

the Islander



Bigger
THAN THE ISLAND

ISLANDER HEADS TO
SUMMER OLYMPICS

HISTORY MADE
AT MARCH MADNESS

INNOVATIVE
SOLUTIONS

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President Miller and the Islander Pep Band cheer on the Islanders Women's Basketball team during the first game of the 2024 NCAA March Madness Tournament.

I am delighted to present the spring 2024 issue of the Islander Magazine. The stories in this publication reflect the big impact Texas A&M-Corpus Christi is having on the Island, in our community, and far beyond.

Within these pages, you'll learn more about the big opportunities related to new degrees designed to address the growing need for skilled health care professionals and explore ways in which Islanders are leveraging advanced technology to develop innovative solutions. You will meet Albert Ramon '05, an Emmy Award-winning alumnus who is making it big in Chicago as a chief meteorologist. You'll go behind the scenes on a big adventure with experts at our cutting-edge Harte Research Institute. You also will see how Islanders Athletics is making a big impact on the

national stage, as we celebrate its 25th anniversary. Finally, you'll be introduced to Ryann Phillips '25, a trap shooter who will compete on the biggest stage in the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris.

Thank you for your steadfast support of our Island University, for your integral role in extending our Islander Impact, and for helping ensure that Islanders are doing big things. We are delighted to share these remarkable stories with you.

Sincerely,

Kelly M. Miller, Ph.D.
*President and CEO
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi*

Table of Contents



Members of the Islander Homecoming Court attend the Homecoming Block Party in downtown Corpus Christi.

SEE MORE PHOTOS OF HOMECOMING | *pg. 38*



BIG APPETITES | *pg. 8*

A food evolution at the Island University



BIG SHOT | *pg. 18*

Ryann Phillips '25 to compete in 2024 Summer Olympics



MAKING IT BIG | *pg. 36*

Emmy Award-winning alumnus Albert Ramon '05 serves as a chief meteorologist in Chicago

04 The Big Blue Sea

Exploring new depths in marine biology

22 Big Machines

Using advanced technology for innovative solutions

26 Winning Big

Celebrating 25 years of Islanders Athletics

38 Big Party

Homecoming unites Islander spirit, past and present

43 Class Notes

Catch up on the big accomplishments, milestones, and adventures of our Islander alumni

Allison Weber '28 wades out into the Oso Bay in front of the Island University to examine the contents of oyster cages.



THE BIG BLUE SEA

Exploring New Depths in Marine Biology

Beneath the surface of the sparkling Gulf of Mexico lies a world teeming with life and mysteries, one that beckons to be explored and understood. For curious and brave students eager to plunge below these depths, Texas A&M-Corpus Christi offers cutting-edge research facilities, unparalleled opportunities for hands-on experience just steps from campus, and the ability to work with preeminent faculty experts both onshore and offshore.

Here on the Island, the next generation of marine scientists and conservationists are poised at the very gateway to the blue frontier. From the unseen complexity of a tiny fish to the secrets surrounding the health of bottlenose dolphins and the genetic puzzles to be solved in oyster conservation, the marine-focused programs at the Island University span an extensive breadth of the animals, plant life, and ecosystems under the sea.

Continued on the next page.



Makayla Guinn '23, '28

 **MAKAYLA GUINN '23, '28**

As you look out over Corpus Christi Bay, you might catch a glimpse of a small research boat heading toward the horizon in pursuit of a pod of common bottlenose dolphins. This is where you'll find Makayla Guinn, whatever the weather, taking photographs and collecting small tissue and water samples to analyze the health of the local dolphin population.

"Dolphins are apex predators and are considered bioindicator species, meaning that the health of a dolphin can reflect the overall health of a marine ecosystem," Guinn explained. "Moreover, dolphin blubber acts as a storage site for toxic chemicals and pollutants, making the quantification of pharmaceuticals and other compounds in the tissue very important to our understanding of how land and sea are connected."

Under the expert supervision of Dr. Dara Orbach, Assistant Professor of Marine Biology, Guinn, an Austin native and first-generation college

student, undertook a marine biology master's degree at TAMU-CC, where she studied the prevalence of skin lesions on dolphins in high-saline environments. Her work reveals that, despite high-salinity environments being renowned for their healing benefits, the local dolphin population often shows the same amount of skin lesions as those in low-salinity systems, indicating that exposure to other stressors could be contributing to this phenomenon.

Guinn, now a doctoral student, said the Island University is an ideal location for her studies.

"There's an ocean of opportunity right in our backyard," Guinn said. "The marine biology programs at the Island University are highly multidisciplinary, have faculty with diverse areas of expertise, and house state-of-the-art instrumentation to perform groundbreaking research in every niche of marine biology."



Alexis Trujillo '22, '24

 **ALEXIS TRUJILLO '22, '24**

Alexis Trujillo, a student of Dr. Frauke Seemann, Assistant Professor of Marine Biomedical Sciences, has embarked on a crucial investigation into the impacts of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbon toxicity. Using fish models, he aims to untangle the complex interactions between bone development, genes, and changing environments.

Trujillo's work in the university's Environmental Toxicology Lab in Tidal Hall not only showcases the pioneering approaches TAMU-CC students are taking to confront pressing health issues, but also highlights the program's deep commitment to nurturing the environmental advocates of tomorrow.

"Using Japanese Medaka fish as our models, we can shed light on the possible effects of pollutants on other animals, including humans," he explained. "For example, assessing how a particular chemical or metal affects critical development stages in the aquatic animal model can help us better understand the underlying mechanisms in developmental biology."

Trujillo, who graduated from Ingleside High School, earned a Bachelor of Science in Biomedical Science from TAMU-CC and is now a graduate student. Currently in the experimentation phase of his thesis work, Trujillo's days are filled with lab work, fish husbandry, and immunofluorescence and immunohistochemistry experiments.

"The location of our university plays a tremendous role in our research capabilities," Trujillo said. "What's more, the life science faculty are some of the most interesting, wise, passionate, and

ambitious people I've ever had the privilege of meeting, and it is an honor to work alongside them."



ALLISON WEBER '28

For Island University doctoral student Allison Weber, whose childhood surrounded by Missouri rivers and lakes cultivated a deep love of aquatic systems, the marine biology doctoral program at TAMU-CC was an easy choice.

"A standout feature of graduate studies on the Island has been the sense of camaraderie between students and faculty," she said. "The practical experience I am gaining here is incomparable, as well as the networking opportunities."

Weber said she has also greatly benefited from the supervision of Dr. Chris Hollenbeck, Assistant Professor of Fisheries and Mariculture, whose knowledge of genetics and the Texas oyster aquaculture industry has been pivotal to her work concerning the genetic composition of eastern oysters. Her research involves developing a genetic test to assess the population and lineage of Coastal Bend oysters; she is also investigating the genetic and reproductive mechanisms of eastern oyster hybrids, which are a key element to the future of oyster fisheries and aquaculture industry in Texas.

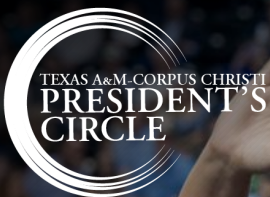
"The impact of my work will fill critical gaps in our understanding



Allison Weber '28

of oyster population genetics, which is crucial to developing informed conservation and resource management strategies," Weber explained. "By providing these insights to inform aquaculture practices, my research both aids restoration and supports sustainable fisheries and economic growth."

As the journeys of these three marine biology students unfold, their work not only promises to advance our comprehension of the marine world but also inspires a new wave of Islanders who stand to become the educators and stewards of our oceans for years to come. •



Join us in our commitment to student success and make your Islander Impact!

President's Circle is a special opportunity for alumni and community members to get involved with their Island University and support the vision of our faculty, staff, and President and CEO, Dr. Kelly M. Miller.

MEMBER BENEFITS

Members receive an inside look into the current happenings on campus, with exclusive event programming and correspondence from President Miller.

PresidentsCircle.tamucc.edu



JOIN TODAY!

MEMBER LEVELS: *Bronze Circle: \$1,000 | Silver Circle: \$2,500 | Gold Circle: \$5,000*



Carnitas Walking Tacos are available
on Crave's ESO Latin menu.

BIG APPETITES

A Food Evolution at the Island University

There is a feast of exciting food updates at Texas A&M-Corpus Christi. Construction is set to begin on Island Sandbar and Grill in May with a completion date this fall. Located in the University Center Rotunda, the Island Sandbar and Grill will be a unique gathering space with a menu inspired by island flavors and the university's coastal vibe.

"We wanted to create a vibrant social hub where students, faculty, staff, alumni, and the community can come together to relax, unwind, and enjoy delicious food and drinks in a welcoming atmosphere," said Neftali Rivera, Director of University Services. "The new dining spot will also be a fabulous location for fans of Islanders Athletics to come and watch a game on the big screen and cheer for our student-athletes when they are on the road."

Another new dining location that doubles as a hot spot for fans of Islanders Athletics is the Island Café, located in Island Hall. Because of its prime location near Chapman Field, home of Islanders Baseball and Softball, and the basketball court at the Dugan Wellness Center, Island Café features game-day favorites and extended hours.

"During games, spectators can enjoy nachos, hot dogs, pizza, popcorn, candy, and more," Rivera said.

Island Café's regular menu includes grab-and-go breakfast foods, coffee, and made-to-order personal-sized pizzas along with specialty pizzas.

"The Flamin' Chicken Cheetos Pizza is topped with Boom Boom sauce and Hot Cheetos dust," said Jaelyn Blohm, Marketing Manager for Islander Dining. "It is an explosion of taste!"

For globetrotting taste buds, The Cove at the University Center Rotunda now includes Crave, which offers an eclectic mix of global cuisines. This comes in the



Fresh, personalized pizzas are available at Island Café.

form of three embedded dining concepts called ESO Latin, Vindy, and City Mac.

"We wanted to create an environment where Islanders could explore a range of global flavors without ever having to leave campus," Rivera explained.

The ESO Latin menu includes made-to-order bowls and wraps featuring items like maple sweet potatoes, roasted corn, chimichurri sauce, and pulled pork.

The Vindy menu includes favorites like the Halal Ball Hoagie, an Indian version of a meatball sub with a savory tikka masala sauce and crispy cucumber cabbage. There is also a Masaledar Tikki Pao Sandwich made with peas and various curry spices and the signature Boom Boom sauce. Vindy also features bowls and snacks, like buffalo cauliflower bites.

City Mac specializes in everyone's favorite comfort food, macaroni and cheese, but with a hearty twist. For example, there is the "Pit Master" mac and cheese, which is topped with slow-cooked beef, zesty barbecue sauce, and crispy onions. There is even a "Veggie Supreme" mac and cheese. In all, there are nine different versions.

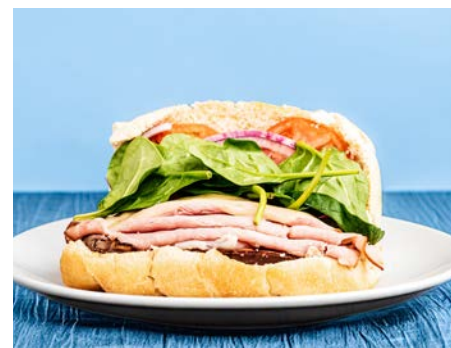
The food evolution comes full circle with a timeless classic: the sandwich. The Salty Seagull, located in the university breezeway, boasts an array of signature sandwiches, including the Italian Meatball Sub and the Cajun Chicken Sandwich.

The sit-down eatery includes an attention-grabbing mural as its central décor motif. Crafted by local muralist Jeremy Flores, the mural showcases the Salty Seagull mascot gazing out over a picturesque Corpus Christi skyline.

Finally, the Islander Dining Hall, the university's primary location for campus dining, will undergo its first major renovation since it opened in 2014.

"This summer, we are updating the menu, the experience, and the environment," Rivera said. "The biggest addition is La Mesa, a Mexican concept, that will be a part of the daily lineup. We are also refreshing the deli, the pizza area, and the salad station."

The Islander Dining Hall will re-open just in time for the start of the upcoming fall semester. •



Made-to-order sandwiches top the menu at The Salty Seagull.



From left: Analy Rodriguez '26 and Ericca Mahaffey '25 stop for a bite to eat at Salty Seagull.



BIG **OPPORTUNITIES**

*New Public Health Degrees to
Launch in Fall '24*

To meet the increasing demand for skilled health care professionals and to address the growing challenges in public health in South Texas and beyond, the Island University is proud to announce the launch of its new bachelor's and master's degrees in Public Health.

“A distinctive factor of our programs is a focus on public health issues specific to South Texas, including cultural, political, and historical perspectives...”

DR. HASSAN AZIZ, College of Nursing and Health Sciences Dean

Starting in fall 2024, the new programs aim to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and experience necessary to effectively address complex public health issues. These programs incorporate interdisciplinary coursework, hands-on learning experiences, and opportunities for research and community engagement, ensuring that graduates are well-prepared to contribute meaningfully to improving population health outcomes.

Housed within the university's College of Nursing and Health Sciences (CONHS), the two degrees provide students with valuable credentials and excellent employment prospects.

“A distinctive factor of our programs is a focus on public health issues specific to South Texas, including cultural, political, and historical perspectives; along with border issues,” said Dr. Hassan Aziz, CONHS Dean.

The introduction of these programs comes at a critical time, as communities around the world grapple with a range of public health issues, from infectious diseases to chronic conditions and health disparities. By offering comprehensive education and training in public health, TAMU-CC is poised to make a significant impact on the health and well-being

of individuals and populations locally, nationally, and globally.

“One of the challenges facing public health today is a labor shortage,” Aziz said. “A locally offered public health degree program provides an opportunity to recruit and retain local talent to the benefit our community. Students armed with public health degrees are not just learners; they are the architects of healthier societies, the champions of preventive care, and the stewards of community well-being. They don't just study change; they become the leaders who catalyze it.”

The Bachelor of Science in Public Health will focus on disease prevention, environmental health, public health surveillance, health policy, and health management. Delivered in a face-to-face format based on student survey results, this 120-credit-hour degree plan incorporates a 300-hour internship, which provides invaluable workplace experience that enhances students' competitiveness in the job market.

The Master of Science in Public Health, which has a specialization in population health research and analytics, looks to enroll individuals who aspire to take on leadership roles in public health

organizations, governmental agencies, and health care institutions to create data-informed public health policies, programs, and services.

“Our advanced degree graduates create healthier communities, improve global health, reduce the impact of natural disasters and pandemics, and address health disparities,” Aziz said. “They are also well-versed in scientific research, policy development, implementation and assessment, education, and effective community skills.”

The TAMU-CC program, which is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, consists of 45 credit hours; its 100% online delivery format allows individuals who are already in the workforce to build their knowledge base while maintaining an existing work schedule. •

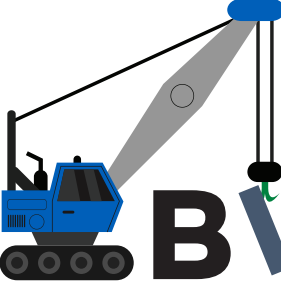


DISCOVER DEGREES

Visit tamucc.edu/public-health to learn more about the new degrees.



The new Arts and Media Building will provide improved sound-proofed rehearsal and performance spaces.



BIG CHANGES

*An Enhanced Islander Footprint
Takes Shape*

At the Island University, an evolution of infrastructure additions and improvements demonstrates the university's commitment to quality education and support services for students, both current and future.

This spring, the university broke ground on its new Arts and Media Building. The 85,000-square-foot structure will provide an improved environment for music, theatre, and dance education, and will serve as an invaluable recruitment tool for students seeking high-quality, accredited programs.

BUILDING AMENITIES INCLUDE:

- 325-seat proscenium theatre
- 200-seat recital hall
- 166-seat black box theatre
- Dance studio and various rehearsal spaces
- Dedicated space for a Dr. Hector P. Garcia display

By adding to the cultural vibrancy of the Coastal Bend community, the building will also contribute to regional economic and workforce development efforts. Various donor naming opportunities are open across multiple levels within the new structure. The project is expected to be completed in spring 2026.

With a history that spans more than a half century, the Student Services Center, better known as the Round Building, was due for an update. The \$4 million project involved an impressive list of improvements including new air handler units, a new elevator, new flooring, code-compliant doors and restrooms, windstorm-rated windows and walls, a fresh coat of paint, and more.

The renovation, which spanned a two-year period, also aimed to enhance the functionality of the space, making it easier for students to locate offices and services.

"We also have all new cubicles, directional signage, and a nice entrance kiosk," said Scott Meares, Associate Vice President for Operations. "All of this helps students navigate the space, get the information they need, and complete their business."

In downtown Corpus Christi, the university's 79,000-square-foot building on the corner of Chaparral and Lomax streets continues its transition into a mixed-use facility. TAMU-CC bought the building, formerly home to JCPenney, in 2019.



The design of the proscenium stage in the Arts and Media Building is inspired by the dramatic underwater experience of the Gulf of Mexico, with gradient layers of blue on the walls and floors.

Phase 1 of the renovation project, slated for completion in January 2025, includes the creation of an art gallery on the first floor and a second Mission Control Center for the Lone Star UAS Center for Excellence and Innovation, iPORT offices, reception and meeting space, and an office dedicated to overseeing economic development activities and industry partnership strategies for the university on the fourth floor.

The second phase of the project will focus on the relocation of the Special Collections and Archives Department from its current home in the university's Mary and Jeff Bell Library to its designated space on the second floor of the downtown building. Due to space constraints on campus, the department's 300+ collections are currently spread across multiple sites, including storage facilities in Corpus Christi and San Antonio, which lengthens the retrieval process for researchers seeking access to these documents.

To fund this move, Island University administrators, with support from community advocates, initiated a fundraising campaign aiming to raise \$2.4 million of an estimated \$6 million needed to build out the floor, which



The lobby interior of the Arts and Media Building is designed with neutral colors and subtle textures to reflect the natural campus landscape.

includes efforts to match a three-year \$500,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. •



To support, contact Jaime Nodarse Barrera, Vice President of Institutional Advancement, at 361.825.3320 or jaime.nodarse@tamucc.edu

BIG BUSINESS

TAMU-CC Career Center Partners with Industry Giants to Support Student Success in Local Workforce and Beyond

For many first-year students embarking on their college journey, the prospect of preparing for their future professional lives might not initially top their list of priorities. The allure of making new friends, exploring newfound independence, and immersing themselves in various activities and classes often takes precedence. However, as they receive important instruction in their required university seminar class, they are also strategically introduced to the university's Career and Professional Development Center.

Led by Executive Director Dr. Leslie Mills and Associate Director Chau Hoang '13 and supported by eight staff members, the Career Center aims to establish a seamless transition for students from college life to the workforce. Whereas previous generations of students may have accessed career-oriented services at a later stage of their studies or during a job fair, the strategic goal of the center is to incorporate essential career-oriented skills into a student's college journey from the outset, ensuring personalized, holistic, and comprehensive preparation for the professional path that lies ahead.

Continued on the next page.



From left: Natalia Vales Rivera '27 consults with Dr. Leslie Mills, Executive Director of the Career and Professional Development Center.

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In 2023, more than 2,000 Islander students attended career or internship fairs hosted on campus.

“At the heart of our mission lies our commitment to equip every student with the necessary tools for a successful career,” Mills said. “Our career counselors pride themselves on their knowledge of up-to-date industry practices and processes, and we dedicate ourselves to giving students the best possible start.”

The TAMU-CC Career Center is a busy enterprise. In 2023, they hosted more than 2,000 student career consultations. They also witnessed record-breaking attendance at job fairs, with over 2,000 students meeting with over 450 employers seeking job opportunities.

Career and recruitment events on the Island have earned a positive reputation in the Coastal Bend, particularly after TAMU-CC joined forces with the United Corpus Christi Chamber of Commerce and the Corpus Christi Regional Economic Development Center to host the inaugural Coastal Bend First Career Fair, held in September 2022. The goal of the fair is to give local businesses priority access to Islander students and alumni to help build a stronger local workforce.

“Seeing our students become employed around the country is wonderful, but it is just as important that students stay here in the local community to share their talents and knowledge,” Hoang said.

This past year also saw the center promote more than 1,000 local internships and practicum opportunities to TAMU-CC students, with 575 local employers associated with these offers. Additionally, 895 students reported completing internships in 2023.

Local employers who are involved in the networking initiatives of the Career Center have responded positively and have encouraged other industry representatives to follow suit.

“The TAMU-CC Career Center is a great resource that many businesses in the region stand to benefit from,” said Joe Hopkins ’92, ’95, owner of the Hopkins CPA Firm. “They support keeping students in our region. Most importantly, they inspire the ambition of interns to obtain valuable experience on the job.”



A STRONGER FOUNDATION

For Valeria Barbosa ’23, ’24, an internship with the Port of Corpus Christi directly paved the way for her future career after she received an offer of employment with the Port as a Human Resources Assistant upon completing her Bachelor of Business Administration from TAMU-CC. She credits the Career Center with equipping her with the resources she needed to find and complete her

internship.

“The center offered a variety of services, including resume writing, interview preparation, and career counseling, which helped me develop confidence in myself as a young professional,” Barbosa said. “I also attended different events hosted by the center, which helped me learn more about the internship process and how to market myself to potential employers.”

The university’s emphasis on career development is a big reason why Barbosa decided to return to her alma mater to earn a Master of Business Administration.

“TAMU-CC provides students with the opportunity to gain real-world experience in their chosen field of study, as well as helps them cultivate the professional skills they need to successfully find internships and employment,” she said. “The Career Center also gives support to recent alumni, which is a wonderful asset for students who don’t know exactly what they want to do right after they graduate.”



MORE THAN A JOB FAIR

The process of helping students become advocates for their own employability goes far beyond hosting a job fair or finding a student an internship; the Career Center team also works alongside university faculty and staff to incorporate key professional competency development and industry experience into the university curriculum. In 2023 alone, the center conducted more than 200 classroom presentations that emphasized this comprehensive approach.

One such example is a partnership with the College of Business to integrate professional development activities into the first-year Introduction to Business class. This initiative requires all students to create resumes, develop professional profiles, and participate in mock interviews. The Career Center team also arranges for guest speakers, often Island University alumni, to deliver lectures to students, with 64 employers visiting classes and attending panel discussions and information sessions in 2023. Students also made site visits to Frost Bank, Steel Dynamics, and Corpus Christi Army Depot (CCAD).

“Working with the TAMU-CC Career and Professional Development Center has transformed our workforce planning,” said Israel Talamantez, CCAD Chief of Future Operations. “They listen, respond,

and work hard to shape our future professionals.”

Another example of faculty-industry partnerships is the university’s Industry Connect series, piloted by Hoang in 2022. The series brings together university faculty, staff, and industry partners to explore industry needs, labor market trends, and collaboration opportunities.

“Our career counselors pride themselves on their knowledge of up-to-date industry practices and processes, and we dedicate ourselves to giving students the best possible start.”

DR. LESLIE MILLS,
Career and Professional Development
Center Executive Director

In its inaugural run with the College of Engineering and Computer Science, the Industry Connect series featured several local civil engineering professionals from companies such as HDR, Inc., SpawGlass, Hanson Professional Services, Port of Corpus Christi Authority, and Lockwood, Andrews & Newman, Inc. In fall 2023, the center hosted its second Industry Connect series focused on connecting representatives from the information technology sector with the university’s computer science majors.

Additionally, fall 2023 saw the Career Center expand its support to recruit industry-sponsored projects for the Engineering Capstone Project course to provide upcoming graduates with the opportunity to work on real industry problems while gaining invaluable exposure to potential employers.

“This capstone initiative allows more learning-by-doing opportunities while offering industry partners additional resources to assist in troubleshooting

challenges, along with building strong brand representation on campus,” Hoang said. “It also plays a critical role in supporting our international students, who may not have the ability to undertake off-campus internships. We also hope this will present new sponsored research opportunities for faculty to further their collaborations with industry.”

The Career Center also encourages students to make one-on-one appointments to ensure they are well prepared before a job interview or job fair. Services include professional writing and communication tips, social media cultivation, resume support, and access to professional clothes for an interview via Izzy’s Closet.

This year has also seen the Career Center partner with Quincia, a new AI-based program to provide students with 24/7 resume and interview support.

“Accessibility is so important for what we want to achieve,” Mills said. “We want to make sure students have resources available to them outside of the normal business hours or when a deadline is quickly approaching.”



BIG BUSINESS. BIG FUTURES.

As the Career Center strengthens its ties with local industries, it is also expanding its reach to national and international corporations. The past year has seen industry leaders from Texas and beyond connect with TAMU-CC to recruit students, including tech giants such as Tesla, Google, and Apple.

The Career Center hosted Tesla’s very first Tech Talk event in the Coastal Bend in fall 2023, with 134 students and 24 faculty in attendance. The very first campus visit from Google, also in fall 2023, welcomed 320 students and 78 faculty, while Apple’s virtual educational development workshop provided great insight to the 36 participating students as they prepared to apply to the company’s Strategic Data Solutions summer internship program.

“The students we’ve interviewed and interacted with from TAMU-CC have been well-prepared, possessing a strong foundation of skills and knowledge relevant to their respective fields,” said Jason Hinds, Managing Director of Google Cloud Customer Engineering. “It was evident that the center’s commitment to providing students with comprehensive

career development resources had a direct impact on the quality of candidates we encountered.”

These are sentiments that also ring true with Islanders, as echoed by computer science graduate student Mohammed Ali Sheriff Shaik ’24.

“Being able to attend an event with an international company like Google was a huge boost to my confidence, and it was great to know that our university attracts such big corporate names,” he said. “I feel lucky to have access to such a dedicated career services team, who go above and beyond to help us form these valuable connections.” •



The university hosted a Tech Talk with Tesla in September 2023, which was attended by more than 130 Islander students.

BIG SHOT

*Ryann Phillips '25 to Compete in
2024 Summer Olympics*



Ryann Phillips '25 at the Olympic Trials event in Tucson, Arizona.

Competitors from all around the world will converge on Paris this July for the 2024 Summer Olympics. Among the world's best athletes will be Texas A&M-Corpus Christi student Ryann Phillips '25. The 20-year-old earned a spot on the U.S. Trap Shooting Olympic Team. The sport involves shooting at flying clay targets from different angles with a shotgun.

"I'm so excited to be going," Phillips said. "I don't think the reality of it all has set in yet, and I doubt it will until I get to the Games."

In her final Olympic-qualifying competition in March, Phillips faced off against 50 other women vying for two spots on the team.

"It's taken me years to get to this point in my athletic career," Phillips said. "If you really want something, you have to go for it."

Phillips, who is from the small West Texas town of Gail, began her trap shooting journey in the third grade after spending some time in 4-H. It was an activity her mother encouraged.

"One thing I can say for sure is that I've found my people at TAMU-CC."

RYANN PHILLIPS '25

"I'm an only child so it's always been just me and my mom through it all," Phillips said. "No matter what was happening in my mom's life, she took me to every practice, paid for every piece of equipment, and made sure I had what I needed to succeed. I don't think either of us ever knew what the future was going to be, but we're both proud to be where we are today."

Phillips says her longing for a supportive campus community is what led her to Texas A&M-Corpus Christi, where she is pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Communication.

"One thing I can say for sure is that I've found my people at TAMU-CC," Phillips said. "Everyone I've met has been so nice and helpful. From the faculty to



Ryann Phillips '25 shows off medals from her recent victories.

staff, everyone makes me feel like they care about me as a person. Having that kind of support as a student and athlete is invaluable to my success in the classroom and beyond."

In order to manage both her academic responsibilities and travel commitments, Phillips keeps open lines of communication with her professors and often completes assignments before their due date. Since fall 2023, she's competed in Croatia, Egypt, Germany, Italy, and Peru as a member of the USA National Open Team.

"I am so grateful to my professors," Phillips said. "They have done more than needed to help me stay on top of my assignments; all of them have been very supportive."

Dr. Diana Ivy, TAMU-CC Professor of Communication, said Phillips shines just as bright in the classroom as she does in competition.

"Ryann is very bright and articulate," Ivy said. "I see her discipline as a student and athlete come through her schoolwork. We've had some good talks about where she's competed, how she trains, and her background in shooting. I think she's fascinating and I'm definitely on 'Team Ryann.'"

From training, to competition, to schoolwork, it is quite the balancing act. But for Phillips, it's just hard work paying off.

"When you take on a dream like this,

it's definitely a labor of love," Phillips said. "When I first began shooting as a kid, I almost gave it up, but then I tried again and as my mom says — I came back with a vengeance. I am incredibly proud and excited to have the chance to represent my country and my university on the world's stage." •



ISLANDER IMPACT

Stay up-to-date with Ryann's Olympic journey by following her Instagram page @ryann.phillips22

Poppy, lead research dog for the K9 Tar Ball Protection project, eagerly awaits her next detection task.



Big Challenge,
BIG SOLUTION

*From the Classroom to Coastline, Dr. Heidi Ballew '15, '19
joins Canine Guardians of the Gulf*

At the forefront of environmental innovation, Texas A&M-Corpus Christi is home to the pioneering K9 Tar Ball Protection project, led by the university's Center for Coastal Studies (CCS) and funded by the Texas General Land Office. This groundbreaking research initiative leverages the exceptional scent detection abilities of specially trained dogs to identify oil spills and tar balls on South Texas beaches with unparalleled accuracy.

As the project advances from its proof-of-concept phase into its critical testing phase, it aims to not only demonstrate the dogs' superior detection capabilities over humans, but also to refine methodologies for broader application in environmental monitoring, marking a significant stride in TAMU-CC's commitment to marine conservation and innovative solutions to ecological challenges.

"So far, Poppy, our lead research dog, has passed the proof of concept with flying colors," said Dr. Loretta Battaglia, Professor and CCS Director. "She detects oil deposits with a minimum of 95% accuracy, up to five meters in depth. She can even locate oil that has yet to wash ashore."

Dr. Heidi Ballew '15, '19, a two-time alumna and current post-doctoral researcher, plays a pivotal role in this project. In undertaking a crucial human observer role, Ballew aims to find tar balls as well, with her results then being compared with those of the detection dogs. The speed and accuracy of the dogs' sense of smell, as opposed to the human observer's reliance on sight alone,



EXCEPTIONAL SCENT

Poppy's superior sense of smell means she can detect tar balls with a level of accuracy that is unmatched by humans.



Dr. Heidi Ballew '15, '19, pictured with her own dogs, joins the project as a post-doctoral researcher and human observer.

is particularly important to the detection task, as the tar balls are likely to melt in the heat and can have negative effects, such as coating the feathers of marine birds.

"Being involved in this project is exciting, not only because I'm a dog lover with three of my own, but because of the sheer innovativeness of the project," Ballew said. "It is an unparalleled opportunity for our team to address oil spill management in a new way, and to form new perspectives and insights for conservation."

Ballew, who hails from Kentucky, chose the unique environment at TAMU-CC for her undergraduate degree, and later enrolled in the marine biology doctoral program.

"I visited the university and was amazed at the nature that surrounded it," she recalled. "I was immediately sold."

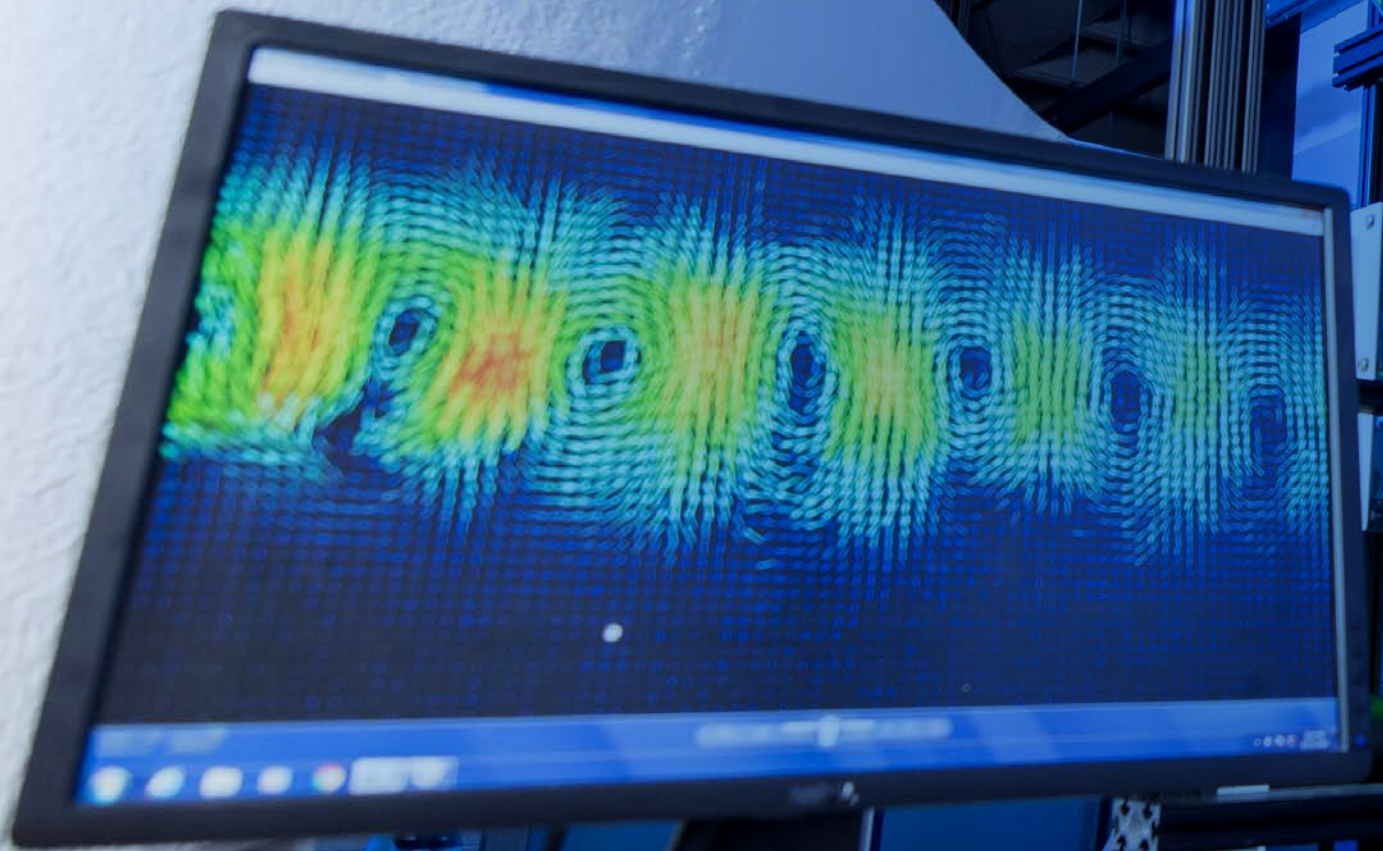
Ballew credits the natural setting of TAMU-CC, the hands-on classes, and the dedicated support of the life sciences faculty with her evolution from a passionate marine biology student to a postdoctoral researcher.

"As most of my courses were experiential, my studies allowed process

integration for concepts we covered in class, and this high-impact learning model made me more confident when those skills needed to be applied in real research settings," Ballew said. "I now use all the skills I have acquired along the way to pose and attempt to answer some of the most pressing environmental and ecological questions that we as humans face. I consider myself fortunate to continue to learn from my mentors here on the Island."

Ballew's involvement in the project extends beyond her own efforts as she is deeply committed to mentoring the next generation of marine biologists and conservationists she meets through her research.

"As Islanders, we get to take classes on a beautiful campus with brilliant scientists who move the needle of science forward every day," she said. "I encourage students to find something exciting about what they are learning and let it lead the way." •





BIG MACHINES

*University Researchers Utilize Advanced
Technology for Innovative Solutions*

When it comes to harnessing the seemingly limitless potential of technology, Texas A&M-Corpus Christi continues to discover new ways to utilize cutting-edge tools to drive research.

From a wind tunnel that is key to analyzing environmental forces and enhancing bridge designs, to a half-million-dollar scanning system for exoskeleton research to improve workplace safety, to an immersive lab system within a virtual reality dome, these big machines help TAMU-CC researchers discover solutions that will make for a better tomorrow.

Continued on the next page.

A 30-foot-long wind tunnel is housed within the Aero-Structural Optimization (ASTRO) Lab, located in the university's Robert R. Furgason Engineering Building.



Mechanical engineering major Gerardo Portales '23 and Dr. Hongwei Hsiao work within the scanning equipment framework.

In the Robert R. Furgason Engineering Building, a research team led by Dr. Miguel Cid Montoya, Assistant Professor of Civil Engineering, is using a wind tunnel to develop safer, more cost-effective bridges by analyzing forces on bridge decks and optimizing their design through numerical computational fluid dynamics simulations and experiments. The 30-foot-long structure, housed within the expansive Aero-Structural Optimization (ASTRO) Lab, commands attention with its intricate network of electrical wiring and monitoring systems, as the roaring gusts it produces echo throughout the facility.

"This equipment is hugely beneficial for the students at TAMU-CC," Cid Montoya said. "If a picture is worth a thousand words, then I believe that an active learning experience in a lab carrying out research is worth a thousand whiteboard lectures."

Cid Montoya's research shows that bridge development can never truly fit a "one-size-fits-all" format. For example, in California, an engineer would have to take earthquakes into account; in Corpus

Christi, the priority will be hurricanes and strong winds.

"When we design a bridge, we look at a wide range of factors — how long will it be, what form will it take, what loads will it bear. But we also need to consider the environment and elements that the bridge will be exposed to," Cid Montoya explained. "Each location is different. We have the local climate, wind speed and turbulence, and the potential for natural disasters, so we must treat each bridge design differently."

Jose Jaquez '25, a mechanical engineering major, said his involvement in the wind tunnel project allowed him to put his skills learned in class into practice.

"Regarding the wind tunnel, my main task is to troubleshoot any issues we come across when updating the design of the machine," Jaquez said. "I do this by either designing new parts for the machine or modifying existing parts or codes. I love being able to use my knowledge of design and electronics to improve the functionality of the machine and to advance our research, all while allowing me to grow as an engineer."

Also located in the Furgason Building is the STAR Lab, which stands for Smart Technology Advancement Research. Led by Dr. Hongwei Hsiao, Professor of Engineering and Rogelio "Roger" Benavides Memorial Chair for Industrial Safety, research conducted there relates to industrial innovation, occupational safety, and public health.

"Our industrial engineering program is quite new; however, we have impressive facilities and a strong faculty team," Hsiao said. "We have everything we need to capably serve students."

The STAR Lab includes a novel piece of scanning equipment that is housed in a semi-enclosed stainless steel configuration that extends from floor to ceiling. The \$450,000 state-of-the-art system is equipped with 10 sets of temporal 3D cameras that capture a human subject's exact dimensions in a tenth of a second.

Engineering majors in Hsiao's human factors class have used the system to learn how to conduct human body size and shape measurements as well as scanning. One of those students is Hoang Wong '25, who is part of the first cohort of industrial

“If a picture is worth a thousand words, then I believe that an active learning experience in a lab carrying out research is worth a thousand whiteboard lectures.”

DR. MIGUEL CID MONTOYA, Assistant Professor of Civil Engineering

engineering majors.

“Some of the program’s highlights have been working with physical anthropometric measurements, actually manipulating a robotic arm, and learning the control and dynamical system theory behind the robot,” Wong said.

Hsiao and TAMU-CC post-doctoral researcher Dr. Hanwen Wang are collaborating on a study about exoskeletons — wearable frames that enhance mobility or strength — for various worker groups. They’re also creating a 3D scan database of the Hispanic population to enhance workplace designs, including better-fitting protective gear like fall-arrest harnesses and body armor. The main aim of the research is to gather data to decrease workplace fatalities among Hispanic and Latino workers.

In the Engineering Lab, a standalone facility next to the university’s Physical Plant, a 180-degree virtual reality-integrated system that includes a 16-foot-wide dome, treadmill, projector, and 3D graphics gives kinesiology majors the ability to digitally recreate a person’s skeleton to better understand how people move.

Motion-capture cameras and muscle activity sensors provide data for biomechanics-related research projects studying the effects of visual surroundings speed on movement and posture, how carrying backpacks influences walking and standing, and the differences in movements between athletes and non-athletes when landing from a jump.



The immersive virtual reality system assists with biomechanical measurements and testing.

The VR system, made by Bertec Immersive Labs (BIL), is housed in a research space managed by Dr. Jangwoon Park, TAMU-CC Associate Professor of Engineering, who happily shares the space with Dr. Bryon Applequist, Assistant Professor of Kinesiology.

“The BIL has allowed me to conduct cutting-edge research in biomechanics and neuromechanics in collaboration with mechanical engineering,” Applequist said. “My students are drawn to the fascinating methodologies that we can utilize to investigate real health problems that affect the residents of the Coastal Bend. The students gain invaluable experience and they get to have fun, all while making a real difference in our community.”

Applequist’s students, mostly undergraduates, have produced 17 unique published research abstracts and conference presentations in the last year; 13 of them using data collected from the BIL.

One of those students is Katie Colburn ’24, a kinesiology major who works with the BIL as a student research assistant. She is also in the university’s Honors Program. To meet the requirements of the Honors Program, Colburn completed a Project of Excellence, which involved participants completing randomized walking trials on the treadmill while the 180-degree virtual reality system displayed a park scene to collect motion data related to a person’s gait.

“Working with Dr. Applequist and utilizing the BIL for my Project of Excellence was such an amazing experience,” Colburn said. “It’s been my favorite part of my time at TAMU-CC, and I hope that research like this can continue with kinesiology through collaboration with engineering. I think it’s a great partnership and I’m thankful to be part of it.” •





WINNING BIG

Celebrating 25 Years of Islanders Athletics

Los Angeles is known as the center of the entertainment world — a place where underdogs and happy endings come together. For a moment this past March Madness, it was the site of a historic moment for Islanders Athletics as the Islanders Women's Basketball team competed in its first NCAA Tournament. They fought valiantly but would ultimately fall to the No. 1 seed USC. It was the end of a historic season, one worthy of a sequel.

"This team and its coach, Royce Chadwick, represent everything that is great about the Island University," said Adrian Rodriguez, Vice President of Intercollegiate Athletics. "This trip to the NAAs and this team's success will no doubt take this program to new heights going forward."

It was just a week earlier that gold confetti littered the floor of the Legacy Center in Lake Charles, Louisiana. There, the same team hoisted the Southland Conference trophy for the first time in program history after beating the Lamar Cardinals in the conference championship game and punching their ticket to the big dance.

"It was a big moment for everyone, including our fans," said Paige Allen '24, '26, senior guard. "We love the fans. They

support us through everything."

These milestones come as the athletic program, now an NCAA Division I school with 16 men's and women's intercollegiate sports, reaches its silver anniversary.

"We've come a long way," said Steven King, Assistant Athletic Director for Corporate Sales and Broadcasting. "We truly came from some humble beginnings."

In the late 1940s, the University of Corpus Christi had a football team called the Tarpons, which in time proved too expensive to maintain, along with swimming and boxing programs. By the mid-1950s, intercollegiate athletics on the Island were gone. It wasn't until the 1990s — 1997 to be exact — when the late Dan Viola, the university's first athletic director, took the reins to revive a program that had been dormant for more than 40 years.

"Dan did an amazing job getting us started again," King recalled. "He had a shoestring budget, and there were some hiccups along the way, but he really connected with the community and got people on and off campus excited about Islanders Athletics."

Viola hit the ground running with a five-year plan to get the athletics program back on its feet. That meant assembling
Continued on the next page.

an administrative and coaching staff, with one of his first hires being Ronnie Arrow, the inaugural coach of Islanders Men's Basketball.

The Texas native had success in his previous head coaching position at the University of South Alabama, where he won two Sun Belt Conference titles and took his team to the NCAA Tournament twice. However, it would be his stop in Corpus Christi that would prove the ultimate challenge.

“We truly came from some humble beginnings.”

STEVEN KING, Assistant Athletic Director for Corporate Sales and Broadcasting

“In those early days, we had no uniforms, no basketballs, and no permanent offices,” Arrow said. “We knew we were going to have some growing pains, but our staff worked hard.”

Success and viability came quickly for Islanders Men's Basketball. In their first year of existence, they finished with a 13-13 record, which included a five-game winning streak to conclude the 1999 season. In the program's sophomore season, they would finish with a 14-14 record.

Meanwhile, Islanders Women's Basketball got off to an even hotter start. In their inaugural season, 1999-2000, they finished with a 14-12 record, which they followed up with back-to-back 16-win seasons. Sheryl Estes, who had nearly a decade of success coaching the Wayland Baptist University Women's Basketball team in Plainview, was tasked with building the Islanders Women's program from scratch, a challenge she was eager to meet.

“We had to convince players to take a chance on a program that had never played a game,” Estes recounted. “We sold over 1,000 season tickets for our first season, sight unseen.”

Momentum for both basketball programs, and Islanders Athletics as a whole, kicked into high gear in July 2002 when the program was granted NCAA

Division I status.

“When I got to the university, I thought, ‘There's a goldmine waiting to happen,’” Arrow recalled. “Getting that NCAA Division I status helped us flourish.”

Four years later, during the 2006-2007 season, Islanders Athletics would find a new home in the Southland Conference. The move gave both the men's and women's basketball programs a manageable pathway to their respective NCAA Tournaments. It's something the men's team capitalized on right away. In their first year in the Southland, they won the conference tournament and punched a ticket to the 2007 NCAA Tournament where they would hang tough against the No. 2 seed Wisconsin Badgers.

“In my opinion, there's nothing that can get a school and a community more recognition than playing basketball in the NCAA Tournament,” Arrow said. “It was great for us.”

In more recent years, the Islanders Men's Basketball team got back to the Big Dance with back-to-back appearances in the NCAA Tournament between the 2021-22 and 2022-23 seasons. They began both trips with the First Four in Dayton, Ohio, with the latter featuring a historic 75-71 victory over Southeast Missouri State for the program's first-ever NCAA Tournament win. The men went on to ultimately face No. 1 seed Alabama in the NCAA First Round.

Islanders Athletics would earn their first NCAA Championship in 2007, courtesy of the endurance of long-distance runner Shadrack Songok '08, who ran his way to a gold medal in the 10,000-meter run and would repeat that same feat the following year at the Indoor NCAA Championships. To prepare for his championship run, Songok trained at Corpus Christi's Cabaniss Field. Not having a track on campus was just one of the hurdles that Shawn Flanagan, the legendary coach who



Top: In 2023, Men's Basketball repeated as SLC champs after winning a thriller over Northwestern State.



Left: Women's Tennis secured the 2024 SLC regular season title after a 7-0 victory over the Lamar Cardinals.

built the Islanders Cross Country/Track & Field Team, had to face.

“Not having a locker room, much of a weight room, or a training room was not fun,” Flanagan said. “But we emphasized what we did have — good kids, good coaching, and a great place to live.”

Flanagan would go on to coach 11 Islanders cross country/track & field teams to conference championships before retiring in 2017.

Student-athletes have enjoyed significant facility upgrades over the years, including the opening of the Dugan Wellness Center in 2009 and the Thomas J. Henry Tennis Center in 2011. Led by coach Steve Moore, a 13-time recipient of the Southland Conference Coach of the Year title, the men’s and women’s tennis teams held a combined 33 Southland Conference titles and 16 NCAA appearances going into the 2024 season.

“What makes me most proud of this program is not just national rankings and NCAA Tournaments, but that Islanders Tennis has excelled with high character players who have earned a team GPA of over 3.0 for 33 straight semesters,” Moore said. “They are ready for success in the real world.”

In 2013, the university welcomed an additional sports facility, the Dr. Jack Dugan and Family Track and Soccer Stadium. From there, championship culture has continued to become engrained in Islanders Athletics.

The Islanders Cross Country teams have each taken a turn at a Southland Conference title in the last three years with the women winning on their home course in 2021 before the men took their first-ever championship in 2023 under first-year coach Bryan Jackson. It’s under the direction of these SLC Coaches of the Year that success emulates itself, something Islanders Beach Volleyball is also no stranger to.

Quickly matching that winning mindset, coach Gayle Stammer has taken the Beach Volleyball team beyond expectations in just seven years. The program has seen four championships in the last three seasons alone, with back-to-back Southland Conference regular season and tournament titles. Their reign has extended into the postseason where they won their first-ever NCAA Tournament match in 2023 after topping No. 16 UT-Martin 3-0 in the first round.



Top: Beach Volleyball clinched the SLC regular season champs title in 2024. This season, head coach Gayle Stammer was honored as SLC Coach of the Year for the third year in a row.



Right: Men’s Cross Country won its first-ever SLC championship in 2023. First-year head coach Bryan Jackson was named 2023 SLC Men’s Coach of the Year.

All programs have combined to win 15 championships between the 2021-22 and 2022-23 academic years and Islanders Athletics has no intention of slowing down that prosperity anytime soon. With 25 years of excellence already in the books for Islanders Athletics, the department looks to expand on its success that continues to reach new heights each year.

“As we mark the 25th anniversary of Islanders Athletics, we reflect not only on our past achievements but also on the remarkable journey of growth and evolution that has defined our program,” Rodriguez said. “This milestone is a testament to the hard work and dedication of our student-athletes, coaches, staff, and supporters who have helped shape Islanders Athletics into the thriving program it is today.” •

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF ISLANDERS ATHLETICS

HELP US THRIVE FOR ANOTHER

25!

GIVE NOW

tamucc.edu/iafgive25



A homemade boat is found on Mustang Island. Tunnell often sees remnants of similar DIY vessels, often originating from Cuba.

BIG



ADVENTURE

More Than a Day at the Beach

A walk on the beach can be a lot of things — a chance to disconnect, exercise, relax, or even hunt for treasure. For Jace Tunnell, Director of Community Engagement at the Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies (HRI) at Texas A&M-Corpus Christi, it's all that, and so much more!

Tunnell's wildly popular "Beachcombing" video series details his walks along many Texas beaches as he examines the varied — and sometimes strange — creatures that wash ashore, along with the weird, fascinating, creepy, and sometimes historic marine debris that finds its way to the sand.

Continued on the next page.



A rescue life raft pod is discovered on Matagorda Island. Tunnell often finds emergency food or water with these and tries to track down where they were launched from.



The series began at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 when beaches were closed to prevent the public from congregating together.

“The Beachcombing series was a way to bring the beach to the people,” Tunnell said. “At the end of 2020, after 30 episodes, we thought we had talked about everything and were going to stop production of the film series, but each week something new kept washing in and here we are in 2024 with enough content for new videos to nearly get us through the entire year!”

“The Beachcombing series was a way to bring the beach to the people.”

JACE TUNNELL, HRI Director of Community Engagement

Tunnell said he doesn't envision a time when there won't be new content available for the video series simply due to the mysteries of the Gulf.

While Tunnell's videos and photos are certainly entertaining, they largely serve to educate audiences about coastal and marine species, as well as draw attention to the greater issue of marine debris.

“I've found over 30 messages in a bottle, a prosthetic leg, a live five-and-a-half-foot alligator, rare blue sea dragons, a safe, three bowling balls, bales of rubber from a 1944 sunken ship, lots of creepy beach dolls, escape pods, illegal fishing boats, homemade rafts, and a mermaid statue,” Tunnell said.

In more recent episodes, Tunnell has taken items he's found back to HRI researchers for further explanation of their origins and their roles in the ecosystem. This might involve deep dives into the world of serpulid tube worms, exploring the complexities of ocean acidification, or even learning what a leptocephalus is (a small, transparent eel larva) through the help of HRI's Center for Sportfish Science and Conservation.

“We want to show the audience that TAMU-CC has world-class researchers working on every aspect of the Gulf of Mexico,” Tunnell said. “It gives viewers a chance to hear from the experts, see their

labs, and develop a connection to the university and the beach that perhaps they didn't realize was right there in their own backyard.”

Tunnell hopes the Beachcombing series will inspire audiences to care more about what is happening along Gulf shorelines, which will lead to the conservation and protection of our oceans, both for current and future generations. •



CATCH AN EPISODE

Visit @HarteResearch on YouTube or Facebook or tune in on KEDT-FM 90.3



Clockwise from top: Tunnell often finds lost fishing gear including corks and lures. Various bits of plastic debris are found including children's toys, single-use plastics, and plastics used in industry like nurdle pellets. Seagoing dolls have been a staple of Tunnell's finds, landing him on the "Last Week Tonight" show with John Oliver in 2022. Occasionally, Tunnell finds cultural "witch bottles" containing various materials meant to trap and remove harmful intentions away from the sender.





The Center for Sportfish Science and Conservation works closely with recreational anglers on outreach and best management practices for catch-and-release fishing of common Texas sportfish species.

BIG MILESTONE

Celebrating 10 Years of Sportfish Research

The Center for Sportfish Science and Conservation at the Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies (HRI) at Texas A&M-Corpus Christi is celebrating over 10 years of innovative sportfish research in the Gulf of Mexico and beyond. The Sportfish Center, as it's commonly known, is the first research center in the western Gulf of Mexico dedicated to providing key science-based information that supports sustainable management of the multibillion-dollar

recreational fishery industry that flourishes along the Gulf Coast.

The center has made a name for itself among anglers, Gulf stakeholders, natural resource managers, and fans of Discovery's Shark Week alike.

"Sharks are great ambassadors for the ocean," said Dr. Greg Stunz, HRI Senior Executive Director and Director of the Sportfish Center. "They are a key that opens the door for scientific curiosity and discovery."

Multiple appearances on the yearly summer television series have drawn significant attention to the Sportfish Center's research on these top ocean predators, with studies focusing on the movement of sharks in the Gulf through various forms of tagging. Shark Week episodes have featured Stunz, along with Associate Research Scientist, Dr. Kesley Banks '19.

"Sharks are a vital part of our oceans," Banks said. "Without them, our oceans

are out of balance. By working to understand the importance of their ecological roles and conserving these apex predators, we're helping to ensure healthy oceans for both current and future generations.”

“The Sportfish Center has become a respected authority on sportfish science and conservation.”

DR. MATT STREICH, Sportfish Center Assistant Director

The work of the Sportfish Center spans far beyond sharks, though. From the beginning, fisheries scientists have launched extensive studies on fisheries-related issues including the habitat and biodiversity surrounding artificial reefs in the Gulf of Mexico,

ways to provide anglers with better catch and release practices, and citizen science programs, to name a few.

“Our angler engagement program, ‘Science That Keeps You Hooked,’ acknowledges the importance of involving recreational anglers in the scientific process,” said James Sanchez, Sportfish Center Angler Engagement Coordinator. “In the last year, our Sportfish Tagging Initiative has seen a 64% increase in participation and those who tagged fish for us provided valuable data that enhanced our understanding of fish movement and growth rates.”

Dr. Matt Streich, Assistant Director of the Sportfish Center, echoes this sentiment.

“Over the next 10 years, we plan to increase our engagement efforts with recreational anglers and other citizen scientists to integrate them into the work we do and strengthen their role as leaders in fisheries conservation,” Streich said.

One of the most impactful projects led by the Sportfish Center is the Great Red Snapper Count. Over the course of three years, 80 scientists from across the Gulf captured massive amounts of data,



Dr. Kesley Banks '19 completed her doctoral work at HRI and now oversees the Sportfish Center's shark tagging program.

revealing in 2023 that there are more than 118 million Red Snapper in the U.S. waters of the Gulf of Mexico. The new estimate could change the way the Gulf of Mexico fishery is managed by federal and state officials.

“The Sportfish Center has become a respected authority on sportfish science and conservation,” Streich said. “We will continue to produce sound science that supports the sustainable management of recreational fisheries in the Gulf, as our ultimate goal is to ensure healthy fisheries for future generations to enjoy.”



BUILD YOUR LEGACY WHILE CHANGING STUDENTS' LIVES

Many supporters like you—who care about keeping your Island University a top research institution while benefiting the Coastal Bend—may be interested in tax-smart ways to help ensure a strong future for our students and our community. You can create an impact by making a gift from your will, your retirement accounts, or your life insurance policy.

Giving to **Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi** provides support for scholarships, scholarly activity, research, and more. To learn more about making a planned gift, visit plannedgiving.tamucc.edu or contact the Office of Development at **361.825.2639**.



ALBERT RAMON '05

MAKING IT

BIG

in the Windy City

What Albert Ramon '05 remembers most about his time at the Island University is the whirlwind of energy. While a student, he was already working as a weathercaster at KZTV, which demanded early 4 a.m. starts. After delivering morning and noon weather reports, he'd head to his classes on campus. After classes wrapped, he would race over to K-99 Country for an evening shift as a DJ playing Nashville chart toppers.

“Every semester I had at TAMU-CC was the best because I was doing what I loved already even before I had a degree.”

ALBERT RAMON '05

“After work, I'd come home, have a bite to eat, study, go to bed, and do it all over again,” Ramon said. “Every semester I had at TAMU-CC was the best because I was doing what I loved already even before I had a degree.”

Today, Ramon has risen through the broadcasting ranks and is now in the No. 3 market in the United States, Chicago, where he serves as Chief Meteorologist for CBS News Chicago. It's his second chief meteorologist position in the Greater Chicago area and he recently earned industry recognition for his work; last fall, Ramon received the Outstanding Achievement for Weather Anchor award at the Chicago Midwest Emmys.

It's been an astronomical rise for the Beeville, Texas, native whose career began humbly as an intern at KRIS 6 News in summer 2003. He remembers watching former Chief Meteorologist Dale Nelson and the late Matt Terhune provide continuous coverage during Hurricane Claudette, which made landfall near Port O'Connor, Texas, on July 15, 2003. Ramon said it was that moment which confirmed his desire to become a meteorologist.

“That's when I knew that I had to do this,” Ramon said. “I saw Matt and Dale on the green screen, and I thought, ‘What they're doing right now, I have to do that.’”

Ramon, who majored in communication at TAMU-CC, credits Dr. Kelly M. Miller, then the Communication Department adviser and internship coordinator, with helping him secure internship opportunities at both KRIS and KZTV. Miller became President and CEO of the Island University in August 2017.

“Dr. Miller designed an internship course for me, and as a 19-year-old, I took that for granted, but now that I'm getting closer to 40, I have an incredible amount of gratitude for her support and guidance,” he said.

In fall 2023, Ramon accepted an invitation from the university's Corpus Christi American Meteorological Society (2CAMS) student organization to return to campus to give a talk reflecting on his career success to students majoring in atmospheric science, environmental science, and communication.

“I also shared best practices on communicating weather with empathy and compassion, which is especially important during severe weather events,” he said.

He said he was especially pleased to be able to visit with President Miller at the event.

“Albert's exceptional qualities as a student were evident from the first time we met, and I always knew he was destined for great things,” Miller said. “We are truly honored that he made time to come back to the Island University to inspire the next generation of Islanders and I'm thrilled to have played a role, however small, in his amazing journey.”

Houston Hall '24, atmospheric science major, serves as outreach coordinator for 2CAMS and initiated Ramon's invitation to return to campus. Hall, an Austin native, remembers watching Ramon's meteorology broadcasts on KVUE-TV, where Ramon worked for 10 years, and he kept up with Ramon via social media after his move to Chicago.

“When Albert spoke during his presentation, he was passionate, and so were the students. It was our best-attended meeting of the year,” Hall said. “Hearing his presentation gave students hope for the future [in the tough times] like when we're struggling in a class or when we might be applying for a job. Knowing that Albert got where he is today in such a short span of time shows that Islanders can do anything they put their mind to.” •

PATH TO SUCCESS

FIRST STOP: KZTV

Ramon started his meteorology career as a weathercaster for the Corpus Christi CBS affiliate KZTV.



FROM THE LONE STAR STATE TO THE WINDY CITY

In 2020, Ramon left his position with KVUE in Austin to serve as chief meteorologist for NewsNation Network in Chicago.



CURRENT SITUATION: CBS NEWS CHICAGO

Today, Ramon serves as Chief Meteorologist for CBS News Chicago, the No. 3 broadcast market in the U.S.







BIG PARTY

Homecoming Unites Islander Spirit, Past and Present

As the echoes of Islander Homecoming 2024 festivities fade into cherished memories, Islanders past and present find themselves reflecting on what truly makes the Island University so special. For many, the essence of TAMU-CC lies not just in its academic accolades or athletic achievements, but in the sense of community that resonates from the Island campus.

“There’s no place quite like our Island home,” said Ally O’Boyle ’28, an English major. “I had so much fun at the Homecoming Block Party and basketball games, and I visited the Alumni Corner tent with my dad and sister, who are both Islander alumni.”

Her father, Patrick O’Boyle ’86, said that not only is he a passionate university advocate but is proud to have raised a family of passionate TAMU-CC supporters.

“Our Island is the very heart of Corpus Christi,” O’Boyle said. “And I’ve watched it grow from a small upper-level university with only a few thousand students to the fantastic institution it is today. It has given me immense pride to see my daughters and son-in-law become Islanders. This campus attracts nationwide

attention for its excellent facilities and outstanding leadership. At the same time, our community benefits as well, with the university acting as an economic engine for the city.”

Throughout the weeklong celebration, Islanders united in their shared love for their alma mater and the vibrant community it represents and serves. From the glittering, cheering “Sparkle Fans” who attend almost every Islanders basketball game dressed in head-to-toe sequins, to the school spirit of the Islanders dance and cheer teams and pep band, the essence of TAMU-CC’s Homecoming shined bright for all to see.

“The pep band brings excitement and energy to our events, especially those tied to great traditions like Lighting of the I,” said Emily DeLaune ’24, communication

major. “For us, performing is a great opportunity to give back to our campus community.”

Craig Gonzales ’00 recently moved back to Corpus Christi after spending nearly 20 years in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. He attended the Homecoming Block Party and Alumni Corner.

“It’s great to reconnect with the university,” Gonzales said. “Now that I am back home, it is amazing to see how the Island University has grown. I look forward to seeing where it goes in the years ahead.”

Mary Browning ’94 attended the alumni association-hosted TOAST! event in downtown Corpus Christi. Browning, who traveled from Houston to attend Homecoming, is a member of the *Continued on the next page.*

inaugural class of graduates who participated in the first commencement ceremony under the TAMU-CC name exactly thirty years ago.

“When I first started college, the university was still called Corpus Christi State University,” Browning said. “Everything was changing so fast, but we went with the flow and loved our time there. And it turned out to be for the best because we graduated under the name Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, which was a prestigious honor.”

For triple alumnus and “Head Sparkler” Ed Cheetham ’73, ’74, ’84, watching the Island University grow is a source of pride.

“Our Island is the very heart of Corpus Christi.”

PATRICK O’BOYLE ’86

“It is really impressive to see the university come into its own, and the fond memories of our time on the Island keep us coming back,” Cheetham said. “We were the foundation of the Island; we are proud Islanders, and now our president, Dr. Kelly Miller is taking it to new heights, which we love to see. Plus, it’s a lot of fun to support the team, and when my wife, Candace, suggested that we dress up to show the team we were there rooting for them, it just caught on like wildfire.”

Local resident Henry Feye is also a member of the “Sparkle Fans,” a group of alumni-founded, die-hard supporters whose shimmering spectacle is a constant beacon of courtside encouragement.

“I’m not an alumnus, just a huge fan,” Feye said. “Coming to watch the Islanders over the last eight years has brought me real joy, and the team’s improvement over the season has only highlighted their talent.”

Both the Homecoming Block Party and Alumni Corner were held in the parking lot of the American Bank Center on Saturday. In the arena, both the Islanders Men’s and Women’s teams pulled out wins against the Southern Louisiana Lions, with the women triumphing at the end of a nail-biting overtime period.

The weekend festivities capped off a slew of Homecoming events, including

Lighting of the I, the biggest pep rally of the year, which transformed East Lawn into a sea of blue the Friday before the games. At the event, the Islanders Men’s and Women’s Basketball teams were introduced to a cheering crowd while the Islanders Spirit Team led fans in celebration.

“It’s such a rush to lead everyone in rallying their school spirit,” said Amaris Martinez Guidry ’24, senior Islanders Dance member and English major. “I think the energy our team radiates adds an extra level of motivation for everyone to support our Islanders.”

The Homecoming Honors Banquet was also held on Friday with Alex Harris ’89, Musanna Al-Muntasir ’08, Amy Montez Frye ’14, and the 2002 Women’s Cross Country team as this year’s honorees.

“These alumni honorees perfectly encapsulate what our current students strive to become,” said Elvia Aguilar ’17, Executive Director of Alumni Engagement. “They are trailblazers, leaders, and mentors whose Islander Impact can be seen in so many aspects of their professional and personal lives. We are proud of these alumni and glad for this opportunity to pay tribute to their successes.”

Islander Homecoming is a clear example of the lasting impact the years of Islander life have on those who have called it home. Each Islander — whether local to the community, or returning to their Island home — contributes their voices to the indomitable spirit of our community. •

O’Boyle family



Homecoming Honors Banquet





Shakas up! Islander pride spreads from campus to downtown Corpus Christi during Homecoming Week.



CLASS NOTES

1960s

Raymond Morgan '69 passed away Aug. 26, 2023. Morgan taught biology, coached football, and was in school administration for nearly 40 years. He retired from Houston ISD, where he served as principal of Waltrip High School. He also was a deacon at Heights Church Houston. He is survived by Lynn, his wife of 56 years, and his son, Michael.

1990s

Charlotte Valerio Valdez '90 launched her new business, Tranquility for Troops, offering therapeutic massage for veterans. She's excited to serve Coastal Bend veterans with her 27 years of experience as a licensed massage therapist.

Rick Dorn '91 has been named the 2023 Wyoming Thespian Director of the Year.

Marilyn Cook '92, '96 was inducted into the Eleanor Roosevelt Chapter of Kappa Delta Pi at the KDP national convocation. Cook has served on many KDP committees, including four years on the Executive Council, and has been in education for over 30 years, teaching K-12 through the university level.

Jennifer C. Reeder '95 will retire in May after 27 years of teaching, including nine years at Katy ISD and 18 years at Cypress-Fairbanks ISD.

Brandey Wade '97, '18 has proudly joined her alma mater, Flour Bluff ISD, as the District Instructional Technology Specialist.

Rosa Valdez '98 was recognized for her dedication, support, and hard work while serving as president and now vice-president of the Board of Directors for the Volunteer Services Council of the Corpus Christi State Supported Living Center. She has grown the board, generated community projects, and continues to bring awareness of the current needs of the center's disabled residents.

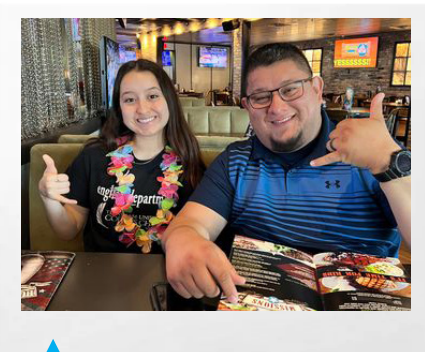


2000s

Tony Elizondo '04 is the proud owner of The Enrichment Group, which specializes in business solutions, personal insurance, and real estate. He has helped thousands of business owners save millions of dollars, contributing to substantial business development across the nation.

Danny Noyola Jr. '04, '08, '13 has been named principal at Haas Middle School in the Corpus Christi ISD. Noyola has a bachelor's degree in political science and two master's degrees — one in public administration, and the other in educational administration.

Sarah Owen '04 has been named principal of Baker Middle School in the Corpus Christi ISD. Owen, a U.S. Army veteran, has been an educator since 2009 and holds a bachelor's degree in health science.



Diana Villarreal '06, '10 enjoyed watching Islanders Women's Basketball in San Antonio during March Madness with her husband Leo and daughter Layla.

Lindsey Whitecotton '08 has been honored as a 2024 Outstanding Delaware Woman in STEM by Million Women Mentors.

Ashley Garza, MSN, RN, SCRNP '09, '19 was promoted to director of the Comprehensive Stroke Center at University Health in San Antonio and has traveled and worked in multiple critical care areas.

Erin Howard '09 started a new career as an Import Policy Analyst with the International Trade Administration at the Department of Commerce in Washington, D.C. She completed both law school and graduate school at American University in 2021-22.

Continued on the next page.

2010s

Melinda Griffin '10 graduated from the University of Texas at Tyler in December 2023 with a dual MBA and MSN in Nursing Administration and recently joined Jackson County Hospital District as their director of nursing.

Jenn Kotzur '10 made the Keiser University Grad School President's List in Fall 2023 and began her Ph.D. dissertation in spring 2024 in Curriculum and Instruction-Leadership.

Naeda Setterbo '10 published her debut children's book "SlothBunny Goes to School," a heartwarming rhyming book with themes related to self-esteem and confidence. In April 2024, she was a featured author at Día De Los Niños at Keach Family Library. The book is available for purchase on Amazon.

Jasmine Richmond '11, '12 was elected to serve as chapter president of the DFW Islander Alumni Association.

Amelia Hunter '12 has been selected for a biologist position as part of the Recovery Planning Team for the Southwest Regional Office within the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Dr. Ana Salazar '12, '23 has worked hard in recent months to open Strengthening Wellness PLLC. Salazar has used her counseling education from Texas A&M-Corpus Christi, coupled with her previous work experience as a licensed professional counselor, to develop a business of her own. She is excited about the new challenge this brings!

Sean Koch '13 was awarded the honor of valedictorian of his graduating law school class and has been named General Counsel for Data Axle, Inc.

Kaylynn Paxson '13, '18, became engaged to Spencer Iezzi on Feb. 10, 2024. The happy couple is planning a spring 2025 wedding.

Mandylyne Cortez '14 is graduating with her Pharm.D. from Feik School of Pharmacy.

Orlando "Orly" Sims '14, '16 has started Orlando Sims Consulting. Sims graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Criminal Justice and a Master of Public Administration and hopes to enhance his clients' chances of favorable outcomes for their political campaigns.

Katy Kiser '15 serves as director of communications for the Catholic Diocese of Dallas. She is an avid reader and community volunteer who spends her free time watching her 14-year-old son, Ethan, a soon-to-be Eagle Scout, play basketball.

Latisha (Hull) Ogbunamiri '15 and Chukwudimma Ogbunamiri '18 gave birth to their son, Obinna Elijah Ogbunamiri, on Jan. 3, 2024, weighing 7 pounds, 8 ounces.

Rachel Woodworth '15, '18 and John C. Cunningham '18 met as students at the Island University, and in true Islander fashion, were happily married at a beachfront wedding in Port Aransas on Oct. 7, 2023.

Victoria Gonzalez '16 recently started a position as a juvenile probation officer at the McLennan County Juvenile Probation Department and was awarded Employee of the Month in March 2024.

Tiffany (Alcala) Hector '16 was promoted to program manager of Youth Engagement Outreach at Texas A&M University. She will lead a team of Youth Engagement Coordinators in Houston and DFW, who will work to increase young Texans' knowledge of postsecondary pathways.



Jasmine Rodriguez '16 added Ramos to her last name after getting hitched on Oct. 14, 2023, in San Antonio.

Stephenie Decker, BSN, RN '17 has been named the administrator for White Orchid Hospice in Corpus Christi.

Karson Foster '17 and Jordan (McDaniel) Foster '19 gave birth to their son, Theodore Daniel Foster, on Feb. 17.

J. Gus Ladwig '17 was promoted to survey project manager for Elevation Land Solutions, located in The Woodlands, Texas.

Adam Quintanilla '17 got engaged to Marjorie Zavala on March 31, 2024. The happy couple resides in Houston.





Alissa Ramirez '17 was selected as part of Leadership Corpus Christi Class 52. She was also selected as a board member for the Young Professionals of the Coastal Bend and serves as the organization's marketing chair.

Becca-Lee Thomas '17 completed her Master of Jurisprudence with a focus in Health Law, Policy, and Management and has accepted a Senior Continuing Medical Education Coordinator position at Houston Methodist.

Kelsey Jae Barrera '18, '20 successfully proposed her dissertation study on April 5, 2024, where she demonstrated the quality and importance of her research study and her ability to conduct the proposed research. With the acceptance of this proposal, research gathering will begin this summer.

Angela Bradshaw '18, '22 is a health communications specialist at Driscoll Health Plan where she manages their social media accounts and video content. She recently kicked off Driscoll Decoded, a podcast that can be found on YouTube.



Chris Potter '19, '22 was promoted to eCommerce project manager II at H-E-B.

Abigail Silva '19 is the new marketing specialist at CASA of Bee, Live Oak, McMullen, and San Patricio counties. CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to help abused and neglected children in the foster care system find permanent homes by empowering citizens as volunteers to advocate for the foster child's best interest.

2020s

Clarissa Salinas '20 and Dale Perryman '21 married on March 14, 2024. Salinas, a nursing major, and Perryman, a kinesiology major, met in 2019 at the Island University.

Zachary Sawyer '20 will graduate in May 2024 with a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine from Texas A&M University College of Veterinary Medicine. He plans to pursue a small animal general practice in the Houston area.

Melissa Terrazas '20 was elected to serve as chapter president of the Austin Islander Alumni Association.

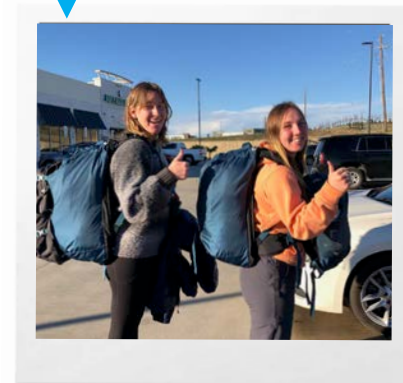
Dr. Jordan Thurston '20 was a guest speaker at the Business Transformation and Operational Excellence World Summit and Industry Awards. Thurston is Senior Vice President and Global Head of Regulatory Profile Management and Performance Analytics at Citi.

Artemio Anguiano Coronado '21 has been named Project Engineer for the International Space Station at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration Kennedy Space Center.

Nic and Avery Rabideau '21 gave birth to their son, Kolbe Rabideau, on Feb. 17, 2024. Kolbe is already a little Islander!

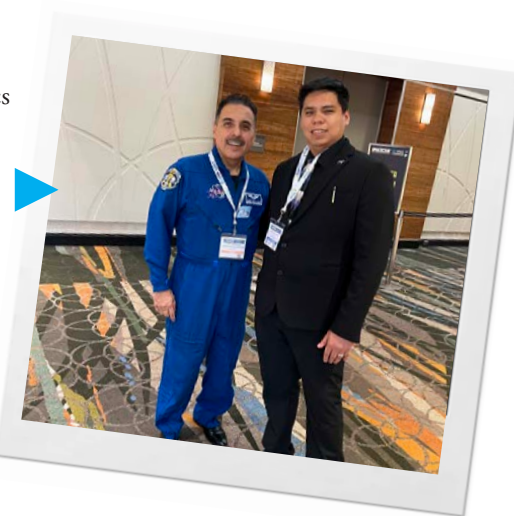
Haley Williams '21 is the senior digital content producer at the NBC affiliate KPNX 12News in Phoenix, Arizona.

Jessie Eagan '22 and Chase Hilderbrand '23 backpacked across Europe after graduation. They spent three weeks working on a farm in Slovenia and three weeks living on and fixing up a boat in Italy. Through Worldpackers, they explore the world and experience other cultures.



Courtnei Lopez '22 qualified for the Wodapalooza Fitness Festival, placing fourth in the world as a CrossFit adaptive athlete.

Dr. Stephanie Fuentes Majors '22 accepted a new role at Driscoll Children's Hospital. She is now part of the new Behavioral Health team and is overseeing the Behavioral Health internship program. She has made an Islander Impact by starting a support group for moms with babies in the NICU.



Olivia Markham '22 has been hired as a graphic designer at the University of Texas College of Education.

Julia Canamar '23 is excited to start her MBA at Texas A&M-Corpus Christi this coming fall semester.

Angela Gonzalez '23 accepted a job offer at Fields, Nemece & Co., an accounting firm, after having completed two rounds of interviews. She thanks the Career and Professional Development Center at the Island University for her mock interviews, which helped her prepare.



Dr. Kimberly James '23 has been named the lone finalist for Superintendent of Schools at Willis ISD. She previously served as Deputy Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, Chief of Staff, and as a principal for the Corpus Christi ISD.

Annika Linguist '23 of Fremont, California, recently started graduate school at Arizona State University.

Chad Maccanelli '23 was recently promoted to a new position within his company. He plans to purchase an official Islander Ring to celebrate!

Jennifer Mahan '23 accepted an academic advisor position with the Island University.

Julian A. Wilmot '23, '24 recently started a position at TAMU-CC as an admission counselor II for the Rio Grande Valley. He is on track to earn an MBA from TAMU-CC this summer and hopes to start the Educational Leadership doctorate program at the Island University this fall.

Islander Forever

TOOL KIT

If you love being an Islander and want to stay involved with the university, here's how to get started.

HOW DO I JOIN THE ISLANDER ALUMNI ASSOCIATION?

You already have! The minute you crossed the stage at commencement, you became a member. Meet the more than 59,000 Islander alumni and get involved!

STAY CONNECTED



Be in the know about what your Island University is up to by following our social media channels, updating your contact information at islanderalumni.org, and reading Currents, our e-newsletter.

SHARE BIG NEWS



We always want to know what you are up to! Tell us about your new promotion, engagement, or bundle of joy at islanderalumni.org/classnotes.

JOIN A CHAPTER

We have Islander Alumni Association chapters in Austin, Dallas/Fort Worth, Houston, and San Antonio.

WEAR YOUR PRIDE!



We want to see Islander shirts and hats everywhere! Need an updated Islander alumni T-shirt? Get a new shirt at islanderalumni.org/store.

PAY IT FORWARD



Donate to the Islander Forever Endowed Scholarship fund to give back to current Islander students. Make a gift at giving.tamucc.edu.

VOLUNTEER



Join the award-winning Islander Mentor Program or sign postcards for admitted students. Tell us how you want to get involved at islanderalumni.org/getinvolved.



SHARE YOUR NEWS & UPDATES

Contact us at islanderalumni.org/update to submit your stories or update your contact information.



THE BIG PICTURE

Anchored in the Past

At the Island University, where the spirit of tradition grows with each passing year, lives a tale of both camaraderie and rivalry centered around the university's anchor, now located in the aptly named Anchor Plaza, near the University Center.

The origin of the university's anchor traces back to the founding of the Anchor Men, the first fraternity at the University of Corpus Christi (UCC). The original anchor and associated plaque were brought to campus as more than mere ornaments; they became a symbol of responsibility, requiring constant vigilance against thieves, regular polishing, and maintenance by students. The 700-pound anchor made appearances at numerous Homecoming parades and was a symbol of university pride and identity.

In the 1960s, this emblem of pride attracted the attention of a rival university in a series of pranks, leading to the theft of the plaque and several attempts to steal the anchor itself. For this reason, the anchor was stowed away and eventually misplaced.

For four decades, the plaque remained a lost relic of times past until an unexpected act of reconciliation; the son of one of the original pranksters returned the plaque to its rightful home, as dictated by his father's will. The hunt for the original anchor found that it had been cut up for scraps.

Undeterred, the university commissioned a new anchor. The replacement, sourced from a naval shipyard in San Diego, California, was installed on campus in 2015. The original plaque was also proudly affixed to the new display.

The anchor has become the focal point of the Homecoming Week event, "Anchors Aweigh." This annual tradition invites members of the Student Alumni Association, the Islander Alumni Association Board, and the entire campus community to paint the anchor from grey to white as a way to connect the past to the present and to honor the UCC spirit. The anchor, together with the original plaque, now stands as a beacon of unity and tradition for the Islander community. •



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