COLLEGIAN
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES ALUMNI MAGAZINE | SPRING 2018

Thirty Under Thirty

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*30 at time of selection
Finding 30 under 30

Selecting only 30 of our top students and alumni who are 30 years old or younger may be the most daunting task my staff has undertaken in bringing you the Collegian.

As a whole, the College has more than 10,000 alumni who fit the criteria, and each of them—some of whom are still in their teens—are accomplishing extraordinary things all over the globe; we have CEOs, theatrical stars, award-winning writers, ground-breaking scientists, and humanitarians—just to name a few.

So to select roughly three dozen from the thousands of our crimson elite, we turned to you, our readers. In response to our emails, newsletter announcements, and Facebook ads, you sent us more than 150 nominations, representing alumni and students who you feel stand out among their peers as they continue to make exceptional strides in their chosen fields.

After receiving all the nominations, our staff then read through each submission, conducted dozens of preliminary interviews, and finally selected the 30 we present to you today.

We are truly proud of our “30 under 30,” and are grateful that each of them is a part of the College and the University. They are testaments to everything we stand for and hope for our students.

As you read through this issue, it is my hope that you will think of other College of Arts and Sciences alumni—young and old—that are carving out a brighter future for themselves and our communities. There are tens of thousands of you, and we want to hear your stories. Please take the time to connect or re-connect, so that together we can inspire each other to greater success.

Dean Robert Olin
As a young alumna spearheading her career, Cameron Shevlin is already the director of Impact Alabama, a division of Impact America.

Impact America is a non-profit group that serves communities in the Southeast by helping families file their tax returns for free, conducting vision screenings for preschool children, providing college mentors for high-school students preparing to take AP classes, and coaching young debate teams.

“Each of our initiatives is in place to address a need,” Shevlin said. “People think you have to go to another country to serve, but that’s not the case. There are plenty of ways to serve right here in Alabama.”

Shevlin’s main responsibility as the director of Impact Alabama is to oversee the Impact workforce, known as AmeriCorps, which is typically made up of recent college graduates who volunteer to serve the community full-time for at least one year.

“To be able to connect young people with areas in need around the state is really important,” Shevlin said. “Alabama is a great state, and there’s a lot to be done here. So being able to plug in these extremely bright and enthusiastic minds to see what change they can bring is a great opportunity.”

According to Shevlin, Impact Alabama and its AmeriCorps members have 21 tax sites across the state; the organization is on track to screen over 50,000 preschool children for vision problems this year across all 67 counties in the state; and they are actively involved in schools in the Birmingham area.

“I think that sometimes it’s hard for communities to believe that people are going to do what they say they are going to do,” Shevlin said. “You have to gain trust and work with a community, and we do that through ensuring that we have a strong team who can carry out each of our initiatives.”

Shevlin’s favorite aspect of Impact Alabama, however, is meeting and getting to know people she otherwise would never come in contact with.

“Especially in today’s world, it is becoming easier and easier to stay within one’s own bubble,” Shevlin said. “Being out in the community day-to-day exposes our team members to the fact that even though we each have our differences—we can always find some commonality.”
Erica Schwalm
CHEMIST PUBLISHED IN SCIENCE MAGAZINE
According to a 2013 report given by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, two million people are infected with antibiotic-resistant bacteria each year.

Worse still, 23,000 of those two million people die as a direct result of their infections.

“Antibiotic resistance is a growing problem, and people are not necessarily aware,” said Penn State Ph.D. candidate Erica Schwalm. “We go to the doctor, we get a set of antibiotics, and we feel better, but bacteria evolve very quickly to combat the mechanisms we make to kill them, and eventually the mechanisms we have to treat infections are going to stop working. Pushing research into antibiotic development is essential.”

Schwalm, a UA chemistry alumna, has been studying antibiotic-resistant enzymes for the last six years, and in 2016, when she was just 26 years old, one of her groundbreaking collaborations on the topic was featured in *Science*, the leading scientific magazine in the world.

“My research focuses on two enzymes that modify RNA in the ribosome, which is where proteins are made,” Schwalm said. “We are interested in these enzymes not only because they do difficult chemistry, but they’re also implicated in antibiotic resistance.”

The two enzymes, evolutionarily related to one another, are RlmN and Cfr. The Cfr enzyme is one of the mechanisms responsible for modifying bacteria so that they are antibiotic resistant, but until Schwalm’s research, scientists did not have an avenue for understanding how.

To get a clue into the process, Schwalm and her colleagues ventured to capture an image of RlmN in the process of modifying RNA because RlmN is structurally similar to Cfr. First, the team grew E. coli cells with the RlmN protein, then crystalized the protein and used high-energy x-rays to see a snapshot of what is going on.

After analyzing hundreds of samples into the middle of the night, Schwalm identified the image they’d been searching for at 2 a.m. in the morning.

“I was very excited,” Schwalm said. “After months and months of work, we finally had something that could answer our question and tell us what we were looking for.”

Schwalm, who has already been hired to work for Merck Pharmaceuticals after graduation, says now that the RlmN structure has been identified, scientists will be able to design countermeasures to the Cfr enzyme and the bacteria it modifies by theoretically designing molecules that will cause the enzymes not to work.

“A lot of drug design comes from being able to look at an enzyme and see what interactions are important,” Schwalm said. “By knowing the structure, we can theoretically design molecules that would bind in a certain orientation and cause these enzymes to not work anymore.

“I knew, starting the project, that it was important to people and it would be high-impact if we could get the right results, but I had never thought, starting grad school, that I would have a *Science* publication when I was done.”
Looking at speech pathologist Lara Dean’s schedule, you might wonder if she has any free time. Dean works full-time for the Birmingham City Schools identifying children with autism, speech or language impairments, or other health impairments; she co-owns her own private practice where she conducts individual sessions with students; and she works with KultureCity to develop and roll out their Sensory Initiative Program across the country.

KultureCity’s Sensory Initiative Program trains public venues such as zoos and sports arenas, which can be loud or visually overwhelming, to foster an environment that is inclusive to children with sensory processing needs. Dean joined the KultureCity team in 2014, and helped lead the first installment of the program just one year later at the Birmingham Zoo.

“After the initial training, we collected data to assess if families and individuals felt the sensory changes at the zoo positively impacted their experience and increased their likelihood to return to the location,” Dean said. “Overall, our data indicated that families and individuals with sensory processing needs felt more accepted and comfortable coming to the zoo after the training was completed, and the zoo staff also felt more comfortable and confident when working with this population.”

Now, roughly four years later, Dean has driven the KultureCity Sensory Initiative to stadiums, zoos, aquariums, and other venues nationwide including Quicken Loans Arena, home of the Cleveland Cavaliers, and Chesapeake Energy Arena, home of the Oklahoma City Thunder.

“I haven’t been to a single training where someone hasn’t approached me and expressed how glad they are to be doing the training because they have a family member who would greatly benefit from this program,” Dean said. “We have pictures and videos of so many families using these tools out in our community which is truly what the whole movement is about.”

Though Dean has made strides for sensory inclusion across the country, she knows that her work is just the tip of the iceberg. There are hundreds of venues that still need these trainings, and what’s more, the places she’s already visited will bring in new employees who will also need to be trained in sensory inclusion.

To help, KultureCity is already in the process of creating an app that can be used by organizations and facilities to do preliminary and follow-up trainings.

“KultureCity’s mission is for all families to feel accepted and included in their community,” Dean said. “This is just one way to help.”
Upstart director and storyteller Xavier Neal-Burgin is pushing to tell underrepresented stories in Hollywood. At only 28 years old, Neal-Burgin has already directed 12 short films, which have led him to become an HBO Film Finalist, a Sundance Lab Fellow, a Student Academy Award Semifinalist—and he has 60,000 Twitter followers to boot.

Neal-Burgin says he is excited by his success and hopes he’ll see increased visibility for black directors, storytellers, actors, and other creatives. Thus far, he has focused his storytelling and his films on the lives of black communities that are rarely recognized on the big screen—and he plans to continue.

“Simply put, I enjoy the varying experiences black people go through and our ability to be both diverse and varied in our depictions,” Neal-Burgin said. “For example, my film *On Time* explores homelessness and job scarcity for black women, while my upcoming film, *A Little Closure*, is a ghost story set on the backdrop of millennial, middle-class black people. I want to convey the idea we, as black people, can represent and be anything.”

Currently living in Los Angeles, Neal-Burgin spends his days writing and directing his own work, pitching to different production companies, and developing new ideas for future projects.

“Still, at 28, I know I have so much more work to do in regards to achieving my dreams,” Neal-Burgin said. “The ultimate goal is becoming a feature-film director, but I want to explore the plethora of avenues within my industry to tell my stories, and adjacent stories, about black and brown people. I’m in this for the long haul, because I know my voice matters.”
LACI JORDAN
GRAPHIC DESIGNER AND FASHIONISTA
As a creative director and curator of her own brand, Laci Jordan is the epitome of success. The graphic design superstar originally set out to be an FBI agent—receiving her first degree in criminal justice in 2010—but now she is hailed by the likes of Essence and Forbes magazines as a “the definition of black girl magic” and a dynamic woman who “has an undeniable pulse on what’s relevant for millennials.”

Jordan has worked for Disney Imagineering, ABC, and as a senior designer at the prestigious Creative Arts Agency in California, where she juggled multiple clients from NIKE to ESPN. Now, she’s taking on the world as a self-empowered entrepreneur, where she’ll have the freedom to spend time on her passion projects.

In her work, Jordan seems fearless as she tackles newsworthy subjects from the Black Lives Matter Movement to Planned Parenthood—often advocating for black creatives in her work, especially women.

“Design is literally being able to create anything,” Jordan said. “It is one of the biggest ways you can communicate with people, and it can bring people together.”

In 2017, she was the mastermind behind Footlocker’s logo for International Women’s Day, and she also created an illustration for ESPN that depicts the “State of the Black Athlete.”

“The state of the black athlete is conflicted,” Jordan said. “As an athlete, you have the keys to success to take care of yourself and your family, but on the other end, you sacrifice your voice and ability to speak on anything political—you’re told to stick to the game. As a black athlete, you’re expected to enjoy your riches and fame in exchange for your voice, choices, and ethics.”

I'M MAKING THE STUFF YOU DON'T SEE BY THE PERSON YOU USUALLY DON'T SEE.

On her wildly successful blog “So Laci Like,” she writes that she’s “making the stuff you don’t see by the person you usually don’t see.”

“I just wanted to create a platform where I could have the space to create original content,” Jordan said. “I can create, essentially, whatever I want.”
As a freelance writer and illustrator not even four years into his career, Asher Elbein has already published multiple times with journalism behemoths including *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times*, and *Smithsonian*.

Elbein knew when he came to The University of Alabama that he wanted to be a science journalist—after all, he'd been obsessed with drawing and learning about dinosaurs from childhood. But rather than pursuing a journalism major, he thought an interdisciplinary approach through New College would serve him better.

"I took paleontology courses, natural history courses, and as many history, creative writing, and journalism courses as I could get my hands on," Elbein said. "Frankly, I wouldn't be nearly as successful as a freelancer if I hadn't been at The University of Alabama with the interdisciplinary opportunities offered by New College."

In fact, it was one of Elbein's final courses at UA that gave him his first taste of success in freelance writing. For the senior class, a feature-writing workshop with Rick Bragg, Elbein had to write three pieces, and after graduation, he successfully sold each of them to a different publication.

"Now, I never write a piece and then try to sell it," Elbein said. "It's too risky. Mostly what I do is a little bit of preliminary reporting, and then I start pitching to see who bites."

Scared of being type-cast, Elbein doesn't just write about dinosaurs and natural history—though he is well-known for that work. One of his biggest successes was actually an article he wrote for *The Atlantic* on why he likes Superman. He's also covered media criticism.

"It's easy to write about things that interest you," Elbein said. "If someone assigned me a piece about business strategy and corporate America, I could write it, but it would take a lot longer."

Despite his success with big-brand media publications, however, Elbein says that his favorite piece is one he wrote for the *Oxford American*.

It was an in-depth, 9,000-word feature that took him roughly two years to fully research and write, and, in the end, it revealed the decades-long consequences of ex-con Dwight York's invented religion—which led to the abduction and repeated rape of one of Elbein's high-school classmates, Iasia Sweeting, in 2014.

"It was a hard story to write," Elbein said. "I wanted to be sensitive to her story, and I went through multiple drafts. Then I argued with the editors, and I argued with the fact checkers. But when the story came out, it was great. I'm really proud of it."

In total, Elbein has written more than 50 freelance articles, some of which he also illustrated, and he plans to continue as a free agent—filling his free time with a bit of fiction writing on the side.
The open sky and beautiful views of northern Nevada have a special place in Rue Beyer’s heart. They’re her office.

As a geologist for the Newmont Mining Corporation, Beyer, among other things, helps to create three-dimensional models of what the company’s gold deposits look like so they can efficiently mine the area. Currently, Beyer works in a 100-mile corridor in Nevada where the gold mines can take decades to empty.

“A mine, depending on several factors, can go from five years to 30 or 50,” Beyer said. “One of the productions I’m working on started in the 1980s and is still being worked on today—and it still has another 10 years left.”

When she’s not mining, Beyer uses rocks as her playground as a mountain climber. Over the past four years, Beyer has climbed Mount Rainier in Washington; Cayambe, one of the highest peaks in Ecuador; the Illiniza volcanoes; and Denali in Alaska—the highest peak in North America. She also ice climbs in Ouray in Colorado annually.

“My love of climbing really stems from the fact that being out in nature shuts the inner critic up and allows me to be my best self,” Beyer said. “One of my great friends and guides once told me I was the only person he’d ever met who smiled and cried while suffering moderate hypothermia in Alaska.”

Each expedition comes with its own challenges. While on one climb, she may face steep 45-degree terrain. On another, she faces extreme cold reaching minus 25 degrees Fahrenheit. And on another she may see a storm or snowfall that stalls their journey for days at a time.

“Mountaineering is not a speed thing,” Beyer said. “It’s really just a slow, slog-through-the-snow and rough-it-out kind of thing.”

Throughout her time as a climber, Beyer has experienced being stuck on a mountain for several weeks due to weather and having to save a team member from a crevasse fall. Despite the challenges, however, Beyer wants to conquer more mountains and expand her technical skills as a climber. In the future, she would love to tackle Mount Kilimanjaro, Aconcagua, and Mount Elbrus.
While 25-year-old Ha Ha Clinton-Dix is fulfilling his childhood dream—not only playing in the National Football League, but making headlines as an All-Rookie, Pro-Bowler, and top 100 NFL player for the last two years—he's also been working towards another of his goals. That is, getting his bachelor's degree.

"I remember Nick Saban coming to my house when I was in 11th grade," Clinton-Dix, now a safety for the Green Bay Packers, said. "I had goals I wanted to accomplish, and getting my degree was definitely one. He looked me right in my eyes at my mom's house and promised me that I would get my degree—that if football didn't work out I would definitely have my degree to fall back on.

"It's something no one can take away from me once football is done."

After entering the NFL draft in 2014 after his junior year of college, with two college football national championships under his belt, Clinton-Dix maintained his enrollment at UA and continued taking classes. He even returned to campus the past two springs. And last summer, the NFL superstar completed an internship at the Brown County Courthouse in Green Bay, Wisconsin, as part of his degree in criminal justice. While there, he spent several days shadowing different members of the judicial system, including the district attorney, which he said opened his eyes to how important the system is.

"It's not really about one individual," he said. "It's about serving the community and making the world a better environment. It's really eye-opening to see the decisions that judges have to make based on what's in front of them."

Clinton-Dix was also struck by his time sitting in on treatment courts for heroine, alcohol, and other drugs.

"The people who came in throughout the week, they really have mental health issues," he said. "I noticed that's the main problem we have with society today: no one wants to talk about mental health, or no one pays it any attention, and it gets swept under the rug. Sitting in on the treatment courts opened my eyes to what's really going on in the world."

While one childhood dream—that of being a police officer and fighting the bad guys like they do in Walker, Texas Ranger—is on hold, another, being part of the NFL, is just beginning.

"The only reason I can believe I'm here is because I really worked my ass off to get where I'm at now," he said. "But it's a blessing—to dream about something as a kid and fulfill your dream is overwhelming and amazing. It's crazy, honestly."

Reflecting on his time at UA, two things stand out. The first was during his freshman year at football practice when the Orlando-native remembers being "cold as hell."

"Coach Terry Jones asked me, 'What's going to happen when Green Bay drafts you?' and I told him, 'I'm not going to Green Bay,'" he said of the town known for its blustery winters. "When I got drafted by Green Bay, what he said was the first thing I thought of."

Clinton-Dix also remembers UA preparing for life.

"It's so easy to talk about Nick Saban because he was my coach," Clinton-Dix said. "But he was also my teacher. He taught me about the little things. It was about doing the little things right. It was about treating everybody with respect on campus whether that was the garbage man or your math teacher. It was about being on time.

"UA really turned me into a young man."

What does he see himself doing after football?

"The only thing that's on the horizon for me is impacting the youth and giving back," he said. "That's going to be my purpose when I'm done with football."

"Nick Saban always told me, 'Nobody cares how good of a football player you are. They care about how you were as a human being. How was your heart? How were you? What do people say when they meet you?' If I could change one kid's life and turn it around after I'm done with football, my life here on earth is done. I'm complete."
The Rockettes are known for their glamour, precision, and determination to be the best. Company member and UA alumna Danni Heverin exemplifies each of these, one eye-high kick at a time.

To become one of the Rockettes, Heverin danced for her life against 400 of the best dancers in the world. After several audition cycles, Heverin was cast in the 80-person dance group, but, surprisingly, her favorite performances haven’t taken place in the troupe’s famed Radio City Music Hall.

Her favorite memory is performing with the Rockettes for the Rockefeller Tree Lighting, which was televised all over the world.

“It was amazing to do that on a national scale and show the world who the Rockettes are,” Heverin said. “The fact that I could do that and show the people watching at home who we are was a magical moment.”

Though Heverin will keep dancing with the company as long as she can, she says she would one day like to educate aspiring dancers. Currently, she teaches masterclasses, but says she would one day like to get her master’s degree and teach full-time.

“Teaching allows me not only to be creative and dig deep into my creative side, but it’s also so rewarding,” Heverin said. “It’s great that I can share my knowledge and experience with younger generations and even people my age; it’s definitely rewarding.”
Dr. Caleb Hill is advancing the way the world thinks about sustainable technology using an unexpected source—coal.

After receiving his doctorate in physical chemistry from UA in 2014, Hill spent two years at the University of Texas at Austin as a postdoctoral researcher and then became an assistant professor of analytical chemistry at the University of Wyoming in 2016. There, he has started his own laboratory focused on nanoscale chemical analysis.

In addition to his academic research, Dr. Hill and his wife, Dr. Kristin R. Di Bona, also a UA alumna, founded Wyonics LLC, a research and development company. Wyonics is dedicated to developing sustainable technologies and resources. Though Wyonics is pursuing projects in a variety of areas, the company has recently been developing new ways that rare earth elements can be recovered from coal via electrodeposition.

"Electrodeposition is attractive because it can recover metals directly from complicated mixtures, such as solutions of dissolved coal," Hill said. "This is where the sustainability comes in. If we can demonstrate it's feasible to efficiently extract high-value products from coal, we can make this more economically attractive than using coal for power. We're not trying to take down the coal industry, we're trying to steer it in a more sustainable, environmentally friendly direction by making it too valuable to simply burn."

Wyonics is expanding faster than Hill expected, and the cutting-edge research has led the company to Phase I funding from the U.S. Department of Energy totaling $150,000.

"It's essentially a short-term grant that we use to demonstrate the feasibility for process," Hill said. "Once we demonstrate this technology, we plan to license it out to coal companies in Wyoming and elsewhere."
EMMA FICK
WORLD-TRAVELING ARTIST AND ILLUSTRATOR
Emma Fick spends half of each year traveling the world. She’s visited roughly three-dozen countries, and she pays for it all on an artist’s salary—granted, she’s no starving artist. At only 27 she’s published two internationally beloved illustrated travel guides, the second of which has sold 3,000 copies and is on its third print run in less than a year.

“It’s really exciting,” Fick said. “And it makes me feel like an art career is not as crazy as I thought—or as crazy as a lot of people in my family probably still think it is.”

Fick’s success in art, however, began rather unconventionally. She was an English major at UA, and after graduation, she received a Fulbright Award to teach English in Serbia for a year. She had plans to return home and pursue her master’s and doctoral degrees in English, but her life plan changed because of a collection of illustrations she had been making while in a small town in south Serbia called Novi Pazar.

“I was doing cultural illustrations, specifically about this small town, as a way to share my experiences with people back home,” Fick said. “But it kind of exploded, and I ended up getting funding from the U.S. Embassy in Serbia to return for another year to pursue art.”

While in Novi Pazar, Fick had held an exhibition of her local illustrations, and the local population turned out in droves. They connected with her work, and the U.S. Embassy was so impressed by the engagement that they asked her to do a similar collection of illustrations for the whole of Serbia.

Fick’s drawings are largely of everyday people and scenes, but they also include some historically significant places and architecture as well.

“For the most part, the process was very organic and stream of conscious,” Fick said. “I would just go out on a walk for example, to the market to get some vegetables, and I would see a woman selling flowers. That would strike me so much because in representing the everyday person, she became a very important emblem of the society as a whole.

“I was very taken by these small vignettes—like the woman selling flowers or a house that was sort of crumbling on the outside but had a beautiful interior that was maintained so lovingly by the people.”

The full collection of her work was published under the title *Snippets of Serbia*, and Fick realized she wanted to use her artistic skills full-time.

“I feel like I found a big part of myself in Serbia,” Fick said. “And I definitely found the courage to pursue art there. A lot of that was just because of the people’s response. If the people hadn’t been so enthusiastic, I don’t know that I would have continued.”

On the heels of her success in Serbia, Fick returned to her native Louisiana to create a *Snippets of New Orleans* book and open a gallery for her fine art. She has sold thousands of copies of her works, which continue to expand and be informed by her travels. For her fine art, she is inspired by ethnographic works and ancient architecture, but she also continues to work on her snippets series. Her upcoming snippets book will showcase the Trans-Siberian Railroad, which she took last year, from Beijing to Moscow.

“I like having these two sides to my production,” Fick said. “Art is so often relegated to the ivory tower. It’s seen as something that people cannot ‘understand’—or that is only for the wealthy and educated. With my fine art, I can do the allegorical stuff for your wall, but then I can do *Snippets*, which is for everyone.”
Alumnus Michael Moore is about to disrupt the world of biopsies. As the CEO and co-founder of Med Kairos, Moore and his colleagues have created an algorithm-based camera that identifies and counts cancerous cells from biopsy samples—a process that was previously done manually.

The camera is expected to save hospitals and their patients both countless hours and millions of dollars.

“We were cued into the need for this technology from personal experience,” Moore said. “My dad had tonsil cancer back in 2009, and they had to take three biopsies. Each time, the sample came back as inadequate, so my dad had to return to the hospital to have another biopsy done.”

After the third biopsy, Moore’s father was told by his doctors to undergo surgery rather than continue to take insufficient biopsies. According to Moore, his father is just one of hundreds of thousands of patients with similar stories.

For fine-needle aspiration biopsies, like the ones undergone by Moore’s father, doctors stick a needle into the tumor and withdraw a small sample of tissue, which is manually examined on a glass slide under a microscope. At larger hospitals, the examination is done in-house, but smaller hospitals send the samples to external pathologists for examination, which can take days or even weeks to process.

In both cases, a pathologist must manually count the cancerous cells in the biopsy in order to determine if there is an adequate sample for diagnosis. With Moore’s new camera, this will be done in seconds, allowing a secondary or tertiary biopsy to be done without ever sending the patient home.

Moore’s product is currently undergoing a clinical validation study at the University of Michigan, Mt. Sinai hospital, and Henry Ford Hospital in order to receive FDA approval.

Once the camera is cleared for use, Moore says he plans to bring the manufacturing of the device home to Alabama to stimulate the economy where he grew up.

“I’m not an alumnus that just that ran off,” Moore said. “I want to come home with this. My ultimate mission is to bring the manufacturing back to where my family is in Alabama.”
What began as Chelsea Lenzner’s passion project to bring together anime and gaming fanatics for a night of meeting, dancing, and fun in the Ferguson Center is now the largest annual anime convention in the state. Each year, the three-day Kami-Con—replete with anime screenings, cosplay contests, tabletop games, dodgeball tournaments, and even a rave—boasts roughly 10,000 attendees.

“We love watching Kami-Con grow,” Lenzner said. “It grows with more attendees. It grows in size and scale. It grows with bigger performances, bigger celebrities, and, the most important thing, it continues to bring this community things it has never experienced before.”

Lenzner’s favorite aspect of Kami-Con is bringing together a loving community of fellow gamers, cosplayers, and anime fanatics once a year to provide memories that will last a lifetime. She runs her own Twitch channel and loves participating in cosplay, playing the roles of countless characters such as Princess Peach, Little Red Riding Hood, and Witch Mercy. Lenzner spends numerous hours preparing for each year’s convention with her co-founder and husband, Raymond Lenzner, whom she married on site at the 2014 Kami-Con.

“Kami-Con is an immensely huge focus in my life. I realize just how much I affect the lives of those who attend,” Lenzner said. “Many write that their entire lives revolved around our event, as many were fortunate to meet their greatest friends, community, and even the one they married at our convention.”

CHELSEA LENZNER
KAMI-CON CO-FOUNDER
For most, being cast in a Broadway musical would be hard enough. Landing the lead? Practically impossible. But for Michael Luwoye, the star of the most-expensive and sought-after ticket in Broadway history, becoming *Hamilton*’s Hamilton was almost an accident.

“I started out auditioning for the roles of Hercules Mulligan and James Madison,” Luwoye said. “I never thought of playing Hamilton. That was never in my mind.”

*Hamilton: An American Musical* is a Tony Award-Winning hip-hop, rap sensation that relies on a diverse cast to tell the story of orphaned immigrant, rhetorician, and founding father Alexander Hamilton. With ticket prices reaching upwards of $6,000 in 2016, it became the most expensive and exclusive Broadway show in history.

Luwoye spent the better part of a year auditioning for various roles in *Hamilton*, but when he was called in to audition for the two leads, he assumed that the casting directors were just thinking ahead—looking for prospects for a few years down the line. Little did he know that later that night, while working at a catering gig, he would get a call from his agent telling him that he’d received the coveted role of Alexander Hamilton himself.

“It was a crazy moment and revelation,” Luwoye said. “It’s wild because this upcoming Wednesday will be 21 months of doing the role, and I still have that feeling. I’m still processing that experience.”

Luwoye learned the lyrics for Hamilton’s role in just two weeks, and he was stage-ready in an additional five. But not only can he play the founding father with emotion and precision. He’s also learned the role of his counterpart, Aaron Burr, and in 2016, he famously played both leads on the same day—one at the matinee and the other later that evening.

“One of the hardest parts of this job is maintaining all of my faculties,” Luwoye said. “To perform seven times a week, Wednesday through Saturday, and attempt a high-quality show each time puts a lot of demand on my body.”

Despite the strain, however, Luwoye says he is dedicated to performing to the best of his ability at each show because he recognizes that—due to prohibitive costs and ticket scarcity—many in the audience will only have one chance to see it. And he wants people to see in the show what he sees in it.

Surprisingly that’s not primarily the music. Though Luwoye grew up loving rap and hip-hop, he says it wasn’t the music alone that drew him to the show. He listened through the album for the first time long after it had become popular—not wanting to get swept up in the hype—and he was captivated by the storytelling. When he got to the final song, “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story,” he especially connected to the presentation of time.

“It made me think about how I personally believe that time is one of the most, if not the most, important commodities that we have,” Luwoye said. “It’s worth more than money. Money is something we can always get more of, but we can’t get more time. And it’s unknown to us how much time we actually do have.”

*Listening to that idea repeated over and over and over again made me think about my own time, and it made me really want to be a part of the show in some way. It made me feel like I had a connection to it before I ever played in it.*

Now that Luwoye has been a part of the show for roughly two years, his connection to it is stronger than ever. He sees similarities between himself and Hamilton, and he loves being able to lose himself in the experience of another person.

“You’re filling your own cup with somebody else’s content,” Luwoye said. “There’s something so attractive about Hamilton, especially the way that he is situated inside of the show, that I love playing him every single night.”
Austin Kitchen lives a balancing act. As director of leadership and engagement for the ChamberRVA in Richmond, Virginia, she works to bring talent to the Richmond area. She also runs a food and fitness blog that has amassed more than 20,000 Instagram followers.

Kitchen’s journey to a healthier lifestyle began in 2015, after a bout with cervical cancer. The intensity of the disease caused many to think this could be detrimental to her health, possibly leaving her without the choice to have children. But after a risky surgery, the cancer was eradicated, and Kitchen used the experience to change her priorities in life and landed on a new goal: find balance that leads to happiness.

“Balance is not just about what you eat or how you work out,” Kitchen said. “It’s about how you’re treating your body and whether or not you’re taking care of yourself—making yourself a priority.”

Kitchen doesn’t allege that she’s a nutritionist, but the honest portrayal of her journey has inspired others.

“I can’t tell you enough how much I love her platform and everything she shares,” one Instagram follower said. “She stands for such a positive and balanced lifestyle.”

Of all of Kitchen’s creations, she says her favorites are smoothies—which have included everything from sweet potato to white chia seeds. She also has photos and recipes for a variety of foods, like pasta, tacos, and her famous pancakes.

“It was really about finding food that made me feel good instead of always feeling that my energy was low,” Kitchen said. “Once I got into finding these recipes that make me feel good, it became a habit.”

Although Kitchen’s full-time gig at the ChamberRVA is her priority, she wants to expand the RVA Fit Foodie empire. She sees herself posting more recipes and workout ideas, as well as encouraging women to find their own balance.
Dallas Gunman Planned Larger Attack, Chief Says

Bomb-Making Materials in His Home — Obama to Visit as Protests Erupt

By ALAN BLINDER and TIMOTHY WILLIAMS

DALLAS — The gunman who killed five police officers in Dallas had enough bomb-making materials in his home to lead the authorities to believe he was planning a larger attack, the city’s police chief said on Sunday. He provided new details of how, during two hours of negotiations, the gunman sang, laughed and asked how many officers he had killed before he was killed by a bomb-equipped robot.

David O. Brown, the police chief, said evidence showed that Micah Johnson, 25, an African-American, had lived in the home for about three years. He was an Army veteran who had received an honorable discharge after being convicted in a sexual assault case in 2014, Chief Brown said.

Mayor Mike Rawlings of Dallas, in an interview near the shooting site, described Mr. Johnson as having employed tactics designed to cause as much harm to people as possible. "He was really well trained in becoming a killing machine, O.K.?," he said. "Shooting law, fighting hand-to-hand at that one point, going high, shooting down another street. This guy trained himself not for that exact location, but he knew how to inflict pain on people."

The details emerged as the nation was immersed in protests, vigils and calls for peace from the White House. A week after the shooting, the city remained on edge and officers remained on alert. Violence has continued intermittently, including a shooting that killed a police officer in Ferguson, Mo., on Sunday night, but there have been no more mass shootings.

Chief Brown said that his officers had been trained to use an enhanced version of "less lethal" weapons and that they were prepared for a "probable scenario." He said they expected more attacks similar to the one on Thursday night, when a gunman who killed five police officers on July 7.

"We’re going to be on guard," Chief Brown said. "We’re going to be on alert."
For the last five years, if there has been a disaster, scandal, trial, election, ruling, or rally in the South, Alan Blinder has covered it. As a reporter for The New York Times, Blinder wrote about the Florida shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in February; he’s covered the Roy Moore scandal and the special election of U.S. Senator Doug Jones; and last fall, he was on the ground reporting about Hurricane Harvey and the resulting floods that devastated Houston.

“A photographer and I were there the day Houston was flooding and they were rescuing people from the rooftops,” Blinder said. “I wrote and dictated a story from the middle of the interstate in a driving rain about what we were seeing, and it was on the front page the following day.

“When you’re in the middle of a hurricane and you’re writing for the next day’s paper, you’ve got this laser-like focus on getting the story, and you’ve got to figure out how to tell it in a compelling way in just a matter of hours. Because you’re so focused on that, you don’t really stop and think as much about your own feelings, your own comfort, or your own situation until you’re done…and then you realize you are the coldest you have ever been in your entire life.”

Despite the harsh conditions, high stress of a 24-hour news cycle, and extensive travel—sometimes more than 100 days out of the year—Blinder says he loves his job.

“Are there tragic stories and difficult stories? Absolutely. But there is a certain richness in being able to tell stories, and there is a certain privilege in people letting me into their lives,” Blinder said. “It’s remarkable every day.”

In total, Blinder has written hundreds of articles, covering the aftermath of more than 20 shootings, 15 natural disasters, 10 elections, and dozens of other newsworthy events.

His initial ambition in coming to UA, however, was not to be a journalist. He knew he loved writing, and he was always interested in people and understanding how they tick, but as a young undergraduate, he hoped to pursue medicine, not reporting.

“I wanted to be a pediatric neurologist,” Blinder said. “But I was drawn to journalism because I was a pretty lousy pre-med student. Let’s just say it didn’t work out.”

Immediately after graduation, in the aftermath of Tuscaloosa’s 2011 tornado, the political science major got a job at a local newspaper in Lake Charles, Louisiana, covering business and state government. Within six months, he had moved to D.C. to work as a city hall reporter for The Washington Examiner, and in the course of his 18 months there, he saw scandal after scandal. The mayor was under investigation, the city council chairman pleaded guilty to fraud, and bribery was routinely uncovered.

“It was a really invigorating time to be a young journalist,” Blinder said. “And it taught me the value and importance of local news.”

However, when the Examiner announced that it was going to change formats, covering national politics through more opinion-based reporting, he decided to seek out new opportunities.

Hoping to learn about job prospects in the South, Blinder reached out to Robbie Brown, a New York Times reporter who had interviewed Blinder’s wife, Meredith, about Black Friday shopping in 2011.

“I am not being falsely modest when I say I had no intention of applying for a job at The New York Times when I emailed this guy,” Blinder said. “I was emailing him saying essentially, ‘have you heard of any jobs in the South in your travels?’ His response was, ‘I’m leaving. You want to apply for my job?’”

Blinder did apply for the job, and to his own surprise, he got it in the summer of 2013.

“I always thought I’d go to a larger paper and move up in my industry,” Blinder said. “But I didn’t have it quite on the timeline that it played out as. Frankly, almost five years later, I’m still a little surprised by how events turned out.”
Kayleb Candrilli is an award-winning poet and author with more than 100 published works, many of which have won such prizes as the Britany Noakes Poetry Award and the Pamet River Prize.

Mostly recently, however, Candrilli was selected from among thousands of applicants as a 2017 Lambda Literary finalist for *What Runs Over*, a poetry collection and memoir about life in rural Pennsylvania as a young transgender boy.

Lambda Literary is the nation’s oldest and largest literary arts organization advancing LGBTQ literature, and Candrilli was one of only five finalists for transgender poetry.

“I’m really proud that the book is being seen in the light I always intended,” Candrilli said. “It is a book about growing up in rural America while queer, and that’s a narrative I needed to see when I was younger. I feel heartened and excited that my book now makes up a sliver of this growing ‘trans canon.’”

Though Candrilli was interested in writing since childhood, they didn’t decide to write until they were 18.

“I went and saw Sister Spit, which was this traveling group of queer artists and writers,” Candrilli said. “I was blown away by the sheer possibility they demonstrated, and by seeing people like me on stage—commanding attention and taking up all the space they deserved.”

Now, Candrilli largely writes as a way to work through childhood trauma and abuse; however, they are also deeply invested in writing triumphant pieces that share a narrative of joy so that other young transgender readers can see a hopeful future.

“So often the trans experience is reduced to trauma (of which there is so much),” Candrilli said. “I want to provide some representation that isn’t mired exclusively in pain. It’s so important that younger readers can read poems in which the speaker is transgender and feels fulfilled and comfortable in their body.”

Candrilli’s upcoming book, tentatively titled *All the Gay Saints*, is especially intended to showcase the joys of the transgender experience.

“The best part of being a writer, so far, is having people reach out and let me know the work has helped them, that it has given them a new or useful way to walk through the world,” Candrilli said. “Often the people who reach out to me are trans, and the safety and well-being of other trans folks means more to me than I can express.”
Behind every Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump, and Tim Kaine is a less well-known Brian Fallon, Hope Hicks, and Ian Sams. The former have a reputation to maintain and a political platform to promote, and the latter spend every waking moment making it happen.

As the current communications director for Senator Tim Kaine, Ian Sams, a 2011 alumnus, says his is an all-in industry.

“The news cycle is 24 hours and therefore your job is 24 hours,” Sams said. “But I feel pretty lucky. The thing that gets me up in the morning every day is wanting to do this. It’s more of a calling and a commitment than it is just a job.”

As Sams would tell you, he got his start in political communications at UA when, as a sophomore, he ran Kendra Key’s SGA presidential campaign.

“It was a very, very competitive race,” Sams said. “I actually still talk about it with the people that I work with now. The intensity and seriousness with which students at Alabama take politics, especially SGA and campus politics, was sort of the proving ground that I needed to decide to do this professionally.”

The campaign Sams ran for Key ended in a 700-vote loss, but it had one of the largest voter turnouts in the school’s history—bringing in roughly 14,000 student ballots.

Since graduation, the stakes have multiplied, and his career has been a whirlwind to match the intensity of his everyday job. At only 29 years old, he has worked for the Democratic National Committee, Delaware Senator Tom Carper, Congressman Tom Perriello’s campaign for governor, Virginia Senator Tim Kaine as well as Secretary Hillary Clinton.

“One of the things that I’m proudest of in my still pretty young career is being one of the lead communications staffers working to roll out Hillary Clinton’s domestic policy agenda in the primary race in 2015,” Sams said. “I would help coordinate policy development, digital roll outs, media placement, press releases, written materials, web pages, etc. on the different domestic policy issues from healthcare to child care to Wall Street reform to the opioid crisis.

“The reason I decided I wanted to do communications in the first place is because it has the power to move and change things quickly. It was amazing to watch a press release that I had written drive the news on the front page of The New York Times the next day.”

Though many Americans have expressed their distrust of politicians on both sides of the party lines, Sams has a lot of hope and faith in the sincerity and earnestness of most national and local leaders.

“People often question politicians’ motivations because people are skeptical of the system, and they don’t think it’s working for them,” Sams said. “But there are a lot of people of good will who are trying to do good and get things done that are constructive.

“These are people at the end of the day,” Sams reiterated. “And as my grandmother used to tell me when I was a kid, ‘they put their pants on one leg at a time just like you do.’“
As the conversation on healthcare continues to heat up on national and local scales, innovative minds like Koushik Kasanagottu are dedicated to entering the primary care field and changing the narrative of healthcare infrastructure and availability in the United States.

Kasanagottu’s medical career is dedicated to focusing on rural areas with inadequate healthcare providers, and finding innovative solutions to instill preventative healthcare and eradicate common preventable diseases such as diabetes and hypertension.

“The number one cause of death in the United States is heart disease, and it is a preventable illness,” Kasanagottu said. “Our healthcare infrastructure is not set up to be a preventive system. We need to invest in healthcare that affects the source of our major illnesses and chronic diseases, and fund programs such as nutrition counseling, exercise physiology, counseling services, mindfulness training, etc. to create a support network for patients to make it easier for them to switch to a healthier lifestyle.”

As a Johns Hopkins Bayview resident, which has a mere 3.9 percent admittance rate, Koushik Kasanagottu, a 2014 alumnus who graduated in biology, will be working alongside the brightest minds as he pursues his residency.

“Hopkins Bayview is especially equipped to educate residents about not only the medicine but also about public health issues and contemporary solutions,” Kasanagottu said. “This environment will allow me to come up with innovative solutions to healthcare difficulties that Alabamians specifically in rural communities face every day. I hope to have the opportunity to come back to Alabama and implement these solutions.”
Joy Spears
DANCER AND PERFORMER

If you were to name any top Billboard music artist in the last 10 years, there would be a good chance that 2011 alumna Joy Spears danced with them in a music video or concert. She's taken the stage with Britney Spears, Lady Gaga, Pink, Christina Aguilera, DJ Havana Brown, Paula Abdul, Pharrell, Kenny Chesney, and the list goes on and on.

“I’ve lived out a lot of jobs that far exceeded my dreams,” Spears said. “But it is definitely a career that you have to love. You sacrifice a lot. There’s rejection, and you don’t start off with the top job you always dreamt of.”

Spears entered the professional world at an early age. From the time she was 15, she toured across the country training younger dancers as an assistant in one of the industry’s top dance conventions, and by the time she graduated high school she’d already debuted on TV in the second season of FOX’s “So You Think You Can Dance.”

Most recently, Spears has been working with Chris Pratt and Jennifer Lawrence for the film Passengers, performing on stage for various music award shows, and dancing in the ABC hit Nashville, the city she now calls home.
Pageantry started as a confidence booster for middle-school-aged Briana Kinsey. Now, at 24, she is the reigning Miss District of Columbia, she finished third-runner-up at Miss America, and she has earned upwards of $60,000 in scholarships in the process.

“Competing for Miss America was one of those dreams I had kind of moved on from,” said Kinsey, who competed for Miss Alabama for five years before moving to D.C for graduate school. “I had moved outside of my home state, but competing for Miss D.C. was another opportunity, and I had people around me who really encouraged me to continue.”

She won Miss District of Columbia and qualified for Miss America during her last year of eligibility.

“It was a surreal experience for sure,” she said. “I was honored and blessed and thankful that I was able to get scholarship money for the things I had been working towards and that are also helpful life skills—being able to interview well, being able to walk into a room with confidence—all of those things that pageants teach you. They’re great for the job of Miss America, but they’re great for my future career as well.”

While holding the title of Miss D.C. and preparing for Miss America—which requires speaking and singing appearances, mock interviews, and personal training sessions several times weekly—Kinsey was also preparing for medical school, which she will begin after she finishes her master’s degree in physiology at Georgetown University.

Her goal is to be a pediatric endocrinologist to help kids fight diseases like diabetes.

“For the families of children dealing with chronic diseases, their doctors become everything,” she said. “I want to be that person for the next generation.”

Kinsey’s favorite part of competing in Miss America was meeting all of the other contestants and being able to say that she has friends from every state in the country.

Her least favorite part? The misconceptions that go with pageantry.

“It’s not always the most inviting thing when I tell people I’m Miss District of Columbia,” she said. “But those layers start to unfold when you talk to people, and they realize that this is a scholarship organization about women’s empowerment and being your best self.

“It’s not so much about the beauty. Of course presentation is important, but it’s not the focal point of the organization.”
Jessica PROCTOR
MISS ALABAMA

Listening to Miss America contestants say that they want to solve world hunger seems so cliché that it verges on trite. But for UA senior Jessica Procter, also known as Miss Alabama, fighting against food insecurity is more than a winning platform—it's a passion project that, most recently, has been helping campuses across the nation to save and bring thousands of pounds of food to needy families each week.

For the project, known as Fifth Quarter, members of Alpha Gamma Delta—where Procter served as philanthropy chair—stay well after the end of UA football, basketball, and gymnastics events to collect the food that is leftover in the north and south zones as well as the skyboxes. The collected food is then donated, in collaboration with the West Alabama Food Bank, to areas that struggle with food security.

"This is like 2,000 pounds of food a weekend," Procter said. "Which is over 2,400 meals."

According to Procter, one in eight people in the country struggle with food security, and in Alabama the ratio is even worse at one in five.

"People think that everyone has enough money for food," Procter said. "They don't realize this is a problem that hits so close to home."

But Procter doesn't just work to help people in Tuscaloosa. Using her Miss America platform, and with the help of her sorority, she has now brought Fifth Quarter to Auburn, Oklahoma, Georgia, and Kentucky, and the national chapter of Alpha Gamma Delta decided that because of the successes they saw at The University of Alabama, they were going to shift their international philanthropic focus from diabetes to fighting hunger, meaning more and more campuses across the country will begin to see programs like Fifth Quarter as well.

"Because of the Miss America program, I have the platform to reach so many people," said Procter, who finished in the top seven of Miss America last year. "People listen to you when you're wearing a crown, and because I have so many things I am passionate about, I am able to use that power for good."
In seventh grade, Tuscaloosa-native Joshua Williams was told that he needed to wait a year to play football so he could participate in spring training. Instead, he forged his own path and joined his school’s band, where he picked up a French horn.

Now, he’s one of the best horn players in the world.

As an undergraduate and now doctoral candidate at UA, Williams practiced constantly to achieve success. But the hours of rehearsals paid off after his performance at the International Horn Competition of America last year.

“During the final round performance, I just got lost in the music,” said Williams said. “The audience reaction was incredible. I’d have to say it was one of the most incredible moments of my life, for sure.”

That moment spurred him into international fame. Williams spent the past year playing events around the country. Recently, he was invited to be a featured soloist with the Detroit Symphony.

The horn virtuoso’s future looks brighter than ever before, giving him the opportunity to do more solo performing. But eventually, he wants to share his knowledge with others.

“I want to do a little bit of everything,” Williams said. “I enjoy giving recitals, traveling the world, and performing. But I eventually want to be a college horn professor. I really love teaching. Teaching is my passion.”
Theodora Bishop
MULTI-GENRE WRITER

Only 28 years old, Theodora Bishop is a Best New Poet and Pushcart Prize nominee; she has been published in more than two dozen online and print journals and magazines; and early this year she published her first novella, *On the Rocks*, with Texas Review Press.

“Theodora is a force of nature, impressive at any age,” said Kellie Wells, director of the UA creative writing program. “But what makes her especially remarkable is that she has published quite a lot and in several genres.”

While Theodora came to UA to focus on poetry, she now writes across genres spanning from long-form fiction to prose—and she even experiments with fairy tales and fantasy fiction.

“Writing in more than one genre allows me two very different ways to communicate,” Bishop said. “I always have more than one project going on across genres. Ping-ponging between deep, concentrated work in each allows me to usually wrap up these projects around the same time and move on to a new batch.”

As a writer with a thorough creative process, Theodora often finds unifying shared human experiences, such as feeling embarrassment or pride, to be the pulse of her writing process. Just months after publishing her first novella, Theodora is already hard at work on two other publications.

“I want to write as often as possible,” Bishop said. “If I can find a sweet spot in whatever form or genre I’m working in, I’m happy.”

Tanesia Woody
AIR FORCE LANGUAGE ANALYST

Tanesia Woody says she’s stubborn. As she tells it, she only decided to become a cryptologic language analyst for the Air Force after the recruiter suggested that she shouldn’t try because roughly 50 percent of linguists fail out of the program.

“When he told me it was the program most people failed out of, I said ‘Cool, sign me up,’” Woody recalled.

Woody has now been serving in the Air Force for six years, and already she has earned more than a dozen honors and awards including the Joint Service Achievement Medal in 2017 and the Presidential Volunteer Service Award in 2016.

As the lead analyst stationed in Anchorage, Alaska, Woody is proficient in Spanish, Russian, and Ukranian. Though Woody can’t talk about her work because it is almost entirely classified, the Air Force website says of her position, “These skilled specialists play an essential role in helping us complete our mission and keep our country safe.”

“I do my part to keep us as safe as possible,” Woody said.
“Five, four, three... And here he is once again—Jimmy Fallon!” The blue curtains on the Studio 6B stage fly open as Fallon, in a futuristic race car, zooms to center stage and challenges the studio audience to a race through New York.

So begins Universal Orlando’s newest attraction, which UA alumna Olivia West helped to create as an intern in 2014.

“That was my first big foray into an attraction that would actually come to fruition,” West said. “It was really the cherry on top of my internship.”

Now, only four years later, West is creating and writing full-time for Universal: Most recently she worked as the lead writer for a new $3 billion park set to open in Beijing, China, in 2020. The park will be the first of its kind to open in the country, and West was responsible for the story behind almost every attraction, restaurant, and hotel for five of the six lands in the park.

“It was the biggest, most exciting opportunity I could imagine,” West said.

When thinking about theme parks, it is easy to consider the work of engineers and art designers, but the story writers are actually the first people to envision what the final rides will be like. They choose what aspects of a movie or show guests will want to immerse themselves in, they determine what the characters and narrators of the ride will say, and they even plan what moves the ride will make in each “scene:” a vertical ascent, followed by fireworks, then a fast plummet to the ground, followed by a 90-degree pivot to the side.

Though West can’t reveal the details of the park’s themes or attractions because they have not yet been officially announced by Universal, she says that she wrote stories for more than 20 attractions—ranging from high-budget, high-capacity rides to full-service restaurants and live shows.

She was even responsible for the graphics content on the props and set pieces throughout the park that add to the atmosphere and sense of place.

“If you’re walking around a theme park, and there are crates and barrels with random numbers, for instance, a story writer was tasked with creating that,” West said. “It seems like one of the more boring tasks, but I have a lot of fun with that because I work in my
birthday, the date that I’m going to get married, and initials of things that I care about. 

“When Beijing comes out, my birthday is going to be all over the place.”

Like many children, West says her love of theme parks began when she was young and went to Disney World for the first time, but it wasn’t until a candid conversation with her mother about her future that she realized her dream job was to be an Imagineer for Walt Disney.

West pursued her dream first as an art major and creative writing minor at UA. Then she went to the Savannah College of Art and Design, one of the top-25 design schools in the country. During that time, she took an internship with Universal, where she helped with the Jimmy Fallon ride, and later she accepted an internship—and then a freelance job—with Walt Disney Imagineering in Burbank, California.

“Disney felt like the behemoth that it was,” she said. “There were so many moving parts and so many people. It was a very fast-paced environment.”

Though Disney was, and still is, West’s dream, she decided to leave California after two years so that she could get more stable full-time work.

“For now, West wants to continue to hone her writing skills at Universal, but eventually she would like to return to Disney as a creative director, overseeing an entire project start to finish.

I GREW UP LOVING THE DISNEY PARKS, AND THAT’S WHY GOT INTO THIS IN THE FIRST PLACE. THAT’S WHERE ALL THE MAGIC IS.

“My heart is with Disney,” West said. “I grew up loving the Disney parks, and that’s why got into this in the first place. That’s where all the magic is.”

Talking to different people—both at WDI and Universal—they said you could have waited years and years at Disney to get an opportunity like you’re getting with Universal—to write for an entire park,” she said.
Emily Seelenfreund is an unstoppable force. A three-time women’s wheelchair basketball national champion, Teach for America alumna, Harvard Law graduate, and Wolinsky Fellow Attorney at the Disability Rights Advocates, she’s accomplished more at 27 than most accomplish in a lifetime.

Seelenfreund’s passion for helping others is just one reason she chose to work at Disability Rights Advocates, or DRA. The legal non-profit firm seeks justice for those with disabilities who have experienced a violation of their civil rights.

As a Wolinsky Fellow, Seelenfreund receives mentorship from some of the nation’s top attorneys, as well as the opportunity to work on prominent civil rights cases. Her fellowship project is focused on increasing access to New York City public schools for students with mobility disabilities.

“Education is one of the biggest tools we have for combatting inequity,” Seelenfreund said. “Yet many schools in New York are not accessible to individuals with disabilities. People with disabilities can’t always get into the buildings and they can’t always access the restrooms, the cafeteria, or the libraries.”

The DRA focuses on class-action lawsuits that advocate for one or several individuals, ultimately making a national impact on the lives of people with disabilities. All cases are done pro-bono and benefit individuals with a wide spectrum of disabilities.

Seelenfreund also chose to work for DRA because the firm’s interests hit close to home. Born with osteogenesis imperfecta, also known as brittle bone disease, Seelenfreund has navigated the world using a wheelchair for almost her entire life.

“I grew up with a disability,” Seelenfreund said. “I was born the same year that the Americans with Disabilities Act passed, and I saw how it impacted my ability to access education and live a full and independent life. I was really struck by the ability of the ADA to ensure a place for disabled individuals in society, and yet I knew there was more work to be done for the ADA to live up to its fullest potential.”

Seelenfreund says it was her own experiences in a wheelchair that pushed her to advocate for others, along with her life-long desire to help marginalized groups.

“As a teacher and as an individual with a disability, I wanted specifically to work as a class-action attorney,” Seelenfreund said. “I have the opportunity to work on one case that can affect countless individuals. It’s an amazing tool that enables civil rights lawyers to really make an impact.”
As the director of east Oregon's Umatilla Basin Watershed Council, alumnus Michael Ward is helping to preserve salmon species across the Pacific Northwest, and in the process he won the 2017 Water Resources Conservation Award for his work.

Steelhead salmon, one of the species Ward works to protect, relies on access to mountain streams in order to spawn. The fish are born in these freshwater streams, and after they mature and travel downstream to the Pacific Ocean, they make their way back upstream to spawn and start the life cycle over again.

However, with a multitude of dams blocking their paths, the Steelhead salmon population, and others like it, are waning.

"These obstructions along the river have negative impacts on the river in general," Ward said. "But they also completely block fish passage to upstream rearing and spawning habitats."

There are dozens of dams on the Columbia River alone, and with the help of state and federal agencies as well as the local Native American tribes, Ward, a history alumnus, is doing large-scale restoration projects on the river's tributaries.

The multi-million dollar project, which has been 20 years in the making, has involved building pipelines as well as destroying obstructive dams like the Dillon Diversion Dam, which was removed in 2017.

"When the machines rolled in and made their first cuts in the Dillon Dam last year, that was a moment I don't think I'll ever forget in my life," Ward said. "It was a huge moment. And having the support of the community made it all that much more enjoyable."

The dam took two months to remove, with the team working from dawn to dusk despite 100-degree temperatures and scorching wildfires.

"We only had a small window to do this work," Ward said. "We had to get in and out while the water levels were low in the heat of summer, but the work was slow because you constantly have to stop to observe the water quality."

Ward says that the Dillon Dam removal was just the beginning of the restoration work, and he has already contracted out work until 2021—potentially removing another dam each year.

"It sounds like it's happening fast," Ward said. "But I'm kind of lucky to come along right now and get to be the one to implement the projects. It took 20 years for this to line up, and there are a lot of people who spent their entire careers just trying to make this happen. It's go time now."

Michael Ward
WATERSHED COUNCIL DIRECTOR
Mary Harmon Young has quickly become one of the most influential and established realtors in the nation, thanks to her creative genes and desire to help her Tuscaloosa community.

Recently, she was honored with state and national awards including a spot on the National Realtors Association 30 Under 30 list, something she calls a “coveted honor.”

“The best thing about this job is that I get to help people,” Young said. “It may be something as simple as helping them find a place to raise a family, or helping them find a place to liquidate properties after a death in the family; I’m able to help people in all stages of life.”

Though Young sells dozens of homes per year, she doesn’t lose touch with her clients after a sale. She hosts festive activities in her home and delivers s’mores to her clients in the fall. Additionally, she helps some clients connect to their new neighbors by hosting a neighborhood party after the initial move-in.

“There’s never an excuse to hang out with your neighbors,” Young said. “You’re running in with the groceries or you’re late to something, so the cocktail parties give everyone an excuse to stop and come together. Everybody wants to welcome their neighbors, so it’s a good way to get everyone involved.”

In nine years as a realtor, she has sold almost 300 homes, and her clients couldn’t be happier.

“Mary Harmon is a Tuscaloosa native who really knows the market inside and out,” Sarah Kate Sullivan, a 2011 client, said. “I couldn’t have done it without her, and I am continually amazed at the lengths she goes to help her clients.”
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