

# Texas Connect

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FOR STAFF AND FACULTY | SPRING 2024

**LOYAL LONGHORNS**  
MEET STAFF MEMBERS  
WHO STARTED OUT  
AS STUDENT WORKERS

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**SUMMER PLANS?**  
PASSPORT SERVICES AIMS  
TO MAKE IT EASY TO GET  
YOUR TRAVEL DOCUMENTS

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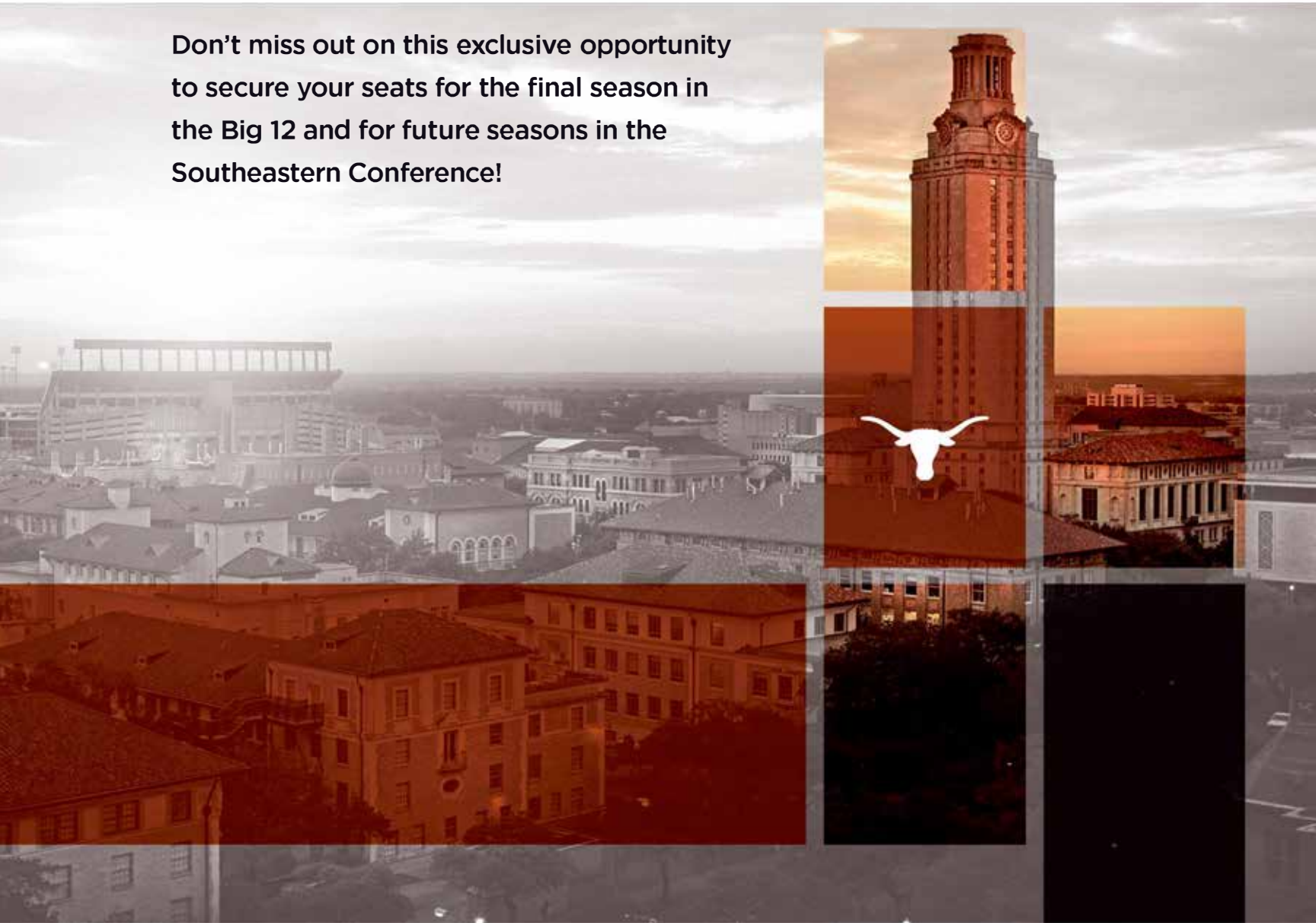
**VISUAL CONNECTIONS**  
ART GALLERIES AT BLACK  
STUDIES EXAMINES  
ART OF COMMUNICATION

## LISTEN IF YOU DARE

Podcast from UT staffer brings  
spooky Latino folklore to life

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SPRING 2024



Detail from "Monolith, HM4" by Michael Booker. Courtesy of the artist and Morton Fine Art

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Photo by Pyro Jenka/Unsplash.com

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Photos from top to bottom by Lela Saidane; William Whitworth



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**On the cover**  
Ayden Castellanos created his "Susto" podcast to help preserve Hispanic folklore.  
Photo by **WILLIAM WHITWORTH**

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**One of the most** wonderful things about being an instructor is the seasonal cadence of the work. We return to campus in January to greet new students, each with a fresh slate of courses, embarking on a new semester journey. I'm teaching a new course this semester, so I'm excited but also a little

daunted perhaps just like my students. I love being part of a community of learners. Here, there's a regular sense of beginning anew. While The University of Texas campus is the physical embodiment of Longhorn Nation, our learning community extends well beyond the Forty Acres. We have students of all backgrounds and all ages, from our littlest students at the UT Lab School, to elementary and middle school visitors who attended STEM Girl Day in February. We have high schoolers participating in the UT OnRamps program earning university credit along with our undergraduate and graduate students. Earning a doctorate is just the beginning, not the end, of a lifelong process of learning as professors continue to explore their areas of scholarship. Adults in our community may take advantage of a wellspring of learning opportunities, from credentialing programs to simply auditing a course. Featured in this edition of Texas Connect are other ways UT provides opportunities to learn something new. Passport Services is making it easier to explore the world. Feeling a little less ambitious? Take in the new exhibits at the Art Galleries at Black Studies!

Whatever your interests, UT Austin is a great place to start. Happy spring!

**Jen Moon**  
Faculty Council chair



**The primary focus** of my tenure as chair of UT Staff Council during the past year has been to create connections and build relationships. Cultivating these partnerships is central to Staff Council's role in representing the interests of staff and providing a conduit for communication between

University staff and leaders. Leading Staff Council also has been personally enriching. I began work at UT six years ago after many years of being a full-time mom. For a long time, I felt this situated me well behind the professional learning curve of my peers, some of whom had nearly two decades of work experience. During this past year, I discovered that the wisdom and lessons of my lived experiences are professionally valuable. Those experiences gave me a robust foundation for advocacy and collaboration, teaching me how and when to set and hold priorities and when to be agile and versatile in the face of unexpected challenges.

I am indebted to the Staff Council officer and program coordinator team for their energetic commitment, keen insights and pervasive integrity. I am so proud of the work of every Staff Council committee and the excellent stewardship of each committee's chair. I am very grateful for the commitment and the engagement of each UT Staff Council representative.

I am a staunch believer in the ingenuity, determination and flexibility of staff. I salute the work, the dedication and the energy of all staff across every UT Austin campus. You are crucial to the University's success, and you bring to life the vision and the mission of The University of Texas at Austin.

**Ann Sellers**  
Staff Council chair



The interdisciplinary Texas Robotics program held its inaugural Robot Parade on Oct. 12, which featured several walking, rolling and sometimes spinning robots.

## Taking our next steps

Following through on the University's strategic plan, Change Starts Here

BY TEXAS CONNECT STAFF | PHOTOS BY MARSHA MILLER

**In May 2022, The University of Texas at Austin** rolled out Change Starts Here, an ambitious 10-year plan to make UT the highest-impact public research university in the world. The plan now has 43 initiative areas focusing on our people, our unique place and our pursuits. With his leadership team, President Jay Hartzell has chosen several of those priorities for the UT community to put special focus on and strategically invest in this coming year. Here are four of them:

### **BUILD AN INTEGRATED ACADEMIC HEALTH CARE SYSTEM**

**Establish UT and Austin as a premier destination for health education, innovation and care**

The University has launched a monumental health care initiative to accelerate and expand UT Austin's burgeoning medical district into a world-class academic medical center for education, research and patient care. The University of Texas at Austin Medical Center will start with two new hospital towers — The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center and a UT Austin hospital. MD Anderson, the nation's No. 1 cancer hospi-

tal and a component of the UT System based in Houston, will expand its footprint to Austin by building and operating a new, comprehensive cancer center, while UT Austin will build and operate a new specialty hospital. Both are planned to occupy the current footprint of the Erwin Center, now being demolished.

"It's important to think about what this means for patients," says Dell Medical School Dean Claudia Lucchinetti. "What does the new UT Medical Center mean for patients in Austin and Central Texas? It means that you no longer need to travel to receive world-class and cutting-edge care."

### **INCREASE VALUE AND AFFORDABILITY**

**Recognize and help mitigate the consequences of increasing costs in Austin**

UT is working to help offset the cost of living for students, faculty and staff through housing, scholarships and financial partnerships. For example, the University and University Federal Credit Union have come together to bring new financial solutions to employees. The partnership will promote financial soundness and financial literacy and help employees not only make better-educated decisions but also teach them how to leverage a range of financial products customized to their needs.

"As an organization dedicated to the welfare of our faculty and staff, we actively seek innovative partnerships to increase affordability and provide unique value to our faculty and staff," says Roger Cude, UT's new vice president for people and talent. "Through custom financial products and tailored financial education opportunities, UFCU is well-positioned to provide value and support to our community."

Examples of the products the credit union is expected to provide are specialty mortgage loans and pre-approved car loans, in addition to a suite of tailored financial-education and financial-literacy seminars. UFCU already has been providing financial education to UT employees for many years through the University's HealthPoint Wellness program.

Nosse Ovienmhada is UT's work life balance and wellness manager in Human Resources, and says, "Under this latest collaboration, UFCU will now be able to tailor education opportunities to the needs of our employees, providing even greater value and support."

### **TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIETY (FOCUS ON AI)**

**Propel the leading edge of research at the intersection of technology and society**

The need for skilled artificial intelligence (AI) professionals is greater than ever, with 97 million new AI-related jobs expected globally over just the next two years. UT's new master's degree in AI is preparing students to stand

President Jay Hartzell speaks at the news conference announcing The University of Texas Medical Center, which will include an MD Anderson Cancer Center. On stage from left: UT System Chancellor James B. Milliken, Dell Med School Dean and Senior Vice President of Medical Affairs Claudia Lucchinetti, UT MD Anderson President Peter Sisters, Gov. Greg Abbott, and UT System Board of Regents Chairman Kevin P. Eltife.



out in this fast-growing field through one of the first AI master's programs available completely online. The coursework covers a range of highly sought-after skills to prepare Longhorns to lead AI innovations across industries from engineering and medicine to finance and project management.

The University has dozens of experts, thought leaders and top research programs in AI. "This is such an incredible time for UT Austin as we build upon our decades of growth and leadership in artificial intelligence," says Melissa Taylor, who is senior assistant dean for strategic initiatives in the College of Natural Sciences and who is leading the University's Year of AI efforts. "We have expertise across campus in every aspect of AI research and education. The lineup of events, programs and initiatives has been off to a strong start with many more exciting activities still to come through the year."

"UT Austin has always been strong in the core areas of artificial intelligence," says Bruce Porter, professor of computer science and chief science officer at SparkCognition. "This campus is where the talent and expertise come together — neural science, mathematics, statistics, data science and more — we have strength in every area."

And UT will put all this leadership, expertise, research and teaching on display throughout the Year of AI.

## ADVANCE INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY (ROBOTICS)


### Break down silos to advance learning across disciplines

There's no better example of interdisciplinary study than what UT is doing in the field of robots. Texas Robotics includes 16 core faculty members, 40 affiliated faculty members, and 200 students, postdocs, visiting scholars and research engineers from four top-ranked departments at UT, including the Department of Aerospace Engineering and Engineering Mechanics, the Department of Computer Science, the Chandra Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering and the Walker Department of Mechanical Engineering.

Texas Robotics is producing research that solves pressing societal challenges in numerous application spaces, including social, surgi-

cal, rehabilitation, vehicles, drilling, manufacturing, space, nuclear and defense. On the education front, it's developing tomorrow's robotics leaders through a holistic graduate and undergraduate program, including offering a graduate portfolio program in robotics and an undergraduate minor in robotics. It's increasing access and exposure to robotics through regularly hosting lab tours, camps, workshops, talks and robot demonstrations, especially for K-12 students and underserved populations. And it is collaborating with industry partners to expand UT's impact on society, connect students to potential careers, develop innovative research, and bridge the gap between education and industry.

Sridevi Rao is the managing director of Texas Robotics, which brings disciplines together through its collaborative research projects. Housed in facilities at Anna Hiss Gym, students, faculty members and researchers from all over campus have dedicated space for collaboration. "Texas Robotics primarily combines students and faculty from the departments of Aerospace Engineering and Engineering Mechanics, Computer Science, Electrical and Computer Engineering, and Mechanical Engineering," says Rao. "However, there are folks from education, English, psychology, the Good Systems grand challenge initiative, Machine Learning Lab, Oden Institute and more working with Texas Robotics as well. By integrating knowledge and skills from diverse disciplines, Texas Robotics can create innovative solutions that tackle complex challenges effectively and push the boundaries of what is possible when it comes to human-robot interaction, manipulation and grasping, and long-term autonomy."

Rao says one example of this work is Farshid Alambeigi's ARTS Lab, which is currently using generative AI for cancer detection and combines expertise from mechanical engineering, robotics, health care/medicine and artificial intelligence. 

Visit the *Change Starts Here* website for more information and updates on these and other initiatives.

[strategicplan.utexas.edu](https://strategicplan.utexas.edu)

*Authors highlights recent publications by UT staff and faculty. These books are for a general interest audience.*



Photo courtesy of Gabriela Polit



# Storytelling in Spanish

Professor brings students' creative voices to a wider audience

BY MIRIAM BELMONTE

**I**n the city of Quito, Ecuador, a young girl wrote poetry in the bedroom of her home. Her mother would collect these poems, and the girl would recite them at family gatherings.

The girl, Gabriela Polit, attended a Catholic school and went on to study philosophy. She came to the United States in her 20s with a full-ride scholarship to obtain her master's degree and doctorate in New York. During her time in graduate school, she began writing short stories and reading them on the radio.

**Gabriela Polit teaches creative fiction and non-fiction Spanish classes and helped launch a creative writing in Spanish minor in Fall 2022 in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese.**

In the fall of 2008, Polit settled down in Austin and began teaching at The University of Texas. She now teaches creative fiction and nonfiction Spanish classes. Polit also helped launch the Spanish Creative Writing Initiative in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese and has recently published a book with stories written by English-speaking students as well as native and heritage Spanish speakers.

Polit said the process of writing enables students to know themselves better.

"Somehow, you detach yourself from that person you were at the classroom or when you felt that you didn't belong," Polit says. "The fact that you have to find the closest word that defines your feeling at that moment — at the same time that may enable you to express what you're feeling."

The Spanish Creative Writing Initiative was inspired by the visit of novelist and screenwriter Laura Esquivel in fall 2019. Hundreds of people showed up to hear her speak at the Blanton Museum of Art. That interest proved to Polit that there was a need to highlight the potential of Spanish-language creative writing. Students in the program are not all native or heritage Spanish speakers, but they share a love for the language.

"The heritage of speakers are a very important part of this project," Polit says. "But the Spanish creative writing is attracting people who want to learn a language, a culture, and to use the tools and the knowledge of that culture to be creative."

Polit and her colleagues launched a creative writing in Spanish minor in Fall 2022 in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese. The minor is open to students who fulfill requirements in Spanish.

Spanish is one of the top five most spoken languages around the world today. The United States ranks fourth among countries with the largest Spanish-speaking populations. It brings students comfort to use the language of their family and home, and Polit opens the doors to students who "code-switch" between Spanish and English.

"When they want to use their Spanish, they don't need to explain themselves, they don't need to justify," Polit says. "It happens naturally."

Initially, Polit had a webpage where she published the stories of her students. But she wanted to make it easier for parents who don't know how to navigate the internet to read the works and to open the stories to a broader audience.

Polit went to HornRaiser, the University crowdfunding platform, to raise money for a book project. "Contar Historias," which she edited, is a collection of 20 stories from her students published by the Tower Books imprint of the University of Texas Press. The stories feature various voices and rich forms of Spanish because, as Polit points out, the





**We are the story we tell ourselves and the stories we can tell to others.”**

— Gabriela Polit

Spanish of someone from Colombia is different from that of someone in Lubbock, or Massachusetts, or Argentina.

“We celebrate the variety of ways of speaking,” Polit says. “That is a music that we want to conserve, that we want to celebrate.”

Polit wants to use the book as an example of what can be done to promote students’ creative work in the language. In the future, she hopes for it to become a series.

Students in Polit’s creative writing classes work closely with her as they exercise their storytelling skills. The classes are organized as workshops where students read literature, analyze the mechanics of writing, and read one another’s work to give feedback on their stories.


“It’s a muscle that we have to train, we have to make stronger,” Polit says. “We will be better people if we tell our stories because we transform ourselves when we tell our stories.”

Students tell Polit they are relieved to talk about themselves in the safe environment of a classroom where they are not tested on knowledge but instead listened to.

“Enjoy, don’t think about grading. Just enjoy the process. Enjoy, even if it’s painful. Enjoy because it will give you a reward that is beyond the grade,” Polit says.

Students undergo a transformation by putting their personal experiences on paper. Creative writing allows the freedom of grammar, point of view, and past or present tense, Polit says, and you detach and put yourself in that paper. It’s you.

Polit, who previously published a novel, a collection of poems and several scholarly works, continues to write her own creative works. She uses writing to answer questions about what bothers her and what she has gone through. Her imagination transforms her emotions from an event and translates that feeling into a story. It is a challenge that she loves.

“We’re storytellers,” Polit says. “We are the story we tell ourselves and the stories we can tell to others.” 



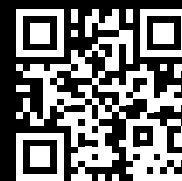
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*Happens Here is a behind-the-scenes view into the lives of people who power UT.*

# What starts here stays here

BY EMILY QUIGLEY | PHOTOS BY WILLIAM WHITWORTH

**T**he University of Texas has more than 14,500 full- and part-time staff members. But did you know that, as of February 2024, the University also had more than 13,000 undergraduate and graduate student workers? These student employees provide valuable services to the UT community, and some either keep working on campus after graduation or come back years later to continue their careers. In this issue, we talked with three staff members about their experiences as UT employees before and after graduation.



It's important to understand how students approach college and the job world, Mike Gutierrez says.

## MIKE GUTIERREZ

Gutierrez is a program manager in the College of Natural Sciences. While earning his bachelor's (2013) at UT, Gutierrez worked several jobs on campus, including as a food handler, a FIG mentor, a peer academic adviser and a teaching assistant.

### **What are some things you experienced as a student that affect how you approach the job?**

Learning how to work in an office setting for the first time and the expectations from different campus partners for student workers helped me build skills necessary to balance school and work. I was fortunate to have supervisors who always put school for me and my peers first and gave us flexibility for our work schedules and put us in positions to succeed. Also learning how to work with people across different generations was helpful to better understand how people of different ages view work in a certain office and how they approach different projects.

### **Was there a certain person you interacted with as a student who set you up for success as a professional?**

I had several supervisors who were always helpful, caring, and had my professional development in mind with the different student jobs I worked. To name a few: Jay Brown, Kathy Uitvlugt, Cassandre Alvarado, Jay Whitehead, President Bill Powers, and Manuel Ramirez. I feel that interacting with all these faculty/staff from different departments during my time as an undergraduate student put me on the path I am on today and shaped the professional I am.

### **What are some of your favorite things about working at UT?**

Having a sense of community and seeing the different cohorts of students develop each year. It's been great to know some of the students I've worked with in other programs from their very first semester (sometimes even from summer orientation) and see them four years later as they celebrate during graduation. I also enjoy

“

**When I returned to Austin after several years in Chicago, I realized that I really wanted to return to UT for work. I wanted to once again be in an environment where education was important.”**

— Elizabeth M. Korves



Elizabeth Korves returned to UT to work after several years away because she wanted to once again be in an environment where education was important.

getting to meet people from different departments who work on similar programs and projects so that we can all collaborate and help support each other and students.

**What have you learned since working here that you wish you would have known as a student?**

There are some policies or procedures that as a student may have been frustrating because it seemed to take too long or didn't move on at all, but now working as staff I understand what it takes to create change and implement new policies. Because there are still some systems that have been used from decades ago, I would tell my old student self that staff also share some of the same sentiments, and patience is important.

**What advice would you give to staff or faculty members to help their student workers succeed?**

As we continue to have more and more of a generational gap with students, it's important to understand how new cohorts of students are approaching college and work in general. I would stress that having flexibility and putting their mental/physical health first is always going to take priority. I tend to keep things light with my student workers that I supervise and make sure to check in with them on how they are doing and share their highlights with me and their peers. Even having one thing that students can find positive between your interactions as faculty/staff will be helpful in the long run.

**ELIZABETH M. KORVES**

Korves is the fellowship program administrator in the Graduate School. While earning a degree in social work (1987), she worked in the Geology Library.

**What are some of your favorite things about working at UT?**

The people! I've had the blessing of working with some of the greatest people over my 30-plus years at UT. Currently I have one of the best jobs on campus because I get to administer fellowships for graduate students. I love the excited emails I get back when I send out award letters. I interact with staff all over campus, and they are some of the most dedicated people I've encountered when it comes to serving our students.

**What have you learned since working here that you wish you would have known as a student?**

Take advantage of any opportunity that is presented to learn something new, especially when it comes to computer programs. You never know when something you learned in one situation/job will be applicable in a different situation/job that will make doing that job easier.

**Was there a certain person you interacted with as a student who set you up for success as a professional?**

Dennis Trombatore, the librarian at the Geology Library. He trained me on some things which were not part of my job, in part because he was hoping to convince me to go to library school. When I needed a job while in graduate school and I applied for a student job at the Loyola University Chicago library, they took one look at my experience and created a new job for me. I could not have done graduate school without that job!

**When did you realize that you wanted to work full time in a career at UT?**

When I returned to Austin after several years in Chicago, I realized that I really wanted to return to UT for work. I wanted to once again be in an environment where education was important.

**What are some things you experienced as a student that affect how you approach the job?**

I had a supervisor who understood the importance of staff morale and that enjoying your work is just as important as how much money you are making.

## HAPPENS HERE

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“

**Inclusion fosters a sense of belonging that will motivate students to actively engage with their work.”**

— Rigoberto Mireles, Jr.

Mentorship is important when working with student workers, Rigoberto Mireles Jr. says.

## RIGOBERTO MIRELES JR.

Mireles is a benefit specialist for the department of Benefits & Leave Management. While earning a bachelor's in corporate communication at UT (2020), Mireles worked as a research assistant for professor Su Yeong Kim on Project SEED and as a student worker for the Human Resource Service Center.


### When did you realize that you wanted to work full time in a career at UT?

People often love the University of Texas at Austin for different reasons. Some may appreciate its strong academic programs, diverse student body, vibrant campus life, or the rich traditions associated with UT. The unique combination of these factors contributes to a sense of pride and connection which has led me to continue my professional career with the University.

### What have you learned since working here that you wish you would have known as a student?

I wish my student self would have spent more time refining the balance I had between my work ethic and planning. In practice, the two are often intertwined. A solid work ethic allows you to execute your plans diligently, while effective planning ensures that your efforts are directed toward meaningful and achievable goals. It's not a matter of one being more important than the other; rather, they complement each other for overall success. A well-thought-out plan provides a roadmap, and a strong work ethic is the fuel that drives you along that path. Students should spend more time creating that professional roadmap so their energy can effectively be channeled towards their long-term goals.

### What advice would you give to staff or faculty members to help their student workers succeed?

To support student workers' success, staff and faculty members should consider assigning a mentor or provide opportunities for students to connect with experienced professionals who can offer them guidance and advice. They should try integrating student workers into the broader team. Inclusion fosters a sense of belonging that will motivate students to actively engage with their work. Lastly, a discussion should be had to explore the career aspirations of these students. Guidance can be provided on how their current role aligns with their future goals and offer insights into potential career paths. By implementing these practices, the University can create a supportive and empowering environment that enhances the success and growth of our student worker population. 



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# Learning by doing

Program gives a taste of college experience to people with intellectual disabilities

**C**oconut milk, brown sugar, lime juice, chicken broth and onions wait on the tables in a room in the Neural and Molecular Science Building. About a dozen students sit crisscross on the floor as Kaelin Rubenzer stands in front of the projection screen and points to the recipe for the day, Thai red curry.

The Lifelong Learning with Friends students are divided into three groups. One student cuts orange, yellow and red bell peppers into slices. In a room across the hall, students wear gloves as they shred a rotisserie chicken. Together, they work to assemble their dinner for the night.

Lifelong Learning with Friends is a University of Texas program for adults with intellectual disabilities, such as autism, Down syndrome or other chromosomal disorders. The program hosts about eight to 15 classes per semester, both in person and via the internet. It accepts 13 students per class on a first-come, first-served basis, serving about 250 adults with disabilities per year, Rubenzer says.

The classes vary from STEM courses to humanities and self-development. During the Fall 2023 cooking class, Rubenzer taught students about different cuisines worldwide.

“The big mission of us is to create a more inclusive society,” says Rubenzer, the executive director of Lifelong Learning with Friends. “It’s real, practical experience to meet people with disabilities firsthand and see what they’re capable of.”

Jonathan Pierce, associate professor in the Department of Neuroscience at UT, founded Lifelong Learning with Friends in 2010. The program was inspired by his son, Ocean, who was born with Down syndrome. Pierce wanted to contribute to scientific discoveries and help people with Down syndrome and other intellectual and developmental disabilities get a taste of university life.

“Support services for people with disabilities often end with high school,” Pierce says.

“I was wondering whether or not we could keep learning going on in adulthood.”

The program began with Pierce running all the operations, from reserving classrooms on campus to teaching the classes, recruiting students and advertising. As the program has grown, volunteers and instructors have joined the team.

Rubenzer, who has a younger sibling with a disability, volunteered with a life skills program for young people with disabilities when she was in high school. That experience made her see how such students can face limited opportunities compared with their peers.

“A lot of them were doing menial tasks,” she says, such as wiping down tables after lunch or folding clothing. “It seemed crazy to me that this was the end of their educational experience.”

Rubenzer wanted to combine her interest in science and her desire to help people with disabilities after arriving at UT in 2016.

As an undergraduate, she began conducting research in Pierce’s lab, became a Lifelong Learning volunteer, instructed classes and later became the program coordinator. Rubenzer’s involvement with the program solidified her aspirations.

Today, she serves as executive director of the program, leading all day-to-day operations and helping coordinate the curriculum. Rubenzer also participates in volunteer recruitment and instructor training and works closely with Pierce.

In each semester, 100 volunteers join the team, mostly undergraduates from the College of Natural Sciences, the Steve Hicks School of Social Work, the Department of Special Education, and the Department of Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences. During the Fall 2023 semester, Lifelong Learning partnered with an Austin public school, the Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders, and over 40 high school volunteers joined the team.

“

**The big mission ... is to create a more inclusive society.”**

— Kaelin Rubenzer



**Kaelin Rubenzer leads all day-to-day operations for the Lifelong Learning with Friends program.**

Volunteers assist students during the lessons while instructors lead the class. Instructors include teachers from the Austin school district, family members of people with intellectual disabilities and UT students who have previously volunteered.

During the first half-hour of a class, students take the time to socialize and get to know one another. Students then go into a classroom for the lesson of the day. Classes have fewer text-based lectures and more visually appealing slides. Rubenzer says it is important to be accommodating and have versatile ways to teach the same thing so students can understand the material.

“You need to have concrete activities for them to engage with their senses,” Pierce says.

The program also teaches adults with intellectual disabilities about subjects for which they have firsthand experience. For example, Pierce has taught a class about pharmaceutical drug discoveries for UT students. When talking about such topics in Lifelong Learning classes, students may not have a complete understanding of the science of prescription drugs but might have taken them and can share their experiences with one another.


“Adults with Down syndrome and autism, they’re interested in the topics I teach my UT students, including alcohol, drugs, diseases and the newest scientific discoveries,” Pierce says.

Pierce says to break down the stereotypes many people have, it’s important to spend time with people with disabilities, get to know them and realize the similarities we share.

“We’re hoping that when you raise your expectations of people with intellectual disabilities, or you meet someone and really connect with them and hear about their troubles that they have acclimating or being included in society, that you’re able to take that experience and do something with it,” Rubenzer says.

Pierce says it is important to treat people with intellectual disabilities as capable adults, and the Lifelong Learning with Friends program models how college students are treated and should behave in a classroom. A survey conducted by the program found that participants improved their social skills and ability to make friends and connections. Students are then able to take their experience home, and they can take it to the workplace to better succeed in life.

Rubenzer says she wants to strengthen ties within the UT community and hopes to expand the program alongside Pierce. She has recruited more adults with intellectual disabilities by visiting community living programs and providing them with virtual programming. Rubenzer partnered with the Marbridge Foundation, and 40 additional adults enrolled in Lifelong Learning. She plans to continue outreach initiatives across Texas.

“It enriches their overall quality of life, and you can see it,” Rubenzer says. “They’re happier and they’re more confident. They pursue age-appropriate, adult topics because there’s finally an environment that encourages them to.” 



**Clockwise from top:** Lifelong Learning students and volunteers, including Kaylie Ornelas, Cory Gentry, May Bubolz Thomas and Meg Traver, cook dinner together during a fall class.



Horticulturist and landscape artist Ty Kasey researches what the campus looked like in the past to inform how he shapes its natural spaces now. “The photos I find are little windows in time for the place I still care for today,” he says.

**As a child, Ty Kasey would visit The University of Texas with his father. The two would walk along Speedway before getting burgers at Dirty’s or seeing the Longhorns compete. Even before he was accepted to study botany at UT, Kasey felt a deep connection to the campus and its environment.**

“I’ve always had a lot of pride and identification with the campus,” he says. “Now I get to be a steward of it.”

Kasey is now a horticulturist, landscape architect and the de facto landscape historian for UT. Kasey and other members of the landscape services team build and maintain environments for Longhorns to enjoy while considering sustainability and native plant life.

For over 20 years, nearly 10 of which have been at the University, Kasey has been amassing experience designing and installing natural environments. He says landscape architects usually work in offices planning and organizing possible landscapes, but he’s chosen a different path.

“Most days, I’ll spend the entire day in the field, in the mud with the plants. I’ve been coming up with ideas and seeing it through to the installation,” Kasey says.

Along with staying outside as much as possible, he uses his expertise as a landscape historian to shape future landscapes around campus. He says that since coming as a kid, he’s wanted to know about every little spot on campus and what it looked like decades ago. Kasey has distinguished himself on campus by creating a personal collection of nearly 100 volumes of Cactus yearbooks. He says he’s passionate about understanding what spaces have been used by students historically and ways his team can consider that with their work.

“We walk across stones on campus that generations of students have walked across,” Kasey says. “The photos I find are little windows in time for the place I still care for today.”

Lisa Lennon, another UT graduate and member of the landscape design and installation team, says that knowing the history of an environment plays a massive role in any work they do. Lennon is the lead landscape

## Shaping the University’s natural environment

Horticulturist looks to the past as he helps create the landscape looks of the future **BY BRADEN MILLIKIN | PHOTOS BY LEILA SAIDANE**



architect for campus and has worked closely with Kasey for close to nine years, and she says they share a love for the natural environment on campus.

“I went to UT years ago, so I have an extra layer of passion and love for the University — much like Ty,” Lennon says. “He and I are kindred spirits, so we’re fortunate enough to be on the same team.”

Although Kasey says he loves the entire campus, there are certain areas that have made an especially significant impact on him. Waller Creek is one of the spots where Kasey has put in considerable work restoring and protecting the environment. Kasey says he’s found decades’ worth of photos that show students sharing his love for this natural landscape. When there was an invasive species problem in the creek, he did his homework to bring back native plants and make it safer for students at the same time.

“I want to understand the connection that students have had for decades within a space,

but we also want to use alternatives and have sustainable modern landscapes,” he says.

Through Kasey’s research and passion for history, he’s developed extensive knowledge about every tree and plant bed on campus. With the changing climate, however, his team must move further away from tradition. Lennon says they want the campus environment to leave a lasting impression on visitors, students, and staff and faculty members alike, but working in Texas has its challenges. Many of the plants her team were once able to use are no longer suited for the dry heat of Austin.


“We want people to start thinking about how climate change is affecting our landscape because we want to be able to do the right thing by our environment,” Lennon says.

As the environment and its needs have changed with the years, Lennon says that the landscape services team thinks of new ways to adapt its methods every day. From relocating plants instead of trashing them, to growing their own plants and diverting a lot of waste

in the process, both Lennon and Kasey say that every change, big or small, makes a difference in the trajectory of the environment.

“If everybody did a small little thing, just think about the big picture, how our climate could start shifting with us,” Lennon says.

Kasey says that every time he finds a photo of students doing homework under a tree in the plaza or professors in conversation by the creek, his love and admiration for the University grows.

“It makes me happy to still be on the campus day after day and watch the sun rise over the Tower,” Kasey says. “I hope our work benefits everyone here so that they care about it like I do.” 

---

Kasey says he prefers to spend most of his time “in the mud with the plants.” As the de facto landscape historian of UT, he has collected nearly 100 Cactus yearbooks.





# THE BUSINESS OF CREATIVITY

The Center for Creative Economies  
braces artists for the real world

BY **BRADEN MILLIKIN** | ILLUSTRATION BY **SARA KINNEY**

**W**hen Sonia Montoya graduated from the University of Colorado with hopes of acting onstage or starting a nonprofit, she felt unsure about what she needed to do to make that happen. Even after receiving a master's degree in public policy from Harvard, she

wanted more tangible lessons to feel empowered in pursuing her career.

As director of the recently rebranded Center for Creative Economies, Montoya now helps students at the College of Fine Arts learn crucial skills and develop their own businesses. "Our mission is to make sure that students engage with not just the artistic aspects (of their careers), but the cultural, the economic and the technological," she says.

While the program was previously known as the Center for Creative Entrepreneurship, its name and goals changed recently to allow for a greater range of internships and workshop topics. The staff of entrepreneurship supporters will continue to aid students, but there will now also be lessons that cover other facets of a creative career — philanthropy, practical career tips, management of personal finances and more.

“

**THE CENTER WAS STARTED TO EMPOWER STUDENTS TO PURSUE WHATEVER CREATIVE CAREER OR CAREERS THEY HAVE CHOSEN FOR THEMSELVES.”**

— Sonia Montoya



Photo by Cami Yates

Montoya joined the center in January 2023 and says she has big plans for the growing program. Under Montoya and her team, the center is offering various hands-on workshops and mentorship programs to prepare students for the competitive world after college. Want to be a tattoo artist? There’s a workshop for that. Need to network with fellow dancers? There’s an event for that as well. Even if students just would like to learn how to not be a starving artist or how to do taxes for a new business, there will eventually be lessons that can help guide their next steps.

“The center was started to empower students to pursue whatever creative career or careers they have chosen for themselves, to show them the myriad of opportunities,” Montoya says.

When she graduated with her degree in literature, she didn’t feel ready for the challenges often posed by beginning a career in the arts, Montoya says. Although Austin is a hub for art and creative career paths, she says learning how to survive and follow your aspirations takes a lot of trial and error that can take many years to sort through. What fine arts students learn in the classrooms is vital to their growth, but students are not always educated on the economies they will soon have to rely on, Montoya says.

“I remember how alone I felt when I graduated. I know from personal experience that students need more than what they get in the classroom,” she says.

The program’s coordinator, Ting-Ting Chen, says the team is trying to build a community around the center and get the word out about all it offers to young creators, scholars, performers and curators. Chen says that a career in the arts can be very fulfilling and lucrative, but she thinks students need information about their chosen careers to avoid being taken advantage of.

“We want to expose students to career pathways, taking into account the current economy, culture and technology,” Chen says. “No one’s major exists in a vacuum.”

One method the center uses is mentorships for the various fields within the fine arts college. To bring attention to the center’s work in the Live Music Capital of the World and to help students who want to be musicians, experienced songwriter Darden Smith has become the center’s first songwriter in residence.

Smith is an alumnus of UT who built a distinguished career writing lyrics and music for himself and legendary artists such as Stevie Nicks. He has spent his life studying and creating music and says that without profes-

**Above:** Sonia Montoya, director of the center, says its work supplements what students learn in their majors. “I know from personal experience that students need more than what they get in the classroom,” she says.

sional help and advice, the music industry can be unforgiving.

“There’s no rulebook. Most artists know what they want to do, but they have no idea how to do it,” Smith says.

Smith emphasizes the importance of creativity in any career path. While the center mainly directs its services to students studying fine arts, it is open to all students at UT. Smith says people can apply the approaches to starting a business in music to other fields as well.

“The same ethics that I use to make a living as an artist are the same thing entrepreneurs use to start a company,” Smith says. “Same amount of effort, same approach to money, same approach to failure.”

Smith says that if the center could only teach one thing to students, it would be self-confidence.

“Trust yourself,” Darden says. “Just trust yourself. Commit to yourself 100%.” **TC**

# Water wonder

Engineering researcher and team hope disinfecting cup can help during weather disasters

BY **BRADEN MILLIKIN** | PHOTOS BY **WILLIAM WHITWORTH**

In recent years, natural disasters and human error have temporarily left the people of Austin without clean water, sometimes for days at a time. In both Hurricane Harvey in 2017 and the winter storm of 2021, people throughout Texas had to find alternative methods for getting water to drink.

Donglei “Emma” Fan, a professor in the Walker Department of Mechanical Engineering and a researcher in the materials science and engineering program, cites these disasters as some of the core reasons for shifting her research toward finding a new method for efficiently disinfecting water.

“I think we need to improve people’s resilience in natural disasters, particularly with ongoing climate change,” Fan says. “Everyone should be able to save themselves.”

Shortly before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Fan and her team of engineers began developing their invention, which she says can remove 99.997% of E. coli bacteria from polluted creek water in just 25 minutes. The process uses an innovative technique that involves placing electrodes inside a cup that captures and removes harmful bacteria, leaving the water safe for drinking.

Whereas standard disinfection techniques use potentially toxic chemicals and often leave behind dead bacteria in the water, Fan’s technique uses electricity to draw out the bacteria. Bacteria naturally move or swim within the water to find nutrients, so the electricity from the electrodes disorients and attracts the bacteria, drawing them right into a trap.

“We leverage the swimming behaviors of bacteria to capture them. With only 8 volts of power, we can physically remove all traces of the bacteria,” Fan says.

At only \$20 to \$30 per unit, Fan says this device could be widely accessible and easy to obtain. She is currently seeking a patent for her design to make it commercially available while her team continues researching ways to refine it to remove viruses and microplastics. The current model is still very effective; when municipal supplies are compromised, you only need a creek or stream and a car battery to power the device.

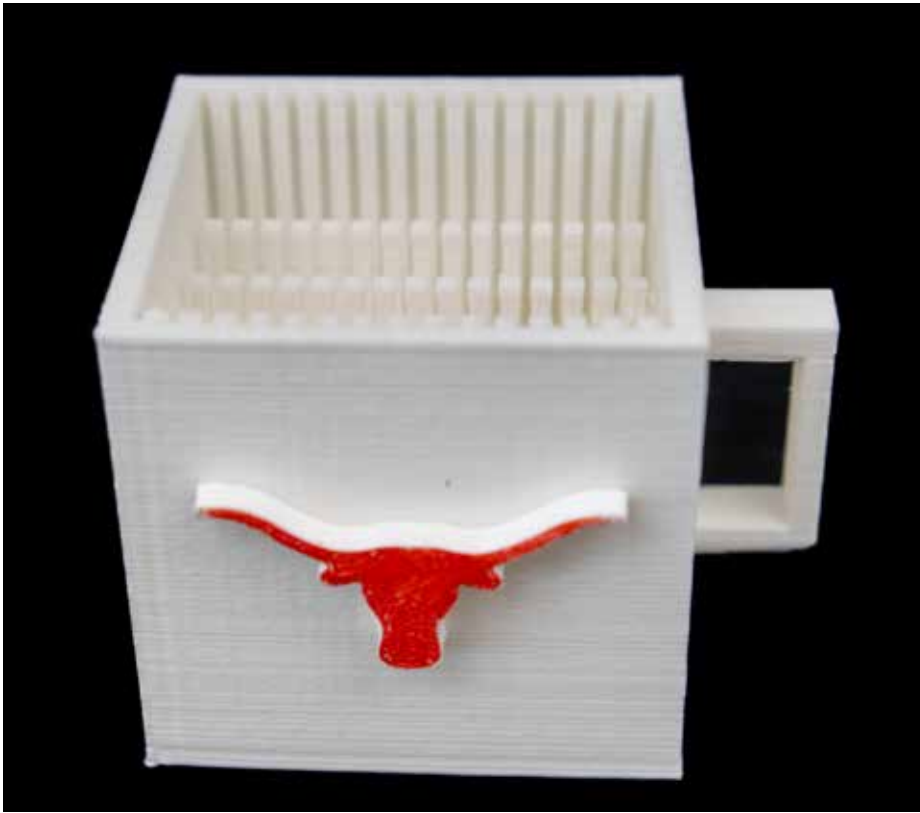
“We designed it so that you could use a battery to power it, which keeps it mobile,” Fan says.

“

I think we need to improve people’s resilience in natural disasters, particularly with ongoing climate change. Everyone should be able to save themselves.”




Photo by Sloan Breedon



Professor Donglei “Emma” Fan and her team continue to refine the water purifying cup.

While the method currently can only disinfect a small amount of water, about the quantity that can fit in a small cup, Fan’s team is researching ways to scale up the process. Fan says that she believes the technique could one day be used to disinfect whole swimming pools without needing any chlorine or salt. She also says her undergraduate students are testing ways to disinfect flowing water to broaden the device’s uses. Each electrode costs around \$2, so larger-scale disinfections would be more costly. Still, Fan says that some of her team members are testing different types of electrodes that could reduce the cost and make installation even easier.

With an increasing risk of climate-related disasters in the future, a reliable way to clean water for drinking is needed more than ever. Fan’s team of researchers will continue testing different materials and approaches, but she says she is now seeking business-savvy partners to help co-develop the technology and get it off the ground.

“I’m interested in talking to people about our progress,” Fan says. “I think this device is very valuable and can make a huge impact.” 



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# *THE SOUND OF SCARES*

*BY BRADEN MILLIKIN*



UT DIGITAL CONTENT COORDINATOR'S CREATION SHARES  
FRIGHTENING FOLKTALES AS WAY OF PRESERVING CULTURE



Joeprachattree/Shutterstock.com

# S

**pirits, ghouls, demons — are they real and lurking among us, or were they invented to scare little children into following rules? This is the focus of Ayden Castellanos’ growing podcast “Susto.”**

“Susto,” which means “fright” in Spanish, delves into tales and myths that disturb children and adults alike. Every other week, Castellanos describes stories from Hispanic folklore in which people encounter monsters and other evil entities, riding the line between reality and utter mystery.

“I’m doing my part because I have an interest in it and want to preserve the stories,” says Castellanos, who works by day in University Marketing and Communications. “In a way, it’s a preservation of culture.”

Castellanos comes from the Rio Grande Valley, and oral stories and folktales were an essential aspect of his life. It was common for family barbecues and neighborhood parties to end with everyone sitting around a fire, sharing their own experiences.

“As soon as the sun went down, somebody’s aunt or uncle was telling you about how they saw the devil in Mexico over the weekend,” he says.

Many people Castellanos grew up with merely took the tales as entertainment, but he says he fell in love with the frights and decided to create his own platform to spread his favorite spooky, otherworldly fables.

“I’ve had this interest from a very early age. Sharing the stories was just a pastime we all did growing up,” Castellanos says.

In 2019, he began addressing his “ghoul friends,” the name he gave to his listeners. Many of the tales come from a book of his childhood, “Stories That Must Not Die” by Juan Sauvageau. Castellanos

says that in his hometown, elementary school teachers would read from the book to give fun, slightly terrifying lessons to the children.

Although Castellanos describes himself as “a bit of a scaredy-cat” when it comes to some of the stories, he believes in the powerful effect that these tales can have on people. Castellanos talks a lot on the podcast about how trauma can affect people’s reactions to the supernatural and how their otherworldly experiences can sometimes intensify their pain. This dilemma is one of the main reasons Castellanos wanted to create a podcast that could give these cautionary tales the respect they deserve. He says that he wants to bring attention to cases where people were unfairly treated as crazy or delusional because of their traumatic experiences. Castellanos also says he couldn’t find a podcast to provide the eerie, nerve-wracking fix he wanted.

“Since I already had a clear idea of what I wanted to hear, I figured I’d just make one myself,” he says.

Since beginning as the lone soul behind the production, Castellanos has released around a hundred episodes and was nominated in the podcast category of the 2023 Austin Chronicle’s Best of Austin competition. He says he is more passionate than ever about consistently releasing quality, terrifying stories while also working as a full-time UT staff member. Castellanos is also venturing out of his home studio to host meetups and storytelling events.

“It’s funny. I feel like I’m taking this oral storytelling journey from person-to-person to digital and back to in-person again,” Castellanos says. “It’s come full circle.”

Castellanos keeps the one-person show going through Patreon supporters who sign up for bonus content and exclusive merchandise. During the day, he works as a digital content coordinator for the University. Castellanos says that digital content and design are his strengths, so even when he isn’t in his home studio recording episodes, he’s refining skills that



**“  
AS SOON  
AS THE  
SUN WENT  
DOWN,  
SOMEBODY’S  
AUNT OR  
UNCLE WAS  
TELLING  
YOU ABOUT  
HOW THEY  
SAW THE  
DEVIL IN  
MEXICO  
OVER THE  
WEEKEND.”**



Ayden Castellanos comes from the Rio Grande Valley and says the spooky folktales he heard as a child are an important part of Hispanic culture.



help to make “Susto” an even stronger production. “It can be a lot, but I wouldn’t do it if I weren’t in love with it,” Castellanos says.

The podcast’s topics are often playful and light, but Castellanos explains that many of the stories have important messages that listeners should consider. In one of his favorite stories, “The Girl Who Danced With the Devil,” a woman disappears because she disobeys her parents and goes out into town, only to end up dancing with the devil. While Castellanos disagrees with the misogynistic undertones of this story, there are lessons about the real world that people should heed.

“The reality of the world is that it’s not safe for everyone,” Castellanos said. “I do want my friends to know that, unfortunately, this is how the world functions.”

This tale, and many more, can be found on [sustopodcast.com](http://sustopodcast.com) or most podcast streaming platforms. Castellanos says that he aims to continue leaving the studio to meet fans of fright and one day to create a team of ghoul friends to carry on the tradition alongside him.

“Maybe one day you’ll see ‘Susto’ on HBO Max,” he says. “That would be the dream.” **TC**



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# TACKLING MENTAL HEALTH

College of Education addresses support for Texas public school students

**BY TRINITY FLATEN**  
**PHOTOS BY LORIANNE WILLETT | ILLUSTRATIONS BY SARA KINNEY**

**C**onnie Dawes has a passion for helping high school students. After graduating from the University of Virginia, she worked for the College Advising Corps, which placed recent graduates in rural high schools where the rates of students going to college were below the state average. Those peer advisers would walk students through general admissions applications, the application for federal student aid, and college essays. Dawes served as assistant director, providing support and outreach to Advising Corps chapters across the country who were doing this work.

She came to The University of Texas in 2010 to work for Advise TX, a chapter of the national College Advising Corps, and helped scale the program to three other universities around the state.

Her experiences led her to adopt the mantra: “Of those to whom much is given, much is expected.” Dawes believes that supplying students with resources begins a chain reaction of benefits that lifts the individual and that the subsequent growth and change extend beyond that one person. She decided to devote herself to this work and saw that mental health support for students was a crucial piece of the process.

The Institute for Public School Initiatives (IPSI) within the College of Education aims to help more low-income high school students get into and succeed in college. In

fall 2022, it approached telehealth provider MDLIVE about a partnership to offer online mental health resources to public schools across Texas. The program launched in late February 2023, and Dawes now oversees the initiative.

The program is funded and housed under a seven-year federal grant, GEAR UP — Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs. The grant serves low-income middle and high school students through encouragement, assistance and preparation for higher education. From now until 2029, IPSI plans to follow the enrolled seventh and eighth graders throughout the rest of their public school education and into their first year of college, making mental health services always available.

“Now more than ever, we know our (high school and middle school) students need that help with mental health issues,” says Dawes, director of the UT Austin Reset and Reimagine GEAR UP partnership grant.

School districts with at least 50% of their students on free or reduced lunch are eligible to participate in the program. However, many selected schools surpass that threshold, with 70% or more students eligible. The school districts involved are Coldspring-Oakhurst, Jasper, Lufkin, Port Arthur, Del Valle and San Marcos.

Most of the selected districts are in rural areas, meaning access to mental and behavioral health care can be minimal, especially with the increased demand for these services in recent years. Because of this, the program

offers students access to support they may never have had otherwise.


MDLIVE created a website for GEAR UP students to make access easier, says Chelsea Fernandez, senior program manager at IPSI. Once registered on the website, students can select from the hundreds of therapists that MDLIVE employs based on their needs, language preferences and availability. After selecting a provider, they can schedule a session anytime.

“If you’re not healthy, it’s hard to do your best,” Dawes says.

Originally intended to launch last fall, the program was pushed out to students in a just few days during spring 2023. After the tragic death of a student on one of the San Marcos middle school campuses on a Friday, MDLIVE had the program ready for use by the next Monday.

After the successful launch of their services for sixth and seventh grade students under the new GEAR UP grant, IPSI and MDLIVE opened services to their 2017 grant members, students who are now in their first year of college.

IPSI plans to continue adding other grant programs to the partnership to expand mental health services.

“I hope that (the services) bring much more awareness to the issue,” Fernandez says. “I hope it breaks some negative or inaccurate stigma or misconceptions about mental health. I hope it normalizes mental health, and I hope it just helps. I hope it just helps our kids.” 



Connie Dawes, left, is director of the Institute for Public School Initiatives within the College of Education, and Chelsea Fernandez is the senior program manager.



Photo by Pyro Jenka/Unsplash.com

A street in Mexico City lined with parasols, lights and papel picado.



# A RELATIONSHIP FOR THE BOOKS

UT's ties with Mexico highlighted at  
international conference

By MIRIAM BELMONTE





aculty, staff members and students at The University of Texas connect with places and people around the globe. But the relationship with Mexico is special.

“The Forty Acres is home to almost 600 students and scholars from Mexico, and almost 150 students from UT Austin have studied, researched or in-

terned in Mexico in the past academic year,” says Sonia Feigenbaum, senior vice provost for global engagement and chief international officer. More than 3,500 alumni live there, as well. “More than 200 UT Austin faculty members engage in research activity in Mexico, and we have more than 140 joint publications.”

The University further strengthened its ties to Mexico last fall by co-hosting the international book festival FERIA Internacional del Libro de las Universitarias y los Universitarios (FILUNI) with its long-term partner Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), located in Mexico City.

“We have a long history with UNAM, 50 years of rich partnership and collaboration,” Feigenbaum says. “In 2021, we established a permanent office, the Mexico Global Gateway, to represent the university in the region, advance research collaborations, foster academic exchanges and connect with our alumni.”

UT has maintained a presence at the book festival since its inaugural event in 2017, but it is the first institution in the United States to co-host the weeklong event. The 2023 festival brought together more than 42,000 people from around the world.

“This is the largest university book fair in Mexico and one of the most important in Latin America that showcases publishing presses,” Feigenbaum says.

UNAM invited UT to be the guest of honor in February 2020, but plans were delayed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. As international travel resumed, Texas Global assembled a task force and began the yearlong process of strategic planning and coordination.

Feigenbaum says the task force solicited input from colleges, schools and departments across UT, forming a team of nearly 30 faculty and staff members who contributed to the myriad topics the University could showcase at FILUNI. A total of about 200 proposals were received.

The event featured 140 UT participants, including President Jay Hartzell, Provost Sharon Wood, 11 deans, faculty and staff members, graduate students, performers and several Longhorn alumni. Together, they represented 23 colleges, schools and units, and 92 members presented as co-panelists in research symposia, discussions and live podcasts.

UT Press showcased 600 of its titles from its bookstand at the center of the venue, offering more than 1,100 volumes for purchase among the 20,000 available at the festival.

University of Texas President Jay Hartzell and Enrique Graue Wiechers, rector, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, at the festival. UT is the first institution in the U.S. to co-host the weeklong event.



The festival also included musical performances and book signings.

Photos courtesy of Texas Global



***“More than 200 UT Austin faculty members engage in research activity in Mexico, and we have more than 140 joint publications.”***

*— Sonia Feigenbaum*

Throughout the convention, the University highlighted UT Austin’s 10-year strategic plan, Change Starts Here, with research themes of technology and society, health and well-being, energy and environment, and arts and culture. UT Austin led 54 sessions that explored these concepts.

“We were able to really tap into the strength of our university to highlight our faculty working on critical issues that impact so many people and communities around the world, thus offering very dynamic sessions, as well as showcasing musical performances and exhibitions,” Feigenbaum says.

The conference also covered topics such as artificial intelligence and solutions to chronic poverty, bringing together different voices.

“It was an opportunity for our faculty who do not get to work together on campus to discover each other’s research and activities and collaborate,” Feigenbaum says.


Mexico is an essential friend to the state of Texas and a natural place to explore some of the research themes of the University’s strategic plan, Feigenbaum says. It’s crucial to use the expertise of students and faculty who share connections with the country in various academic disciplines, including Indigenous culture and languages.

The University of Texas Press showcased 600 of its titles from its bookstand at the center of the venue.

UT’s libraries and collections hold important materials that demonstrate the University’s ties to Mexico, including holdings in the Benson Latin American Collection, a library devoted to Latin America and Latina/o studies on campus, as well as the Harry Ransom Center.

The Dell Medical School, which sent representatives to FILUNI to speak about health and well-being, in 2022 began the Academic Model Providing Access to Healthcare (AMPATH) program in Puebla to look at global health. AMPATH opens a gateway for conducting research and training for medical professionals.

Texas Global has generated partnerships with institutions across regions in Mexico, creating new opportunities for staff and students to collaborate. FILUNI was yet another big step in advancing the University’s mission by fostering global engagement, research connections and partnerships abroad.

“Texas Global, think of it as this: the organization that drives but that also follows, that collaborates, and celebrates all of the work of our stakeholders across campus and around the world, demonstrating that we are a global institution,” Feigenbaum says. “What starts here changes the world, but we change the world together through collaboration.” 



Photos courtesy of Texas Global

The UT delegation to FILUNI included President Jay Hartzell, Provost Sharon Wood, 11 deans, faculty and staff members, graduate students, performers and several Longhorn alumni.



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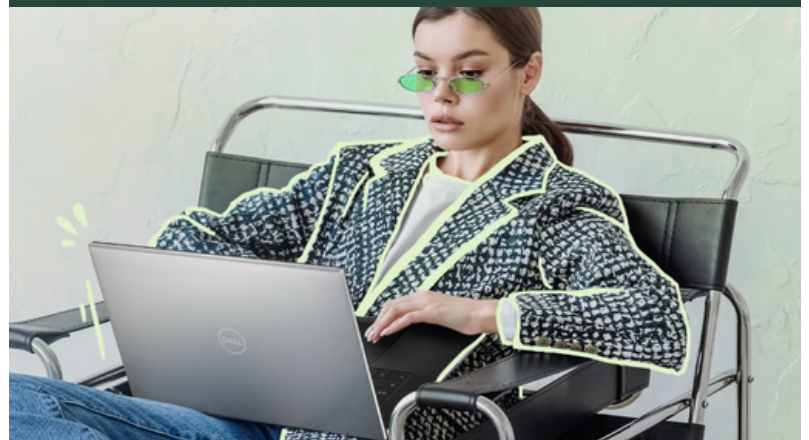
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# The art of perception

Art Galleries at Black Studies exhibitions challenge how we understand cultural identities

BY EMILY QUIGLEY

**F**aces — or the absence thereof — dominate the works in the spring exhibitions of Art Galleries at Black Studies. But “Wave Patterns” by Michael A. Booker and “(un)knowing” by Alicia Henry shouldn’t be taken at face value.

“This is a moment where things are in flux globally. It feels like, at many times, we fall back onto the default of what we think we know,” says Phillip Townsend, curator of art for Art Galleries at Black Studies (AGBS). “And I think both of these exhibitions are challenging us to think about perception, but also the real idea of flexibility ... what we think we know about certain subjects, topics and themes, and asking us to rethink them or be open to rethinking them.”

Henry, an artist in Nashville, Tennessee, uses textiles, found materials and other media to create human heads or figures that are manipulated rather than true to life. “By distorting and transforming the human form, Henry challenges traditional notions of identity, making way for new narratives and interpretations,” Townsend writes in the exhibit notes. The exhibition challenges the viewer to acknowledge that we can’t ever truly understand everything about the human experience but that freedom can be found in accepting that reality.

The works from Maryland-based Booker

and flags used in the nautical International Code of Signals. The play on “waves” is clear, but Booker also examines how these different symbols communicate ideas to the viewer. His subjects often are looking away — their facial expressions concealed — so the hair becomes the focus.

Townsend’s exhibition essays, he says, are designed to “engage with the work and reframe it so that a person who doesn’t have a background in art can access the work.”

But unlike at some museums that offer extensive descriptions and interpretations about each piece, the labels on these works are brief. On the Booker pieces, for instance, the code behind the flags is unexplained, forcing the viewer to try to figure out what is being communicated and what is being concealed. That lack of detail is intentional, Townsend says.

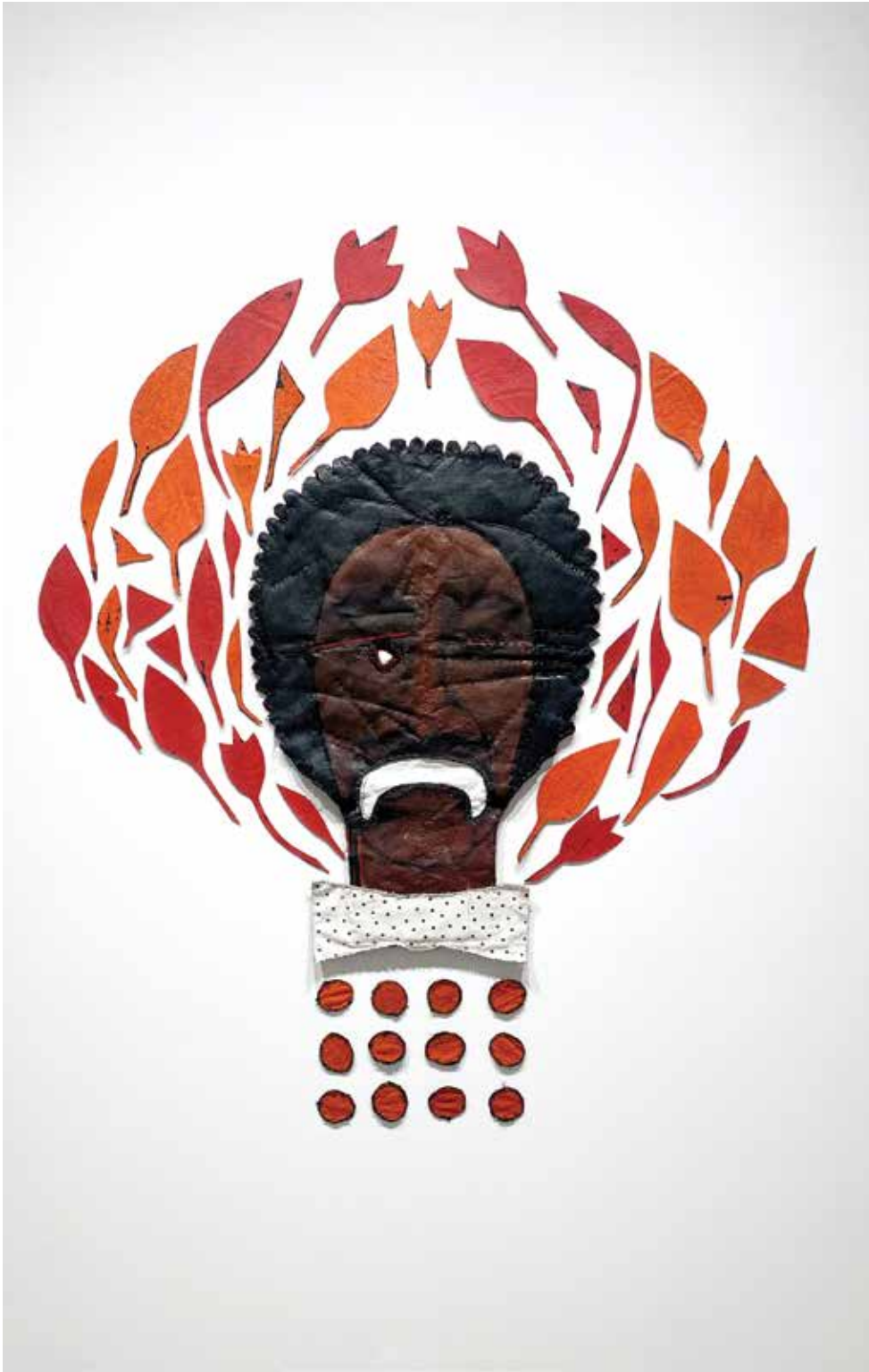
“Our museum is a space for critical thinking and critical dialogue. And I don’t want to impede that by providing too much information,” he says. “So I want people to come in, especially students, and think a bit critically about ... why the space exists, why we are presenting this particular exhibition and why these objects are in this exhibition.”

The two gallery spaces feature exhibitions twice a year, but art can also be found on every floor of the Gordon-White Building. AGBS uses these project spaces to rotate art from its nearly 1,300-piece permanent collection and



Photos courtesy of the artist and Morton Fine Art

Michael Booker’s works such as “Capsized. DX” (top) and “When I Get Home (Nest). UV9” combine three themes: the flags of the International Code of Signals, ocean waves and Black hairstyles.



Courtesy of the artist and Liliana Bloch Gallery



Photos courtesy of the artist and Morton Fine Art

**Left:** Alicia Henry uses found materials and textiles to depict human figures or heads.

**Above:** “bEAcon” (top) and “Monolith. HM4” are among the works from Michael Booker on display.


# SPOTLIGHT

also bring in works from Austin-based artists.

Townsend says AGBS exists as a resource for staff and faculty.

“We’re trying to engage more faculty and staff to have them come to the galleries, with or without their students,” Townsend says. He and other AGBS staff members lead tours, and they can pull work from the collection that is not on display for viewing.

AGBS, which opened in 2016, puts an emphasis on being an accessible and inclusive space. There’s no admission fee, and the galleries are open to anyone. Openness is at the heart of its mission.

“We pride ourselves on being an inclusive institution,” Townsend says. “There are works in the collection by artists that are of Hispanic descent, and then we have Indigenous artists of the U.S. in the collection, as well as Black artists from the United States, across the diaspora and the continent. We are primarily interested in the Black experience, and anyone can engage or be in proximity to that.” 

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## “Wave Patterns”

by **Michael A. Booker**

Idea Lab

Gordon-White Building 2.204

Open noon-5 p.m.

Tuesday-Friday and

by appointment on Saturday

On display through May 3

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## “(un)knowing” by Alicia Henry

Christian-Green Gallery

2nd floor of Jester Center A232

Open noon-5 p.m.

Wednesday-Friday and

11 a.m.-2 p.m. Saturday

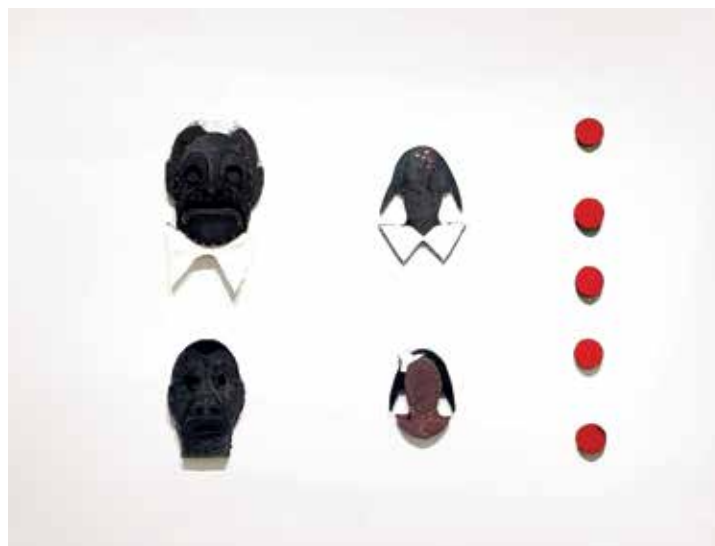
On display through May 18

Courtesy of the artist and Lilliana Bloch Gallery



**Above:** Alicia Henry’s untitled pieces distort and transform the human form.

**Right:** Henry’s mixed media portraits explore the fluidity and complexity of Black experiences.



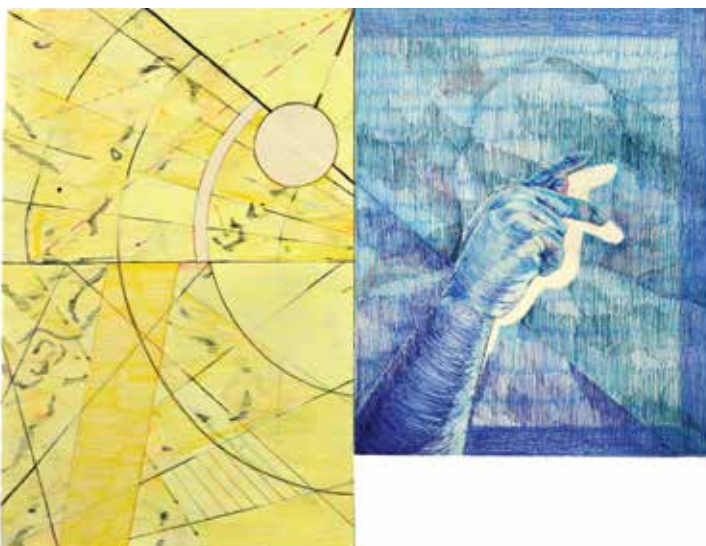
Courtesy of Art Galleries at Black Studies, The University of Texas at Austin



“

Both of these exhibitions are challenging us to think about perception, but also the real idea of flexibility ... what we think we know about certain subjects, topics and themes, and asking us to rethink them, or be open to rethinking them.”

— Phillip Townsend



Michael Booker's "Wave Patterns" exhibition, including "100K" (left), examines how codes function both in and out of cultural contexts.

Courtesy of the artist and Morton Fine Art

The term “back forty” refers to a portion of the farm that often goes unvisited. In Texas Connect, the recurring Back 40 section showcases hidden gems on campus.



Photos by Taryn Elliott/Pexels.com; Marsha Miller; courtesy of UT Athletics

# ‘The full luxury passport experience’

Globe-trotting Longhorns get help with travel documents at Passport Services

BY MIRIAM BELMONTE | ILLUSTRATION BY SARA KINNEY

**A** slight buzz from the air conditioning dances with the light chatter that fills the small room in the Main Building where Passport Services has been temporarily relocated. Cubicles circle the space, and people enter with documents in their hands as they prepare for vacations or trips to study abroad.

In 2008, Larry Phu, then the director of finance and administration for the International Office, and Heath Roberie, recently hired as Texas Global's chief financial and administrative officer, opened an acceptance facility for passport applications. The operation now employs six workers who process about 10,000 U.S. passport applicants per year. The office, which recently moved back to 2400 Nueces St. after nearly a year of renovations, is open to the public but is designed to accommodate staff, faculty and students during their busy schedules.

"The main service is convenience," Passport Services manager Erick Romero says.

Employees are cross-trained in everything from preparing and executing an application to taking passport and visa pictures and handling payments. The goal is to provide efficient customer service.

"Every other place has another function," Romero says. "The post office is 100 things you can do there, so their staff is limited with how much time they can dedicate."

Passport Services is part of Texas Global, as is Education Abroad. This makes it very convenient for students who plan to work or do research abroad to apply for their passport in the same building.

Spring is the busiest time of the year. To avoid long lines or booking delays lasting months, the office uses an appointment system that allows scheduling just a few days in advance. Romero says it allows greater flexibility and availability for people who urgently need a passport.

Employees are straightforward about deadlines and an applicant's probability of obtaining a passport, says Nicholas Jimenez, assistant manager of Passport Services.

"Our reputation has been really good on that regard," Jimenez says. "We try to make it easy to understand, easy to come in and out. We know people have busy lives, whether you're a student or general public."

Jimenez says it is important to remember to treat everyone with kindness and respect and to keep customer service a top priority.

"You get the full luxury passport experience here," Jimenez says. **TC**

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*This section introduces featured staff and faculty members in their own words.*

### What kind of jobs did you have in college, and what lessons stick with you?



**MIKE GUTIERREZ**  
15 years at UT  
**Program Manager**

I had a variety of on-campus jobs including mentoring, peer advising, food hall, teaching assistant, research assistant, and recruiting positions. The biggest lessons that stuck with me were learning how to work with people from different backgrounds and skill sets to know what is expected in the workplace after college.



**CONNIE DAWES**  
10 years at UT  
**Director**

I worked for my university's art museum (now the Fralin Museum of Art) during my fourth year at the University of Virginia. Getting to know the staff and building relationships with art history faculty members in a deeper way was invaluable. In fact, it led me to an internship in New York City after college.



**RIGOBERTO MIRELES JR.**  
3 years at UT  
**Benefit Specialist**

Being an intern for multiple different departments offered me invaluable lessons that extended beyond the workplace. Those jobs taught me to stay curious. Curiosity fuels creativity by encouraging exploration. It has encouraged a proactive approach to my life, where my challenges are seen as opportunities for growth.

### What's your favorite spot on campus to spend some quality outdoor time?



**KAELIN NGUYEN RUBENZER**  
8 years at UT  
**Executive Director**

The small patio behind the Moffett Molecular Biology Building is a nice little oasis for sitting. There's also a great slab of rock near Patton Hall that's perfect for sunbathing. I used to lay and fall asleep there between classes.



**LISA LENNON**  
10 years at UT  
**University Landscape Architect**

I love the plaza at Dealey Center for New Media, because I was a part of the design team, and because of its use of native plants and trees.



**PHILLIP A. TOWNSEND**  
7 years at UT  
**Curator of Art**

My favorite outdoor spot on campus is the patio at the Gordon White Building. It's close to Idea Lab, an art gallery housed inside the building, and it has a north-west orientation which is a perfect place to enjoy lunch in partial sunshine and relative silence.

### Where was the last place you went using your passport, or where would you like to go in the future?



**AYDEN CASTELLANOS**  
2 years at UT  
**Digital Content Coordinator**

The last place I went to using my passport was to Honduras. I spent a week at a youth home mentoring children living with HIV. I would like the next time I use it to be to go to Ireland.



**TY KASEY**  
9 years at UT  
**Horticulturist**

I haven't flown since COVID. I last used my passport on a trip to Mexico in 2019. We visited Mexico City and Oaxaca City. I was on an adventure to visit Ahuehuetes (giant ancient Montezuma cypress trees).



**D. EMMA FAN**  
14 years at UT  
**Professor**

I went to many places around the world. Mostly for attending conferences and to give talks. The latest trip using my passport was to Toronto for a meeting in July.



**TING-TING CHEN**  
3 years at UT  
**Program Coordinator**

A whirlwind winter trip through Germany, Austria, and Hungary! So much history, and I love seeing how people in other places live their lives. I'm hoping to visit family this coming winter 2024, so it looks like Taiwan and Japan are in the books.





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The University of Texas at Austin



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## “Total Eclipse of the Horns”

On April 8, the entire campus will be looking up at an event Central Texas hasn't experienced in 627 years.

A total solar eclipse.

Austin is perfectly positioned under the moon's arc across the sky as it crosses the sun from 1:36-1:38 p.m., an event UT President Jay Hartzell dubbed “Total Eclipse of the Horns.” Classes won't meet and most normal University services will be suspended from 1-2 p.m., so take a break, look up, and enjoy it while it lasts, because it won't happen again in Austin for another 319 years.



### DELL MEDICAL SCHOOL

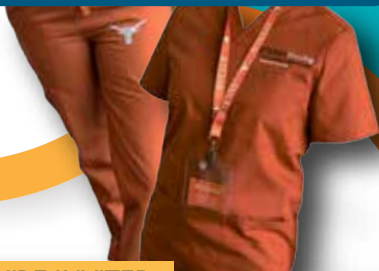


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