer for the Owls. Brandon Stroud was the team's leading rebounder and the A-Sun Defensive Player of the Year.

A raft of new talent, including Tampa native Kobe Knox, a transfer from Grand Canyon University, joins holdovers from the Bulls' 14-18 season last year.

- BRIAN SIEGRIST / USF Athletics

**Above: All eyes are on women's basketball player Sammie Puisis, who is on the preseason watch list for several honors.**



Retired from academia,  
Rebecca Penneys  
continues to perform  
and educate

## Acclaimed pianist aims to spread the ‘language of peace’

By KILEY MALLARD / USF Advancement

**A** CHILD PRODIGY, pianist Rebecca Penneys has been immersed in music since she began playing by ear as a toddler.

It’s a powerful language, she says.

“It’s a language of peace, and I’m definitely an advocate of peace on earth,” she says. “Music makes you smarter.

When you play an instrument, it changes your thinking. The whole idea is that civilization then can go forward in a more peaceful way.”

She has spent decades working toward that end, both performing and teaching. And, while she officially left the classroom in 2017, retiring to St. Petersburg, she has continued educating and supporting student artists through USF.

In 2013, she launched the Rebecca Penneys Piano

Festival, a three-week, tuition-free collegiate piano festival hosted each summer at USF. It draws up to 40 aspiring artists, selected from about 200 applicants, from all over the world. Participants attend private lessons, master classes and concerts — all led and performed by a who’s who of pianists.

Recently, Penneys established the Rebecca Penneys USF Music Fund, which provides two-year assistantships to five music master’s degree students who perform in a chamber music ensemble. Known as the Rebecca Penneys Graduate Collective, it consists of two pianists, a violinist, a violist and a cellist.

It’s a format Penneys is fond of. In 1974, she founded the New Arts Trio chamber ensemble, which won the Naumburg Award for Chamber Music in 1980 and 1982 and was the trio-in-residence at the Chautauqua Institution from 1978-2012.

# USF Rising

"That's why I've included other instruments. I couldn't see myself just helping pianists since I still have a chamber music series in New York state. Chamber music is so wonderful to play," she says.

School of Music Director David Williams says the assistantships are great for everybody.

"It's great because the students are on assistantship and their duties are to perform in this group. They're getting an education and a really great experience out of it," he says. "And it's great for the School of Music because we've got some really talented students who represent us — and Rebecca — in the community and performing on and off campus.

"Everybody wins in this arrangement, and it's because of Rebecca."

While most assistantships in the school offer 10 hours a week, the Penneys assistantship is twice that, which makes these spots especially attractive and has helped the school recruit talented musicians from all over the world.

Ji Hae Yun, who hails from South Korea, is a member of the inaugural cohort of the collective. She says as a pianist, she is used to playing alone. "Chamber music helps us understand the other instruments better," she says. "This, in turn, fuels our imagination on our



As a toddler, Penneys would accompany her brother to his piano lessons, then come home, crawl onto the piano bench and play by ear the songs he'd been practicing.



**Left: Penneys formed the New Arts Trio with Piotr Janowski, violin, and Steven Doane, cello, in 1974. She formed the Salon Trio in 1997, which performs a five-concert series each year at the Rochester Academy of Medicine.**

she taught for 37 years. After retiring to St. Petersburg, Penneys chose to invest in students at USF, impressed by the beautiful new music building.

“I think that the USF School of Music is unique compared to other schools of music in the state. It’s a perfect location. It’s a beautiful building. The size is just perfect,” says Penneys, a courtesy Steinway artist in residence at USF.

Penneys grew up as a musical prodigy, playing piano before receiving any formal lessons. She made her recital debut at 9 and performed as a soloist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra at 11. She won the Special Critics’ Prize at the seventh International Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw, Poland, at 17. She’d go on to win many other international prizes and perform on every continent except Antarctica throughout her career.

“I’ve always performed, and I’ve always taught. I’ve never felt complete just performing,” she says.

Penneys also studied ballet and always found it easier to dance than to play piano. “When I finally decided, ‘OK, I’m going to be a pianist,’ I thought the only way I could do it and feel good is if I could create the same feeling of floating at the piano that I felt when I danced,” she says.

At USF, Penneys has also supported WUSF Public Media and established a fund to refurbish an antique Steinway piano donated to the College of The Arts. But the festival and the collective remain her focus.

“My hope is these students will latch onto a dream, go out in the world and be involved, whether it’s with an orchestra or playing concerts,” she says. “There’s a big world out there. I think everybody’s voice, if you listen to it, takes you on a unique trip. Everybody needs to give themselves permission to do that. That’s what I do. I go about the world doing that.”

own instrument. Sharing different interpretations of the music we play together is also valuable.”

Yun calls being a member of the collective a privilege. “It’s beneficial, because we can really focus on this chamber group, our regular lessons and studio time,” she says.

She hopes to continue performing professionally, and, like Penneys, to one day teach.

“All these ideas are about enriching the community,” says Penneys, reflecting on the festival and the collective.

Penneys’ own career has been a dance between teaching and performing.

She is professor emerita at the University of Rochester’s Eastman School of Music in New York, where

**Penneys, fourth from left, met with students in the initial cohort of the collective, including, from left, cellist Kosuke Uchikawa; violist Joven Aquisap; violinist Gabriel Mendoza; pianist Veerle Winkelmolen; and pianist Ting Yu (replaced by Ji Hae Yun in spring 2023).**



# USF Rising



From left: TGH senior Vice President Wendi Goodson-Celerin, '88, MS '98 and DNP '18.; TGH Executive Vice President Kelly Cullen; Florida Health Sciences Center President and CEO John Couris; USF President Rhea Law; USF Health Senior Associate Vice President Usha Menon; USF Health Executive Vice President Charly Lockwood, MD; and USF Senior Vice President of Advancement and Alumni Affairs Jay Stroman

## HEALTH CARE

### TGH gifts benefit community health, students' success

A NEW CHAPTER HAS OPENED in USF's 50-year-plus storied partnership with Tampa General Hospital.

On Sept. 7, the university announced a \$25 million gift from TGH to name the Center for Athletic Excellence. Part of USF's new on-campus stadium, the center will include clinical space where TGH will provide community behavioral health services, therapies that address both physical and mental challenges to well-being, along with facilities for USF's student-athletes. The gift, the largest ever to USF Athletics, will also name the university's athletics district.

"As one of the nation's leading academic and research health systems, we are committed to strengthening our community," TGH President and CEO John Couris said, noting the growing demand for behavioral health services in the Tampa Bay region.

"That's why we're doubling down on our partnership with the University of South Florida to expand access to care and support," he said.

On Sept. 28, the university announced another



**We're doubling down on our partnership with the University of South Florida to expand access to care and support."**

— John Couris

generous gift from TGH — \$4.4 million for a new nursing simulation lab at the USF Health College of Nursing. The Tampa General Hospital USF Health College of Nursing Simulation Lab will offer advanced training for nurses as they prepare to join the health-care workforce.

The USF-TGH partnership continually provides new and innovative opportunities for the university's students, faculty and staff — and ultimately creates a healthier Tampa Bay region, says President Rhea Law.

"The generous support from TGH will further strengthen our USF Health College of Nursing as we prepare nurses for successful careers and help fill an important workforce need in our communities," she said.



# ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: OUR NEW SUPER POWER?

Stories by TOM WOOLF / University Communications

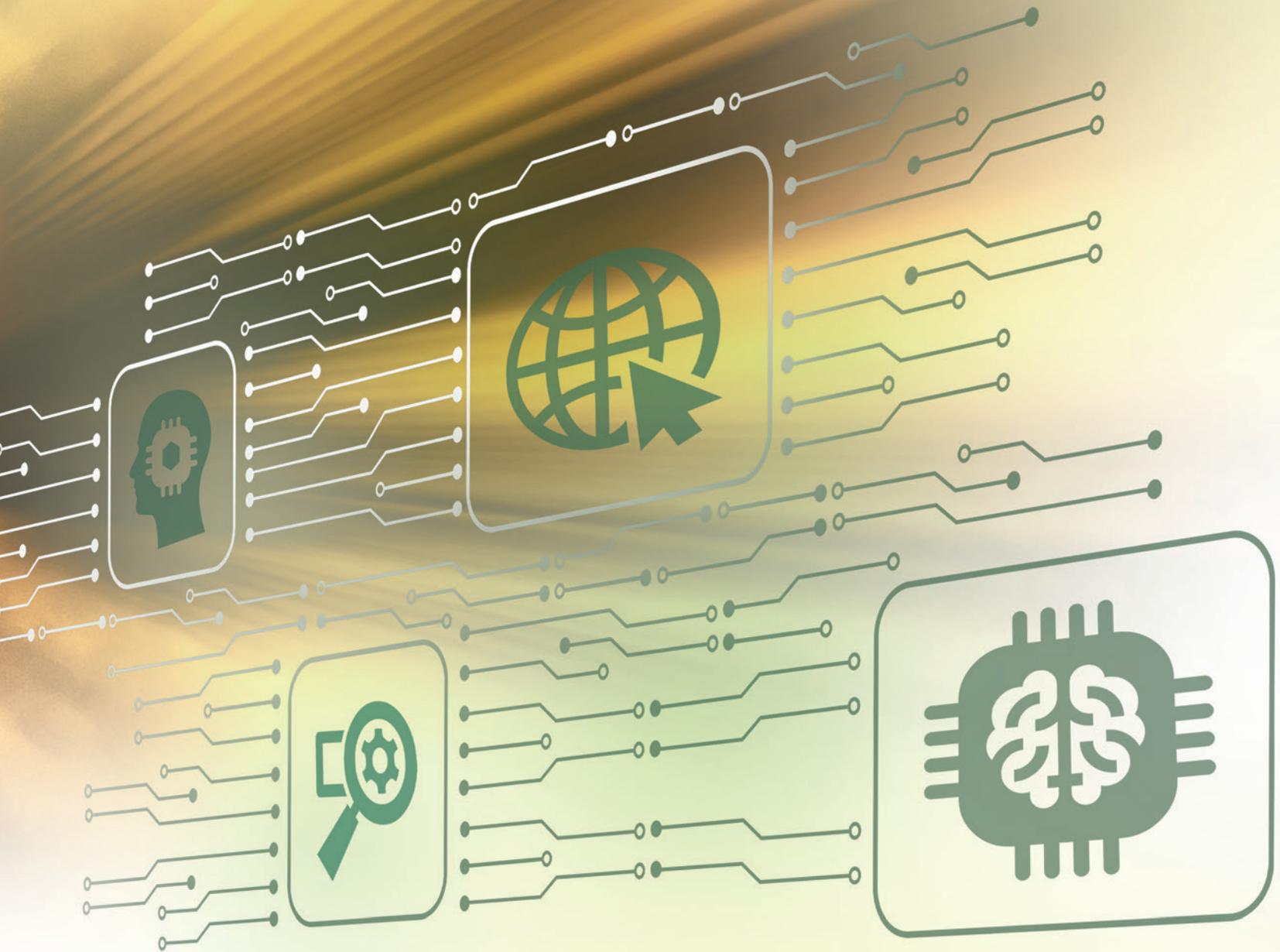
Did you ask Alexa to set a timer while you were cooking dinner last night?

Start the day with the weather forecast courtesy of Siri?

Artificial intelligence — AI for short — has become so intertwined with our daily lives that most of us probably don't give it a second thought. Need help planning a trip? What about getting that last-minute birthday present delivered tomorrow? Stymied by a problem at work, or with homework?

Illustrations: JOHN PELEROSI / USF Advancement





How we think about AI has changed dramatically over the past year with the advent of generative AI chatbots ChatGPT, Google Bard, Bing Chat, DALL-E2 and more.

What is generative artificial intelligence? Just ask Bing Chat.

“Generative artificial intelligence is a type of AI that can generate new forms of creative content, such as audio, code, images, text, simulations and videos. Generative AI models learn the patterns and structure of their input training data and then generate new data that has similar characteristics.”

That was Bing Chat’s response to this prompt: Define generative artificial intelligence in 50 words.

As the technology evolves at breakneck speed, the question being asked across all sectors of society is whether AI poses a threat or holds promise.

Prasant Mohapatra, USF’s provost and executive vice president of academic affairs, says the answer is both.

“We have to do some trade-offs between threat and promise,” says Mohapatra, an accomplished researcher in wireless

networks, mobile communications, cybersecurity and internet protocols. “It has the potential to be very positive, but if generative AI is used in inappropriate ways, it may have unintended — or intended — severe consequences.”



PRASANT MOHAPATRA

Mohapatra co-chairs the Generative AI Strategic Planning Group, created by USF President Rhea Law and composed of faculty, staff and administrators to develop guidelines for using the technology. Members are exploring AI’s role in teaching and learning, as well as operationally in such areas as human resources, admissions, and business and finance.

“AI is not magical, it is based on fundamental aspects of science, and we want our students to learn about the foundations of AI and how it can be leveraged in a positive way,” Mohapatra says. “At the same time, we have to make sure the future generation of leaders — our students — learn about the negative aspects, that if it is not used in a proper way, it can do more harm than good.”

On the operations side, Mohapatra says, “Things are moving so quickly, we have to make sure that the AI tools we are using meet

our requirements for performance and accuracy.”

There also are ethical considerations, such as in the purchase of products and services.

“We should not have vendor selection software driven by AI that is biased toward only large corporations,” he says.

Sidney Fernandes, MS '00, vice president of information technology and chief information officer at USF, co-chairs the strategic planning group. Generative AI has taken the world by storm and it's very promising, he says. But he also has concerns.

“There has to be a lot of effort by those using AI to ensure that it is used ethically, that it is used with a fair degree of skepticism of the answers it provides and that it is used as an assistant to the human being, not as a replacement,” he says.

As an example, Fernandes referred to recent cases where other universities used plagiarism detection software to determine whether essays submitted by students were original work or AI-generated.

“In some cases, students who were caught cheating were wrongly accused because AI has some implicit biases, especially toward non-native speakers,” he says.



JENIFER JASINSKI SCHNEIDER

Jenifer Jasinski Schneider, '89 and MA '92, a professor of literacy studies and president of the Faculty Senate, also serves on the planning group. She says faculty members have expressed mixed reactions to generative AI.

“Some are very interested in it and see the potential and are excited about learning about it,” she says. “Others are very suspicious and concerned.”

While she can “see all sides to it,” Schneider views AI as a tool with great promise.

“I've been using it in a variety of ways, such as developing a course and in writing emails,” she says. “I've asked it questions to see what it knows, whether it's accurate. A colleague and I have been playing around with how we query it, because how you prompt it changes the responses you receive.”

She feels a sense of urgency when it comes to AI in the classroom.

“We have to make sure our students are prepared for the workforce,” she says, “that they understand what business, or medicine, or education, or social science is doing with AI.”

Worries about students using AI to plagiarize “should just be taken off the table,” she adds. “AI is here to stay. As educators, perhaps we need to think about how we use writing as a catch-all assignment to demonstrate knowledge. Maybe we could use alternative methods.”

Kobe Phillips, a senior majoring in ecology and evolutionary biology and a member of USF's Judy Genshaft Honors College, uses an AI design tool in one of his classes — something that is encouraged by his professor. Phillips believes AI is a “phenomenal resource” for students and faculty.



KOBE PHILLIPS

“There is so much potential in this space, be it for helping students to create study guides or create code or new solutions when they couldn't think of one, or even for professors for generating questions,” Phillips says. “As students, we want to put our best foot forward. We are here to learn and these new resources could transform our ability to learn.”

## IS IT ART WITHOUT HEART?

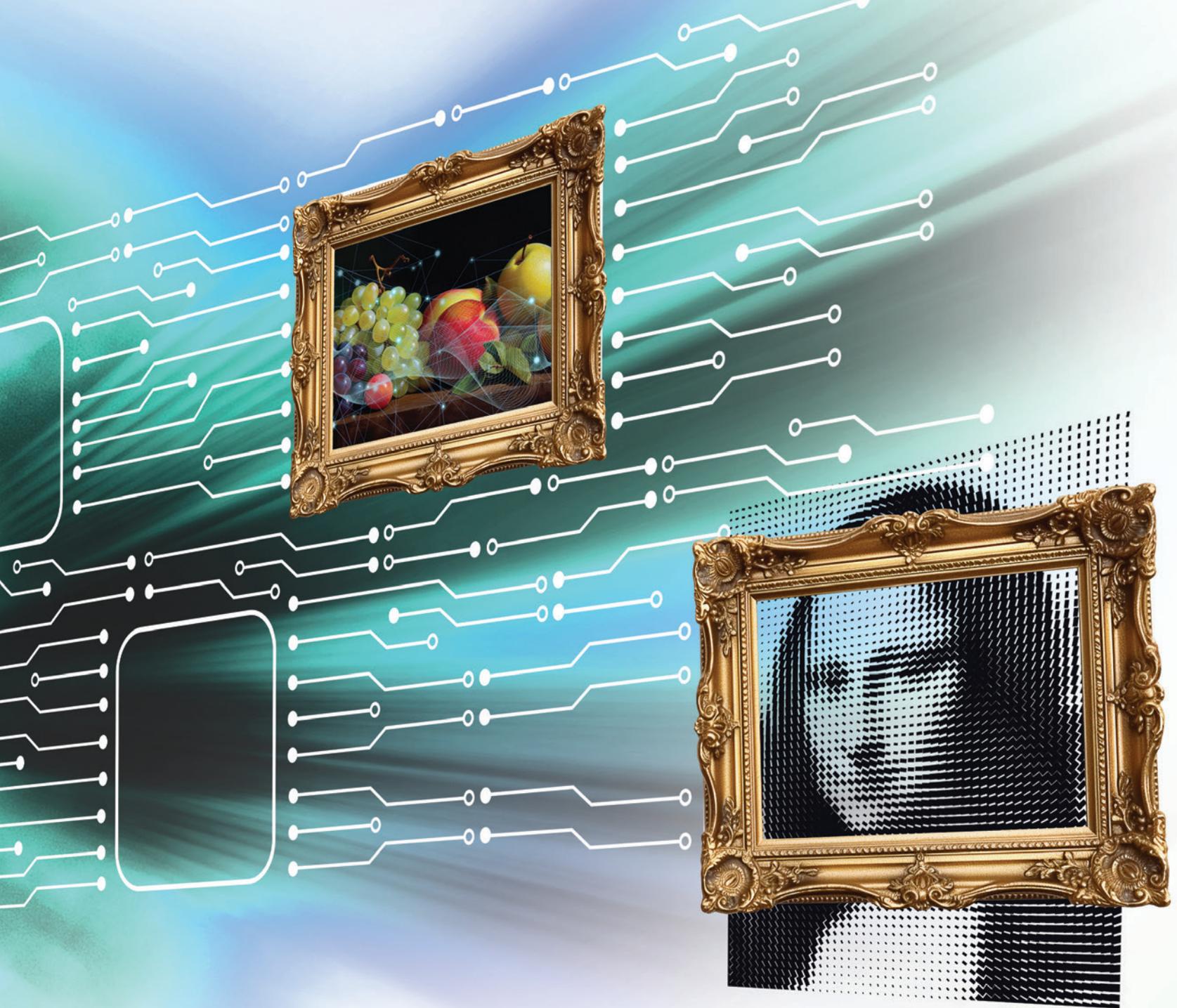
Heather Sellers is an accomplished poet. An award-winning author of books, short stories and essays.

And a disrupter.

“Writers and artists are welcoming of disruption,” says Sellers, director of USF's creative writing program in the College of Arts and Sciences. “Artificial intelligence is a great disruption. I think we see our own role in society as disrupters, to ask questions and push out of the way how things have been done in order to move things forward in a new way.”

Sellers, who has taught at the college level for 30 years, including the past 10 at USF, says that at this point, AI cannot write a beautiful poem or create a novel with depth and meaning. But that day may be coming.

If it does, “It's going to completely change our understanding of the human experience,” she says. “What I think is so important about the humanities being at an inflection point like this is our engagement with the ancient questions that have always governed our discipline: What is it to be human? What is it to feel? What is it that is important and to be cherished in the human experience that needs to be fed into AI and fed back to us so there's a synergy



in the relationship? It's going to continue to evolve, but I don't find that threatening."

As she has experimented with generative AI tools, she has found they can't do what poets do.



HEATHER SELLERS

"AI is not able to render the complexity and depth of the human experience and put those into language that's beautiful and meaningful," Sellers says. "What's exciting in the classroom is to be able to show students, when you ask AI to write a poem in the style of Robert Frost, why it isn't able to do

that. There are a lot of aspects of meaning-making and language and the human experience that are beyond its capabilities."

It can be helpful with formulaic writing like letters of recommendation and program reviews, she notes. But while poetry and great novels use form, they are not formulaic.

AI stretches the imagination and can be a great collaborator, says McArthur Freeman II, an associate professor of animation and digital modeling in the School of Art and Art History,

He often employs technology for films and games in his creative efforts. He's also a sculptor, which starts with digital models, and a painter.

"With AI, the question has to do with what we bring to the table," he says. "AI has no feelings, it's not invested, it has no desire. One type of AI can render images in very exquisite and beautiful ways with lighting and texture, but what it doesn't do is generate ideas and a direction. That's what artists bring, their perspective."

AI has been shown to reflect bias, and that concerns Freeman. He recalls the experience he and his wife had when they asked a generative AI tool to produce images of 100 physicians.

"They were all white males and almost all of them had gray hair," Freeman says. "It's easy to look at it and think, 'It's a computer,

it doesn't have bias.' All of these programs are trained off of the data that someone inputs."

Sellers agrees that's a problem, but it also creates an opportunity for her as a teacher.

"From an educational standpoint, it's very exciting to feed AI a prompt that you know is going to generate something that's blatantly biased," she says.

She asked a generative AI program to translate "non-binary" into Spanish.

"It will say 'no binario,'" the masculine form, she says. "If you ask it what that means, it says that depends on the gender of the person if it's a male or a female. It just doesn't know.

"But that's one of the things students come to a university for, to learn critical thinking, to be able to slow down and assess. I don't think it's any different than the way we've been asking students to always consider the source since they were in fourth grade. It's a source and it has incredible weaknesses. Bias is baked into everything, and this is a great opportunity to bring awareness to bias and authorship and ownership."

## IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH, A HELPFUL TOOL

Usha Menon recalls a moment early in her career while working with a more experienced nurse in a hospital maternity ward. Her mentor looked down at a tiny patient and told Menon that something was about to happen with this baby.

"I said, 'How do you know? That baby looks perfectly fine,'" Menon says. "And she said, 'Well, the hair on the back of my neck is standing up.'"

Years later as a cardiac care nurse, Menon would sometimes find herself hovering around certain patients' rooms, braced for a crisis. "I couldn't quite say why. It was just a feeling."

That is what generative artificial intelligence cannot mimic or replace.

"When we think about machine capabilities, how do you program for that extensive experience and the gut feeling that humans bring to a situation?" asks Menon, dean of the USF College of Nursing and senior associate vice president of USF Health. "I don't think you can."

While Menon and other medical professionals say AI has its limits, they agree it's already providing benefits. As demand for health care overwhelms the supply of providers, they welcome

Noting fears of widespread use of AI by students to cheat, Freeman says, "We have a responsibility to prepare students to adapt and compete in a world that will be utilizing AI after they graduate. Rather than focusing solely on restricting its use, we need to find new strategies to employ AI as part of the learning process."

New technologies can be useful tools and facilitate new ways of thinking, he says.

"They prompt us to ask questions like, 'How can AI enrich our understanding of the creative process and our role in it? What can it enable us to learn that was less accessible before? What do we need to strengthen in our own education to better leverage and collaborate with these tools?'"

AI, Freeman says, "can reveal things that we haven't been able to readily perceive, which allows us the opportunity to learn to see new things."



MCARTHUR FREEMAN II

AI taking over administrative chores and other tasks that don't require their expertise.

"We have an aging and sicker population, particularly here in the Tampa Bay region. We have 1,000-plus people a day moving into the state, and our ability to deliver care is increasingly stretched thin," says Dr. Nishit Patel, MD '10, a professor in the USF Health Morsani College of Medicine, vice president of medical informatics for USF Tampa General Physicians, and vice president and chief medical informatics officer at Tampa General Hospital. "We have to figure out, how do you serve those additional needs with the same or less of a workforce?"



DR. NISHIT PATEL

The COVID pandemic accelerated the development and use of tools like USF Health's patient portal, MyChart, which streamlines communications, freeing providers for more hands-on care. Patients use MyChart to schedule appointments, message with providers and request prescription refills, all from home.

"We went from about 330,000 patient portal messages pre-pandemic, in 2019, to almost 900,000 last year," Patel says. "You look at tools like generative AI because the promise of what's there

is to solve a problem that seemed impossible just a couple of years ago.”

Imagine AI sorting through patients’ medical records.

“We have tons of valuable information captured in your electronic health record, but many of those valuable insights are hidden away from physicians because of the sheer volume,” Patel says. “Generative AI has the potential to scrape the entirety of a patient’s chart and provide me with a high-yield summary of all of the key events and results since I last saw the patient.”

It doesn’t replace providers’ decision-making, Patel says, rather, it allows them to make better decisions more quickly.

For example, at Tampa General Hospital, surgical patients get speedier access to specialized nursing care thanks to AI.

“When a patient is coming in for surgery, we have to think about what happens after the procedure, including how long they will need to be in a post-anesthesia care unit (PACU), if they will need to stay in the hospital afterwards and which type of specialized unit they need to be placed into for that type of surgery,” Patel says. “Bed planning and capacity planning are incredibly complex activities that have historically required a lot of time and generally occurred the morning of the procedure.”

TGH has developed predictive models that have shortened PACU hold times by 28%, reduced bed planning time by 83% and shifted bed planning to days before the procedure. They have a 95% accuracy rate.

“What this means for patients is that we have made all the necessary planning for their successful recovery before they even step foot into the operating room,” Patel says.

But will the day come when algorithms make medical decisions?

“The fundamental practice of medicine remains the same,” Patel says. “Medical decision-making still occurs at the cross section of data, experience and training, and that does not change with AI.”

In psychiatry, Dr. Ryan Wagoner, MBA ’22, has not seen widespread adoption of AI beyond patient scheduling. But he sees its potential. An associate professor and division chief of the Morsani College of Medicine Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neurosciences, Wagoner says AI may one day offer limited help in treating mental illness.



DR. RYAN WAGONER

Primary care doctors, who treat most “straightforward” issues such as depression and anxiety disorders, might find AI’s algorithms useful in prescribing medications, Wagoner says. But for more complicated problem, patients will still need people.

“Especially in psychiatry, very often people do not want to tell a computer ‘Here’s why I’m feeling so awful about something’ or ‘Here’s this unusual experience that I’m having,’” Wagoner says. “They want a human being to be able to relate to and provide some empathy to understand that shared human experience.”

If someone in a fragile emotional state seeks help from a chatbot and it responds inappropriately, what will be the impact? he asks. Mental-health professionals might also say the wrong thing, but they can read patients’ cues and switch gears.

“There are some stops in there that humans have whenever they see another individual’s emotional state headed in a certain way,” Wagoner says. “A chatbot won’t have that.”

AI can be an amazing tool with great potential to assist in health care, he says.

“But I’m not looking for AI to replace what I do anytime soon.”

College of Nursing  
Dean Usha Menon says  
AI could improve training  
simulators, such as this  
child mannequin being  
used by USF student nurses.

# MORE WINNERS THAN LOSERS IN THE WORKFORCE

Is generative AI coming for your job?

Maybe. Maybe not.

The past year's rapid growth of such tools as ChatGPT, Google Bard, Bing Chat and Dall-E2 has led to widespread speculation about which workers they may one day replace — and which new career options they may create.

Distinguished University Professor Sudeep Sarkar describes generative AI as “a computing technology that is going to unleash the human potential. It is a tool that's going to accelerate innovation and creativity.”

Sarkar chairs USF's Department of Computer Science and Engineering and is co-director of the USF Institute for Artificial Intelligence + X. The “X,” he explains, can apply to a wide variety of disciplines — business, biology, finance, public health, for example. Sarkar also is a member of the university's strategic planning group that's developing guidelines for the use of AI in teaching, learning and USF operations.



SUDEEP SARKA

The technology has remarkable potential to transform work. But, Sarkar says, “I haven't seen companies saying, ‘We are going to get rid of this job because generative AI can do it.’”

“What's going to happen is that the nature of some jobs will morph,” he

adds. “Some jobs will become larger in scope, while for other jobs, the nature of the work will shift.”

USF Innovative Education, working with faculty in the College of Engineering, has created an Artificial Intelligence Certificate program. It is fully online, catering to the needs of working adults seeking to upskill or reskill to advance their careers. Students learn how to design and deploy AI for real-world applications.

Sidney Fernandes, vice president of information technology and chief information officer at USF, says that when it comes to the impact of AI on jobs, “There is no one-size-fits-all answer.”

There may be new opportunities in AI research and development, as well as positions focused on compliance security and ethical and responsible AI implementation. He also noted the executive order issued by President Joe Biden in late October regarding AI regulation and the need for transparency, suggesting the need for new skill sets in legal compliance and information technology.

Existing jobs that might be dramatically affected by AI include

those involving repetitive tasks or processes that can be automated. Examples include data entry, some aspects of customer service, as well as entry-level white-collar jobs from technology, to legal, to human resources and health care.

“In all of these cases, the jobs will not go away,” Fernandes says. “Rather, AI will be something of a tool for creating more efficiencies and better outcomes, as long as the users of the tools have a firm understanding of the limitations.”

“There will be the need for a human to review, make judgments and ensure that we do not ever trust the AI answers.”





# The Magic of *Music* in Motion

# USF's Herd of Thunder marching band marks a grand tradition in its 25th year

By DAVE SCHEIBER

**J**UST BEYOND THE DIN OF AFTERNOON rush-hour traffic on Fowler Avenue, a jam of a different kind takes shape on a sprawling USF practice field. Overhead, gray and white clouds billow against a blue backdrop, a vibrant sideshow to the cacophony of brass, woodwinds and percussion warming up beside fluttering Color Guard flags. It is as if the sky has heard the Herd and wants in on the act.

Welcome to another evening practice for USF's marching band, the Herd of Thunder, aka HOT, one of up to four weekly three-hour rehearsals during football season. After a long day of classes and part-time jobs, students toting instrument cases, flags, rifles and sabers converge on Fowler Field just before 6 p.m. to rehearse before the Bulls' next home football game at Raymond James Stadium.

For the past 25 years, the HOT band has united students and staff and nurtured an enduring bond, with friendships that last long after the final halftime show.

Outwardly, the Fowler Field scene has changed since the summer of 1998, when USF's first Herd of Thunder practiced "The Mission," an anthem composed by its inaugural director, Sid Haton. That initial band camp under a sweltering summer sun drew some 160 members. Today, the Herd of Thunder marks its silver anniversary with numbers exceeding 350.

Their formations have become more intricate, their performances more sophisticated, and they now sometimes rehearse in the new, air-conditioned Porter Family Indoor Performance Facility. Yet, in other ways they remain the same. They still stampede from the stadium tunnel onto the field for their pregame show. And they still play "The Mission" at the end of every game.

Cherished traditions can be created only when one invested generation passes them along to the next. In 2009, HOT alumni were invited for the first time to join the band on the field during the Homecoming game. Nineteen enthusiastic Bulls answered the call. This year, the annual Homecoming reunion performance drew a record 158 former HOT members.

"As corny as it sounds, the band acts like a family," says Director of Athletic Bands Trevor Butts, '15 and MM '20. "The ties the students establish throughout band camp starting in freshman year remain very strong."

**Brass musicians perform in the HOT Band Road Show, a pregame tradition at USF Football's home games.**

**Inset: The first HOT band performs in 1998.**



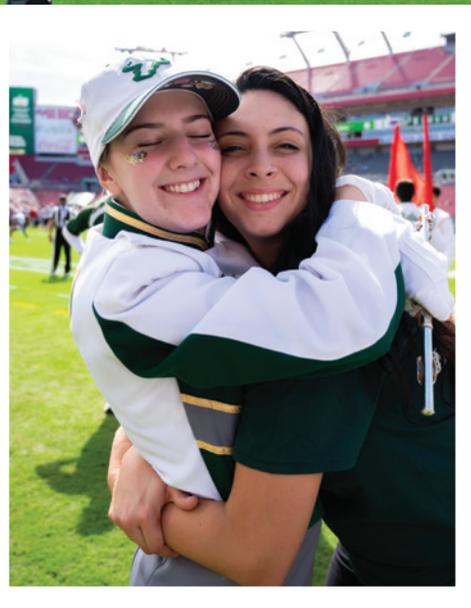
Right: Color Guard alumni, identifiable by their “Alumni” flags, perform with the 2023-24 squad at Homecoming 2023.

Inset: Piccolo section leader Bella Holton and alumna piccolo player Alex Gonzalez, '22, share a hug.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:**

Right top: Bruce Herrmann, '03 and MM '14, a drum major in the first HOT band, conducts alongside current drum major David Grullon during the Homecoming reunion performance.

Left bottom: Former HOT band director Matthew McCutcheon hugs former USF President Betty Castor — the “mother” of USF’s marching band — as current band director Trevor Butts, left, and President Rhea Law look on. The band paid tribute to Castor as part of its 25th anniversary celebration.



**T**HE HOMECOMING GAME against Florida Atlantic University is front and center during this early fall practice. Butts, a HOT band alumnus who served as drum major, has gathered his musicians on the field for a huge huddle. The performance will include music from the first Herd of Thunder show in 1999, including “Maleguana” and songs from “Zorro.”

“We have a lot of time to really learn and perfect this show, but we’re learning this show as well as our funk show,” he calls out to the group, before directing walk-throughs.

Nearby, the Herd’s 46-member Color Guard and featured twirlers sit on the concrete floor of an open pavilion, listening intently to their unit’s director, Liz Bannon, '10, Life Member. She’s a HOT alumna. Her parents, both members of Tampa Bay orchestras, and brother are all USF music alumni.

Bannon played various musical instruments and danced growing up. But in high school, she glimpsed her future when she saw USF’s competitive Winter Guard unit perform. “That was the moment I knew I wanted to go to USF and be part of that,” she says.

She enrolled at USF in 2004, joined the HOT Color Guard and soon won a spot on the Winter Guard for the next four years.

Even after becoming a schoolteacher, she remained connected, joining the staff in 2012 and taking over as Color Guard director in 2017. Today, she works as the alumni relations officer for the College of Public Health, and continues to work part-time with the Color Guard.

“There’s something I tell the students on day one of rehearsal every year,” Bannon says. “If you do it right, then the people you don’t even know yet in this room will be in your wedding. Or you’ll be marrying them.”

“Constantly through the years you point out, ‘There’s another USF band or guard wedding!’ What marching band does — what music itself does — is connect people. Across majors, across backgrounds,

across beliefs. For our students, when they show up to their first class as a freshman, they already have 350 people on campus who have their back.”



USF’s Color Guard founder, Mary Dooley, '02, Life Member, can catch practices these days from the third floor of the Patel Center,



Left top: From left, Tanya Bruce, '96, Life Member, and Panos Valavanis, '17 and MSCS '19, join other HOT alumni for Homecoming rehearsal.

Left: Liz Bannon, left, Color Guard alumna and current instructor, remains close to squad founder Mary Dooley.

where she works as an executive assistant in the office of President Rhea Law.

Dooley had been teaching and directing the color guard at Gainesville High School when she received a call from Haton, the band director hired by then-President Betty Castor. Dooley started the guard in 1999, turning it into an elite unit, and in 2002, founded the USF Winter Guard, regarded today as one of the best in the nation.

She worked through the tenure of second HOT band director, Michael Robinson, and his successor, Matthew McCutchen, '06, who oversaw a leap in participation and overall caliber. "Each of them asked me what kept me in my role, and I said, 'You'll soon recognize what keeps me here: It's the students,'" Dooley recalls. "They are so special and so dedicated. I probably would have retired after 10 years, but I stayed another three because it was so hard to leave the students."

Their commitment runs deep. HOT band and guard members participate in many ensembles, including indoor concert performances and Rumble for basketball games. Color Guard members who also participate in Winter Guard average 35 hours of practice and performance time a week when seasons overlap, with semester dues paid by students to cover equipment and gear. Each HOT member receives class credit and a small semester-end talent stipend.

One HOT alumna has achieved noteworthy heights. In 2018, former drum major Melissa "Mely" Salguero, '09, won the Grammy Music Educator of the Year Award. The Herd of Thunder Marching

Band helped her overcome her shyness, she said at the time.

"Standing in front of all those marching members and leading the band helped prepare me for the day I stepped into my classroom for the first time," she said. "USF truly helped me become the leader I am today."

And there are other, equally rich, rewards.

"When we march onto the Raymond James field, I can only describe it as electric," says band co-captain Emma Nelson. "There's no other feeling like it, to see all the students and Bulls fans cheering and super excited. There's so much energy."

Megan Silvey, a senior and Color Guard section leader from Daytona Beach, says it's the best support system imaginable.

"We're all there for each other."

Then she pauses, her voice breaking and tears welling. "I think this program will be something I'll always remember. It's something that made me who I am and has given me the best friends I've ever had."

By 7:15 p.m., the band members have taken their positions and begun meticulous walk-throughs for the Homecoming show. Students memorize their music, choreography and timing as Butts directs from a tower high above the field.

As they practice, it becomes clear why original band director Haton, who died in 2008, established a "sky appreciation" moment during evening rehearsals. The horizon is now glowing a fiery orange and yellow, streaked by gray and blue.

And the Herd of Thunder marches on.

# 'It should be CEPHALOPOD week'

## 56 questions with Heather Judkins

By JOHN TIPTON / USF Advancement

**W**ITH A MIND AS AGILE as the creatures she studies, Heather Judkins, PhD '09, dives deep during our 56-question interview. An associate professor of integrative biology at USF St. Petersburg, Judkins is a marine biologist and an expert in cephalopods — octopus, squid and other sea creatures with big heads and tentacle-bejeweled arms. In 2019, she made headlines and history as part of a research team that caught a giant squid on camera in U.S. waters for the first time. It was in her back yard — the Gulf of Mexico.

Move over, "Shark Week," it's time to shine a light on cephalopods.

Here's an edited excerpt, but you can fully immerse yourself in the full video by scanning the QR code or going to [usf.to/56QJudkins](https://usf.to/56QJudkins).

**Q: What's the most surprising new species you've discovered?**

**Judkins:** The most surprising was this deep sea squid, *Bathyteuthis*, a deep maroon squid. We thought we had one new species, but we found out we had three new species.

**Q: What do you find most challenging during an expedition?**

**Judkins:** We go out to sea for a couple of weeks at a time. Weather is obviously a challenge. We sometimes have to skirt around storms and hurricanes.

**Q: What's the most fascinating thing you've seen in the deep?**

**Judkins:** We have lots of really cool biodiversity. We collect fishes, jellyfish, squids, octopus, crustaceans, and we're looking at the biodiversity. Who's found in the water column? Where? What are they eating? Are there contaminants impacting these groups?

**Q: What do you hope to change while studying biodiversity in the Gulf?**

**Judkins:** We've been doing this project since the BP oil spill occurred in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. We're hoping our work is going to better inform what goes on the next time an oil spill occurs.

**Q: What's the best way people can help the ocean?**

**Judkins:** There is a lot of evidence that what we're doing on land is actually translating to what goes on in the ocean. Anything that could be done to reduce pollution, reduce plastics, reduce trash going into landfills.

**Q: What is one thing you experienced recently that you found motivating?**

**Judkins:** I got the chance to see Jane Goodall. This woman is 89 years old and she stood there and talked to us for two hours about her work. I looked at my friend and I was like, 'I hope when I'm 89 my passion is still so great.'

**Q: Advice for aspiring marine scientists?**

**Judkins:** Whether they are a third-grader,



a high-schooler, an undergraduate, I would tell them to get out and explore. Volunteer or intern somewhere. The broader their experiences, the better they'll be able to hone in on what they're truly passionate about.

**Q: Tell us about your first experience examining a squid.**

**Judkins:** It was actually an octopus, which are notoriously difficult to identify. Mike Vecchione, my co-advisor, is sitting over my shoulder. I'm looking at this key and I cannot identify this octopus. I'm like, 'What the heck? Who wrote the key?' And Mike says very casually behind me, 'I wrote this whole book.' So that was embarrassing. He was very cool and casual about it like, 'Yep. They're really difficult to identify.'

**Q: How many octopus and squid have you examined?**

**Judkins:** It's literally 20,000ish. I have about 13,000 cephalopods I have studied as part of my work with the DEEPEND Consortium.

**Q: This or that. Would you rather live in the past or the future?**

**Judkins:** I am going say live in the past.

**Q: Who would you want to meet in the past?**

**Judkins:** Historical oceanography folks. Ones that built the first collection bottles, who discovered the deep sea first.

**Q: Capt. Nemo or Capt. Jack Sparrow?**

**Judkins:** I'm going Capt. Jack Sparrow.

**Q: Summer or winter?**

**Judkins:** Neither in Florida. Fall in New England.

**Q: Between the book and the movie, "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea"?**

**Judkins:** The book. Of course.

**Q. First thing that comes to mind. Your favorite book?**

**Judkins:** "Old Man and the Sea" by Ernest Hemingway.

**Q: "Shark Week"?**

**Judkins:** I think it should be "Cephalopod Week."

**Q: While at sea, what's your go-to snack?**

**Judkins:** A granola bar. We have to get up at really weird times, so at 2 a.m. a granola bar usually hits the spot. With a Diet Coke.

**Q: Favorite childhood toy?**

**Judkins:** My bike. You could go explore anywhere.

**Q: Childhood celebrity crush?**

**Judkins:** Andre Agassi.

**Q: All-time favorite movie?**

**Judkins:** "Space Balls." In honor of my brother. It's our favorite movie.



**Q: Favorite deep-sea creature?**

**Judkins:** The giant squid. Let's go for obvious.

**Q: When you're on a research cruise, what do you do to kill time?**

**Judkins:** We sleep! Our shifts are six hours on, six hours off for two weeks. So when the nets go down, I am taking a nap.

**Q: What's your favorite movie in which there's a boat involved?**

**Judkins:** "Jaws."

**Q: What is the most random sea life fact you know?**

**Judkins:** An adult parrotfish poops one ton of sand per year.

**Q: If you could be any sea creature, what would you be?**

**Judkins:** A tuna, because I can go in deep and shallow water and I can cross oceans.

**Q: What's one thing you do daily that makes you happy?**

**Judkins:** Come to work at USF St. Pete.

**Q: What did you want to be growing up?**

**Judkins:** A marine biologist. I thought I was going to work with Jacques Cousteau.

**Q: Do you eat seafood yourself?**

**Judkins:** I do eat seafood.

**Q: What's your favorite seafood dish?**

**Judkins:** It might be calamari actually, which is squid. As long as it's cooked properly, it's delicious.



# Their legacy thrives beneath the Golden Arches

## J.C. Prado and his Bulls family now reign as Florida's No. 1 McDonald's owner-operators

By KILEY MALLARD / USF Advancement

**T**HROUGH THE 1960S AND '70S, Sunday afternoons in the Prado family's West Tampa home meant time with grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, hanging out, sharing stories and playing games.

As the day drew to a close, Juan Carlos "J.C." Prado's dad or uncle would often gather the kids for a trip to McDonald's.

"That was our treat for the week," J.C. says.

"Seeing all the things McDonald's has provided for us and our family, you look back and get nostalgic when you remember how important that brand was to us then and what it is to us now."

J.C., his wife, Jenifer, and children Rachel and J.C. Jr. have become Florida's largest McDonald's franchise holders, with 43 restaurants owned by The Prado Group. Those golden arches symbolize more than a livelihood for this family of Bulls — they represent values passed from one generation to the next and years of hard work and sacrifice, a dynasty they hope continues for generations.

“ “

**It's all about your employees, your customers and the interactions you get to have in the restaurants with them. It's special. We impact a lot of lives."**

— J.C. Prado

"It was a seven-day-a-week grind," J.C. says of the early years. Rachel, a preschooler when her parents acquired their first restaurant in 1992, remembers going to bed in a sleeping bag under the food prep table when Mom and Dad worked late into the night.



J.C. AND JENIFER INVITE THEIR "KIDS" to the table at The Prado Group headquarters to share their family memories. Two life-sized Ronald McDonald statues greet visitors to the building and restaurant memorabilia decorates the walls. There's plenty of laughter as J.C., a gregarious storyteller, punctuates each tale with a life lesson: family comes first, work hard, take chances.

He immigrated to the United States from Cuba with his parents and big brother, Frank, when he was 5 years old. "We didn't have anything," he says, "but I didn't feel like I was ever lacking."

From early on, he chose his own path — preferably one that would keep him close to home. When Frank enrolled at Jesuit High School, J.C. opted for Tampa Catholic, where he played basketball for the district champion Crusaders.

"Sports have always been a driving motivation behind who I am as a person," he says, adding it taught him discipline, how to prepare and how to succeed. He'd go on to coach the team for years.

Tampa Catholic proved a fortuitous decision. There he met Jenifer Zambito — the future Jenifer Prado, his wife of 42 years.

When he graduated in 1976, his father urged him to follow his brother to Duke University. J.C. got in, but North Carolina seemed so far away. He and Jenifer instead enrolled at USF. An accounting major, he graduated in 1979; Jenifer followed in 1980 with a mass communications degree.

Photo: A young J.C., left, with his mother, Caridad, sisters Damarik and Maite, and older brother, Frank.



J.C. Prado says McDonald's has gone from being a Sunday evening "treat" to a way of life for him and his family.

Below: The Prados' youngest child, J.C. Jr., earned his approval in 2020, joining mother, Jenifer, and sister, Rachel, right, as an owner-operator.



JOHN TIPTON / USF Advancement



**Above: When they bought their first restaurant, Jenifer and J.C., center, never anticipated that their children, Rachel, left, and J.C. Jr., right, would one day join the business.**

He was the first Bull in his family, but he blazed a trail. He estimates 80% of his clan have since become alumni, including Rachel, '09, J.C. Jr., '14 and both of their spouses, as well as cousins, nieces and nephews. Cousin Aurelio "Lelo" Prado and his wife, Pam, both Alumni Association Life Members, are longtime USF employees.

J.C. quickly landed a job with a CPA firm and later started his own. A client eventually offered to sell him a travel agency — a turning point he never saw coming.

The agency shared a building with the regional offices for McDonald's Corp., a company Jenifer had worked with during her time at an advertising agency. Soon, the couple was booking all its travel.

In 1988, McDonald's regional manager, Bruce Reid, approached the Prados about taking their relationship a step further. McDonald's wanted to diversify their owner-operators, he said, noting Prado's Cuban heritage. He'd also seen the couple had the work ethic necessary to succeed.

"We didn't have kids, so we'd work till eight or nine o'clock at night," Jenifer says.

For J.C., it was a no-brainer.

"McDonald's was a brand of my youth," he says.

The Prados underwent McDonald's rigorous training program, including two to three days a week working, gratis, in roles from crew person to management. It culminated in two weeks at McDonald's "Hamburger University." Approved to become franchise owners in 1990, it would take two years to find an available



**It's not just my dad and mom. It's not even just me and my brother anymore. Now it's our kids and possibly even our kids' kids. We're doing something that will last for generations to come."**

**– Rachel (Prado) Millan**

restaurant close enough to Tampa to satisfy their homebody needs. They finally debuted in Brooksville, a 35-mile drive from home.

From the beginning it was a family affair, with most roles in The Prado Group filled by members of J.C.'s or Jenifer's family. The Caspers company, Florida's largest McDonald's franchisee for decades, dominated the south, so the Prados grew north and west into Bushnell, Homosassa, Crystal River and New Port Richey. By 2015 they had 10 stores.

That year, Rachel won her McDonald's seal of approval, so when nine restaurants in Clearwater became available, The Prado Group jumped.

"It was like the flood gates opened," says J.C.

J.C. Jr. earned his happy stamp in 2020 and the family's holdings continued to grow. They now include several Hillsborough County restaurants and, after Casper's

third-generation owners announced a sell-off last year, The Prado Group hopes to acquire a few of their former restaurants if McDonald's elects to rebrand them.

Reid says the key to J.C.'s success was how he got the whole family involved from the start. "He and his family have really done well. They are among the best that McDonald's has," says Reid, who has remained friends with the Prados over the last 35-plus years and sold his eight Lakeland restaurants to them when he retired.

Between the advent of smartphones and delivery services — and the COVID-19 pandemic — the business has seen revolutionary changes. Florida McDonald's, for instance, were the first to use Uber Eats.

"The younger operators were all over it," J.C. says. "They understood it."

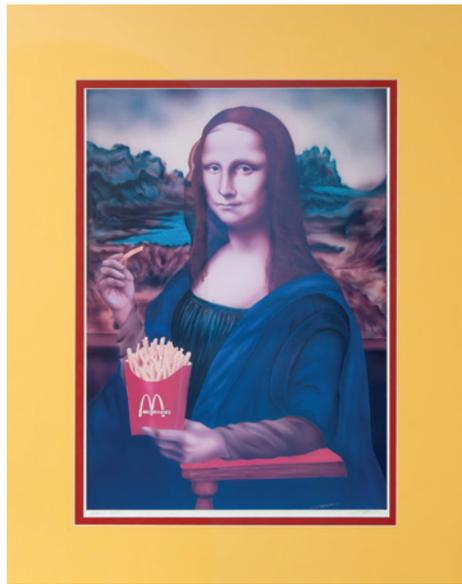
And younger customers have embraced the plethora of ways to get their Mickey D's, he says.

"McDonald's is cool to them again."

All this change has caused many older operators to bow out. But not the Prados.

Having the "kids" involved helps. "A lot of times they'll explain it to us," says Jenifer.

Rachel appreciates that role and the significance it may one day have.



"We're part of something that in the next 30 years, when our kids are having kids, they'll say, 'Wow, you guys were involved when you started doing delivery.' It's cool," she says.

The thing the Prados enjoy most about McDonald's is that it's a people business.

"It's all about your employees, your customers and the interactions you get to have in the restaurants with them. It's special," J.C. says.

"We impact a lot of lives."

J.C. Jr. agrees. "Being able to impact so many different people's lives, it's our bread and butter."

The Prados say two institutions have profoundly influenced their lives in the best of ways, and it's reassuring to know they'll continue to do so. USF will always be their school.

"That's where my grandchildren are going!" says Jenifer.

And those golden arches will always represent family time.

"It's not just my dad and my mom. It's not even just me and my brother anymore," Rachel says. "Now it's our kids and possibly even our kids' kids. We're doing something now that will last generations to come."

**Above: Even the Mona Lisa enjoys those McDonald's French fries.**

**Right: Visitors to The Prado Group offices are greeted by a life-sized statue of Ronald McDonald, his arm around a portrait of three generations of the Prado family.**



JOHN TIPTON / USF Advancement

# 'USF showed me the way'

## 2023 USF Alumni Awards

**A**S A KID, STEVE PRESLEY FIGURED he'd one day play professional football. Or baseball. Or both. College never entered his mind — he had sports, and his family had no money anyway. But when the love of his life traveled across the state to enroll at USF, he wasn't about to let her go alone.

"I got to school, and I had to choose a major," he recalls. "They put up a list, what graduates earn, and engineer was No. 1. I thought, 'That seems like a lot of math.' Accountant was No. 2. I didn't know what they did, never met one. But that day, I chose to be an accountant."

Today, Presley is Nestlé's CEO for North America, the largest market of the world's largest food and beverage company. He's also a 2023 USF Distinguished Alumnus.

"It doesn't matter what your beginning is," he says. "Are you committed to doing great things in your life? You just have to believe."

In October, the university celebrated the 47th annual USF Alumni Awards, recognizing Distinguished Alumni Presley, '90;

J. Michelle Childs, '88; and Nicholas "Nick" Cox, '85; Donald A. Gifford Service Award recipient Stephen Fessler, '77; and Paulette C. Walker, recipient of the Class of '56 service award for non-alumni.

For each of the honorees, recognized for their decades of exceptional achievement and contributions, USF was a turning point.

"USF supported me — a full academic scholarship, a job as a tutor for the basketball team and then in the Student Affairs Office," says Childs, one of three short-list candidates for a U.S. Supreme Court appointment in 2021. "That genuine support for a first-generation college student gave me the opportunity to excel."

Cox, the longest serving statewide prosecutor in Florida history, didn't have a grand plan as a freshman. Two political science professors steered him to his calling.

"I never dreamed about being a lawyer until I got to USF, and USF showed me the way," he says.

"We recognize these individuals because they are leading and serving in an exemplary way," says President Rhea Law. "They personify the values of our great university and truly represent what it means to be a USF Bull."

““

**We recognize these individuals because they are leading and serving in an exemplary way. They personify the values of our great university and truly represent what it means to be a USF Bull.”**

— President Rhea Law, '77



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## USF Distinguished Alumna

Recognizing USF alumni who have achieved the pinnacle of success in their careers

## J. Michelle Childs

Management '88, Life Member

# One of the nation's great legal minds

**F**ROM MISS BLACK FLORIDA to one of three front-runners for a seat on the U.S. Supreme Court, J. Michelle Childs' quest for excellence has always been boundless.

Today, she sits on the U.S. District Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, the second most powerful court in the nation and considered a steppingstone to the U.S. Supreme Court.

"There are so many reasons why Michelle is a great legal mind, but part of it is she just doesn't sleep until she gets it right," says Burnadette Norris-Weeks, '88, Michelle's Delta Sigma Theta sorority sister.

Michelle led from a young age. At her South Carolina high school, she was class president and valedictorian, and at USF, she reigned as Homecoming Queen, Miss Uhuru, Most Outstanding Senior and Delta Sigma Theta chapter sorority president. In 1986, she won the Miss Black Florida beauty pageant — and scored what was, in effect, her first successful lawsuit when the pageant director reneged on promised prizes.

Graduate degrees in business and law followed, and Michelle joined Nexsen Pruet law firm in South Carolina. In 2000, she became the first Black woman to make partner at a major law firm in the state.

She ascended to the South Carolina Circuit Court in 2006 and to the state's U.S. District Court in 2009, presiding over numerous landmark cases. One ruling required South Carolina to recognize same-sex marriages from other states two years before the Supreme Court legalized it across the country.

Her record caught the eye of President Joe Biden, who shortlisted her for the U.S. Supreme Court in 2021. He ultimately appointed Justice Ketanji Brown-Jackson, then nominated Michelle to her current post. Her investiture ceremony proved poignant and memorable.

"She was praised by so many luminaries, including Congressman Jim Clyburn, The Honorable Merrick Garland, and Justice Ketanji Brown-Jackson," says Margaret Seymour, senior counsel at Saxton and Stump and retired federal judge.

"When Justice Brown-Jackson and Judge Childs embraced during the ceremony it brought tears to my eyes to see two Black women in the highest legal positions in our country." Go to [usf.to/Childs](https://usf.to/Childs) for more.

- MELISSA WOLFE, '13, Life Member / USF Advancement





## USF Distinguished Alumnus

Recognizing USF alumni who have achieved the pinnacle of success in their careers

## Nicholas “Nick” Cox

Political Science '85

## Fighting for Floridians

**N**ICK COX HAS ALWAYS had a knack for making headlines.

The press captured a young Nick on the ballfield and celebrating the nation’s Bicentennial. He went national in 1985 when, as a USF student and rural mail carrier, he made the first U.S. postal delivery inside the walls of a local nudist community.

The media attention took a more serious turn when he began prosecuting capital cases at the Hillsborough state attorney’s office with Karen, the mentor he would eventually marry. They continued when, as deputy attorney general for Central Florida, he tackled racketeering, Medicaid fraud and crimes against seniors.

He moved on to teaching at Stetson Law School and then to the troubled Florida Department of Children and Families. Media reports touted a new transparency with Nick serving as a regional director under Bob Butterworth.

In 2011, Nick’s former USF classmate, then-Attorney General Pam Bondi called on him to serve as statewide prosecutor. Earlier this year, upon being sworn in for his fourth term, he became the longest-serving statewide prosecutor in Florida history. He leads the fight against



organized crime, including human trafficking and gang violence.

“Outside a courtroom, he tended to be happy as a frat boy and good-natured as a Labrador,” the Tampa Bay Times wrote of Nick in 2007. “Inside a courtroom, he was all booming voice and righteous anger, urging juries to vote guilty. They generally did.”

Nick attended Jesuit High School and then USF, where political science professors Scott Payne and Michael Gibbons inspired his interest in the legal profession. He won a scholarship to Washburn University’s law school in Topeka, Kansas.

Nick was named the 2018 Prosecutor of the Year by the Florida Council on Human Trafficking, and he’s been honored by numerous agencies, including the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Tampa Police Department.”

“He has that drive. He has that purpose. He has that mission,” says Florida Attorney General Ashley Moody. “And because of that, he inspires everybody he works with.” Go to [usf.to/Cox](http://usf.to/Cox) for more.

- DAVINA GOULD, MA '03 / USF Advancement



## USF Distinguished Alumnus

Recognizing USF alumni who have achieved the pinnacle of success in their careers

## Steve Presley

Accounting '90

# From factory floor to CEO

**T**HROUGHOUT HIS CAREER, Steve Presley has been guided by generous mentors and a desire to help others achieve.

His high school sweetheart, Pam, played a role, too. He didn't plan to attend college, but when she announced she'd be traveling across the state to attend USF, he followed.

Steve began his career as an auditor in an accounting firm, where he mastered balance sheets, but felt something missing. He wanted to play a bigger role. So he went to work at a confections company where the plant manager took him under wing, guiding and teaching until he told his young protégé it was time to reach higher.

Nestlé, the world's largest food and beverage company, offered that opportunity. Again, mentors stepped in, showing him the importance of connecting with people from the ground floor to the c-suite.

Today, Steve is Nestlé's CEO for North America, known for empowering employees, transforming workplace culture and inspiring young people.



"People want to follow him no matter what he does," says Judy Cascapera, chief people officer for Nestlé North America. "That is a talent that I have not seen in anybody that I've ever worked for or with."

Steve was just 29 when he joined Nestlé as the controller for a struggling Virginia beverage plant. There, a new mentor laid the groundwork for transforming the plant by building relationships with employees.

They turned the business around and Steve was offered a junior executive role with Nestlé. He rose through the ranks and was named CEO in 2018. To spur growth, he moved the North American headquarters to Virginia, persuading many employees to follow. In the past five years, Nestlé North America has grown by nearly \$10 billion.

Grateful for the help he received as a young man, Steve has mentored thousands of young people over the years. He and Pam now work with Speak Up for Kids, advocating for children in foster care.

Through the Nestlé Foundation, they created the Steven and Pamela Presley scholarship for USF student-athletes.

His advice for success? "Fall in love with somebody that's amazing and supports every dream you have." Go to [usf.to/Presley](http://usf.to/Presley) for more.



### Donald A. Gifford Service Award

Recognizing USF alumni who have provided countless hours of service to USF and the Tampa Bay community

## Stephen Fessler

Music '77, Life Member

# A passion for arts and humanity

**A** YOUNG STEVE FESSLER HEARD Julie Andrews sing in “The Sound of Music” and felt her touch his soul, striking the opening chord of a lifelong love of the arts.

At home, his parents were always helping others, instilling in their son a strong sense of empathy and dedication to service.

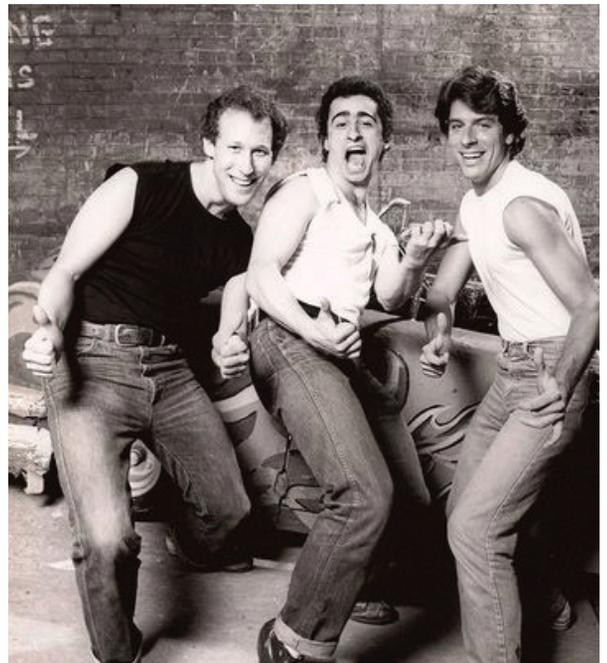
The twin passions have led to a life of extraordinary achievement.

“My USF professor, Dr. Robert Summer, taught me to listen to others, because life is not a solo,” Steve says.

Enrolling on a vocal scholarship, he was still a student when he was selected to sing in the 1976 National Bicentennial Chorus, performing in the world premiere of “American Cantata” by Lukas Foss. As a senior, he nailed a job with the famed Norman Luboff Choir.

He has since appeared in Broadway musicals, including “Grease,” and performances at 245 venues in eight countries. Eventually, he returned to Disney where he worked as a producer.

A mentor, teacher and volunteer at USF for more



than 40 years, and current USF Foundation board member, Steve married Randy Lord in 2015. The two share a passion for music and service. In 2016, they established the Steve Fessler and Randy Lord graduate assistantship scholarship.

“Any time you ask him to do anything, or if he sees a need, he will be the first to volunteer,” says fellow Foundation board member Anila Jain, '81, Life Member.

An executive board member for Central Florida Community Arts, Steve has overseen the creation of inclusive programs, like dance for Parkinson’s disease patients.

In 2021, he and Randy helped bring “A Strange Loop” to Broadway. The show won the 2022 Tony Award for Best Musical, and the couple brought some of the cast members to USF to work with students.

“If you want to touch the past, touch a rock,” Steve says. “If you want to touch the present, touch a flower. If you want to touch the future, touch a life.”

Go to [usf.to/Fessler](https://usf.to/Fessler) for more.

- GREG BOWERS, MEd '11, Life Member / USF Advancement



## Class of '56 Award

Recognizing a non-USF graduate who has provided countless hours of service to USF and the Tampa Bay community

## Paulette C. Walker

## Educator, leader, beloved mentor

**A** THIRD-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENT — rare for a Black person growing up in the U.S. in the 1950s and '60s — Paulette Walker's dreams were fueled by the legacies of her parents and grandparents.

She graduated high school at 16 and attended Michigan State University with plans to become a pediatrician. Acceptance at a medical school would have been challenge enough for a single Black woman in the 1960s, but when she married, she knew the odds were stacked against her.

She switched from pre-med to mathematics and had a job even before she graduated.

Paulette became the first Black female systems analyst at the local telephone company, Michigan Bell — owned today by AT&T.

But she felt dissatisfied. Her mother encouraged her to teach.

She went to work at Highland Park School District near Detroit, teaching while pursuing a master's degree. Next, she became the school's guidance counselor.

In 1990, she moved to Florida and launched what would become a 21-year tenure at USF's College of Education.

"I said, 'This is a university that is already focusing on what needs to happen. It's a university of progress, and



that's where I want to go,'" she says.

She became a beloved mentor and respected colleague — a professor and academic advisor, and later, director of undergraduate programs and internships. She also rose as a beacon of leadership, becoming the 25th national president of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc., the largest Black Greek-letter sorority in the world.

"She made a difference and an impact in our organization on so many different levels — community outreach, technology, the whole sisterhood coming together," says sales executive Joannell Lawson, a former Delta Sigma Theta regional leader.

Walker continues to make a positive impact in the community through her work with multiple nonprofits.

"Paulette Walker cares about those she interacts with," says Diane Briscoe, a former College of Education faculty member. "She demonstrated that every day and it was a constant reminder of how important that is." Go to [usf.to/Walker](http://usf.to/Walker) for more.

- JESSICA MARTINEZ, '18 and MA '23 / USF Advancement

# 5 minutes with Christine

## My fellow Bulls,

WHAT AN EXCITING TIME FOR USF ALUMNI! We're now 377,000 strong and more connected than ever before, with new programs in an ever-growing list of new ways to support our great AAU university.

This fall saw a sell-out crowd celebrating our five illustrious 2023 USF Alumni Award recipients. Horns Up for Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. alumnae, whose members showed up en masse to recognize two of their own: J. Michelle Childs and Paulette C. Walker. Learn more about all five of the incredible honorees on pages 44–49.

Your pride was on full display throughout Homecoming, with more than 5,000 Bulls and friends attending the Alumni Association's annual Welcome Home Party and

stopping by our Spirit Tent before the Homecoming game. A record 158 Herd of Thunder marching band alumni joined student HOT members during the halftime show, which marked the band's 25th anniversary with a salute to its founder, former USF President Betty Castor.

Your Alumni Association leads all Homecoming planning, with 66 unique activities this year for alumni, students and their families, employees and our neighbors. I can't think of a better way to unify our USF community and strengthen our shared bonds. Thank you for your enthusiastic participation.

Earlier this month, we inducted the classes of 1972 and 1973 into the Golden Guard Society. The anniversary ceremony marks 50 years since graduation with a luncheon reunion and campus tour. Many thanks to the special Bulls on our reunion committee: Phil Amuso, '73; Jim Crotty, '72; Joe Guidry, '73; Lenora Lake-Guidry, '73; Bruce Talcott, '73; and José Valiente, '73.

I hope you get some down time in the coming weeks, because 2024 will kick off with a bang! We'll celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. Day Jan. 13–15 with the annual Alumni Stampede of Service. Dozens of community service projects are planned by alumni groups around the country. Visit [usfalumni.org](http://usfalumni.org) to sign up.

On March 9, the wildly popular Green & Gold Gala returns to The Florida Aquarium in downtown Tampa. Tickets are all-inclusive and provide an evening of great food, drinks, live music, an exciting silent auction, great USF spirit and camaraderie, and surprises that will absolutely delight you. Get your tickets soon — this event is often a sell-out! Visit [usfalumni.org/2024G3](http://usfalumni.org/2024G3).

Thank you for being USF's largest, strongest and proudest group of advocates. Together, we're making an incredible impact. Every day.

Go Bulls!

**CHRISTINE TURNER, '97, LIFE MEMBER #4335**  
USF Alumni Association Chair





## Your 2023-24 Alumni Association board

The USF Alumni Association’s board of directors includes Bulls who’ve demonstrated a firm commitment to USF’s success and are association Life Members and Circle of Excellence donors. It also includes a USF presidential designee, a USF Board of Trustees representative, a USF Foundation representative, a faculty/staff representative, a USF Athletics Bulls Club representative,

and two students — the student government vice president and a USF Ambassadors campus president. Ex-officio directors are the senior vice president for USF Advancement and the association executive director.

The board sets policy and guides the direction of the association as it connects and engages alumni for their lifelong involvement with the University.

**Officers**

**Chair:** Christine Turner, '97

**Vice chair:** Sally Dee, '94 and MBA '11

**Past chair:** Braulio Colón, '03 and MPA '10

**Treasurer:** Juan Soltero, '10

**Secretary:** Balaji Ramadoss, MSEE '03 and PhD '14

### Directors:

- Misty Akers, '01
- Kerine Black, '00 and '01
- Maya Brown, '15
- Ashley Butler, '12
- Emily Colón, '10 and MPA '14
- Jennifer Condon
- Sara DuCuennois, '99
- Mark Giddarie, MS '17 and DBA '21

- David Hollis, '69
- Gina Kafalas, '12
- Ram Kancharla, '85 and MBA '87
- Maja Lacevic, '09
- Allison Madden, '03 and MBA '15
- Diana Michel, '88
- Will Perez, '14
- Luz Randolph, '06 and MEd '08
- Todd St. John-Fulton, '19
- Verlon Salley, 1994-97

### Student representatives:

- Sean Schrader, '22, USF Ambassadors St. Petersburg campus president
- Elizabeth Volmy, Student Government vice president

### Ex-officio directors:

- Jay Stroman, senior vice president for USF Advancement and Alumni Affairs; CEO USF Foundation
- Bill McCausland, MBA '96, vice president and USF Alumni Association executive director

# WHERE'S Rocky?

With more than 377,000 alumni around the world, Rocky finds plenty of friends and willing travel companions. If he jumps in your suitcase or pops up where you least expect him, snap a pic!

Email high-resolution photos (300 ppi) and details to [alumni@usf.edu](mailto:alumni@usf.edu) with Where's Rocky in the subject line. Or mail via USPS to USF Alumni Association — Where's Rocky?, 4202 E. Fowler Ave., ALC100, Tampa, FL 33620-5455.

**a** Rocky went the distance to escape the heat this summer, traveling to the Alaskan glaciers with **Larry Blenke**, MBA '89, and **Virginia (Curley) Blenke**, '81. They were celebrating the anniversary of their blind date 35 years ago at USF St. Petersburg. The Blenkes' Bulls family includes son, Anthony, '13, and daughter, Mary, MA '18.

**b** Rocky couldn't get enough of Iceland this year. He tagged along with **Anne Schulz**, '01, Life Member #5316, and her husband, **Robert**, to see famous Elephant Rock on Heimaey Island.





**C** How do you hail a gondola? Rocky learned from **Dr. Anila Jain**, '81, Life Member #132, and **Bill Mariotti**, '15, Life Member #3626, in beautiful Venice, Italy! Anila and Bill are USF Foundation and USF Sarasota-Manatee board members. Anila is also a USF Distinguished Alumna and USF Donald A. Gifford Service Award recipient!

**d** He's visiting Europe's mightiest waterfall — in Iceland! Rocky joined **Karin Johnson**, '74, Life Member #7944, and **Bob Johnson**, '76, Life Member #7945, on a trek to see Dettifoss.

**e** There's only one place to see Superman and that's in Metropolis, Illinois. **Michael Ciccarello**, '77, Life Member, brought Rocky along to meet The Man of Steel.

# Cha-ching! These **BULL-LED** businesses are winners!

**F**ROM A NONPROFIT ADDRESSING the housing crisis to a real estate company redefining the industry, 56 Bull-led businesses are leading the charge for phenomenal growth. The 11th annual USF Fast 56 Awards celebrated the fastest-growing Bull-led businesses based on revenues over the previous three years. This year's winners included surprises — all revealed during a suspense-filled awards presentation in September.

“The drama!” exclaimed Michael Ugliaboro, chief financial officer of first-time award recipient JDMG, LLC and subsidiaries, which ranked No. 2 overall. “What a fantastic way to recognize Bull entrepreneurs. We didn’t get No. 1 this year but look out — we’ll be back!”

For the first time in the awards’ history, the title of No. 1 fastest-growing business went to a previous first-place prizewinner, IDEAL AGENT. The real estate services company also placed No. 1 in 2022.

Additionally, IDEAL AGENT won the 2023 Accelerator Award, which recognizes the fastest-growing Fast 56 company with more than \$20 million in annual revenue.

In another first, the business with the highest annual revenue overall, recipient of the Apex Award, won that honor for the second consecutive year. Baldwin Risk Partners ranked No. 6 overall in the final line-up.

“We celebrate our Bull-led businesses because they make such a difference in the lives of so many people,” says Bill McCausland, MBA '96 and Life Member, vice president and executive director of the USF Alumni Association. “These are the folks providing products and services that make our lives happier, healthier and safer. They’re creating jobs. They’re innovating every day, finding new ways for their industries to meet our wants and needs.

“Congratulations and thank you to all Fast 56 recipients and all of our incredible Bull business leaders!”

Nominations for the 2024 Fast 56 will open in the spring. Visit [usfalumni.org/fast56](http://usfalumni.org/fast56) for updates.

— FAST **56** TOP TEN —



**1**

**IDEAL AGENT**  
[idealagent.com](http://idealagent.com)

**Steve Johnston**, '95,  
Life Member, Founder/CEO

**Zavier Rodriguez**, '99  
Co-Founder/Chief Technology  
Officer

**Gavin Scott**, '00  
Co-Founder/Vice President of IT

IDEAL AGENT is a full-service real estate services company that makes the home-buying and-selling process easy and profitable.



# 2

## JDMG LLC and its subsidiaries and affiliates

hub.deltaoilco.com

**Michael J. Uglialoro, '07**  
CPA, Founder and Chief Financial Officer

**James Dallas Owens, 1996-97**  
CEO

**Dr. Brandon Faza, '05, Life Member**  
Medical Director

JDMG LLC and its subsidiaries and affiliates is a consumer packaged goods cannabis company serving the Oklahoma market.



# 3

## ONE DAY CAME INC.

www.onedaycame.com

**David C. Delancy, '98**  
Owner-Principal

One Day Came Inc. is a general contractor and construction manager specializing in design plus build, commercial and new construction, renovations and commercial space improvements.



Presenting Sponsor



**4**

**MY ORGANIC TURF**  
myorganicturf.com

**Eric McCarthy, '13**  
Co-Owner

My Organic Turf is the Tampa Bay area's go-to expert for sustainable lawn care, pest control and weed control rooted in organic principles.

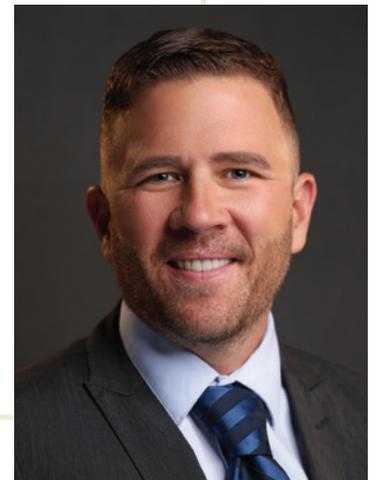


**5**

**MATRIX HORMONES**  
matrixhormones.com

**Edward Leonard, '02,**  
Life Member, CEO

Matrix Hormones is an elite provider of bioidentical hormone replacement therapy based in Tampa and providing services nationwide.



**6**

**BALDWIN RISK PARTNERS**  
baldwinriskpartners.com

**Elizabeth Krystyn, '87,**  
Life Member  
Founding Partner

**Corbyn Lichon, '13**  
Chief Accounting Officer

Baldwin Risk Partners is an award-winning, entrepreneur-led insurance distribution holding company.



**7**

**THE CANDLE POUR**  
thecandlepour.com

**Misty Akers, '01, Life Member**  
Co-Founder

**Dennis Akers, '10, Life Member**  
Co-Founder

The Candle Pour is a custom candle experience that offers a unique way for people to discover scents while creating a customized product.



THE CANDLE POUR



# WHO SAYS SLOW AND STEADY WINS THE RACE?

We're honored to be among this year's USF Fast 56 awardees



Although we work with some pretty slow moving customers (like turtles and manatees), we're growing rapidly and so excited to be one of USF's Fast 56 awardees. We've been busy restoring Florida's water bodies to healthy, thriving ecosystems since 2014. Congratulations to all the University of South Florida's Fast 56 awardees.



For more information on our projects and services, please visit [seaandshoreline.com](http://seaandshoreline.com) or follow us on social media.



– FAST **56** TOP TEN –

**8**

**EXCITE MEDICAL**

excitemedical.com

**Saleem Musallam, '04,**  
Life Member  
Founder/CEO

Excite Medical is a medical device company that holds four U.S. Food and Drug Administration 510(k)s, including one for the DRX9000, used to treat lower back pain and sciatica.



**9**

**WEY ENGINEERING, PLLC**

weyeng.com

**Matthew Wey, PE, '97 and MSCE '00**  
President

**Don Skelton Jr., '17**  
Associate Vice  
President/Private  
Development Lead

Wey Engineering provides consulting services to the Florida Department of Transportation and various municipal agencies in the Tampa Bay area.



**10**

**PIPAS LAW GROUP**

pipaslaw.com

**Christian Pipas, '07**  
Owner

**Chris Waters, '12**  
Managing Partner

Pipas Law Group fights for the rights of injured people in Florida.



PIPAS LAW GROUP  
PERSONAL INJURY & CIVIL LITIGATION

**The 2023 USF Fast 56**

- ALLMAG Auto Parts
- AspirEDU Inc.
- Atlas Professional Services Inc.
- Baldwin Risk Partners
- Barrett School of Music
- Bay Stage Live
- Black Digital
- BridgeView
- ComplianceQuest
- Control Logics
- David J Reali, CPA
- DCE Live Inc.
- Diamond View
- Edgility Inc.
- Element Engineering Group LLC
- Everett Financial Group LLC
- Excite Medical
- Fresh Legal Perspective, PL
- Habitat for Humanity of Pinellas & West Pasco Counties
- Hammerlane Apparel
- Hydra Engineering & Construction LLC
- Ice of Central Florida
- IDEAL AGENT
- JDMG LLC and its Subsidiaries and Affiliates
- Keel Farms
- Lukos
- Machine Tool Recyclers
- MADE
- Majestic Restaurant Group
- Mastry's Brewing Co.
- Matrix Hormones
- McKay Advertising + Activation
- Metrc LLC
- Moxie Digital
- Mueller Pye & Associates CPA
- My Organic Turf
- Northwestern Mutual
- NovelEsolutions Inc.
- One Day Came Inc.
- PainTEQ
- Park Family & Cosmetic Dentistry
- Patel, Greene & Associates LLC
- Pipas Law Group
- Raney's LLC
- ReedTMS Logistics
- Riverwalk Boating Company
- Sea & Shoreline
- STRATEGIC TAX CONSULTING INC.
- Superior Optical Labs Inc.
- Tarmak USA
- The Candle Pour
- The Joint Chiropractic Tampa Bay
- Veith Engineering & Business Solutions
- Walker Chiropractic and Wellness Center
- Westminster Pharmaceuticals LLC
- Wey Engineering, PLLC



**Tampa Bay Times**  
**Pursue  
the truth**

[tampabay.com](http://tampabay.com)

The news you need  
from the source  
you trust.

PROUD SUPPORTER OF THE  
USF ALUMNI  
ASSOCIATION

# Class Notes

## 1970s

**DERREL BRYAN**, Special Education '72 and EdD '04, has been appointed interim dean of the School of Education at Florida Southern College. He was previously an adjunct professor at the college.



**JULIANNE HOLT**, Finance '77, Life Member, received the Hawkins Community Partnership Award during the USF Department of Criminology Wall of Fame ceremony. Holt has served as public defender of the 13th Judicial Circuit for 31 years. She has also been a USF adjunct professor since 1997.



**CATHERINE PEEK MCEWEN**, Political Science '79, Life Member, has been appointed to two committees of the Judicial Conference of the United States, the policy-making body of the federal judiciary. She was appointed to an indefinite term on the Committee on the Judicial Branch and a second term on the Advisory Committee on Bankruptcy Rules. McEwen is a USF Distinguished Alumna.

**ALLEN SHIRLEY**, MEd Educational Leadership '79, was appointed to the Florida High School Athletic Association board of directors. He is the principal of South Sumter High School in Bushnell, Florida, and the former director of secondary education and district athletic director for Sumter County.

## 1980s

**MICHAEL B. BENARDO**, Finance '88, was appointed associate director for the anti-money laundering and cyber fraud branch of the division of risk management supervision at the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. in Washington, D.C. He previously served as cyber fraud and financial crimes section chief for the FDIC.



**JOHN CHIANG**, Finance '84, has joined the Chijet Motor Co Inc. board of directors. He served as treasurer of California from 2015 to 2019.

**RANDY NUNLEY**, Accounting '87, Life Member, was named inspector general of Seminole County Clerk and Comptroller of the Circuit Court. He was previously senior internal auditor with the Greater Orlando Aviation Authority.



**J. MICHAEL PEPPERS**, Accounting '85 and MAcc '90, Life Member, was appointed to the national board of the Committee of Sponsoring Organizations of the Treadway Commission. Peppers is chief audit executive for the University of Texas System.

**DAVE PUHALSKI**, Physical Education '85, Life Member, was recognized for 32 years of success as Land O'Lakes (Florida) High School's boys' varsity basketball head coach when the Pasco County School Board named the school's gymnasium in his honor. Puhalski coached his teams to 479 wins and six conference and district championships before retiring in 2021.

**ELLIOT STERN**, Accounting '80 and MBA '84, Life Member, was appointed to the Early Learning Coalition of Pinellas County. He owns Elliot W. Stern Consulting and is past chair of the Better Business Bureau.



**LEE BERCAW**, Criminology '97 and MA Criminal Justice Administration '12, Life Member, was named chief of the Tampa Police Department. He has been with the department for 26 years.

**JONI BERNBAUM**, Criminology '94 and MA Counselor Education '98, an associate instructor of criminology at USF, was selected to participate in the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Citizens Academy.

**LUCIA MARTINEZ GONZALEZ**, MA Library and Information Science '91, received the Elizabeth Martinez Lifetime Achievement Award for excellence in librarianship. A librarian and award-winning children's book author, she is a past president of the Association for Library Service to Children of the American Library Association.



**ARTHUR HUSHEN**, Criminology '96, Life Member, was inducted into the USF Department of Criminology Wall of Fame as a distinguished alumnus. Hushen has 30 years of law enforcement experience, retiring from the Tampa Police Department in 2006, where he served in the Special Operations Bureau. He played an instrumental role in creating the first Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design unit in the country.

## Send us your class notes!

Send Class Notes submissions and high-resolution (at least 300 ppi) photos to [pcarnathan@usf.edu](mailto:pcarnathan@usf.edu) or mail to Penny Carnathan, USF Advancement Communications and Marketing, 4202 E. Fowler Ave., ALC100, Tampa, FL 33620-5455

## 1990s

**SUZANNE BECHARD**, English '93, Life Member, was named associate deputy attorney general of Florida's criminal and capital appellate bureaus. She joined the attorney general's office in 2001 and was named Tampa criminal appeals bureau chief in 2018.





**MONICA MARTINEZ**, Interdisciplinary Social Sciences '97 and MA Criminal Justice Administration '18, was inducted into the USF Department of Criminology Wall of Fame as an outstanding ambassador, which honors professionals who have represented the Department of Criminology in ways that promote and enhance its identity. Martinez is director of the resource development department for the 13th Judicial Circuit Administrative Office of the Courts.

**NICOLE NEWLON**, Finance '95 and MBA '97, was appointed to the Pasco-Hernando State College District board of trustees. She is an attorney at Johnson, Newlon & DeCort, P.A.

**SANDY PETTIT**, Chemical Engineering '94, MChE '10 and PhD '14, Life Member, has joined the University of Alabama as the College of Engineering's assistant dean for student success. She was previously a USF professor.

## 2000s

**GENEVIEVE BORELLO**, International Studies '08, was named an Association Forum Forty Under 40 recipient. The Chicago "association of the associations industry" recognizes outstanding association and nonprofit professionals for their accomplishments. Borello is director of membership, marketing and diversity for the American Bar Association.

**APRIL GRAJALES**, Finance '01 and MBA '03, Life Member, has joined Regions Bank as senior vice president, Tampa market executive and Tampa Bay commercial area executive. She is a USF Foundation board member and a former USF Alumni Association board chair.

**CHRIS HARDEN**, MBA '07, won a Mom's Choice Award for "Find Stanley! The Christmas Treasure Hunt Game" and "Stanley & the Candy Cane Wormhole." Harden is an author, illustrator and founder of Candy Cane Wormhole, LLC.



**JUNG KWAK**, PhD '06, was a featured lecturer in the School of Aging Studies and Florida Policy Exchange Center on Aging Distinguished Alumni Lecture Series. Kwak is an associate professor at the University of Texas at Austin School of Nursing.

**ASHLEY LANSDALE**, Mass Communications '06, has joined Starbucks as senior communications manager, global supply chain, in Seattle. She was previously public relations manager for Amazon.

**KARLA MASTRACCHIO**, Communication '03, Life Member, has joined the National Security Innovation Network/Defense Innovation Unit in Washington, D.C., as senior communication director. She was previously academic chair, Asia/Pacific, for the Joint Special Operations University in Hawaii.



**ANDREA NALLS**, English '09 and MA Library and Information Science '11, Life Member, was named CEO and president of Dunedin Fine Art Center in Dunedin, Florida. She was previously director of

experience and operations at the Tampa Bay History Center.



**ELIZABETH PERKINS**, Psychology '03 and PhD '09, was awarded the Service to the Association Award by the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities,

the largest interdisciplinary membership organization of professionals and others



concerned about intellectual and developmental disabilities. Perkins has been a member of the association for more than 20 years.

**MATHEW RATNER**, Communication '08, has been appointed director of sports and entertainment tourism at the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau. He was previously the bureau's associate director.



**DAVID REALI**, Accounting '09, Life Member, has expanded David J Reali CPA with the acquisition of Barbara Mott & Associates. His firm, a two-time USF Fast 56 award recipient, was named to the Bradenton Herald's 2023 list of Bradenton's Best in the tax services and accounting firm categories.

# Class Notes



**JOAN REID**, Psychology '04, MA Rehabilitation Counseling '04 and PhD '10, was inducted into the USF Department of Criminology Wall of Fame as a distinguished alumna. Reid is a USF criminology professor and director of the USF Trafficking in Persons Risk to Resilience Research Lab at USF St. Petersburg.



**NASREEN SADEQ**, Psychology '13 and PhD '19, was selected jointly by the Gerontological Society of America and the Academy for Gerontology in Higher Education as a recipient of the 2023 Rising Star Early Career Faculty Award. Sadeq is an assistant professor of instruction, among other roles, in the USF School of Aging Studies.

**ANDY TAYLOR**, Political Science '09, Life Member, has joined Tampa Electric as regional manager for Pasco and east Hillsborough counties. He previously served as a legislative aide for Pasco County Commissioner Seth Weightman.

**ASHLEY TROUTMAN**, Marketing '04, has been appointed to the Polk State College District board of trustees. He is a financial advisor with Northwestern Mutual Wealth Management and previously worked as a field representative for Woodmen of the World and as a sales team leader for Fields & Company.



**SHELLY M. WAGERS**, MA Criminology '05 and PhD '12, was inducted into the USF Department of Criminology Wall of Fame as an outstanding ambassador, which honors professionals who represent the Department of Criminology in ways that promote and enhance its identity. Wagers is a USF associate professor of criminology and president of the National Partnership to End Interpersonal Violence Across the Lifespan.

**SETH WEIGHTMAN**, Criminology '08 and MS Entrepreneurship in Applied Technologies '11, was elected to the Pasco County (Florida) Board of Commissioners. He is the municipal services manager for Republic Services Inc. waste disposal company.



**JONATHAN "J.B." WRIGHT**, Industrial Engineering '05, Life Member, was promoted to director of manufacturing engineering at McCormick Stevenson Corp. in Clearwater. He was previously the company's manufacturing engineering manager.

**LAURI WRIGHT**, PhD '07, was named president of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. She previously directed USF's doctorate of clinical nutrition program and the Center for Nutrition and Food Security.

## 2010s

**ASHLEY BELL BARNETT**, MPA '10, has been reappointed to the Polk State College District board of trustees. She is the immediate past chair. Barnett is a former teacher who serves on multiple community boards.

**JOEL BROWN**, Political Science '11, Life Member, has joined Tampa Electric as regional manager for Tampa/Hillsborough County. He previously served as the interagency water manager for Pinellas County Utilities.

**DANIEL CARDWELL**, English '14 and MA Library and Information Science '16, Life Member, received the International Graduate of the Year Award from Phi Delta Phi, International Legal Honors Society. He is a 2023 graduate of Western Michigan University Cooley Law School.

**VANESSA CENTELLES**, Criminology '17 and MA '19, was selected as a 2023 American Society of Criminology Ruth Peterson Fellow. The Ruth D. Peterson Fellowship for Racial and Ethnic Diversity Award encourages students of color to earn their degrees and enter the field of criminology and criminal justice.



**CHRISTIANA S. CROWDER**, Criminology '16, was inducted into the USF Department of Criminology Wall of Fame as an outstanding ambassador, which honors professionals who represent the

department in ways that promote and enhance its identity. She is vice president of Citigroup's Financial Intelligence Unit, conducting money laundering, terrorist financing and fraud investigations.

**RONNIE GAJOWNIK**, Interdisciplinary Social Sciences '15, was named manager of the Hillsboro Hops Minor League Baseball team. She was previously the Minor League Baseball coach for the Arizona Diamondbacks.

**MEAGAN KOPSTAD**, Psychology and Long-Term Care Administration '18, received an Outstanding Alumni Award from the USF School of Aging Studies. Kopstad is executive director of Blue Heron Senior Living in Wesley Chapel, Florida.



**ANDREW KOUTNIK**, MS Medical Sciences '17 and PhD '20, has joined Sansum Diabetes Research Institute in Santa Barbara, California, as a research scientist.



**MELISSA LUGO**, MA Criminology '13, was inducted into the USF Department of Criminology Wall of Fame as a distinguished alumna. Lugo is a research and policy associate at the North Carolina Sentencing and Policy Advisory Commission.

**TARA MCCARTY**, Mass Communications '12, has joined the metro team at The Washington Post as its first visual enterprise editor. She previously worked on the paper's design team.

**JEFF ODOM**, Mass Communications '16, has joined Indianapolis-based IndyCar as director of digital marketing. He previously oversaw digital and social media for Orlando City SC of Major League Soccer and Orlando Pride of the National Women's Soccer League.



**LINDSAY PETERSON**, PhD '16, received an Outstanding Alumni Award from the USF School of Aging Studies. Peterson is a research assistant professor and director of the Florida Policy Exchange Center on Aging in the USF School of Aging Studies.

**MATTHEW SCHNELLER**, PharmD '16, was selected as the Young Pharmacist of The Year by the Florida Pharmacy Association. He is a pharmacist at Walgreens Boost Alliance.

## 2020s

**DWAYNE BOYLES**, Integrated Public Relations and Advertising '21, was selected by the Vegas Vipers in the XFL Rookie Draft. He is a former linebacker for the USF Bulls.

**JADEJHA EDWARDS**, Criminology '21, competed on an episode of the TV show "Hot Wheels: Ultimate Challenge Best Builds." She is a cybersecurity engineer.

**TAYLER ONION**, PhD '22, has joined Western Illinois University athletics as assistant athletic director for development. She was previously assistant director for student-athlete enhancement at USF.



**ALEX THIEL**, MA Criminal Justice Administration '21, was inducted into the USF Department of Criminology Wall of Fame as a distinguished alumnus. Thiel is a sector commander for

the Tampa Police Department, where he has served for more than 18 years.



**DANIELLE THOMAS**, Criminology '20 and MA Criminology '22, was inducted into the USF Department of Criminology Wall of Fame as an outstanding ambassador, which honors professionals

who represent the department in ways that promote and enhance its identity. Thomas is a lead research assistant for the Crime Etiology and Treatment Evaluation Lab at USF.

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## In Memoriam

**PAMELA JEANNE (TRAUGOTT) ADLER**, Sociology '93 and MA Education '94, Aug. 8, 2023

**NOLA ALLEN**, MBA '83 and MPH '05, USF Professor Aug. 6, 2023

**PAUL J. BEHRENS**, MS Marine Science '75, Sept. 9, 2023

**SHIRLEY ANN CHENNAULT**, Psychology '73, MA '76 and PhD '89, June 26, 2023

**MATTHEW "MATTY" DAVIDSON**, General Business Studies '19, Sept. 10, 2023

**RICHARD GLENN FERNANDEZ**, Finance '75, Aug. 21, 2023

**DR. JAMES RAYMOND FISHER JR.**, MA Sociology '76, July 9, 2023

**JEFFORY FORBES**, Accounting '79, Aug. 10, 2023

**HARRIET FOUNDAS**, MA Elementary Education '70, Oct. 9, 2023

**ELVIRA TAMARGO GARCIA**, MA Education '69, Aug. 8, 2023

**JERRY CLAYTON HIERS**, Secondary Education '75, Sept. 24, 2023

**GILBERT JACKSON**, MEd Education '83, March 16, 2023

**JOHN F. KEELAN**, Accounting '77, Sept. 1, 2023

**DALE IRVING LEIFESTE**, Psychology '65, Aug. 8, 2023

**PAMELA EATON LLEWELLYN**, Elementary Education '81, July 7, 2023

**CHARLES MCARTHUR**, Mass Communications '76, Sept. 21, 2023

**GARY H. "MAC" MCBRIDE**, English Education '65 and MA '71, Aug. 10, 2023

**ROBERT WILLIAM MILLER**, Marketing '69 and MBA '78, Sept. 5, 2023

**VIRGINIA ALDRICH MURRAY**, Music '73, Sept. 14, 2023

**CHRISTIAN ARNOLD MYER**, Political Science '00, Sept. 28, 2023

**BEVERLY E. BAKER DEMOTT PAPPY**, MA Education '72 and PhD '77, Sept. 16, 2023

**LAWRENCE RICHARD PETERS**, Marketing '71, June 28, 2023

**REGINALD ROBINSON**, Sociology '90, Life Member, USF Sponsored Research Administrator, March 27, 2023

**CHARLES F. RODRIGUEZ SR.**, MA Education '70, June 24, 2023

**NINA JANE (GARBER) SINSLEY**, MA Education '67, July 22, 2023

**MICHAEL KENT STARLING**, Chemistry and English '69, June 13, 2023

**WILLIAM WARREN STEPHENS**, MA Education '98, Aug. 4, 2023

**KENNETH TROY**, Nursing '96 and MS '98, Aug. 31, 2023

**JOHN R. URBANOWSKI**, English '68, April 30, 2023

**CHARLES DOUGLAS WALLER**, Management '68 and MEd '01, Sept. 2, 2023

**ROBERT WELKER**, MBA '74, Life Member, Professor of Business Law, Benefactor, Sept. 8, 2023

**BETTY JUNE (STRATTON) WOMACK**, MA Education '70, Aug. 8, 2023

## Faculty and Staff

**SANDRA L. BROWN**, Retired, Aug. 9, 2023

**CHRISTINE P. COE**, Educational Resources, Life Member, Feb. 18, 2023

**DR. PETER BENJAMIN DUNNE**, Professor Emeritus, Medicine, Aug. 28, 2023

**JORDAN I. KOSBERG**, Professor, Social Work, July 20, 2023

**DR. JOHN I. MALONE**, Assistant Professor, Pediatrics, Aug. 10, 2023

**DOUGLAS L. NELSON**, Distinguished Research Professor Emeritus, Psychology, July 26, 2023

**WILLIAM D. OWEN**, Professor Emeritus, Music, Sept. 14, 2023

**DR. DONALD PELL**, Clinical Assistant Professor, Medicine, July 13, 2023

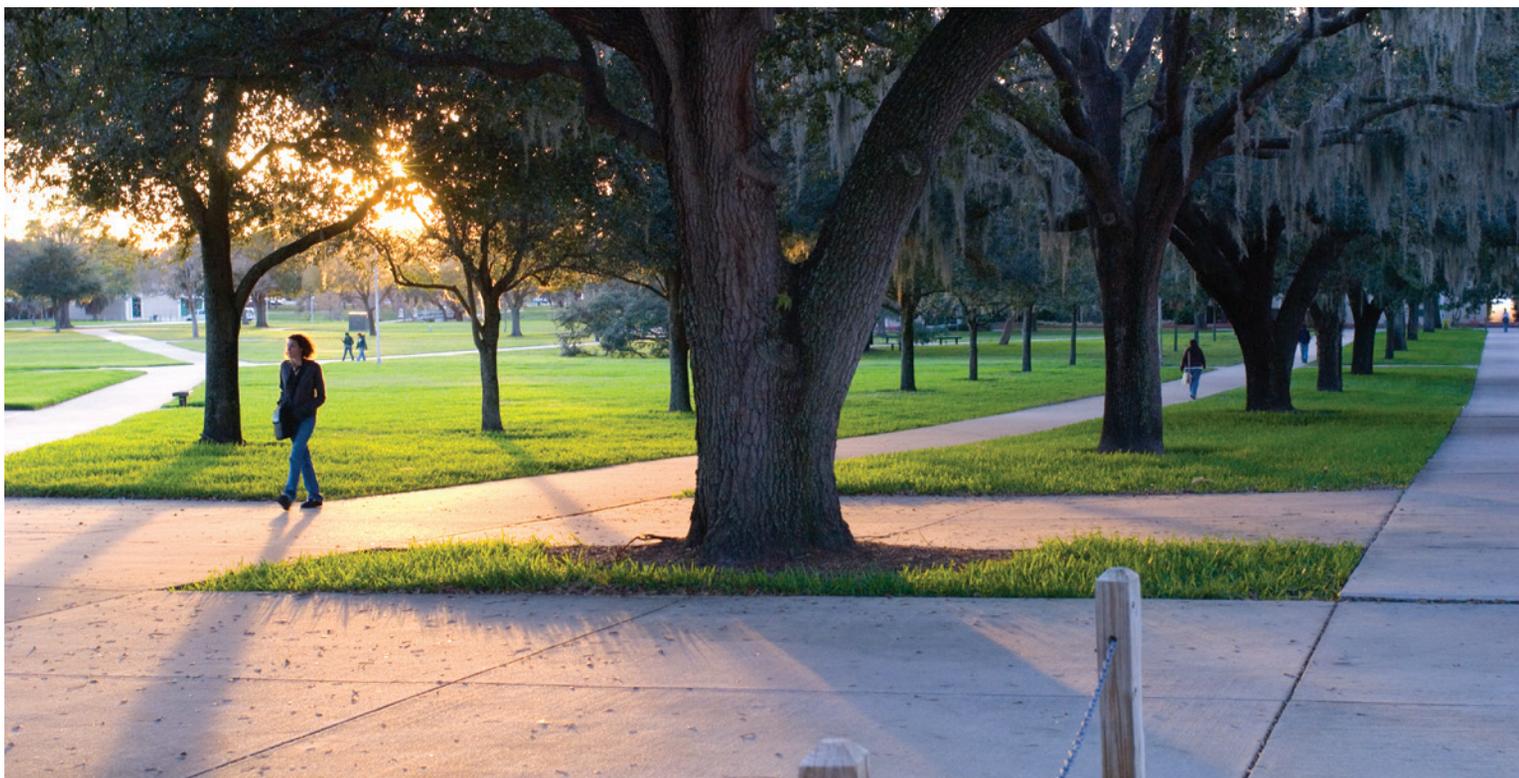
**JANE G. REED**, Math Professor, Academic Advising, July 21, 2023

**PAUL A. URAVICH**, Chief of USF Police Department, Aug. 22, 2023

## Friends

**CONRAD GORDON DEATS**, Benefactor, OLLI Instructor, Sept. 10, 2023

**CELIA ZIRIN**, Benefactor, Aug. 18, 2023





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**Chandler Balkcom**  
WUSF Brand Manager

Chandler Balkcom is a double Bull, graduating from USF with his bachelor's degree in History in 2019 and his master's in History in 2022. He became an intern at WUSF Public Media in August 2019 in the digital services department and was focused on writing articles on classical music to highlight Classical WSMR.

His talent and dedication led to a job offer from WUSF where he now assists with graphic design, events marketing & planning, membership campaigns, social media management, and website design.

Chandler has been integral to the success of all of WUSF's digital initiatives including The Zest Podcast, Arts Axis Florida, and Modern Notebook.



# Chapters & Societies

## No matter where you live, you'll always be a Bull!

The USF Alumni Association's chapters and societies connect Bulls with one another — across the country and around the world. Through social events, professional networking, fundraising and community service, among other activities, alumni groups help USF grads and friends support one another, our university and current students. They play an important part in the Alumni Association's mission to provide meaningful ways for Bulls to make an impact; protect USF through advocacy; share pride in our great university; and stick together.

It's easy to get involved! Just email the contact person of the group you'd like to visit. For alumni group events, visit [usfalumni.org/events](http://usfalumni.org/events).

Alumni and friends enjoy a Bulls Family Beach BBQ hosted by the USF Pinellas Alumni Chapter in June.



## Interest-Based Groups

### Black Alumni

Tina James  
LaShante Keys  
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### Bulls of the Last Decade

William Dailey  
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### Dance Alumni Society

Sadie Lehmker  
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### DBA Alumni Network

Andy Hafer  
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## Global Networks

#### Brazil

usf.to/USF-Brazil

#### Caribbean

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#### Colombia

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#### France

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#### India

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#### Saudi Arabia

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