

PR UNA

VOLUME 3 / SPRING 2026 ISSUE

MEADOWS
SCHOOL OF
THE ARTS DEAN
**SAM
HOLLAND**

“On the
inside,
I’m still the
guy with the
ponytail &
diamond
earring.”



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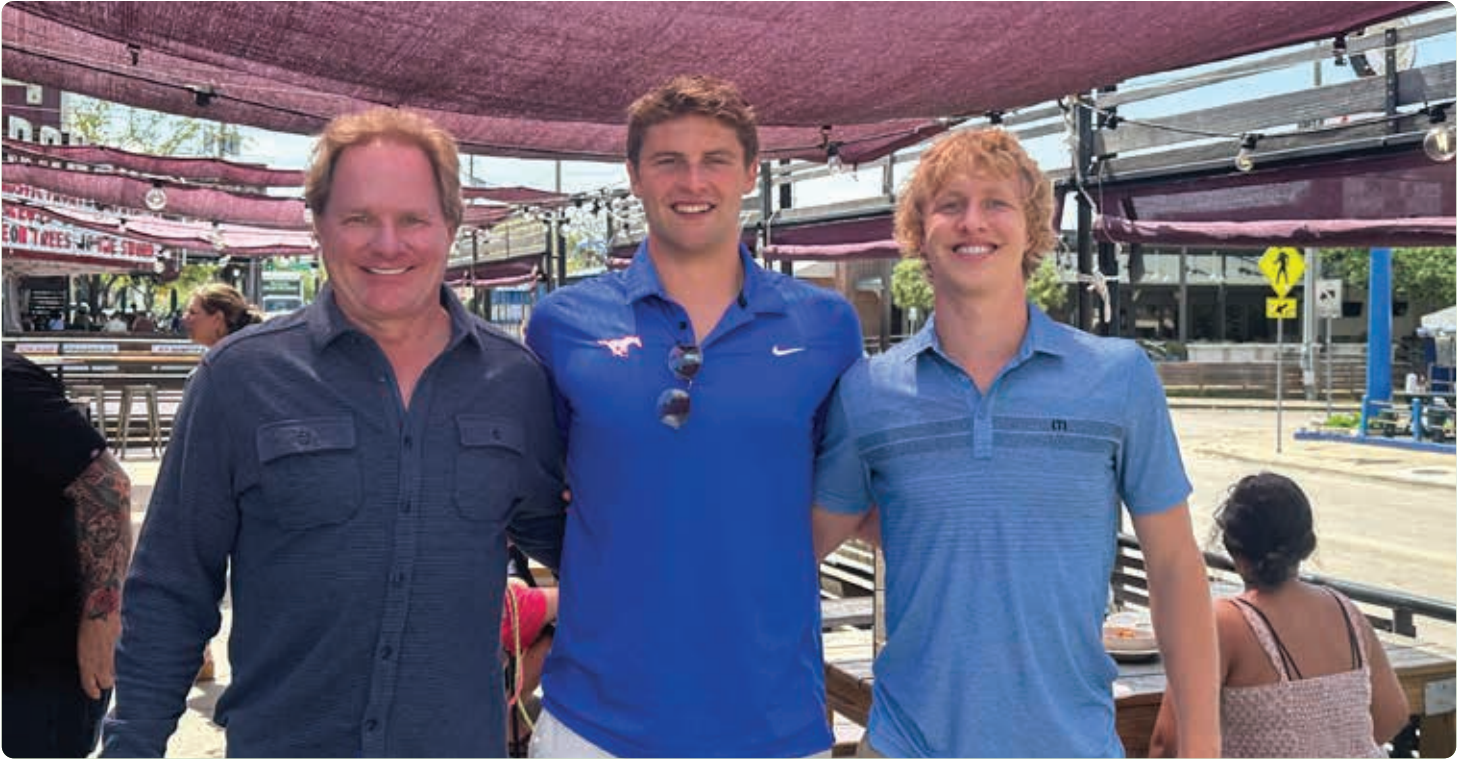
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CONTENTS



"Magazine sponsor Matt Fleeger, owner of Gulf Coast Western is also actively involved ongoing with SMU like serving as a mentor for current 4x SMU record holder, NCAA All-American Jack Berube. (Pictured here with Jack, and Matt's son Dalton, who is currently a freshman at SMU and now friends with Jack). Full circle moment! Jack and his family are also featured in this issue! Check it out!"



4 SAM HOLLAND



8 TREY DYER



10 D'ANDRA SIMMONS



12 ERIC DICKERSON



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Editor's Note

It's our third issue of PRuna Magazine!

And what an issue! Backstory, we launched Spring 2025 due to my need to share some of the amazing alumni that our students have the opportunity to interact with regularly, and the hard work that our students display writing about these talented grads! It's all about sharing these stories with the world. Welcome to PRuna Magazine Spring 2026 issue!

As a former staff reporter with People Magazine, along with being a writer/editor with other amazing media outlets – I've always wanted to produce a magazine during the semester once I started teaching ten years ago at SMU. As a journalist, I remember how hard I'd work on a piece and the excitement of opening the magazine to see it in print. I also loved the feeling of working among other writing professionals from research to our managing editor to make a magazine happen.

I reached out to People Magazine, who provided us with tons of copies of previous issues to use as inspiration. I also contacted my friend and legendary newsperson, Larry Hackett. Larry, a former longtime managing editor for People Magazine also served as my editor back in the day.

The thrill of having him speak to my classes and share his wisdom and expertise? Full circle moment. As one student commented, "I never would have thought that I would be working with the former editor of People Magazine. Larry was phenomenal!" Thank you, Larry!

The students worked hard. Research. Interviews. Fact Checks and more!

This issue's cover has our own Dean Sam Holland who is celebrating his 35-year anniversary heading up our Meadows School of the Arts. He exemplifies the same sentiments displayed as we worked on all of

our stories – the pride current SMU staff, students and alumni feel from being a part of this amazing university. The life lessons learned. The friendships. The network. Checkout his story and you, too will be in awe of our phenomenal dean!

This issue is dedicated to our originating and current sponsors – former SMU alums Matt Fleegeer, owner of Gulf Coast Western and Trey Dyer, CEO of Mesero Restaurants, along with my longtime friend Brad Fuller CEO of Al Biernat's Steakhouse. This magazine has a zero budget as in no funding but yes, it does have expenses to publish it. I kick in money and rely on the support of sponsors to make it happen. If it wasn't for these three originating sponsors, there wouldn't be a PRuna Magazine – period and the students would have missed out on this exciting learning opportunity. Matt, Trey, and Brad have even been involved with our SMU community in countless ways as speakers, class clients, charity, projects, and more. Matt recently made a \$2 million gift to the Garry Weber End Zone complex and the ACC Competitiveness Campaign.

Our newest sponsors this issue are very well known among the SMU alumni and business community - Kyle Noonan and Josh Sepkowitz of Free Range Concepts. These guys give back to our SMU community in so many ways from classroom clients and more. Thank you for your sponsorship, guys! #heroes

The enthusiasm and support grow for PRuna with big plans for this semester and beyond. A warm thank you and welcome to Belclaire Luxury Living as a new sponsor! We are truly thankful for your support and looking forward to working together! We also have more exciting news coming with the upcoming issues so stay tuned!

I'd also like to do a shoutout to my longtime friend who passed recently, the legendary Al Biernat. There is a tribute in this issue dedicated to him, who was also an avid SMU supporter. Please read it and know that yes, he was larger than life and a man of deep faith.

Enjoy this issue and these incredible stories. Connect with our amazing students, groups, and alumni that are a part of it! Special thanks to photographer Nick Gibson for his skills and talent in various shoots, including the Dean Holland piece.

A heartfelt thanks to our alumni for being a part of this valuable learning experience – your patience, input and enthusiasm truly mean the world. You inspired us with your stories that we're excited to share with the world!

Thank you to CCPA department head, Gordon Law, and Melissa Austin, director of administrative affairs for their support along with a high five to our ad interns – Angelica Barrera and Grace Finley!

And standing ovation to Hyper Local Media Solutions – our publisher for bringing this magazine to life. PRuna Magazine could not happen without their dedication, support and talent!

And finally, I thank my students. They persevered and made this issue happen. I am so proud of these professionals and honored to be a part of their learning experience – their lives. I will never forget the moments we shared making it all worthwhile!

PonyUp!

Chris Coats

Professor of Practice

Checkout PRuna Magazine online – look for the link at www.ten90.media

Meadows Corporate Communication and Public Affairs

Pink, Power, and Pony Pride.

Avery Hinson's Journey From SMU to Victorias Secret.

By Lucie Gray Miller

For Southern Methodist University alumna Avery Hinson, a career in public relations began with curiosity, adaptability, and a willingness to say “yes.” Since graduating from SMU in 2020 with a BA in Public Relations, Hinson has built a career in brand communications and now works in public relations for Victoria’s Secret, helping manage influencer partnerships, events, and VIP relationships for one of the world’s most recognizable fashion brands. Her path, from internships during college to working on global campaigns, reflects both the opportunities available to SMU students and the fast-paced reality of modern fashion PR.

Hinson chose SMU partly because of its specialized public relations program, which stood out among relatively few programs nationwide. Originally from Columbus, Ohio, she was also eager to experience a new environment and “explore different points of view”. During her time at SMU, she embraced the opportunity to try new experiences and build connections.

Throughout her four years at SMU, there were numerous academic experiences that left a lasting impression. Hinson points to a crisis communications class and a public speaking course as especially influential. Those experiences helped prepare her for an industry where communication, quick decision-making, and relationship building are essential.

Following graduation, Hinson tried her hand at a few PR businesses before landing a job at Victoria’s Secret, where she has been working on the company’s communications strategy for around six years. “Every day is really different,” she said, discussing life at the number one largest lingerie retailer. However, a typical day might involve evaluating influencer campaigns, coordinating with stylists and publicists, or preparing for large-scale events.

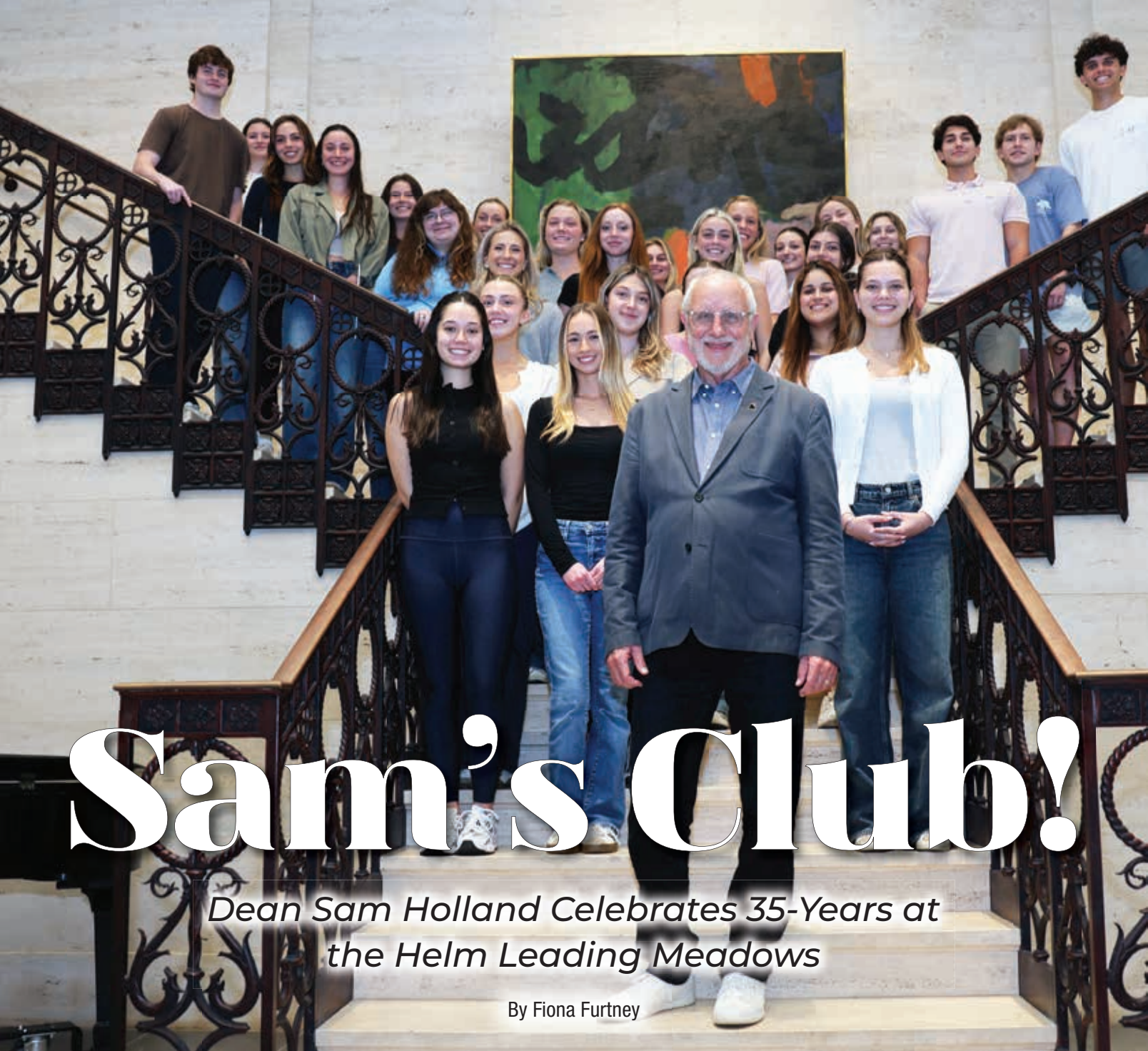
One of Hinson’s most memorable experiences at Victoria’s Secret involved spotting influencer Alex Earle before her rise to major fame. Hinson recalls first seeing Earle over Thanksgiving and thinking, “I get it. I’ll reach out to her agent. I’ll just see what her rates are like.” The team quickly moved to include her in a Valentine’s Day campaign launching in three weeks, a decision Hinson admits felt risky at the time. “I’m dying on this hill,” she remembered thinking, but the partnership paid off.

In recent years, Hinson has seen firsthand how dramatically influencer marketing has transformed fashion PR. When she began working on campaigns, coordinating even a 20-person influencer campaign felt ambitious. Today, the brand works with thousands of influencers across multiple platforms.

Despite the glamour associated with fashion PR, Hinson emphasizes that success often comes down to mindset. Her biggest advice to students is rooted in a principle borrowed from improv: “yes, and.” “You never know where a job could take you,” she said, recalling that she initially joined the company as an assistant rather than directly in PR. Over her first two years, she gradually advocated for opportunities and transitioned into the work she had originally hoped to do.

For current SMU students hoping to break into PR or fashion, Hinson encourages curiosity and openness. “Anything that interests you at SMU, any class, you should try to take it,” she advised. “As much as you can differentiate your perspective and explore things that light you up, it will come into play at some point.”





Sam's Club!

Dean Sam Holland Celebrates 35-Years at the Helm Leading Meadows

By Fiona Furtney

In the spring of 1991, Samuel S. Holland tucked his long hair into his collar and removed the diamond stud from his left ear. He had arrived on the SMU campus to interview for a job as a piano pedagogy instructor.

More than 35 years later, Holland is still here. The ponytail is gone, but the spirit that defines this classically trained former rock 'n' roller remains.

Holland, who has served as Dean of the Meadows School of Arts since 2014, has led a school that now enrolls 1,000 students from 94 countries. Since becoming interim

dean, he has helped guide nearly \$182 million in fundraising and a \$40 million increase in the school's endowment. His days are spent surrounded not only by music, but by students and faculty across 11 departments ranging from music to advertising to corporate communication and public affairs. Through it all, Holland sees himself as part of an ensemble, a player whose contribution matters most when it supports the greater whole.

"When it all comes together, you've helped someone realize a dream to make the world a better place," he said.

Growing up in Abilene, Texas, as the oldest of three brothers during the Vietnam War, Holland found refuge in music. After his family moved to Philadelphia during middle school, piano gave him a way to stand out. He jokes that it did not hurt when it came to meeting girls, but beyond that, music offered something deeper.

One moment, in particular, stayed with him. As a tenth grader, he attended a performance by the Philadelphia Orchestra where legendary pianist Van Cliburn, a Texas native, played the Grieg Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 16.



“It was a glimpse of what heaven would be like,” Holland said.

Though Holland was classically trained at Oberlin College Conservatory in Ohio and The University of Texas, where he graduated in 1975, his musical life expanded beyond the concert hall. He was the only varsity athlete at Oberlin’s conservatory, competing as a distance runner.

But classical music was not his only outlet. After graduate study, Holland taught in Princeton at the New School for Music Study and at Westminster Choir College. During that time, he joined a

rock ’n’ roll garage band, playing keyboard along the Jersey Shore and in parts of New York City.

“There were times where I would play all through the night,” he said. “I’d get home with just

enough time to make it to church and play the organ.” Over time, Holland found himself drawn not only to performance, but to leadership. When he arrived at SMU, he built his reputation as a musician, scholar, and faculty member, eventually serving as head of the piano department, then associate director, and chair of the division of music.

In 2014, Holland stepped into the role of interim dean while the university conducted a national search. Because SMU had historically hired deans from outside, he assumed the role would be temporary.

“I thought I would learn from the process and apply somewhere else,” he said.

Six months later, he was called into Provost Paul Ludden’s office who offered him the job permanently, with President Gerald Turner’s endorsement.

By the fall of that year, Holland was officially appointed dean. The role marked a shift from individual performance to leading a multimillion-dollar operation,

overseeing budgets, faculty, student programs, and the school’s long-term vision. But Holland does not describe the job as one of authority so much as one of service. Decisions about hiring, programming, scholarships, and funding are all made with the student experience in mind.

A significant part of his work is fundraising, which he sees as both strategic and personal. Building relationships with donors means telling the stories of students and helping others see what one gift can make possible. Some of the most rewarding moments, he said, come when one decision can solve several problems at once.

Still, the pace is relentless. His weeks are filled with meetings, public speaking engagements, fundraising events, and administrative responsibilities like managing budgets, recruiting faculty, and guiding Meadows’ continued growth and reputation.

Most days, however, begin quietly. Before heading to campus, Holland starts with spiritual reflection and exercise, followed by a walk with Bayley, the Pyrenees mix he and his wife rescued three years ago. During the drive from Richardson, he listens to jazz, including Miles Davis and Bill Evans, though he sometimes mixes in country or even ZZ Top. He rarely listens to classical music in the car. “It’s not quiet enough to hear the details,” he said.

Outside the office, he finds balance through movement and family. He often rides his bike 20 or 30 miles outside Dallas and values time with his three adult children, Kristen, Benjamin, and Eli, two of whom attended SMU, and his five grandchildren. In contrast to SMU style, Holland keeps it simple. His only designer shoes are a pair of Louis Vuitton sneakers, a gift from his youngest son, who works for the brand.

“I would have never bought them myself,” he said with a laugh. “They’re too expensive.”

Despite the responsibilities of leading one of SMU’s most prominent schools, Holland insists he hasn’t changed much. Amid the demands of leading hundreds of employees, thousands of students, and multimillion-dollar fundraising efforts, he remains true to his purpose and himself.

“On the inside. I’m still the same guy who had the ponytail and the diamond earring.”



The Journey of Dr. Carrie Teller

Faith, Leadership, and Finding Purpose

By Mae Repstad

When one sits down with Dr. Carrie Teller, her passion about faith, leadership, and community shows strongly through her stories and experiences; a true representation of someone who has lived many lives in one. A former professional cheerleader, pastor, mother, survivor, and mentor to students, her story is about the moments that shape a life's purpose.

Dr. Teller was born on February 8, 1969, and grew up in Dallas in the Lake Highlands neighborhood. Her early years were defined by dance, a passion nurtured by her Aunt Kitty, who worked at a dance studio and later opened her own. Every afternoon after school, Kitty picked up Carrie and her sister and took them to the studio.

"My whole childhood was built around dance," Teller recalls.

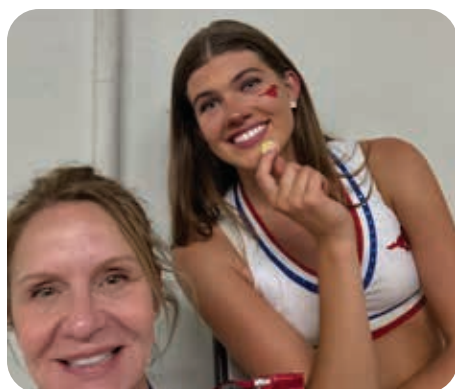
In 1987, she graduated from Lake Highlands High School and briefly attended Baylor University. A few years later, in 1991, Teller auditioned for the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders. She advanced to training camp but was cut in August before the first game. Instead of giving up, she returned the following year, and from 1992 to 1996, she was selected as a Dallas Cowboys Cheerleader.

“It was an incredible experience,” she says. “But it also taught me perseverance.”

Around that time, Teller met her husband, Andy, and stepped away from performing. She returned to teach dance before focusing on raising her two children. During those years, she also completed her undergraduate degree at SMU through night school. Years later, in 2021, both of her children graduated from Southern Methodist University. Her son, Preston, earned a Bachelor of Science, and her daughter, Cameron, also earned her B.S. Cameron continued her education and, in March 2022, earned her Master of Science in Management while also competing as a member of the SMU Women’s Tennis Team from 2018 to 2021.

A turning point came in 2016 during a family vacation when her son was assaulted and critically injured.

“There were days I didn’t know if he was going to make it,” she says.



The experience challenged her faith but ultimately led her back to it. She enrolled at SMU’s Perkins School of Theology and pursued a Master of Divinity. From August 2020 to May 2021, she served as a Pastoral Fellow in the Mark Craig Leadership Network at Highland Park United Methodist Church. She then continued on staff in a pastoral role from 2021 through November 2022.

“It wasn’t about quoting scripture,” she says. “It was about connecting with people.”

In 2018, Teller was diagnosed with Stage IIa triple-negative breast cancer. She completed treatment in Dallas, including chemotherapy and a double mastectomy. The experience was difficult, but she approached it with a perspective shaped by her family’s earlier trauma.

After completing treatment, she returned to school and pursued a Doctorate in

Ministry focused on leadership and community building.

Teller’s connection to SMU remained strong. In April 2024, she began leading SMU Spirit, overseeing the university’s cheer, pom, and mascot programs. What started as a group of 20 cheerleaders, 20 pom members, and 2 Peruna mascots has grown into a larger program that now includes 22 pom members, 20 cheerleaders, 4 Peruna mascots, the live Peruna horse, and 8 Peruna handlers.

Today, Teller works with SMU’s spirit teams as both a leader and mentor.

“This isn’t just about pom or cheer,” she says. “It’s about helping students discover who they are.”

For Teller, faith is present in mentorship, encouragement, and community. “It’s about reminding people they’re not alone,” she says.

Her guiding principle remains the same: change the world one life at a time



Trey Dyer

The Art of the Pivot

By Bella Brinker

For Trey Dyer, having an answer is never the end of the conversation. It is only the beginning.

The Dallas entrepreneur, advisor to Liquid Zero and CEO of Mesero Restaurant Group, says he approaches business by thinking about “what is next in my life? Like if this chapter is closing, what is next?” Whether launching restaurants like Mesero, training artificial intelligence, or developing beverage brands like Liquid Zero, Dyer’s philosophy remains the same. “As an entrepreneur, you have to throw everything against the wall and see what comes out.”

He attended Southern Methodist University law school graduating in 2002. This decision was practical: Dyer was looking for a new way of thinking.

“I tell people all the time to go to law school, don’t practice,” Dyer said. “Because you learn so much about how to think.” That lesson came quickly after failing several classes his first semester. Professors told him he had answered questions correctly but failed to approach problems from every angle.

“In the grand scheme of things, there’s an answer, great. That gets you to the finish line,” he said. “But if you look at the whole scale, there are a lot of other directions you could go.”

That lesson became the way he would approach every future challenge.

His pivot from law into the restaurant industry was spontaneous and anything but planned. “It was completely spur of the moment,” he said. “Just a roll of the dice.” He was

simply asked if he wanted to do it, and the only answer in his book was “yes.”

The journey began in 2009, when Dyer handled litigation for the ex-wife of Mico Rodriguez, the business owner known for expanding Mi Cocina from one location to more than twenty. Through that connection, the two developed a relationship that would eventually turn into a business partnership.

In 2011, Rodriguez presented the idea of getting into the restaurant industry together to Dyer. By November of that year, the two launched Mr. Mesero on McKinney Avenue in Dallas, which was later rebranding to Doce Mesas in 2018. By 2014, the restaurant quickly built momentum and their vision continued to grow as they expanded to areas such as Inwood Village, Prestonwood and Legacy West. This marked the beginning of what would become a thriving and authentic restaurant brand rooted in hospitality, Mesero.

Today, Mesero has expanded to multiple Texas locations, as well as Oklahoma City and Nashville, and is known for its blend of Mexican and Tex-Mex cuisine and signature margaritas.

Despite its growth, Mesero’s culture remains rooted in family. “We have over 600 employees and they are all my family,” he said. “I would do anything for them.”

However, Dyer acknowledges that success never comes without drawbacks. “In 2024, food went up, alcohol went way down,” he said.

That mentality was prevalent during COVID-19. While many businesses shut down, Dyer pushed forward, pivoting to a takeout-focused model and introducing margarita kits to-go.

“If you are going to go down, you are going to go down fighting,” he said.

Dyner knows the restaurant business is just one piece of a much larger plan.

One such opportunity came a few years ago when Dyer became an advisor to Liquid Zero, a zero-calorie margarita mixer developed with Mike Hiller and now sold at AT&T Stadium and in restaurants across the country.

He is also deeply engaged in artificial intelligence. “I don’t use AI like Google,” he said. “My average prompt is about 750 words.”

He believes that AI is not a shortcut. It is a strategic tool.

Despite every direction Dyer is pulled in, the biggest challenge remains deciding what comes next.

“You wake up every morning and think about what else you could be doing,” he said.

For Dyer, it is about the questions asked along the way to get to the next chapter—not reaching a final destination.





D'ANDRA SIMMONS

What's Cookin' with this RHOD?

By Evelyn Wooten

D'Andra Simmons, a name many recognize from her four seasons on the *Real Housewives of Dallas* (Bravo), actually has so much more depth and accomplishment. She's owned a successful skincare and cosmetics company for over 10 years, has become a celebrity chef, and continues to pursue and grow her directing and acting career.

Simmons is a fifth generation, Dallasite, born on March 15, 1969. When it came time for college, she chose Sweet Briar College in Amherst County, Virginia, a private women's liberal arts school.

"I felt like I was kind of shy, and going to a women's college really helped me find my voice." She graduated with a degree in both International Affairs with a specialization in Middle Eastern Politics and Theatre.

While she did not attend SMU she is a very active presence on campus, such as being a guest in classes taught by Professor Chris Coats, within Corporate Communication and Public Affairs (Meadows School of the Arts). Simmons also has ties to the Annette Cadwell Simmons Hall and the Harold Clark Simmons Hall, which was funded by her aunt and uncle who donated \$25 million.

Simmons sat down with PRuna Magazine to give an update on her life outside of Hollywood, new business ventures, and that nagging question she always gets - will there be a RHOD reunion?

BUILDING A BUSINESS EMPIRE

Simmons currently owns two businesses Ultimate Living (<https://ultimateliving.com/>)

and Hard Night Good Morning (<https://hardnightgoodmorning.com/>). Ultimate Living was originally started by her mother, Dee, a cancer survivor, in 1996 and was the first greens powder made by a woman. The brand is all about selling supplements that are made with the most up to date scientific data. She appeared on Christian TV broadcasts daily around the world to help her mother market the product, she would be the expert while her mom would share her cancer story. Together they ended up earning approximately \$10 million a year in the company's prime. Simmons took over Ultimate Living in 2018 when her mother retired, and she became both President and CEO.

Hard Night Good Morning was started by Simmons in 2008, and it is a luxury

skincare line that is aloe vera based. She is currently working with her 22-year-old business partner from the UK to build back up both businesses.

“One huge lesson I learned - if you own a business, you need to understand every part of it.” Simmons shared that she has made the mistake in the past of letting others handle everything and her being on the outside. Not again.

STEPPING INTO REALITY TV

The Real Housewives of Dallas was something that Simmons continually said no to multiple times. At the time she was chairing all different events in Dallas such as the Junior League Ball, Cattle Baron’s Ball Underwriting Chair, Salvation Army Luncheon, and so on. She chaired around 30 balls and was one of the most successful fundraisers in that time period raising around \$5 million.

The network came back to her and started filming a different Dallas social show that they were wanting her to join. She knew that it was the wrong cast and would not do well. In 2016, she joined The Real Housewives of Dallas after having a mix of friends on the cast. Simmons stayed on the show four seasons. Ultimately, not renewed, it ended in 2021. She joined the show to promote her businesses vs. seeking fame.

“I never wanted “She was a Real Housewife” to be my whole legacy.”

Would she ever attend a reunion?

“If Bravo or NBC asked me then, yes. If it was just the women wanting to get together then, no.”

Simmons does stay in contact with some of the women, but admits there are a few that she will never talk to again. But if they were to make a new cast she would return.

PASSION TURNED INTO CULINARY CAREER

Cooking is something that Simmons has loved ever since she was a child. She spent hours in the kitchen as a child with her mother and grandmothers. Her maternal grandfather was also a butcher. This is where she learned how to cook meats and the importance of different cuts and what they are used for. Her mother went to a culinary school with a woman who taught out of her home and she would learn how to make beautiful French dinners. All of these influences really played a role in Simmons’ love for cooking as well as a love of food.

Being an only child allowed for her to travel with her parents and experience five-star Michelin restaurants.

While cooking was just for fun at first, the past few years, Simmons has turned it into a career. She graduated in 2022 from the Dallas College Executive Culinary Program (<https://www.dallascollege.edu/study/culinary-pastry/>). Simmons attended every Monday thru Friday from 6 a.m. till 9 or 10 a.m. for six months.

“I already had a good understanding of food and cooking but this program really focused on teaching the basics of the culinary world.”

Simmons had never found cooking to be stressful unless it is timed. While she’s been approached to appear on various TV celebrity chef shows, she’s been selective in her choices.

Judging competitions is something that she has done frequently such as Michael Symon’s Barbecue USA (Food Network) and has also been asked to do Beat Bobby Flay (Food Network). She has also been able to enter the world of culinary partnerships with pans, pots, and spices. Simmons loves to judge food competitions and share recipes on her youtube channel, (<https://www.youtube.com/@therealsimplifysimmons>).

She’s even sharing her culinary talents with family and friends recently making Poulet au Vinaigre for her anniversary dinner.

One piece of advice on her latest venture?

“Don’t let anyone tell you that you can’t do something. If you know you’re good at it and it brings you joy, continue pursuing it.”

WHAT’S NEXT?

Simmons’ likes to keep herself busy and she definitely has her future plans filled. Currently she is working on continuing to build her businesses as well as redecorate her home. She is also starring in an off Broadway show, “Designing Women” and will be playing the role of Suzzane Sugarbaker, which was originally played by Delta Burke (CBS 1986-1993). This role is one that Simmons really wants to do justice and her mentor Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, who wrote “Designing Women,” is helping her prepare. There will be shows in Houston, Austin, Dallas, Nashville, and upstate New York. Simmons has already interviewed with one Broadway producer, so hopes that if it does well enough in production it goes to Broadway.

Another big project she is currently working on is her first big-budget film, which is around \$24 million. The film is called “Darling Greatly,” which features her as the female lead and Brendan Gleeson, one of the most famous Irish actors as the male lead. Harry Potter movie fans know him as Mad-Eye Moody.

Simmons really understands what it takes to be successful in this life and wants to remind others “Continue to be a critical thinker. Don’t let someone else think for you.”

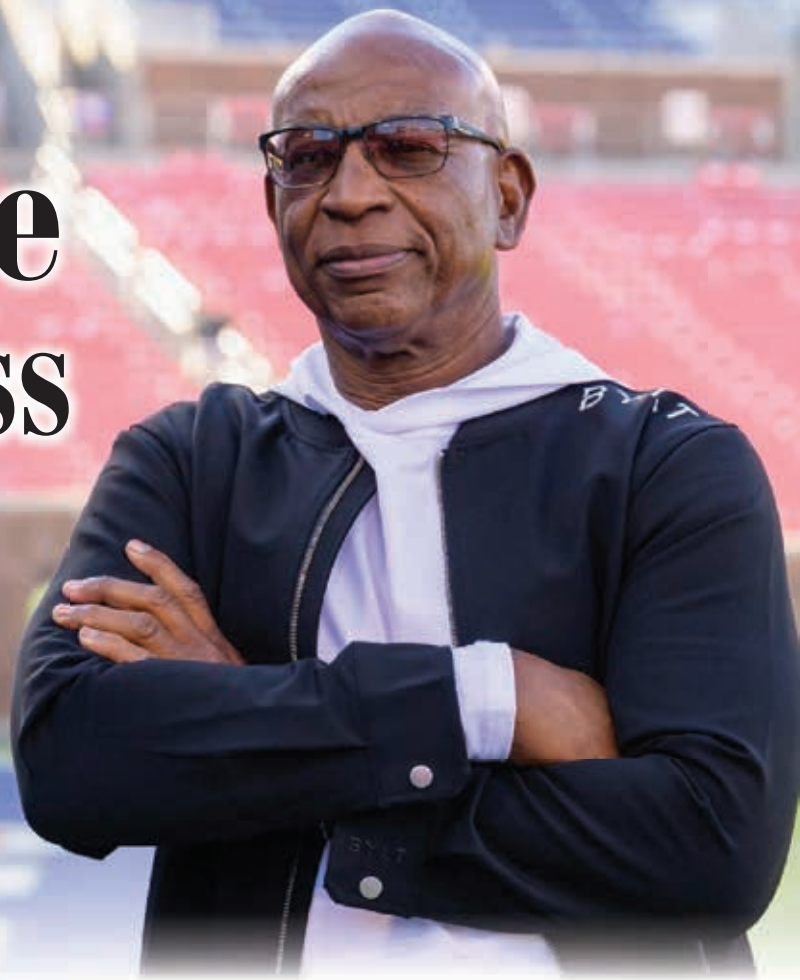
She’s independent. Fierce. And always ready to take on the world.



Back on the Pony Express

Eric Dickerson
Returns as the 2026
Commencement Speaker

By Alexa Black, Elise Waterston, and Grace Moundas



A Saturday in Gerald J. Ford Stadium. Many SMU students know the feeling. Walking from the Boulevard into Ford, ready to cheer on Mustang Football. On May 16, 2026, about 1,400 students will enter Ford Stadium for the last time, but it won't be for a football game. Among the students, parents, and faculty who enter Ford that day will be Eric Dickerson. This time the legendary player won't be in a football uniform, but at the podium as the commencement speaker.

Under the lights of Ford Stadium, on the same field where his illustrious career began, one of SMU's greatest will return to where it all began.

Pro Football Hall of Famer and SMU legend Eric Dickerson attended the university from 1979 to 1982, where he led the "Pony Express" and took Mustang Football to new heights. He finished his collegiate career in Dallas, helping lead the team to a No. 2 national ranking, before being drafted to the Los Angeles Rams in 1983. After an impressive career in the NFL, Dickerson was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1999. Today, he is an entrepreneur, NFL analyst, and runs the Eric Dickerson Foundation, which provides opportunities to disadvantaged youth through education.

More than four decades after carrying the expectations of a program on his shoulders, Dickerson returns to pass that responsibility on to a new generation of SMU graduates. There may be no better voice than Dickerson— who once faced doubt,

pressure, and the perseverance required to build a legacy— to advise the Class of 2026 as they step into a new journey.

We had the opportunity to sit down with Dickerson to gain some insight into his upcoming commencement speech on May 16, and hear more about his passion for our university.

From the start, Dickerson spoke with unmistakable pride in SMU, making it clear that his relationship with the university has never faded. "It means the world to me to come back to my university ... I love SMU ... it'll always be a part of me," he said, reflecting on what it means to return to the university as the commencement speaker.

Dickerson shared that going "to SMU was the right decision," a choice that ultimately "changed [his] life in an excellent way." During his time as a Mustang, Dickerson built lasting relationships, including with teammate Craig James. The two formed the iconic "Pony Express," a partnership that helped transform the program and bring a new level of success to the university. He pointed to that period as a turning point, sharing that once they "started winning, it changed everything," both for the program and his love for the school.

His journey reflects the kind of success that SMU continues to cultivate, and in many ways, he has become a symbol of what it means to carry the university's legacy beyond graduation. That lasting connection is what makes his return especially meaningful, as the experiences that once shaped him now influence the message



he will share with the next generation of Mustangs.

On the field, one moment stands above the rest. After a challenging loss to the University of Texas his freshman year, SMU returned to Austin the following season with renewed confidence and determination. Facing one of the top teams in the nation, the Mustangs delivered a statement win, a defining moment that showcased the program's momentum and the beginning of something greater.

As Dickerson prepares to return to Ford Stadium, his message to graduates extends far beyond football. He emphasizes the value of surrounding yourself with the right people and embracing the opportunities in front of you, recognizing how those influences can shape both confidence and direction.

Above all, his message centers on potential and purpose. "Everybody has a gift," Dickerson shared, encouraging graduates to recognize their strengths and take ownership of what comes next. As the



Class of 2026 leaves SMU, his words serve as a reminder that their future is not limited

to where they begin, but defined by what they choose to build moving forward.



From the Hilltop to the NFL

The Rise of Sana Merchant-Rupani

By Olivia Teo

For Sana Merchant-Rupani, (SMU '11 Bachelor of Arts - Corporate Communication and Public Affairs; and Sports Management) working in professional sports wasn't always the plan. Today she helps shape digital strategy across the NFL, supporting all 32 teams and more than 110 colleges, often monitoring games in real time. Her path to the league developed over time as she explored multiple different opportunities in communication, marketing, and digital media.

WHERE SPORTS BECAME THE BRIDGE

Born in Mumbai, India in 1989, she moved to the United States with her family in 1999, just a few months shy of her 10th birthday. Growing up in Dallas meant adjusting to a new culture and finding ways to connect with classmates. Sports quickly became one of those connections. "It felt like a way to assimilate, connect with people and make friends."

In high school, Merchant-Rupani joined the drill team, which meant spending

time around football games. Even with the exposure, though, she did not initially see sports as a career.

FINDING HER PATH AT SMU

Merchant-Rupani graduated high school in 2007 and attended Southern Methodist University that fall, majoring in Corporate Communication and Public Affairs (CCPA). She credits her professors at SMU for having a major impact on who she is today, not just during college, but something she carries with her still. One class discussion that really stuck with her was with a former SMU professor, Christy Bailey Byers, who introduced students to Twitter and how quickly social media changed the reporting of breaking news and how social media was starting to reshape the way people get their news.

THE FIRST LEAP INTO THE INDUSTRY

In 2011, after graduating from SMU, Merchant-Rupani began her career in global communications at The Burson

Group (www.bursonglobal.com) a strategic network of highly specialized global agencies that partner with clients across geographies, stakeholders and sectors in their Dallas office. She credits the SMU Meadows CCPA Advisory Board for nibbling this opportunity. Board member, Mike Lake, was the general manager of Burson's Dallas office. She later transferred to Burson's New York office before leaving the company to join the marketing and public relations team at the Empire State Building, helping with digital media efforts for one of the most recognizable landmarks in the world.

STEPPING ONTO THE NFL STAGE

In December 2015, she had a full circle moment coming across an opportunity with the National Football League (NFL) looking for a manager of club social media strategy. Based on a deep interest in digital and social media, and in sports from her childhood - she took the chance and applied.

That role jump started her career with the NFL. Over the next several years, she continued to grow within the organization,

becoming a senior manager and then director of club and college social marketing in 2019. In 2023, she was promoted to senior director.

Many people assume that working in social media means posting directly to accounts, but Merchant-Rupani explains that her role focuses much more on strategy and analytics. “I’ve never published for the NFL. I’m working on club strategy.” Instead of posting content herself, she studies engagement data, analyzes trends, and helps teams build digital strategies that resonate with fans.

COUNTDOWN TO KICKOFF: A GAME WEEK IN THE DIGITAL ROOM

While fans mostly see the excitement on the field each week, much of the work happens behind the scenes. Merchant-Rupani and her team review digital performance from the previous week, analyzing which stories, videos, or posts resonated most with all audiences. They worked closely with team media departments across the league, helping clubs develop strategies and prepare for upcoming games and campaigns. “We back everything up with data, the data doesn’t lie.” On game days, Merchant-Rupani monitors games, social media activity, and fan reactions across multiple screens at once. Even when she is watching from home or the office rather than inside the stadium, she closely follows the digital conversation surrounding the league.

ON THE SUPER BOWL STAGE

One of the most memorable moments early in Merchant-Rupani’s NFL career came during her first Super Bowl after joining the league. Having only recently started in the role after two months, she finally found herself experiencing one of the biggest events in sports from behind the scenes, Super Bowl 50 in San Francisco. Standing in a packed stadium with over 71,000 fans while more than 100 million viewers watched around the world helped her realize



the scale and global impact of the league, which is broadcast in 190 countries each year.

RECOGNITION AND MAKING HER MARK

As Merchant-Rupani’s work in digital strategy grew, she gained recognition across the sports and marketing industries. In 2019, she was named to the “Forbes 30 Under 30” list in the marketing and advertising category, an honor recognizing young professionals. The annual list recognizes 600 individuals under the age of 30 across industries who are shaping the future.

The timing of the announcements made the moment even more memorable. The list was released during the same week Merchant-Rupani was preparing for her wedding week, turning an already exciting time into one she describes as unforgettable, as she prepared to marry her husband, Rahim Rupani, also a fellow SMU graduate (‘11). While the recognition came as a surprise, she says it meant a lot to see the work she had been doing receive recognition and attention.

Over the years, her work at the NFL has also been recognized through several major industry honors. In 2020, she was part of the team that won a Sports Emmy Award for Outstanding Trans Media Sports Coverage celebrating the league’s 100th season. The following year, the NFL marketing team was named among Ad Age’s marketers of the year



in 2021, highlighting the league’s influence in digital storytelling and fan engagement.

While sports have traditionally been a male-dominated industry, Merchant-Rupani has also seen real progress. Many of the marketing leadership roles at the NFL are now held by women, something she says it has been inspiring to witness as the industry continues to evolve.

One of the goals she is focused on today is helping the NFL continue to grow globally and reach new fans around the world. She and her team are continuously exploring new ways to connect with fans across different countries, cultures, and platforms.

In 2025, SMU recognized her accomplishments as well, when Southern Methodist University named Merchant-Rupani the designated Alumni Emerging Leader Award recipient, honoring graduates who have made an impact in their fields.

ADVICE FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

For students interested in working in sports or digital media, Merchant-Rupani emphasizes the importance of staying curious, building strong skills, and being open to change. Her advice: “Hard work beats talent when talent doesn’t work hard.”

From discovering her love for sports as a way to connect classmates to helping shape digital strategy across the NFL, Merchant-Rupani’s journey shows her curiosity, adaptability, and determination can lead to opportunities students may have never imagined.



THE BERUBE STANDARD

By Jack Berube

At Southern Methodist University, the Berube name has become closely tied to athletics. But inside the Berube household, the story has never been simply about records or medals. It is a story about perseverance, family support, and a shared belief that effort and attention to detail matter most.

Ryan Berube (class of '97) first built his reputation in the pool at SMU as a freshman in 1992, before going on to win Olympic gold at the 1996 Atlanta Games. Years later, Jack (SMU class of '27) would arrive on the same campus and swim in the same program, under the same coach, eventually chasing the same record board his father once stood atop.

"I think deep down, every father wants their kid to be more successful than they are," Ryan said. "I still get teary about it."

But the Berube family's athletic success wasn't limited to the pool. On land, the other — and arguably prettier — half of the family made her own mark in SMU athletics.

Jack's mother, Michele (Stackhouse) Berube, was also an SMU athlete (class of '97). She competed in cross country and track and field (javelin) and contributed points at the Southwest Conference Championships ('95).

As impressive as their accomplishments were in their respective disciplines, the relentless pursuit of precision, perfection, and maximum effort left lasting lessons that would later shape how Michele and Ryan approached parenting. Yet Ryan says the mentality that creates elite athletes doesn't always translate easily to life outside the pool.

"The things that make you a world-class athlete are not necessarily the skills that make you a world-class dad or a world-class spouse," he said.

That realization shaped the way he and Michele approached raising their son. Instead of forcing Jack down a specific sports path, they focused on supporting whatever he chose to pursue.

"First of all, we had no plans," Michele said. "We were never the parents who lived through their children. We were always just supporting our child in whatever strengths you may have."

Jack remembers his upbringing slightly differently. In fifth grade, overwhelmed by expectations about effort and discipline in the household, he once told his parents, through tears, that "no one else in my class could live in this family." Michele's response

was immediate: “We don’t measure ourselves from the bottom.”

The philosophy in the Berube household was simple. - “We’ve only ever expected two things: attitude and effort.” Jack remembers, “If something wasn’t going well, you didn’t ignore it, you had to go and fix it. If I struggled in a math class, I got a tutor. English class? The writing center. If something needed work in the pool, we worked on a Sunday. There was always time to be made for the things that made you better. If you didn’t exhaust all your options, you didn’t apply yourself or give your best effort.”

That philosophy was imparted to Jack at that dinner. The emphasis on attitude, effort, and constant attention to detail gradually built a foundation for success that would eventually reveal itself in the pool.

The moment that happened on November 22, 2024, during SMU’s Invitational meet.

In the closing stretch of the 100 backstroke, Jack powered through his final strokes and touched the wall before turning to the scoreboard. When the time appeared, the record that once belonged to his father was gone – in its place was a new, younger Berube.

“I was elated,” Jack said. “At first, I actually thought I missed it. Then the realization hit — and it was electric... It was the biggest relief I had ever experienced. After months of setbacks and the feeling of having potential but being unable to show it, it was erased in that moment. It felt really, really good.”

For Ryan, the experience was overwhelming.

“To see him grow and persevere and succeed at the end of the race... it was hard to describe,” he said. “It was a blur, and it felt really emotional... we’re just so proud of him.”

Ryan had once swum those same lanes as a Mustang, building a career that would eventually lead to Olympic gold. Now, decades later, his son had surpassed one of the program’s most enduring records in the very same pool.

For Michele, the emotion came instantly.

“It was just a flood of pride and joy and excitement and just lots of tears,” she said. “It was such a special moment for you to break his record at SMU.”

The swim not only staked his place in SMU history but also ignited a career in



“ It was equal to watching Ryan win the Olympics in Atlanta.



the pool that has quickly become rapidly ascending.

Nearly three decades after Ryan’s Olympic moment in Atlanta, the Berube family story in the pool is still unfolding as Jack Berube looks to take on NCAA championships in Atlanta, Georgia, on March 28th, 2026. It is the fastest collegiate meet in the country,

filled with the best swimmers in the world, where Berube says, “I will become an All-American and do something pretty cool.”

For the Berube family, this is the rarest kind of story — where legacy is not just continued but rewritten in the exact place it was first built: Southern Methodist University.

A Powerhouse Fueled by Curiosity

From transfer student to transforming the DFW community through investigative journalism Eva Parks is not afraid to tell the truth.

By Claudia Wilson



Every morning Eva Parks walks into the NBC 5 Dallas-Fort Worth newsroom, she has no idea what story is waiting. What she does know is that it could change lives. With three Alfred I.

duPont-Columbia Awards, two Peabodys, and a career built on holding those in power accountable. Parks graduated with a Bachelors of Art in Broadcast Journalism in 2003 from Southern Methodist University

(SMU) Meadows School of the Arts, and has become one of the most decorated investigative journalists in North Texas.

Parks grew up in Richardson, Texas, graduating from Richardson High School



in 1998 with a sharp eye on the news. Watching journalists cover the 1993 Waco siege and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing planted a seed she did not yet know how to name. Parks initially attended the University of North Texas, where she spent three semesters studying advertising before transferring to SMU in 2001. Parks decided to pursue journalism after a chance encounter with an investigative journalist during a visit to the Fox 4 station who opened her eyes to a career her curiosity had been quietly preparing her for all along.

At SMU the late Professor Marty Haag's Basic Video and Audio Production course gave her the technical foundation she still draws on today. She soaked up every opportunity: a luncheon with "60 Minutes" founder Don Hewitt, internships at KDFW Fox 4 and the CW Network, and a single day stint as a production runner earning \$200 when FOX News Channel came to campus for an election rally. "As a student, soak up every opportunity you can, stay curious, say yes to things you never expected. You don't know which opportunity will change your entire career."

In 2003, Parks was wrapping up her last semester on the Hilltop when she started working for ReelFX, a Dallas-based visual effects company. After graduating that December, Parks tapped into her network to land a role at NBC News's Southwest Bureau in July 2004. When Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005, she volunteered

to coordinate support for NBC crews in the disaster zone, organizing four supply-filled RVs to aid journalists on the ground. Hurricane Katrina was a pivotal point in my career. I saw an opportunity to jump in and help during a crisis situation and flagged a higher up at NBC News who would later become one of my greatest mentors. It was one truly a fork in the road where I rose my hand and doors were open," Parks said.

Parks spent several years on the East Coast before returning to Dallas in 2009 as SMU's Director of Video Communications. She stayed there until former colleagues encouraged her to apply for a position with a new investigative unit at NBC 5 Dallas-Fort Worth knowing her curious nature would make her an asset. This move reshaped her career. "Investigative journalism had never been part of my original plan," she said, "but it's where I am supposed to be." Today she serves as a senior investigative producer on a three-person team that produces long-term investigations, uncovers corruption and drives policy change across North Texas.

The team's work carries real consequences. Their four-year investigation "Big Buses, Bigger Problems: Taxpayers Taken for a Ride" unraveled a series of shady deals by Dallas County Schools that led to the largest corruption case by dollar amount in FBI history and won them a Peabody award in 2017. Another investigation helped sexual assault victims get justice after hundreds of rape kits sat untested for years



in Fort Worth. In January 2026, the team earned their third duPont Award, a rare distinction, for "Driven to Death," a series investigating Loop 12, one of America's most dangerous roads. As a result of the piece, city officials committed millions of dollars in infrastructure improvements, and fatal accidents on that stretch have already declined.

Parks has watched the news industry transform dramatically, but her belief in its core mission has never wavered. "In today's world, anyone can point a phone and record something," she said. "What sets journalists apart is the responsibility to get the story right." More than two decades in, Parks plans to continue utilizing her curiosity to find the next story with the ability to change lives because for her the awards are great but, "nothing is more rewarding than being able to create meaningful change in your own backyard."

Honoring our SMU friend

Al Biernat

By Amelia Rewis

Al Biernat, the legendary restaurateur and owner of his internationally acclaimed namesake steakhouse have hosted some of the top dignitaries, politicians and A-list celebrities nearing 30 years since first opening. SMU CCPA Professor Chris Coats worked closely with Al and his nephew, Brad Fuller, director of operations while she was a staff reporter with People Magazine. So closely, that at one point a wall had framed article after article from People Magazine stories she had written highlighting celebrity visits to the restaurant.

Besides knowing countless celebrities, what many don't know is the giving heart that Al and Brad have for Dallas, including being a friend of our SMU community. From

being involved in projects as class clients "Our classes were so excited to have Al as a class client during the semester to learn from him.

They couldn't believe that they had 'THE' Al Biernat giving them business advice,"

s a i d

Professor Coats), mentoring, hosting students and athletic teams, - and more, they have always been there to support SMU.

"Since we have been open for 28 years, we see incoming freshman and their parents every year," said Brad. "We then look forward to serving students and their parents for the entire time they are attending SMU. It's fun to see students develop and continue to grow. Many stay in Dallas, and have become lifelong customers. College visits and orientation is usually first exposure, but then parents weekend, whether if for the university or Greek life, we always love serving our collegiate clientele. We have several regulars from the board and faculty as well. Former President Gerald Turner is still a regular to this day."

When it came time to seek sponsors for PRuna Magazine, which has zero budget dollars, Professor Coats sought financial aid from sponsors to make it happen. Al Biernat's has come through with each issue. They recognize the importance of this magazine and the opportunities it provides to students, and they never hesitate to support. Our team wanted to thank Al and Brad for their support, and with Al's passing in 2023, we wanted to share with readers a bit of the man known to his friends and family as "Big Al" - yes, he was tall and strong, but also bigger than life. Brad has worked alongside his uncle since he was a teenager. Devastated by Al's passing due to ALS, he has been truly touched by he continued stories and support received from Al's legions of friends and fans. He understands the love.



“My uncle was my best friend and my mentor. you never know what turn life may take. ALS is a horrible disease, and we never saw it coming, but he left a wonderful legacy, and our restaurant culture is to get to know people, really care about people, and make lifelong friends. Our family wants to keep that going for a very long time to come.”

Al’s legend lives on through his family, friends, and longtime customers. We keep his spirit alive at SMU and are thankful to Brad and the rest of his team for their ongoing support for projects like PRuna Magazine for our students. Brad shared some insight into the man he considers his hero and the namesake of the award-winning restaurant.

Al was known for making people feel special—do you have a personal story of a moment when he went above and beyond to make you or someone’s experience unforgettable?

There are many, but here is one that comes to mind: The plaques with names on our booths are dedicated to folks that donated to a charity in which Al allowed the charity to auction off the rights to the plaque. This started back in 1998 (pre-opening). There is one plaque on booth 5 that was not auctioned off but simply given to a couple that Al wanted to be sure to make feel extra special. The wife was terminally ill, and they came to Al Biernat’s on a regular basis and sat at booth 5. When Al found out she was ill, he had the plaque made so that they always knew that was their booth while time was still with them. That plaque is still there today.

If you could share one secret about what makes dining at Al Biernat’s special, what would it be?

Personal and genuine care about what the guest feels about his or her experience, and true and genuine hospitality. It is about relationships.

Was there a moment that made you realize Al’s impact went beyond just running a restaurant?

From working at The Palm, I knew that Al was loved by just about everyone that he crossed paths with. He didn’t make enemies and never met a stranger – it didn’t matter if



you were the dishwasher or the biggest spending customer in the building, he took the time to tell you and care about your day. He put Jesus first – and held strong to his faith – and that is what set him apart. The restaurant biz was his ministry, and he was always so kind and caring to everyone. If someone was in need – in the hospital, or had a loss, or just down and out – he would go out of his way to help them.

Was there a particular dish or drink that you always associated with Al Biernat’s?

Ok, not a dish or drink to associate with the actual restaurant, but I drink black coffee from a tall glass (iced tea or water glass) daily because of Al. That’s how he did it, so he could easily disguise the coffee, leave it anywhere if he needed to talk to someone, and - you get more coffee than a regular coffee cup....

For a while there, we drank mochas – but those ended up being too high in fat and sugar.....black coffee

What made it special to you?

It made sense, so I started copying my uncle. I still do it to this day, and I think of him every time I have a glass of coffee...

What’s the most rewarding aspect of working there, especially given the restaurant’s longstanding legacy in Dallas?

Keeping the legacy going and making sure that we continue to operate just as Al

would. The culture we built is religion to me. Generational guests and smiling new faces that want to return are what it’s about. Continuation of cultivating the team to understand that – and....let’s see what we can do better – every day – food, wine, spirits, service, ourselves...

How would you describe the sense of community around the restaurant, both among staff and customers?

If Dallas were the universe, Al Biernat’s is in the center. Multi-generational relationships are established, and big things always happen in our dining room.

Was there a tradition, phrase, or small habit of Al’s that became part of the restaurant’s identity?

“More Than a Great Steakhouse!” I remember us coining this phrase in the beginning. Al wanted his restaurant to be more than an old-school, traditional steakhouse. We accomplished that, we evolved well beyond and continue to evolve as trends change.

If you could say one last thing to Al, what would it be?

“Thank you for being such a good uncle, friend, and mentor. I will not let you down.”

The Story Behind La La Land Kind Cafe Francois Reihani

Hilltop to Headlines

Written by Fiona Furtney, Megan Watson, Phoebe Blake, and Maura McHugh



François Reihani, an SMU alum and the founder of La La Land Kind Café, opened the brand's first Dallas location in Lower Greenville in 2019. In the years since, that first shop has grown into a multi-city café brand with locations across Texas and beyond, known for its bright yellow storefronts, polished aesthetic, and devoted customer base. But behind the branding and expansion is a company built around something more lasting. From the beginning, La La Land has paired its visual identity with a mission to support young adults aging out of foster care through paid internships, mentorship, and career development, work that's now led through

the La La Land Foundation. In conversation, Reihani was less concerned with the hype than the discipline and values behind it. He spoke thoughtfully about leadership, hospitality, resilience, and what it takes to build a brand that will last.

Q & A: FRANÇOIS REIHANI

HOW DID YOUR TIME AT SMU SHAPE THE WAY YOU THINK ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND BUSINESS TODAY? DID THE SMU NETWORK ASSIST LA LA LAND?

"The class sizes were so small, and you had great people come speak to you," Reihani

said. "You hear from inspiring people who have done great things. Being involved in something like that was motivating to build something."

That SMU network later became the backbone. Reihani spoke about a fellow Mustang, Preston, who introduced the young CEO to his father. "I met Andy Teller, who had visited the store with his daughter," he said. "Andy had remembered Preston sleeping on my couch," he said. "Our first big, more institutional investors were from SMU."

"NORMALIZING KINDNESS" IS CENTRAL TO YOUR BRAND. WHEN

DID YOU REALIZE KINDNESS COULD BE A FUNCTIONING BUSINESS MODEL?

“I grew up in Mexico, where people, in general, are very kind to each other,” Reihani said. Then he moved to LA, and it was “quite the opposite,” he said. “It changed me for a while before I realized I was not being nice to people either.” That realization became foundational to the way he thought about La La Land and the hospitality business in general. “Hospitality is like the forefront of humanity, the only strangers people talk to.” And the way he sees it, treating those strangers well isn’t complicated. “We just believe it’s the right thing to do.”

LA LA LAND WORKS CLOSELY WITH FOSTER YOUTH THROUGH ITS INTERNSHIP PROGRAM. WHAT DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE FOR THE YOUNG ADULTS WHO GO THROUGH IT?

“It’s very much the core of how the company began,” Reihani said. For him, the purpose of the program has stayed the same from the start. “It is not about sugar coating anything,” he said. “It is about changing people’s lives.” Still, building something that could actually do that took time. It wasn’t until La La Land’s seven-year anniversary that things finally clicked into place. “We just now feel like we have a solid program,” he said.

YOU’VE SAID IT’S MORE IMPORTANT TO BE A GOOD PERSON THAN A SUCCESSFUL ENTREPRENEUR. HOW DOES THAT PHILOSOPHY GUIDE YOUR DECISIONS AT SCALE?

“A great entrepreneur is going to need good karma on their side,” Reihani said. For him, that idea is practical rather than abstract. “On a large scale, as you’re building a company, every decision of how you treat people around you can create good karma and will pay off tenfold,” he said. Good karma, he explained, drives every decision he makes. “You have to stick to your gut about what

doing the right thing is for you.” Hire good people, surround yourself with them, and the rest follows.

WHAT’S YOUR MESSAGE FOR SMU STUDENTS WHO WANT TO BUILD SOMETHING MEANINGFUL?

“To me, my magic formula is twofold,” Reihani said. “It’s delusion and certainty.” You need to have “certainty that something will happen,” he said, and then “you have to be at another level of competitiveness and be resilient.”

“No one just became great one day and did not have to get knocked down 50 times,” he said, a reminder that the formula only works if you are willing to keep getting back up.

WHAT DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE TO YOU?

“I’m pretty hard on myself. I very rarely sit there and say I am doing so well,” Reihani said. There is always another level he tries to achieve. He said a successful day looks more like seeing the business come to life, “when we open a new store that is killing it, when you see that light in action, I think then you feel a little bit of success.”

WHAT MANTRA DO YOU LIVE BY?

“When you do the right thing, magic happens. I

think it is simple enough,” he said. “You need magic to happen in any great business or any entrepreneurship story,” Reihani said. “And you build those right moments by doing the right thing.”



The Nonlinear Journey of Fernando Valdes

By Clara J. Forbes



In a few months, Fernando Valdes will trade the high-speed, data-driven corporate world for the rich soil of his family's Guatemalan coffee farm. It is a stark contrast to his current reality as the Head of Global Sales Compensation at Uber Eats, where he manages complex, performance-based sales plans for sellers and account managers worldwide. But for Valdes, a man whose career has taken him from clipping audio for the Texas Rangers to corporate offices in

Amsterdam and New York, the path to success has been anything but linear.

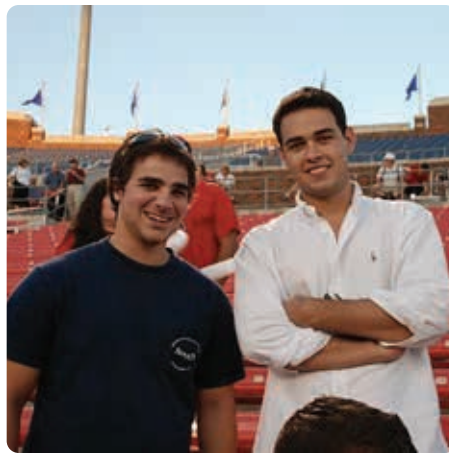
Growing up in Guatemala City, Guatemala in the 1990s, Fernando Valdes spent his high school years involved in Model UN, sports teams, and hiking. Valdes' journey to Texas began with a family connection; his brother, 15 years his senior, attended Texas A&M University. Valdes explored his options within the state and found his home at Southern Methodist University (SMU).

Like other college students, his academic path was initially uncertain as he explored five different paths including business, economics, and English literature before finding his fit in SMU's Meadows School of the Arts. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Advertising and Journalism and a minor in Psychology in 2009.

Amidst his time at SMU from 2005 to 2009, Valdes embraced campus life to its fullest, enjoying the city of Dallas, attending



“
**...do not stress
 short-term
 things...**



athletic games and joining Phi Gamma Delta fraternity. Academically, several courses left a lasting impact on his personal and professional life. He credits Dr. Alice Kendrick’s Account Planning course, where he learned how to use focus groups and surveys, with teaching him how to think critically. He also fondly recalls Dr. Nina P. Flournoy’s Investigative Journalism class, and a Personality Psychology course where his professor used personal life stories to relay concepts.

His early career was full of excitement; he even spent time in 2011 working for CBS covering the Texas Rangers, where he clipped audio and listened to baseball games and eventually moved back to Guatemala to become the video editor in chief of a local newscast. Despite this early success, Valdes realized he wanted a deeper understanding of business strategy so he could continue advancing his career. This ambition led him to Vanderbilt University in pursuit of a Master of Business Administration, from 2013 to 2015, focusing on human organizational performance.

The transition from graduate school to the corporate world brought unfamiliar challenges for Valdes. Moving to Nashville and later New York, Valdes took a position at Citi where he describes feelings of imposter syndrome while immediately stepping into a management role. Over 6 years and 5 months, he learned how to become

resourceful and drive innovation within his new corporate setting.

His adaptability eventually led him to Uber Eats in 2021, where he took on his most significant career accomplishment. For the past four years, he has led the complete redesign of all the sales incentive plans. Tasked with overseeing employee compensation, he successfully built out a new sales plan, led the recommendation process, and implemented a maker-checker system.

Throughout his career, Valdes has lived and worked across the globe, including stints in Guatemala, Singapore, New York, Costa Rica, and Amsterdam, driven by a passion for discovering novel places. The connective tissue across his diverse professional experiences is his commitment to doing things that make him happy. While financial stability is important, he prioritizes roles that challenge him and offer opportunities for constant learning.

Reflecting on his journey, Valdes offers clear advice to soon-to-be graduates: focus on what you genuinely enjoy doing, as there are many places where you can make a difference. To his younger self, his message is equally grounded: do not stress short-term things, he advises, noting that there are no bad decisions because individuals decide their own definition of success and happiness.

While Valdes has enjoyed discovering new places and building a career that took him from the classrooms of SMU to corporate offices in Nashville, New York, and Amsterdam, he is finally ready to return to his roots. In just a few months, he will trade his high-powered executive role at Uber Eats for the soil of his home country and run his family’s coffee farms.



Sarah Cantu

Fast Track to Philanthropic Fame

By Loretta Jean Devening

SARAH'S START

Born on August 31, 1979, and raised in Great Falls, Montana, Sarah Cantu came from a family of Southern Methodist University (SMU) Mustangs. Despite not being a Texas resident, she was raised with a deep love for the university, as both of her parents, uncle and cousin had attended. Cantu grew up coming to the Boulevard and had no doubt that SMU was the right choice for her future.

Cantu had an early start to her educational pursuits in the communications field. Cantu was a journalist for her hometown's newspaper while in high school. Although her love for journalism and communications remained steadfast throughout her life, Cantu and her family had always been involved in fundraising and philanthropy.

Cantu's grandfather served on the board of his town's local hospital, and her mother was involved in the Junior League, and her father also served on the board of many nonprofits. Philanthropy was in her genes.

Upon her admission to SMU during Fall 1998, Cantu knew she wanted to pursue a career in some type of journalism or communication field, but what she did not know was the amount of job opportunities that lay within the field of philanthropy.

Upon embarking on her own experience at SMU, Cantu didn't realize it yet, but she was carrying on more than one family tradition. Not only was she now the fifth Mustang in her family, but little did she know she would carry on her family tradition of philanthropic involvement.

During her time at SMU Cantu was a member of the Tri Delta chapter, as well as a valued student in the Meadows School. As a junior, Sarah declared her major in corporate communications and became immersed in all the connections that being an SMU student in Dallas had to offer.

A TRADITION CONTINUED

During her junior year in 2001, Cantu began taking a non-profit management class. In it, she learned about organizations like Make-A-Wish and Susan G. Komen. When one of the requirements for her course was to obtain an internship in the nonprofit field, Cantu worked at the Center for Nonprofit Management for a semester, (Thecnm.org) Known for strengthening community by working with nonprofits and other stakeholders, which opened her eyes to her future career possibilities within philanthropy. Cantu graduated

from SMU in Spring 2002 with a Bachelor of Arts in Corporate Communication and Public Affairs.

Post graduation in 2002, Cantu began residing in California nabbing a sales manager position at the Hotel Coronado in Coronado California.

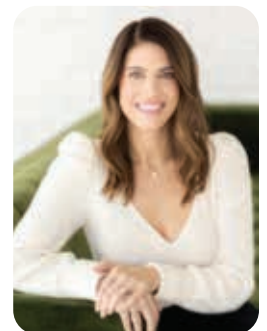
In 2007, Cantu began rapidly climbing the ranks in healthcare philanthropy. She worked at the American Heart Association for three years and even held the title of Senior Director of Business Development. In 2010, she continued her career with an impressive ten years at Sharp HealthCare, (www.sharp.com) A San Diego health care leader with hospitals and medical centers throughout the area where she served as Senior Director of Philanthropy and Campaigns at Sharp, Cantu directed a \$50 million capital campaign to fund the construction of a new hospital tower at Sharp Chula Vista Medical Center.

Cantu made her way back to Dallas in 2020. She pursued her Master's in Business Administration, a degree she acquired from the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs in 2022.

In November 2022, Cantu accepted the role as Vice President of Donor Engagement and Experience at Baylor Scott and White. She helps to lead the strategic vision and execution of donor engagement and philanthropic experience across the largest not-for-profit health system in Texas. Cantu has been with Baylor Scott and White for almost four years and plans to continue in her role for the foreseeable future.

Cantu's decorated career in healthcare philanthropy reflects not only her professional success but also her lifelong commitment to service and community impact. From her early exposure to philanthropy at SMU to leading multimillion dollar campaigns and shaping donor engagement strategies across major health systems, she has consistently demonstrated a passion for making a difference. Her journey highlights the power of combining education, experience, and purpose to build a meaningful career. Reflecting on her path, Cantu shared, "SMU was formative for me. It didn't just introduce me to philanthropy; it showed me how purpose-driven work can create real impact. That experience ultimately helped define the direction of my career."

Sarah Cantu
VicePresident, Baylor Scott & White
Foundations | Nonprofit Executive |
Healthcare Philanthropy



The Boulevard Blueprint:

From the Hilltop to a Global Empire

By: Portia Hammond

Every fall, the shade of the trees along Bishop Boulevard hosts a very special kind of Dallas magic. For the SMU community, the Boulevard is a high-fashion runway where personal style is the primary currency. It was here, amidst the white tents and game-day energy, that Amber Venz Box (Class of '08) conducted her first unofficial market research. "At SMU, there was a style blog called 'Hilltop Glossy' that would shoot the best looks at the Boulevard," Venz Box recalls. "It was a HUGE endorsement to be featured... I definitely hoped my street style would be captured there." Long before she was the president of a billion-dollar tech titan, she was a Meadows student observing a simple human truth: people don't want to shop from catalogs; they want to shop from people they trust.

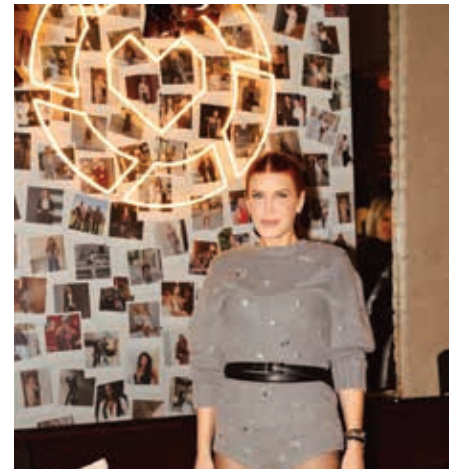
There is a poetic irony in the fact that a world-changing algorithm was born out of a casual conversation in University Park. Today, billions of dollars in annual sales flow through the LTK app, but the spark remains rooted in the Dallas aesthetic. As a Corporate Communication and Public Affairs major, Venz Box studied how trust is built. "The most powerful communication has always been rooted in trust," she says. "People don't change their behavior because a brand tells them to; they change because someone they trust influences them. That's the framework LTK is built on: trust at scale.



Venz Box did more than launch an app; she validated an entire career path. Before LTK launched in 2011, "content creation" was often seen as a digital hobby. Today, it is a sophisticated industry that has minted more than 200 millionaires.

The realization of this shift came with a sting of frustration. After graduation, Venz Box was a personal shopper when the Dallas Morning News featured her blog. "I still remember opening the paper and seeing 'BLOGGER' in big, bold type," she says. The article pointed out she was giving her services away for free. "My clients were using the links I shared to shop on their own. I had unintentionally cut myself out of a job. That frustration became the foundation of an entirely new industry."

The journey from a dorm room to a boardroom was rarely a straight line. Venz Box famously started her venture with just \$236 in her bank account, a stark contrast to the \$2 billion valuation the company reached in 2021. Choosing to stay in Dallas rather than Silicon Valley required a specific kind of "Mustang grit." "We had to be scrappy," Venz Box admits. "Building in a community that shaped you is grounding. SMU is a place that values entrepreneurship, leadership, and long-term thinking." For the thousands of students graduating each year, her journey



proves that resourcefulness is more valuable than a massive inheritance.

As a parting gift to seniors sitting in Fondren Library today with a big idea and a small balance, her advice is simple: start where you are. "Don't be afraid of the 'no,'" she reflects. "It's okay if no one understands what you are doing. If you are passionate and diligent, you will find your people." Amber Venz Box didn't just change the way we shop; she proved that the distance between a seat in a Meadows classroom and a seat at the head of a global tech empire is shorter than you think—provided you are willing to build the bridge yourself.

Follow her @AmberVenzBox and visit www.shopltk.com



From Scouting Style to Defining It How **Samantha Klaassen** Is Redefining What Comes Next

By Bridget Burns

In a showroom lined with next season's collections, Samantha Klaassen decided what customers would be wearing months before it ever hit the floor. For most of her twenties, she built her career up to being Senior Assistant Buyer for Designer Ready-To-Wear Collections at Bloomingdale's where her days were filled with market appointments, reviewing collections, analyzing sales reports, and making decisions that shaped what ended up in stores. It was fast-paced, high-pressure, and constantly moving. Now, she's stepping away from it entirely.

Born in 1996 and a California native, Klaassen's path to this moment didn't happen overnight. It was built step by step, through years of structure, pressure, and persistence. After graduating from Southern Methodist University in 2018 with a Bachelor's degree in Journalism and Fashion Media, Klaassen moved to New York City and began her career as a fashion assistant at Marie Claire, where she worked for one year. In 2019, she transitioned to Bloomingdale's, where she spent nearly seven years working across various positions and departments as a buyer. Her roles required long hours, constan



“ People’s opinions of you are far less important than your opinion of yourself.”

market research, and a deep understanding of consumer behavior, skills she developed through both experience and persistence.

Nearing the end of 2025, after almost seven years in the corporate fashion industry,

Klaassen made a decision that didn’t come with a clear next step. She left Bloomingdale’s. Not for another title or company, but for a reset, a pivot, and an opportunity to build something entirely her own. “I don’t want to live a life where I treat work as urgent and everything else as optional,” she said.

Today, her days look completely different. Instead of reacting to deadlines, she’s creating on her own timeline. In October of 2025, she launched OctoberEleventh (octobereleventh.substack.com), a newsletter where she shares developing ideas, creative direction, and reflections on style and life. The name itself is personal, inspired by her and her twin sister Alex’s shared birthday, October 11, a detail that also carries into the future vision of the brand. The platform blends routine, fashion, and personal insight in a way that feels more like a conversation than content.

However, the newsletter is only the beginning. Looking ahead, Klaassen plans to evolve the platform into a clothing brand she will build alongside her twin sister, Alex, a 2018 graduate of SMU’s Lyle School of Engineering.

At the core of Klaassen’s future brand is a clear philosophy: clothing should enhance



your identity, not define it. She envisions pieces that are versatile and intentional, items that stand on their own without overpowering or forcing a specific identity onto the wearer. “I don’t want the clothes to wear you,” she explains. “I want you to wear them.”

As she returns to Dallas in 2026 and steps into this next chapter, Klaassen is embracing uncertainty with purpose. What once felt like a departure from structure now feels

like an opportunity to define her own path. Because for Klaassen, this next chapter is not about having everything figured out. It is about trusting the process, doing the work, and building something meaningful from the ground up.

Watch out for OctoberEleventh at October-eleventh.com, or follow along on Instagram @octobereleventh and TikTok @october_eleventh.

Isabelle Redfield

By: Ella Parastaran

Isabelle Redfield, who graduated from SMU with a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in 2021, remembers watching the 2008 and 2012 election coverage and “falling in love” with news and media reporting. She was fascinated by the political maps turning red and blue and found herself drawn to understanding the media and talking to people.

Redfield grew up in San Francisco, California and says the state’s entrepreneurial spirit shaped her early ambitions. In high school, she founded her school’s political club and discovered a love for public speaking and political discourse. When it came time for college, she was driven by her ambition. Redfield says she “won the lottery” with her decision to attend SMU.

She started at SMU in the fall of 2017 studying political science with a minor in Corporate Communication and Public Affairs (CCPA). She quickly became immersed in campus life, building relationships with classmates and professors that would shape her career.

“SMU taught me very early on that the world runs on relationships.”

Those relationships and classroom experiences were complemented by time spent in Washington, D.C., where Redfield began interning at when she was 16. She first worked for the United States Senate for the Committee on Environment and Public Works in summer 2016, while in high school, and again in 2018 before entering her sophomore year of college. Before entering her senior year, she was a White House Intern in the Office of the Senior Advisor for Policy.

By the time the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, Redfield already had multiple summers in Washington D.C. under her belt. That summer, while working part-time as a stock associate in Colorado, she began developing a new project: a media platform called *The Conservateur*.





Building *The Conservateur*

Redfield co-founded *The Conservateur* (<https://www.theconservateur.com/>) with her friend, Jayme Franklin, after noticing what they believed was a gap in political and cultural media for conservative-leaning women. The platform, which currently has more than 300k followers on Instagram (@theconservateur), blends politics, fashion, culture, and lifestyle coverage, creating content they felt was missing from mainstream media.

Launching the site while still at SMU pushed her outside her comfort zone. Redfield said creating something publicly taught her valuable lessons in pressure and confidence as she built out the platform in front of her peers. "When you fall, it hurts, but it gives you tough skin," she said.

"We simply built the media that we wanted to consume."

Following her college graduation in May of 2021, Redfield worked as an assistant to an on-air anchor at FOX News for two years before transitioning to her current position. Redfield currently lives in Washington, D.C., working at Meta, which employs more than 75,000 people (as of 2025), on their Public Policy and Generative AI team. Her work centers on how companies navigate political bias and public perception of those biases as AI becomes increasingly influential in politics and media.

Though she never expected to work in tech, Redfield says her background in politics, media and communications prepared her for the fast-changing environment. She describes Meta as an optimistic company and loves what she does.

Redfield intends to continue expanding *The Conservateur* as she and her co-founder navigate what's next for the brand. Looking back, Redfield sees a clear connection between the curiosity and passion that first drew her to election coverage and the career she has built since graduating from SMU. Her advice to students is to remember that "life is not linear." Instead, she encourages students to focus on building trust, forming meaningful relationships and offering help to others whenever possible.

"Do well, do good, and leave no doubt. That's my motto."



A Legacy in Every Sip

By Bella Putnam

Larissa Spies stood at the PepsiCo (<https://www.pepsico.com/>) testing table in New York, determined to get it right this time. Every year on “Bring Your Child to Work Day,” she was given the opportunity to invent any flavor of soda she wanted. Inspired by PepsiCo’s iconic house of brands, such as Pepsi beverages and Fritos-Lay snacks, she set out to create a groundbreaking popcorn flavored soda. From the ages of 7-13, she returned to the same creation and was determined to perfect

it. Every year, it fell flat, but she did not give up easily.

Spies does not just see Pepsi as a name on a soda can she saw in her fridge growing up; she sees it as her family legacy.

Spies is a third-generation employee at PepsiCo, following her grandfather and both of her parents. Her grandfather, Steven Demchuk, served as Vice President of Finance, and was on the team that helped strike a PepsiCo deal in 1972 to trade the iconic Pepsi syrup to The Soviet Union with

the exchange of Stolichnaya Vodka. Years later, her parents met while working at PepsiCo. Her dad spent 33 years working at the company, spending 10 years as VP. Her family's dedication to the company spans more than 80 years, making the company a family legacy.

Growing up surrounded by the legacy, Spies didn't just learn about PepsiCo; she was experiencing it. The early memories of being at that test table gave her a firsthand look at what made the company so inspiring. What once felt like a fun childhood memory turned into a goal.

When it came time for the college hunt, Spies looked at 12 colleges before settling on SMU, where she enrolled on August 24th, 2015. She was drawn specifically to the beauty of the campus and the opportunity to major in different schools.

At SMU, Spies took on a double major in Corporate Communication and Public Affairs and Sociology with a minor in Law and Legal Reasoning. Outside of the classroom, she served as a Student Ambassador and was a participant of Student Foundations, also serving as Secretary of a pre-law fraternity. In July of 2017, she interned at PepsiCo's legal department, which was her first official role in the company she had grown up around.

Spies graduated on Saturday, May 18, 2019, with a Bachelor of Arts degree. Following graduation, she spent 9 months at a different company figuring out if she wanted to pursue law school. In the back of her head, she knew she wanted to follow in her family's footsteps and return to PepsiCo. On March 9, 2020, only four days before the world shut down for COVID-19 quarantine mandate, she got her first PepsiCo role post grad. She worked in Global Digital Reputation within Corporate Communication, where she combined her legal expertise, communication, and passion for social media. She spent three years handling brand impersonation and



brand safety before deciding she wanted to return to SMU for graduate school, while still balancing work and earning her Master of Business Administration (MBA) in Marketing/Marketing Management.

From there, Spies' role at PepsiCo evolved into Marketing and Social Media Strategy. She joined their internal creative agency, D3, where she developed strategy and influencer strategy. She worked on campaigns for Fritos & Smartfoods in 2024 and Cheetos in 2025. Spies' Cheetos x Wednesday Campaign went on to win a CLIO grand, and the Influencer and Talent Storytelling extension won CLIO gold. Her role often had her very hands-on, even regularly jumping into a Chester Cheetah suit for media content, a reflection of her full willingness and dedication to the brand.

As of December 2025, Spies was approached to circle back and re-establish a Global Social & Digital Governance role, supporting over 500 brands, saying she is "the only person doing that specific job."

Her inspiring story reflects PepsiCo's mission to "Create more smiles with every sip and every bite." For Spies, there is a legacy within every sip and within every bite. The legacy stemmed from her grandfather who helped expand Pepsi's brand in an earlier era, her parents who built their lives and families inside the company, and now Spies helping protect how PepsiCo shows up in the digital world. She is living proof of the company's mission, and she is carrying forward the future of PepsiCo. Moving forward, she



keeps one principle at the center of what she does: "Always have a positive attitude, a positive intent, and be someone that people want to work with."

Be The Buffalo

How Caroline Boothe Olsen Charged Through Capitol Hill and Built a Career in Washington Policy

By Olivia Anderson

In the early morning hours of September 2013 on Capitol Hill, before most had even turned on the lights, Caroline Boothe Olsen was already knocking on the door of her internship at the office of U.S. Rep. Pete Sessions', R-Texas. Fresh out of Southern Methodist University and determined to prove herself, she made it a rule to be the first one in and the last one out. Unpaid but still working in a trial-by-fire environment, she treated every morning as an opportunity to prove that she belonged.

For Olsen, moments like that weren't obstacles. They were opportunities to move forward. It's a mindset she captures in three words: "Be the buffalo." When storms approach, cows run away from them, but the buffalo runs towards and charges straight through. By moving into the storm instead of away from it, they reach clearer skies faster. This philosophy guided Olsen through her career from a 17-year-old campaign volunteer to her current seat as a Senior Policy Advisor at Venable, a Washington, D.C. based law and policy firm.

A Passion That Sparked Early

Olsen, born in 1991, began her innate path to Washington in her hometown of Albuquerque, New Mexico, where she attended St. Pius X High School. In 2008 at only 17, she volunteered on Heather Wilson's, U.S. Rep R-New Mexico, congressional campaign, spending evenings phone-banking and getting her first real look at how campaigns run behind the scenes. What started as a requirement from her mother quickly became a passion. By high school, Olsen was eager to be close to the action that even her lunch breaks became opportunities to be at the Republican National Committee headquarters, in Albuquerque, where she could see political strategy happen.



“ Leave it all on the floor ”

A Foundation Built at SMU

That early curiosity in the storm of politics led her to Southern Methodist University. She first heard about SMU through a cousin and visiting campus was all it took. Dallas offered the energy of a major city that she yearned for, and SMU's programs and connections aligned perfectly with her interest in politics and communication. She graduated in May of 2013 with a Bachelor of Arts in Corporate Communication and Public Affairs and minors in both Business and Law. Getting there took hustle, but Olsen didn't shy away from the challenge. Balancing Tri Delta, PRSSA Student Foundation, internships, and a full course load, she learned how to manage her tasks without dropping the ball. Professors like Dr. Rita Kirk and Herbert Crouch pushed her thinking on messaging and the legal machinery running behind the government. The juggle of jobs, classes, and extracurriculars built something that couldn't be taught in a classroom setting and those instincts proved essential when it mattered most.

A Breakthrough in Washington

Her break into Washington came through on the Hilltop on the Hill during President Barack Obama's inauguration. SMU Alumna Torrie Matous, who worked for Congressman Pete Sessions at the time, told students that anyone interested in working on Capitol Hill needed to reach out. Olsen did. One email led to an internship, and that internship stretched into six years in his office. Olsen climbed from intern to staff assistant, press assistant, press secretary, communications director, and eventually chief of staff. The pace was relentless. Days started early, ended late, and required constant adaptability. She quickly learned that hesitation never fit into the equation.

“You have to prove every day that you belong.”

A Turning Point

When Sessions lost his re-election campaign in November of 2018, Olsen faced a choice. These were the most formative years of her career, and she charged the storm headfirst. She joined Congresswoman Liz Cheney's office as the Director of Member Services in January of 2019 before transitioning into policy work, first at INCOMPAS, a Washington, D.C.-based telecommunications industry association, in January of 2023, where she focused on telecommunications policy and congressional relations, and later as a Senior Policy Advisor at Venable in March of 2025.

Through the Storm

Today, Olsen advises clients, at Venable, on issues ranging from cybersecurity and defense policy to telecommunications and aerial fire suppression. The issues shift and the stakes change but each new challenge is another storm to move through. Olsen doesn't point to one defining moment of her career instead she credits her success to a pattern of showing up early and working harder than expected. Her advice to students is simple: take the risk, do the work, and don't wait for permission.

<https://www.venable.com/>

Beyond the Storm

Throughout her career, Olsen has relied on the same philosophy that first inspired her interest in politics. “Be the Buffalo,” she tells her daughter today as she navigates both motherhood and her career.

“Take things as they come. I wasn't here to be comfortable, I was here to grow.”

Ra Kazadi's Vision for Dallas Creatives

By Kayla Norman



What started as a way to fill time during recovery quickly turned into something bigger. He started small, screen-printing t-shirts and other items with his artwork, at times selling sketches for around \$30 and paintings for about \$100.

But Kazadi knew he could expand his art form beyond these early projects. He began creating custom artwork featuring teammates and other athletes, collaborating with them on social media to promote his work. After his teammates went on to play in the NFL, they began buying his work and connecting him with new opportunities.

While Kazadi is modest about his work, today his paintings sell for up to \$10,000.

He graduated from SMU in May 2022 with a Bachelor of Arts in Advertising from the Temerlin Advertising Institute. After graduating, he began his first job as a partner at Collectible All-Stars, where he worked across creative direction, branding, content strategy, and athlete partnerships.

Now, his focus is fully on growing Nostalgia & Noise. One example of that work is a collaboration they hosted with Sneaker Politics and Marshall in August 2024, which invited four artists to design custom Marshall Stanmore III speakers. The speakers were then released for sale, with proceeds supporting charities chosen by the participating artists and generating about \$20,000 in charitable contributions.

Looking ahead, Kazadi said his goal is to help push Dallas into the national creative conversation.

"There are people and organizations in Dallas trying to support creatives," Kazadi said. "But when you think about the top 10 most creative cities in the U.S., Dallas often fails to make that list. As one of the 10 biggest cities in America, I don't think that should ever be the case."

On the weekend of September 25, 2025, visitors stepped off an elevator onto the 25th floor of Dallas Urby, a luxury apartment building located in Dallas' Design District, into a creative wonderland. Across six empty apartment units, 27 artists transformed the spaces into a temporary gallery of sculptures, photography, and paintings, drawing more than 700 visitors over the weekend.

The event, organized by Nostalgia & Noise, reflects co-founder Ra Kazadi's mission to create more opportunities for Dallas creatives since the organization's launch in January 2024. Kazadi, a 26-year-old former SMU football player, now works at the intersection of athletics, creativity, and entrepreneurship.

Through Nostalgia & Noise, the Dallas-based creative community and contemporary culture agency he co-founded, he brings artists, musicians, brands, and audiences together through collaborative projects and cultural events (nostalgia-noise.com). Since its founding, the organization has grown into a network of more than 10,000

supporters, with over 30,000 followers across social media platforms and 40 artists working in its studio space.

Kazadi's drive to build Nostalgia & Noise grew out of a life shaped by both athletics and creativity. His parents met as student-athletes at the University of Tulsa, and his father later played professionally in the NFL before working in collegiate athletics. Kazadi said he has been drawn to art for as long as he can remember. As a child, he loved comics, and by middle and high school, he was obsessed with a Jean-Michel Basquiat book that sat on his mom's kitchen table.

The balance between creativity and athletics followed Kazadi into SMU in 2018, when he was recruited to the football team as a safety. During his sophomore season in 2019, an injury that required reconstructive ankle surgery gave him more time to paint, pushing his art from a long-standing interest into a more serious pursuit.

"All of a sudden, I had three or four extra hours a day. I just started painting more," he said.

BRIDGING THE GAP

THE UNSTOPPABLE RISE OF ALEX GLOVER

By Grace Jin

From the piney woods of Magnolia, Texas, to the bright lights of ESPN+ and the ACC Network, Alex Glover has always known how to command a room or a volleyball court. A standout Middle Blocker who began her recruitment journey in the eighth grade, Alex's story isn't just about athletic prowess: it's a blueprint for the modern NIL era, defining what it means to be a powerhouse brand and the reigning NIL Female Athlete of the Year.

Growing up in Magnolia, a city near Houston, Alex was shaped by a small-town environment that fueled her competitive spirit. A student-athlete who realized early on that volleyball was more than a hobby; it was a vehicle. "I started getting scholarship mail and college interest early," Alex reflects, noting that she committed by the 10th grade. Despite the pressure of being a high-level recruit, she maintained a balanced high school experience.

When it came time to choose a university, Alex was looking for growth. Ironically, she initially wanted to get out of Texas, but Southern Methodist University (SMU) offered a combination she couldn't find anywhere else. "I loved the coaching staff, and the fact that Dallas is a city that is constantly growing appealed to me," she says. Perhaps most impressive was her choice of study. Alex didn't take the "easy" route, pursuing dual degrees in Operational Research & Engineering Management and Data Science. "There were times I wanted to quit," she admits, "but I persevered. I realized it was only four years to get a world-class education. I didn't want to take the Smith (Lyle School of Engineering) challenges lightly."

Her time at SMU from 2019 to 2023 was defined by a massive learning curve and a huge success. She said Statistics for Engineering was one of her toughest classes and a "huge lesson" in transitioning and managing the grueling travel schedule of a Division I athlete. On the court, the memories are legendary. If she had to pick

one "all-timer," it would be winning the conference championship in her fifth year in the spring of 2024. "It was special," she says, a fitting capstone to a career spent defending the net at Moody Coliseum.

In 2023, she was able to score more than 40 Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) deals during her time at SMU. She was able to use the NIL deals to convince donors at SMU to put the money towards women athletics. Later in 2024, Alex was named and awarded the 2024 NIL Female Athlete of the Year. She also focused on her personal branding in content creation by doing trendy videos on TikTok's with her teammates and doing game coverages for volleyball or basketball games.

Since graduation in Spring 2024, Alex has transitioned from the jersey to the headset with remarkable speed. After a 2023 engineering internship, she realized her heart was set on broadcasting. She is now making waves as a Color Analyst for ESPN+ and the ACC Network, as she had to make sure not to say the word "we" when being an analyst for the SMU volleyball game. Her first game on air? An SMU game, naturally. "It was important to me to give back to the athletes coming up behind me," she says. Alex still works closely with the Mustangs as an NIL consultant with the volleyball team and published an eBook called *'An Athlete's Strategy to Scoring NIL'*, which is a guide for student-athletes to navigate the Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) landscape and teaching them on how to secure brand deals.

Looking five years down the road, Alex's "dream" is to be a pro-game analyst for ESPN. She is currently working her way up, building a platform for herself in sports media. Her guiding light through this busy season of life is Luke 12:48 *"To whom much is given, much is required."* "Doors opened for me at SMU," Alex says, "I don't take those for granted."

For the upcoming Class of 2026, Alex's advice is grounded in reality: "Don't be tied to your degree. You have to love what you do, not just do it for the money or the TV." She also stresses the importance of networking, something she wishes she had done even more of in person during her freshman year. Today, Alex remains deeply involved with the Hilltop. Whether she's acting an NIL Consultant for the volleyball team or working closely with the Athletic Director, she is a testament to the fact that SMU is "a great place for networking." Alex Glover isn't just watching the game from the sidelines; she's explaining it to the world, one block and one broadcast as a time.





Chase Your Dream Career

Josh Madans advice to take full advantage of your experience at SMU and following your career dreams.

By Bailey Wolfington

Who knew that planning a wedding could lead to a career in public relations? In 2004, Josh Madans took his first PR role at TODD Events in Dallas, a move that opened the door to a wide range of career opportunities he never expected.

Growing up in Dallas, Madans always admired Southern Methodist University, but he initially chose a different path. He attended University of Texas at Austin from 1988 to 1991. Although he enjoyed his time there, he decided to return to Dallas for his final two years of college with friends. More importantly, he wanted a smaller community with more personalized relationships.

Madans transferred to SMU in 1991 and graduated in spring 1993 with a B.A. in Advertising. Looking back, he credits that decision as a turning point in his life.

“SMU, for me, it meant going to class, paying attention and finally taking my schoolwork seriously,” Madans said. “It was a chance for me to grow up. I was also able to leave the Texas bubble and meet people from all over the world.”

After graduating, Madans moved to New York City to begin his career, but the fast-paced lifestyle quickly led to burnout. He soon returned to Dallas, where his career took an unexpected turn.

While planning his wedding in 2004, he connected with TODD Events — and that

connection led to his first role in public relations. He became director of PR and stayed with the company for about 11 years.

At the same time, Madans began building his own brand, launching Rest + Revolution PR Hospitality as a freelance venture. Through this work, he expanded his skills and built strong relationships in Dallas’ hospitality and events industry.

After years of balancing both roles, Madans eventually parted ways with his business partner and found himself at another crossroads. This time, he decided to pursue a longtime personal interest: fashion.

“Back then, fashion wasn’t something the average guy talked about,” Madans said. “But now menswear is a huge thing.”

In 2016, he founded Halo Homme and Billy Baker & Co., where he creates linen pocket squares and luxury accessories for men. The venture allowed him to explore a new side of his creativity.

“For me, this was a way to be creative in a way I had never been before,” he said.

Just when it seemed like he had done it all, another opportunity came through an SMU connection. In 2018, SMU alumnus Brady Wood approached Madans with a new role. Wood was opening a private club in Dallas called Park House and wanted Madans to serve as director of member experience.

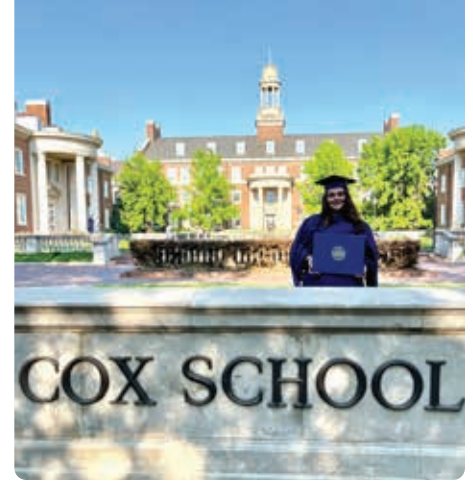
The role was a perfect fit. Madans had always been drawn to the atmosphere of private clubs, and the position allowed him to combine his background in PR, hospitality and events. Eight years later, he remains at Park House, playing a key role in programming and member experience.

Madans was ready to build his career right when he started at SMU. The relationships at SMU continue to shape his career and open new doors.

“SMU people are at the top of their game, and it’s great to have that connection,” he said.

His advice to current students is simple: Take full advantage of your time at SMU and focus on what you truly enjoy. While it can be tempting to chase the highest-paying job, long-term success comes from passion and purpose.

“When I graduated, I was always chasing what paid the most,” Madans said. “But you need to find something you love.”



Julia Baca Wiseley Highlights New Mexico's Beauty Beyond Taos

By Lena Rembert

For most Southern Methodist University students, New Mexico is best known for SMU's Taos location. But for Julia Baca Wiseley (SMU '20, '22), New Mexico is much more than a scenic destination. It's home, heritage, and the focus of her career.

SANTE FE UPBRINGING

Raised just 15 miles outside of Santa Fe, Wiseley grew up surrounded by animals, agriculture, and the rich cultural history that defines the state. Growing up around Indigenous communities, deep Hispanic traditions, and a thriving arts scene played an integral role in her life. In 2003, at age five, she joined the 4-H program, raising goats, chickens, turkeys, and rabbits. In addition to agriculture, the program taught her budgeting, public speaking, and leadership skills. Her early experiences helped build the foundation for her career: "My whole life has been adding tools to my toolbelt."

LESSONS FROM SMU

In 2016, Wiseley arrived at SMU with a focus on her major Music in Viola Performance. Like most students, she became a double minor in Arts Management and Arts Entrepreneurship. Through roles as Marketing Intern for the Sante Fe Opera (2017,2018), Interim Editor of Dallas Doing Good (2020-2022), and a Development Intern at AT&T Performing

Arts Center (2021-2022), she developed skills finding the intersection of marketing and communications. "PR and marketing often get lumped together...so you almost have to be able to do both." Wiseley credits mentorship from Dr. Kathleen Gallagher as an important role in her development. Gallagher, former Arts Management and Arts Entrepreneurship professor at SMU, empowered her to pursue and expand her interests beyond academics.

CAREER OR EXPERIENCE?

In 2020, after undergrad, Wiseley faced a decision many students struggle with, what to do next. "I felt like I had more tools that I needed to add to my toolbelt," rejecting a full-time position to attend graduate school. She returned to SMU, earning her Masters of Arts in Arts Management and Nonprofit Leadership and Masters of Business Administration in a dual graduate degree while balancing coursework, internships, and multiple part-time jobs. This experience prepared her for marketing roles across nonprofit and corporate organizations.

A FULL CIRCLE

In 2022, Wiseley decided to return to New Mexico after finishing graduate school. A decision that was partly professional but deeply personal.

Today, she is the Marketing and Branding Manager for the New Mexico Department

of Cultural Affairs promoting eight museums and eight historic sites across the state. Her focus is attracting visitors while highlighting New Mexico's cultural assets like art museums, archaeological sites, and exhibits focused on agriculture and space exploration. Tourism accounts for \$8.8 billion in state spending, and Wiseley works to connect visitors with experiencing New Mexico's history and culture.

Her connection to the department also holds personal meaning. Wiseley's mother, a graphic designer, has worked in the same cultural affairs department for 20 years creating exhibition graphics and ad campaigns related to museums. Wiseley recalls helping install exhibits and helping in the galleries as a child, framing a full circle moment to work alongside her mother.

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

Looking back, Wiseley said "I would have never thought I'd be back here doing this." She currently plans to continue building her career in New Mexico's cultural sector. With a growing family and a career dedicated to promoting New Mexico's cultural identity, Wiseley is right where she wants to be. "It's sort of like giving back." Giving back, using marketing and communication skills she developed, she now helps tell the story of the state that shaped her.





CERTIFIED FOR SUCCESS

By Donovan Cashen

We got the inside scoop on an initiative that is credited for actually helping students secure post-grad opportunities for SMU students to help them graduate with more than just a diploma. Leading that effort is Lauren Klassen, head of training and certification within SMU's Office of Information Technology, who oversees the university's rapidly expanding certification testing center. Klassen, who has spent years developing technology training programs on campus,

has guided the initiative from its early focus on Microsoft Office skills with plans to broaden SMU's portfolio aligned with today's workforce demands. Since the center's launch in 2017, it has evolved into a campus-wide resource that prepares students, faculty, and staff for industry-recognized credentials. This success was recognized in 2024 when SMU's program earned Certiport's Innovation and Excellence award for North America. Created to meet employer demand for verifiable digital skills, the program

now provides comprehensive support from preparation through testing, helping students translate classroom knowledge into measurable career advantages.

Klassen's involvement in the program began with a single student request that revealed a major gap on campus. A professor had mentioned Excel certification, and the student sought her guidance because Klassen is a Microsoft Office Certified Trainer. After helping the student prepare, Klassen had to direct her to another university to

take the exam because SMU did not offer certifications. That moment sparked the creation of the program. Launched in 2017 as a pilot to certify just 65 students, the center certified more than 400 in its first semester. Today, the total has surpassed 10,000 certifications, reflecting both strong student demand and growing institutional support.

While the program began with Microsoft Office certifications, particularly Excel, it continues to evolve. Excel remains the most popular exam, followed by Word and PowerPoint, largely because these tools are foundational in corporate environments. Klassen notes that many students discover that although startups may rely on Google applications, larger organizations still depend heavily on Microsoft's suite. The certifications reinforce coursework across disciplines, from business analytics to research writing and presentations, by ensuring students can use these tools at a professional level. In partnership with CCPA, Professor Chris Coats is working alongside OIT to pilot Adobe Express certification to evaluate interest and explore integration into classroom learning, with future expansion dependent on faculty partnerships.

Beyond skill development, the program's impact is most visible in students' career outcomes. Klassen shared the story of a student who earned an Excel certification just one day before a job interview. When asked about her Excel skills, the certification provided immediate proof of competency, ultimately helping her secure an internship at Warner Brothers over another candidate without credentials. Employers value certifications because they validate real-world ability, reduce training time, and allow new hires to contribute more quickly. Faculty and career services staff also collaborate with employers to highlight the strength of SMU graduates who hold these credentials.

Certification is open to all students, faculty, and staff, rather than being limited to a specific course, although some classes may require it. Preparation resources include official exam objectives, practice software such as GMetrix, and LinkedIn Learning, which Klassen describes as a "24-hour tutor." Some students complete multiple certifications in a single semester to strengthen their résumés,



while employees use them to stay current with evolving technology. Looking ahead, Klassen believes the workforce will increasingly prioritize micro credentials, which are short, stackable skills that can be built upon using tools like Excel to advance to advanced analytics platforms and even artificial intelligence applications.

For Klassen, the most rewarding aspect of the program is hearing from students who land internships or jobs and attribute their success to the certifications they received. She has personally completed more than 20 Office certifications herself, noting that the Excel Expert exam was among the most challenging. Her advice to uncertain students is straightforward: certifications help candidates stand out in a crowded job market, and there is little downside to gaining a credential that signals proven ability. As SMU continues expanding this



initiative, the certification center stands as a clear example of how targeted skill validation can complement a traditional degree and give graduates a measurable edge.

Mustang Made

How Lizzy Bentley Built City Boots

By: Sarah Blanton

Before City Boots gained national recognition for its timeless, unique, and bold cowboy boots for women, the idea sparked while she was in college at Southern Methodist University. Founder and CEO Lizzy Bentley graduated from SMU with a BBA in 2012. While walking on campus, she regularly wore her vintage cowboy boots, consistently receiving compliments and questions from classmates about where she bought them.

“I was always a collector of boots; it was something I was really passionate about.”



After repeatedly hearing the same compliments and questions, she began to notice the gap in the women's boot market more clearly. As a result, she realized there were no brands creating high quality, unique boots women would want to wear for all occasions.

The concept of City Boots began in college, but Bentley did not immediately start the brand right out of college; instead, she moved to Houston and started her career in the oil and gas field for about two and a half years.



She often discussed starting a brand with her friends and family, who have given her positive feedback and urged her to follow her dreams. Bentley referred to herself as a “verbal processor” and would speak aloud, running ideas by the people closest to her. When she had an idea in her head, she couldn't stop talking about it, and she knew it had to become real.

In 2016, she turned her dreams into reality, founding City Boots to create timeless, elevated women's cowboy boots rooted in Lizzy's passion. She began with a single design, producing six pairs. The following year, she launched four more designs, and the brand quickly took off. Today, there are over 10 styles available on the website in various colors.

You can purchase City Boots on the website and in Houston and in Fort Worth. They range from \$920 for the 247 Boot and \$1,650 for The Heart Boot. They are made out of 100% premium leather that are built to last. Each boot that is created is made by hand and goes through a two hundred step process from start to finish.

Starting the City Boots brand was not easy. She partnered with her mom in the beginning but managed everything by herself. Bentley says one of the biggest challenges in the beginning was learning how to sell.

“I wasn’t a natural salesperson, and a lot of it was figuring out things as I went.”

But what she did know was the return on investment from her finance background at SMU and in the workplace. “I knew the importance of return of capital; every dollar I spent there had to be a return,” she explains.

She built a website and order page from the ground up and began promoting the brand on social media. Instagram launched when Lizzy was a college senior, and she realized it was a powerful marketing tool. Some of her first customers were from her sorority sisters at SMU. Her sisters were among the first to help spread the City Boots brand, which ultimately led to its significant success.

As the popularity of cowboy boots has become a nationwide trend, celebrities such as Tinx, Emma Roberts, Brittany Mahomes, and Pamela Tick have been seen wearing the brand.

Last month the brand celebrated 10 years and hosted a party at Fort Worth’s William Campbell Gallery that was transformed into a boot gallery with all the famous styles. The event showcased how the famous boots are made. The mayor of Fort Worth Mattie Parker, Lioness star Michael Kelly, and five time rodeo champion Luke Branquinho were all in attendance.



“I design from a personal space.” She designs boots she would want to wear and ones she has never seen before.

Lizzy Bentley hopes that students understand that a traditional career path doesn’t have to look a certain way. “Your degree matters, but it doesn’t define your whole life.”

Without her degree in Finance from SMU, she would not have had the essential background to help her launch the City Boot brand. Looking back, she says it is meaningful to her to connect City Boots back to her alma mater.

Coming to college at SMU was a step outside of her comfort zone. She was the only person from her high school in Amarillo to attend. Lizzy said, “SMU was where I stepped out on my own path,” and “Now that path has become my life’s work.”

Photography Credits: Jana Cantua and Emily Jolliff



FINDING THE RIGHT PLAY

How Reeves Eddins Built a Career in Sports PR

By Paula Araiza



On any given day, Reeves Eddins, an account executive at Tony Fay Public Relations (TFPR), moves behind the scenes working to bring stories to life. It is, as he describes, “fast-paced, rewarding, and ever-changing,” the kind of work that defines careers in sports public relations, and exactly where he thrives.

Born June 5, 1998, and raised in Memphis, Tennessee, Eddins did not always envision himself in this role. But his ability to adapt, connect, and persist would ultimately define his career.

He graduated from Southern Methodist University in May 2021 at age 23 with a Bachelor of Science in Applied Physiology

and Sport Management and a minor in Corporate Communication & Public Affair and completed his Master of Science in Sport Management in May 2022 at age 24. Since graduating, he has applied the knowledge, relationships, and experiences gained at SMU to shape the key lessons he now shares with aspiring professionals.

OUTWORKING THE STARTING LINE

By sophomore year in 2018, at age 20, Eddins made a defining decision, pivoting into a sports-focused major and committing to gaining experience as quickly as possible.

“I wanted to gain as much experience as I could as quickly as possible,” he said.

That urgency evolved into one of his guiding principles: “the biggest impact comes from doing more than what’s asked.” Between September and December 2019, at age 21, he interned at XSM Global, an action sports marketing agency, where a chance meeting with TFPR’s now Senior VP of Sports & Consulting sparked his interest in sports PR as a career.

“I treated every undergraduate opportunity as a chance to learn and meet people,” he said.

THE POWER OF SHOWING UP

That mindset reinforced another key lesson: “strong relationships are the foundation of meaningful results,” Eddins

said. That belief proved critical in February 2021, when, at age 22, he followed up with a Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) guest speaker and earned a part-time role with the Dallas Mavericks' stat crew. To this day, he still works select home games, distributing stats to team benches during timeouts and assisting radio broadcasters by passing live game notes.

PLAYING THE LONG GAME

During his final semester in graduate school, he began interning with Tony Fay Public Relations, quickly recognizing it as a coveted, dream opportunity he had worked toward landing early in his career. The opportunity to work alongside Tony Fay, a legend in the public relations industry, marked what many would describe as an epic moment in a young professional's career.

That opportunity did not come immediately. Years of outreach and follow ups reinforced his third principle: "long-term persistence beats short-term urgency."

After joining TFPR full time in 2022, Eddins progressed from intern to coordinator to manager and now to account executive, supporting more than 25 clients. He serves as a connector between his clients and the media, working daily to spotlight their initiatives at both the local and national level through pitching and drafting press materials.

MOMENTS THAT DEFINE A CAREER

"Our job is to make the media's job easier," Eddins said. "The smoother we make the process, the better the story."

His work has contributed to major events such as the College Football Playoff National Championship, WrestleMania, and the Ryder Cup Captain's Pick Announcement at PGA Frisco. He has also secured national and local coverage for organizations including Children's Cancer Fund, Heritage Auctions, and Choctaw Casinos & Resorts.

That work has taken him across the country from New York City and Los Angeles to Miami and Atlanta, operating in high pressure environments where execution and attention to detail matter. Along the way, he has worked alongside figures including Dirk Nowitzki, Shaquille O'Neal, Adam Schefter, and Mark Cuban.



That growth has not gone unnoticed.

BUILT FOR THIS MOMENT

"Reeves' growth is everything you hope for when you hire a young professional," said Tony Fay, founder of TFPR. "He's smart, takes directions, and listens. But what really sets him apart is his drive and hunger to keep learning."

His dedication has also earned industry recognition, including being named a finalist for Public Relations Society of America Dallas' Young PR Pro of the Year in 2025.

For those who saw his drive early on, his success comes as no surprise.

"The minute you meet Reeves, you know he is going to accomplish great things," said Chris Coats, a former professor of Eddins

and current SMU professor. "He is driven and there is nothing that will hold him back."

Looking ahead, Eddins continues to build on that momentum, with opportunities tied to major global events, including the FIFA World Cup.

Even as the stage grows, his initiative and consistency in relationships remain the same.

BACK TO WHERE IT ALL STARTED

If he could go back to where it all began, his message to his freshman year self would be simple: "Don't stress so much about grades. The relationships you build and the real world experience you gain are what actually set you apart." On game day, those lessons still guide him.

From Ranger to Scholar

MEET SUPER HERO PRESTON PATTEN

By Jack Griffin



ARE THERE SUPERHEROES OUT THERE?

Here at Southern Methodist University, believe us when we say we have an actual super hero among us and his name is Preston Patten. Like so many young people, Preston wrapped up high school, and could have made his way to college but his story took a turn away from the ordinary. In September of 2017, he joined the military. He soon found himself facing intense pressure and

developing skills for high stakes missions. After completing his service in one of the most rigorous U.S. Army regiments, he transitioned from the battlefield to a whole new arena: the world of education.

FROM ELITE SOLDIER TO STUDENT

After spending five years serving with the 75th Ranger Regiment, the premier light infantry force of the US military,

Preston transitioned to SMU. Carrying over vast knowledge about the Rangers' highly demanding training program and how they excel in swiftly tackling tough missions across the world. Preston served two tours in Afghanistan, and one tour in Syria; Engaging in many firefights and counter-insurgency missions. The Ranger pipeline has a reputation for its tough challenges. Those looking to become a part of it are required to go through the Ranger

Assessment and Selection Program (RASP) where they will be put to the test on their durability, capabilities to lead, and mental strength. Rangers explore a wide range of tasks from launching air attacks to gathering intelligence on enemy activities, as well as carrying out counterterrorism missions. They do all of this in small groups and push their limits facing tough situations. In his time in the military, Preston lived and breathed a life centered on strict rules and order, always putting the mission before everything else. Preston spent approximately 5 years throughout his career in the army. Having finished his time in service, he found himself staring down a new obstacle: how to move from military life, to the civilian world with all of its stark contrasts and adjust to it.

A DIFFERENT BATTLEFIELD: THE COLLEGE ENVIRONMENT

Leaving the barracks behind Preston enrolled at SMU in 2023 and joined the Corporate Communication and Public Affairs department. In the military everything is about strict rules and clear goals, university is all about being able to work independently and taking charge of your own learning. As Preston walked through the halls of SMU, he quickly realized that the environment was all about teamwork and collaboration rather than following a strict chain of command. In order to thrive he needed not just a strong work ethic but also a willingness to learn from others. “No one owes you anything and the people around you are your peers now... Humbling yourself, fully stepping out of the uniform both mentally and physically, In the Ranger regiment, elite performance is expected every single day. Surprisingly, the same abilities that work great in an army setting like leading others, bouncing back from tough situations, and thinking on your feet in stressful moments, fit right in and pave the way for success. When veterans bring their traits to a respected institution like SMU, they truly stand out and thrive. If they put in a lot of effort into their job and show great leadership skills, they will shine brighter and undoubtedly be successful in any profession.

PRESTON'S TOP THREE TIPS FOR MILITARY TRANSITION

1. Have a Clear Azimuth (a clear direction)
“Have a plan and push toward it with the same intensity you did in uniform.”



2. Embrace Humility - There's no strict hierarchy.

“The people around you are your peers now.”

3. Keep the Mindset, Not the Identity

“Retain the qualities that made you elite without making your past your entire identity.”

Through Preston's shift from serving in the 75th Ranger Regiment, to becoming a student at SMU, we see that heroes do indeed walk among us, often blending in with their peers, yet bringing with them a

wealth of experience and wisdom. What his journey highlights is that moving from a life in the military to one in academia may pose difficulties, but it also opens doors to new possibilities and growth. When veterans approach college life with a clear sense of direction, approach new experiences with humility, and carry with them the discipline they have honed through their time in service they are set up to not just survive but truly thrive in this environment.

Wish to learn more?

<https://75thrangerregiment.org/>

Restorative Farms

By Amelia Rewis



Drive five minutes away from SMU in any direction, and you will find an ample supply of grocery stores ranging from high-end to quick grab-and-go spots. For some people, it is impossible to imagine not having this luxury at their fingertips. After all, why wouldn't there be a grocery store close by?

For the residents of South Dallas, this is not only their current reality, but something the community has been fighting to change for many years. Over 36% of Dallas residents live in a food desert, meaning there are roughly 170,000 people with a severe lack of access to the fresh, healthy produce people need to fuel their bodies.

Doric Earle and Owen Lynch noticed this community struggle and wanted to make a difference. The two found a shared interest in providing aid to a highly underserved community living less than twenty minutes from the affluent neighborhood SMU can be found in. The pair, along with a team of Dallas locals, founded Restorative Farms in hopes of shrinking the gap in accessibility and food knowledge between the two communities.

Restorative Farms is a nonprofit organization that works to tackle food deserts by creating a unique agrisystem within communities suffering. The organization has distributed over 986,000 servings of food valued at just under \$1.5 million to members of the community. The pair realized that through the connections they had in corporate America and relationships with students and faculty at SMU, it was possible to do a lot of good.

For Professor Earle, it "became obvious" that he should be working on projects like this. After leaving his technology and IT consulting company, Professor Earle followed in the footsteps of many family members, ending up in academia at SMU. Through this transition, he was able to learn about the communities in Dallas as well as the desire his students possessed to give back.

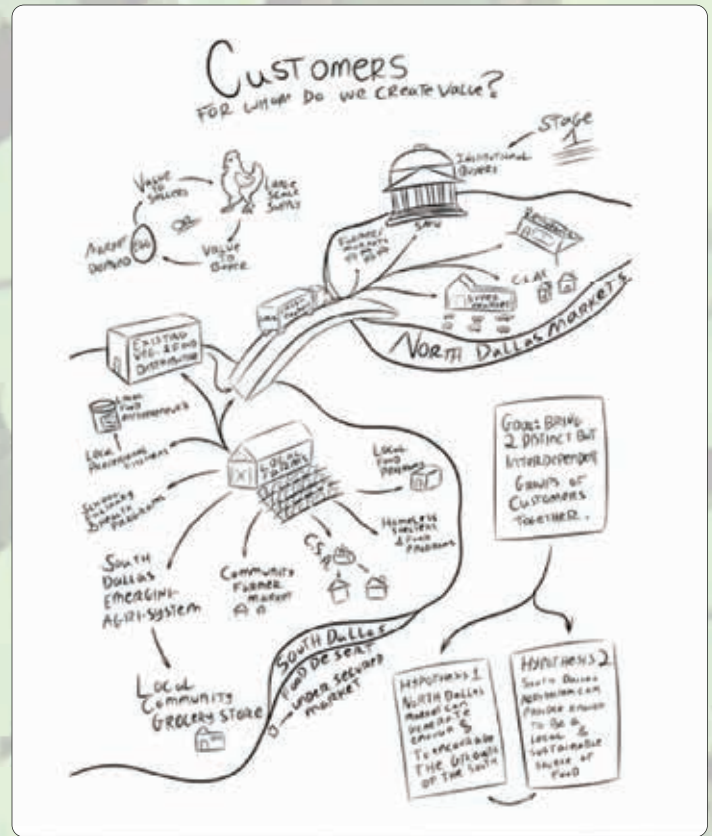
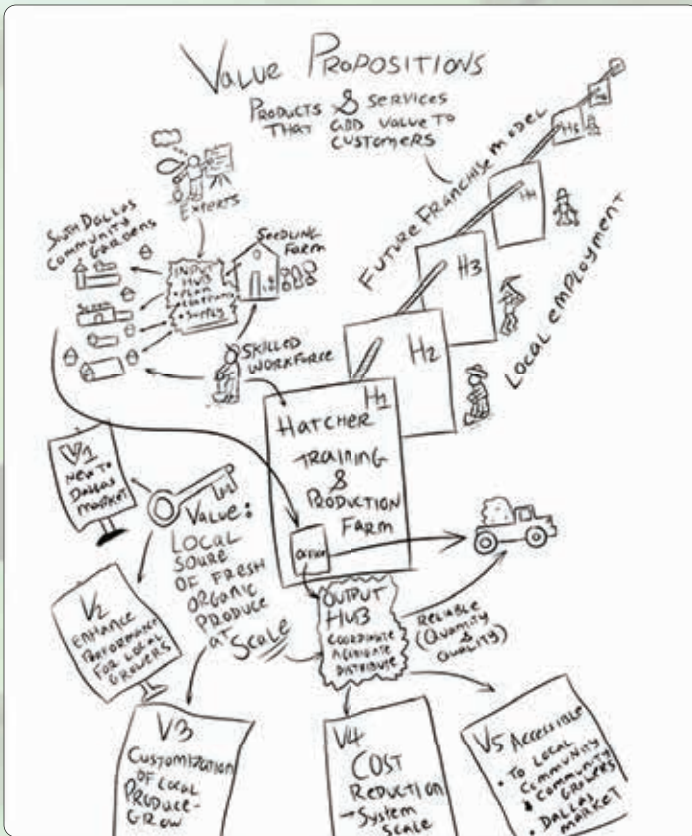
Earle and Lynch, both CCPA professors, realized there was real potential for students to get involved in the project. The pair began to offer it as an option for the CCPA students needing to meet internship

requirements, but it soon grew to be about more than just students hoping to fulfill a course requirement.

Professor Lynch, a scholar of Systems Theory from Texas A&M University, was curious about the resilience of the national and local food systems in America. After countless surveys and hours of research, Professor Lynch began to draft a system that he believed would be the introduction of a cyclical project that could one day be self-sustainable and implementable in communities all over America.

Restorative Farms offers a variety of products ranging from CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) Boxes, vegetables, and salad packs to transportable seedlings ready to be planted. These seedlings and plants are priced around \$3 and range from items like broccoli to different seasonal selections that may be otherwise unavailable to these communities.

Before changes in policy regarding food distribution and farming initiatives happened in Texas, the organization received almost 80% of its income through these



CSA boxes being bought by underserved or disabled individuals. That number has since declined.

The restorative farms website also has over 20 different recipes that highlight the unique ingredients people can choose from when engaging with the organization. Infrastructure like this helps not only provide the food itself to community members, but also sustainable resources that make it possible for these communities to engage with healthy and clean ingredients.

Both professors Earle and Lynch felt immense pride and joy watching their students connect with a project they have poured over for so many years. The pair especially enjoys getting to watch students build unique and meaningful relationships with members of the South Dallas community.

As Professor Earle, Professor Lynch, and their team lead by example of what it means to create a lasting, meaningful impact on the community, South Dallas looks to the future. A future that includes access to food resources that are necessary for healthy bodies and healthy communities.

The pair started out not looking for any money or accolades, simply two people looking to make a difference in their community. Restorative Farms has blossomed

into an organization loved by the SMU community and Dallas as a whole, with continued support from students and volunteers. The possibilities for growth are endless. Restorative Farms aims to produce an ecosystem that can support itself and the local growers and community members engaging with it. By creating a food system that is resilient, Restorative Farms is leading the way to a healthier Dallas, where its citizens never have to wonder where their next vegetable is coming from.



Gordon **LAW**

*A conversation that
SHAPED LIVES.*

Interview by Sage Esaili

A voice of confidence rings true in any lecture from SMU Professor Gordon Law. He carries authentic and unmistakably genuine care for his profession, and it's no surprise that Law has changed and shaped the lives of hundreds of students at Southern Methodist University (SMU) joining the ranks in 2011.

Law's classes have ranged from Advertising Media, Digital Media Strategy, Strategic Brand Management, Survey of Advertising and more. Before he became a professor at SMU in 2011, Law built a career in agency experience in national advertising agencies including Moroch; Grey; Backer & Spielvogel; Bozell; Keller Crescent Company; and Slingshot. Law worked with national brands like Red Lobster, Chuck E. Cheese and helped revive struggling companies.

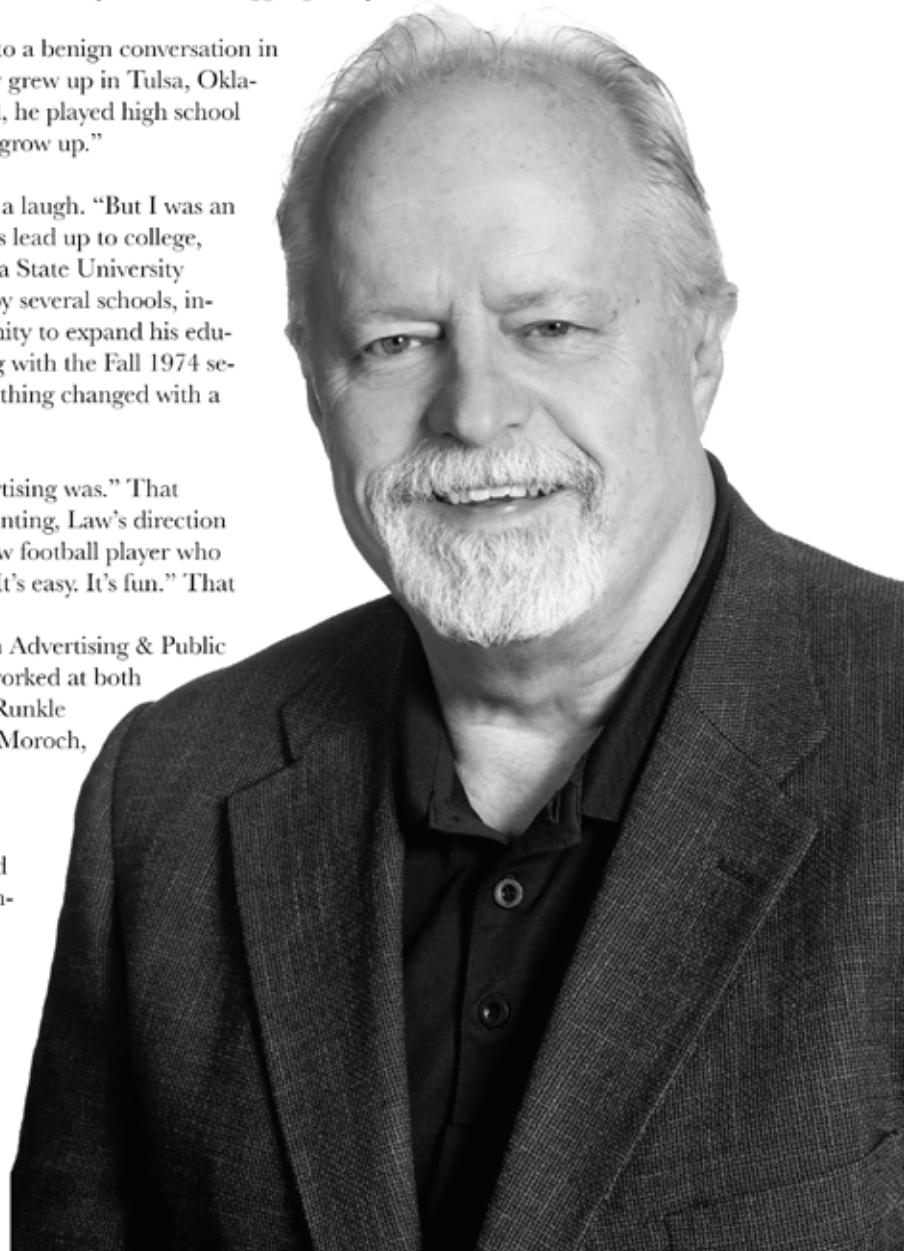
He traces the start of his advertising career to a benign conversation in college that changed the course of his life. Law grew up in Tulsa, Oklahoma during the 60's and 70's. In public school, he played high school football and stated that it was a "great place to grow up."

"I was a very average student," he says with a laugh. "But I was an exceptionally good athlete." Football shaped his lead up to college, where he got a scholarship to play at Oklahoma State University (OSU) located in Stillwater. He was recruited by several schools, including SMU, but OSU gave him the opportunity to expand his education while continuing to play football starting with the Fall 1974 semester. Starting as an accounting major, everything changed with a pivotal conversation.

Law admits, "I didn't even know what advertising was." That changed in the fall of 1975. Bored with accounting, Law's direction became unclear. Frustrated, he ran into a fellow football player who suggested, "You ought to get into advertising. It's easy. It's fun." That same day, Law decided to change his major.

He graduated May of 1978 with a degree in Advertising & Public Relations. Over the next couple of years, he worked at both large and small agencies. He started at Lowe Runkle Company in Tulsa, which eventually became Moroch, one of the largest agencies in the Southwest.

"I learned something from every place I worked," he says. "I was always trying to build experience. Good agencies, good clients, learning every side of the business."



Briefly in the 80's working the client side gave him a new perspective on the industry, but agency life ultimately suited him better. In 2015, Law created his own agency, Swimming Duck (<https://swimming-duck.com>). Agency highlights include helping a men's clothing company achieve almost 2,500 e-commerce sales at a 4.6:1 ROAS through a diversified media plan leveraging prospecting and helped a Tex-Mex chain reverse a three-year sales decline with a limited media budget through the use of recency and a seasonal media mix.

The secret sauce to marketing? His answer is simple but fundamental: strategy. "Nothing really happens unless you have a good strategy," he says.

There were many highlights to Law's career, including his incredible turnaround for the brand Chuck E. Cheese. In the 80's Chuck E. Cheese and its competitor, ShowBiz Pizza, were struggling financially. The restaurants were dark and outdated and business was hard to keep steady. But with the right leadership, operational improvements, and new marketing strategies, the company staged one of the most remarkable comebacks in the restaurant industry. "Our work started running in late 1985," he recalls. "And from the very first campaign, things started improving." In 1986, Nation's Restaurant News then described the turnaround for Chuck-E-Cheese as the "greatest in restaurant history." To Law, this was a defining moment in his career. "It was an incredible team effort," he says. "But being part of something like that, it was really special."

Even after receiving countless awards such as the Advertising Hall of Fame "Student Voted Professor Inspiring Excellence Award" four times, most recently in 2025, dean recognitions, and SMU student selected awards, nothing highlighted Law's life like the appreciation from his students. Law was picked by the dean to be the Corporate Communication and Public Affairs (CCPA) department head and served for 2 years. In fall 2026, he will return to teaching full time within the prestigious advertising ranks at SMU. In the future, Law plans to transition out of Swimming Duck soon, but would like to keep teaching as long as he can have an impact, and make a difference.

He notes that the most meaningful awards over his career come from students. Although he exemplifies gratitude for all awards, Law beamed, "[student awards] mean so much more to me... because it means I made a difference in somebody's life that year."



Flexibility paired with strategy led Law to borrow a famous quote from boxer Mike Tyson.

"Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face"





A NIGHT AT MOODY

SMU BASKETBALL AND THE ENERGY OF COLLEGE HOOPS

By Chris Darnier, Reid Aaron and Josh Hoppenstein

On February 10, 2026, nearly 7,000 fans packed into Moody Coliseum as SMU faced Notre Dame in a matchup that represented more than just another game on the schedule. It was Notre Dame's first game at Moody Coliseum since 1990. Among those in attendance was former U.S. President George W. Bush, whose appearance drew attention from the crowd and added to the excitement surrounding the night.

The contest highlighted the growth of the program and the energy building within the campus community. Nights like this, when thousands of fans fill the arena, momentum shifts quickly, and every possession carries weight, capturing the true spirit of college basketball.

The game began with immediate intensity. SMU pushed the pace early, scoring 12 points in the first 4 minutes and forcing Notre Dame to adjust defensively.

By halftime, the Mustangs had shot nearly 48 percent from the field, demonstrating the offensive rhythm that has defined much of their season. Notre Dame responded with physical play inside the paint, grabbing 18 rebounds in the first half, which helped keep the score close heading into the break. Miller scored the last six points to give the Mustangs 43-37 lead at the break.

In the second half, SMU's energy seemed fueled by the home crowd. The Mustangs

went on a 10–2 run over 3 minutes, highlighted by a windmill dunk by Pierre Jaron, Jr. that brought the entire arena to its feet. Defense also became a key factor. SMU forced 9 turnovers in the final 15 minutes, converting several of them into transition points that shifted momentum firmly in their favor. By the final buzzer, SMU secured the win with a score of 89–81. Leading the way offensively were SMU's top performers, with Jaron Pierre Jr. finishing with 22 points, followed by Boopie Miller with 20 and Corey Washington adding 14 points, providing the consistent scoring needed to close out the game.

Beyond the numbers, the atmosphere was what made the experience memorable. College basketball games rarely feel quiet, but this one felt especially electric. Students stood for much of the 40-minute game, chanting and reacting to every possession. The noise echoed throughout Moody Coliseum, reminding everyone why live college basketball remains one of the most exciting environments in sports. From the moment you walk into Moody, there is a noticeable buzz, with students lining up outside, music playing throughout the arena, and a constant sense of anticipation that builds as tip-off approaches. Even during timeouts, the energy never drops, with performances, fan interactions, and the student section keeping the momentum alive. It is not just a game, but a full experience that keeps everyone engaged from start to finish.

The Mustangs have also put together a strong season, entering the matchup with a 20–8 record and building momentum as conference play continued. That success has helped bring more energy to games at Moody Coliseum and has drawn increasing support from the student body. Attending SMU sporting events has become a defining part of campus life, whether it is basketball games packed with students or other athletic events that bring the community together.

Opportunities like this also highlight the value of experiential learning. Students in our class were able to attend and cover the game thanks to the SMU Athletic Department and Professor Chris Coats, who encouraged students to experience live sports coverage firsthand. Being able



to observe the atmosphere, the crowd, and the pace of the game in person added a new dimension to understanding sports journalism.

For those in attendance, including many SMU students experiencing the rivalry atmosphere firsthand, the night served as a reminder that some of the best moments in sports happen not on television, but inside the arena itself.

For anyone looking to experience it firsthand, tickets to SMU basketball games can be purchased online through the SMU Athletics website (smumustangs.com) or in person at the Moody Coliseum box office on game days. Student tickets are often available at little to no cost, making it an easy and exciting way to be part of the action on campus.



TFAS 15: SMU

By Bridget Burns, Lily Tollison, Maggie Malazia, Milan Lenhart, and Lauren Thuet

Fighting for More Than a Win



The Fight Against Suicide (TFAS) was created to raise awareness for suicide prevention while bringing communities together for a cause far bigger than sports. Founded in 2021 in memory of Sam Asbury, TFAS has grown into a national, peer-led movement focused on changing the way suicide prevention looks on college campuses.

Across the country, TFAS events have expanded to multiple universities nationwide, where students step into the ring not just to compete, but to support a cause that affects countless people. Through ticket sales, donations, and community support, the events has helped raise significant funding for suicide-prevention efforts and mental health initiatives. In its 2025 Annual Impact Report, the organization reported reaching 8,000 students and raising more than \$875,000 while expanding its campus-based programming.

Beyond fundraising, these events create an environment where awareness is amplified and conversations that are often avoided are finally brought to the forefront of discussion.

This year marked an important milestone as the movement arrived at Southern Methodist University for the first time.



X



On March 26, 2026, TFAS took over the Mesquite Arena for SMU's first official Fight Against Suicide event. The night featured 10 boxing matches, with 20 SMU fraternity students stepping into the ring after months of training to support mental health awareness. What may look like a typical fight night from the outside is actually something much more meaningful for the students involved.

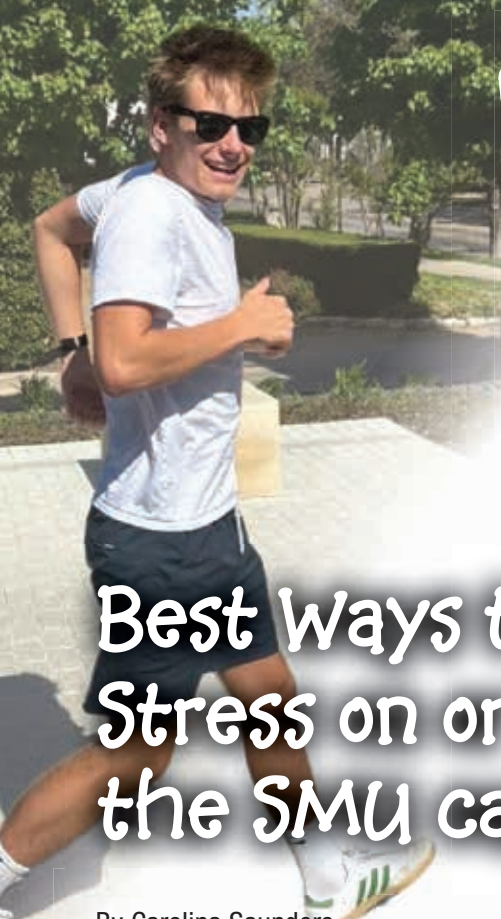
Behind the event is a deeply personal mission. TFAS honors Sam Asbury, whose story continues to inspire the organization's commitment to suicide prevention and open conversations about mental health. His legacy serves as a reminder of why events like this matter and why communities must continue to support one another.



Bringing TFAS to SMU is about more than hosting a single event. In its first year at SMU, TFAS is already bringing together hundreds of students, alumni, and supporters to stand behind a message that matters: no one should have to struggle alone.

For many of the students involved, stepping into the ring is about far more than boxing. It is about using their platform to fight for awareness, support, and change.

Because on this night, every punch thrown represents something bigger than a match.



Best Ways to Relieve Stress on or around the SMU campus

By Carolina Saunders

College students constantly juggle classes, assignments, internships, family responsibilities, and a full social life carry significant stress loads. At SMU, many students turn to exercise, fitness, and outdoor activities to manage academic pressure while improving their overall mental health. From running or cycling around campus or on the Katy Trail to workouts, basketball, swimming, or beach volleyball at the 173,000-square-foot Dedman Center, physical activity has become a common way for Mustangs to reset during demanding weeks.

Research increasingly shows that exercise helps college-aged students reduce stress and improve mood. According to a recent study from *Frontiers in Psychology* in 2025 titled, “Effects of physical exercise on college students’ sense of meaning in life” the results from 604 college students surveyed found that regular exercise significantly reduces stress perception and strengthens mental resilience.

At SMU, a typical student schedule often exceeds a 12 to 15 credit-hour course load, leaving little time for relaxation or mental recovery. With nearly 12,000 undergraduate and graduate students on campus, many balance their coursework with internships, part-time jobs, and extracurricular commitments,

totaling more than 30 hours of additional responsibilities each week.

According to a study from *Frontiers in Psychology* in 2025 titled, “Effects of physical exercise on college students’ sense of meaning in life” shows that physical exercise helps students manage these pressures by reducing perceived stress and improving emotional well-being. According to *Study on the Buffering Effect of Physical Exercise on College Students’ Psychological Stress 2023*, more than 280 million people worldwide experience depression, emphasizing why fitness strategies are increasingly recommended to support mental health.

One of the most popular places for SMU students to exercise is the nearby Katy Trail. The trail stretches 3.5 miles, providing an accessible outdoor space where students can run, walk, or bike just minutes from campus. According to *Outdoor Exercise In Relation To Depression, Anxiety, Stress, And Quality Of Life In College Students 2024*; outdoor exercise habits have found strong connections between time spent exercising outside and improved mental health. In one study of 222 college students between ages 18 and 25, researchers found that students who exercised outdoors more frequently reported significantly lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress.

SMU sophomore Milo Corner regularly runs on the Katy Trail as a way to relieve stress. “Running has become my way to reset,” said Corner. “If I’m stressed about school or work, getting out on the Katy Trail helps me clear my mind and come back more focused.”

Another SMU student, Andrew Rosson, explained how going to the gym at Dedman four days a week and taking walks on the Katy Trail are his favorite ways to stay active during the academic year. Rosson explains, “Going to Dedman consistently keeps me grounded. Even on busy days, getting a workout helps me stay balanced mentally and physically.”

He continues, “It’s not just about fitness – it’s also social. You see the same people, maybe play some pickup basketball, and it always takes your mind off everything else.”

For students who are into weightlifting, cardio training, or team sports, the Dedman Center provides various options for personal and team play stress relief. Swimming in the center’s 25-yard pool or working out in the gym can have meaningful benefits for mental health. Research shows that even just 20 minutes of moderate daily physical activity can improve mood and reduce anxiety levels among young adults. In team sports, basketball remains one of the most popular on campus. A pickup game features 10 players competing in a 5-on-5 format, providing not only exercise but also social interaction and network building. Beach volleyball is another great outdoor activity offered at Dedman, where matches are usually played in teams of two, fostering teamwork skills. As college students, it’s important not only to work hard in classes but also to find release. SMU offers its students many outlets to decompress and find personal headspace during times of stress.

The Katy trail - https://katytraildallas.org/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

SMU deadman gym - https://www.smu.edu/studentaffairs/campus-recreation/facilities/dedman-center?utm_source=chatgpt.com

SMU Tennis Rec Courts - https://www.waze.com/live-map/directions/us/tx/dallas/smu-tennis-courts?utm_source=chatgpt.com&to=place.ChIJXXS1SYWfToYRn5ZGPfjPYvk

GOALS FOR GREATNESS SMU MEN'S SOCCER

by Diana Carranza, Kate Seitz, Loretta-Jean Devening and Kennedy Thiel



THE NIGHT EVERYTHING CHANGED

On a night in Cary, North Carolina, when the final whistle sealed SMU's 1-0 win over Virginia, it felt like time stopped for the Mustangs. The trophy appeared on the sideline, and at that moment, all that mattered was that SMU had just won its first ACC men's soccer championship.

For head coach Kevin Hudson, that game and winning the championship were "a validation of what we already knew of our place in the top 10 of college soccer programs," the payoff for a culture that was ready for that stage long before they got the ACC trophy.

It was surreal for the team to lift the trophy, and for Hudson, it felt amazing: a new league and a championship in just their second year. The moment was emotional for players, the university, and everyone who had supported SMU soccer along the way.

LIFE AS THE DEFENDING CHAMPIONS

The reality of being the defending champions looks quiet. The off-season means empty bleachers, some training sessions under

gray Dallas skies, and friendly games against pro teams like North Texas SC and Corpus Christi. Those games don't come with rings or trophies attached, and there is no championship waiting at the end.

Instead, the spring season is about something less visible but just as important: staying sharp without the spotlight. Hudson has it figured out: "The guys are intrinsically or internally motivated... they want a great education and a chance to develop and eventually be a professional." With just five exhibition games in the spring, the challenge is real.

CHASING THE NATIONAL DREAM

So what's next? "We want to continue to evolve and expand the quality and success of the program. We'd love to win a national championship. We feel that if we're competitive near the top of the ACC, it puts us in a position to try to win a national championship," Hudson said.

Last season's MLS draft reinforced this: "two drafted, one signed a pro contract before the draft... We've had two guys take pro contracts. One is in Nashville, the other ones are here at FC Dallas." Hudson views it as "another validation of what we're doing... every year we should have one or several guys moving on to be professionals when they're done. But our ultimate joy and satisfaction comes when they graduate from SMU, and they're successful in life... to produce really good people with a great education who can be great fathers and husbands."

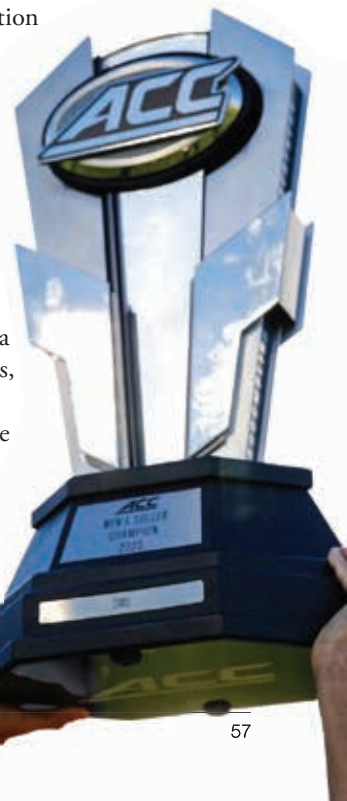
WHAT MAKES SMU SOCCER UNIQUE

"What do we have that's unique? We have a wonderful university that gives you an excellent education in a major city that is vibrant, thriving, and growing, and a program that can help, hopefully, with a healthy culture... The school, the location, and the program can all be elite," Hudson said.

2025 brought record attendance from students, Highland Park and East Dallas families, club soccer groups, and alums. Hudson's message: "Come to the games. They're free... It is free to get in. There's a Kid Zone... watch good soccer in Dallas, close to the heart of the city.

The bigger, the better." He highlights the fun -" bounce house, face paint, band to come and play drums, engage the kids" - making an SMU Men's soccer game a perfect family night.

Photo rights of SMU Men's Soccer and SMU Athletics





SMU WATER SKI TEAM

MORE THAN JUST A CLUB

By Mila Oliva

Forty minutes east of campus, as the sun rises over Dream Lake in Kaufman, Texas, a different kind of SMU practice is already underway. While most of campus is still asleep, members of the SMU Waterski Team are carving through glassy water, chasing personal bests before 10 a.m. classes begin. They practice Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday at sunrise. The commitment is quiet, early, and relentless. But what happens on the water is only part of the story.

Club sports at SMU don't receive the same spotlight as official NCAA programs. They may not fill stadiums or headline campus newsletters every week. Yet the time, discipline, and heart poured into them rival any varsity roster. For the SMU Waterski Team, the mission was never simply to compete. It was to build something lasting, something legitimate, and something that felt like family.

In just three years, the team has grown from six members to sixty. That growth did not happen by accident. It came through early mornings, long drives to the lake, countless hours of logistical planning, and

a shared belief that this team was meant to become more than just a club.

Tournament weekends look like caravanning together after class on Fridays to Austin, Houston, San Marcos, Conroe, or even Louisiana to cities like Lafayette and Monroe. Saturdays begin before sunrise, as President Jess Silverstein '26 describes it, "We're an organized mess... like the morning of a tournament from 7 to 9 AM is kind of scary, but then once we're in the groove, it's truly the most fun ever."

Slalom, trick, and jump are the three events that structure every tournament. Women start, men alternate, and that rhythm carries through the weekend. Most members are relatively new to the sport, which means every tournament is filled with personal bests. When someone hits a PB, tradition dictates that teammates tackle them into the lake in celebration. It is chaotic, electric, and unforgettable.

Then there is life beyond competition.

The team is divided into a travel team of 28 travel members and a broader social team bringing total membership to 60. Social members ski once a month but attend

weekly meetings at the Ski House, or as we call it, "The Skouse." Dinners are provided at every meeting. They eat together. They pray together. They attend church together. They intentionally avoid Sunday practices so members can spend time growing in faith.

The foundation of faith has shaped the culture in profound ways. Many members openly describe the team's growth as a blessing and a gift. The family dynamic is not metaphorical. Teammates

call one another siblings. As Lily Vo '28 puts it, "I feel like I can go to anyone on the team for anything." They dance together at Billy Bob's and Red River, they tailgate at SMU football games, they go to concerts, they do workout classes, they host their own formals, they even made a Christmas card; the overlap doesn't end after practice.

Recognition has followed the growth. The team was nominated for NWSA Team of the Year 2025. President, Jess Silverstein, was nominated for Female Leader of the Year 2025. Founder, Markus Mortenson, was nominated for Male Leader of the Year 2024. At this most recent winter conference,



the team earned Most Improved Team. Those awards matter, they reflect something deeper the team has built together.

Waterskiing is an expensive sport. “Team equipment, site maintenance, boat gas, repairs, and travel easily clears \$10,000 a semester” according to Treasurer, Eden Cassingham 26’. Many members purchase their own gear simply to keep up with their level of competition. Funding from Student Senate, the Mom and Dad’s Club, SMU Giving Day, fundraisers, and independent

donors have been generous, yet the need remains constant. Commitment in club sports is not discounted because the logo says “club.” In many cases, it requires more sacrifice.

The SMU Waterski Team is proof that visibility does not define value. Early alarms, long drives, shared meals, group prayer, celebrations tackles, and sixty students choosing to build something together — that is the essence of this team.

They are competitors.

They are leaders.
They aren't just friends.
They are family.
They are more than just a club.

Follow along and support the team’s journey:

Instagram and Facebook: @smuwaterski

Editor’s note:

“Writer Mila Oliva is also the proud Captain of this amazing team!”



SMU Spring Break

By Ella Ricci, Eliza Schumacher, Mae Repstaad, Payton Elsaden, Oliva Teo

During March 16 thru 20, the long-anticipated spring break week hit SMU. It's a much-needed reprieve to help students catch up on work or relax before that final stretch of the semester leading to final exams. While there are countless creative ways and places to celebrate, here are a sample of destinations travelled by fellow students!

Naples, FL

By Ella Ricci

Naples, Florida is the ideal spring break destination, offering the perfect mix of relaxation, ocean views, great food, and lively nightlife. Imagine waking up, stepping onto your Airbnb patio, and being greeted

by a warm sea breeze and a white sand beach already glowing in the sun, setting the tone for a day of tanning and unwinding. With spring temperatures averaging in the mid-70s, Naples provides perfect weather for beach days at spots like the Naples Pier, Vanderbilt Beach, and Delnor-Wiggins Pass State Park, all known for their calm waters, scenic views, and easy access. Beyond the beach, the area boasts a vibrant food scene, from cozy breakfast spots like GLDN Hour Coffee to upscale dining in Mercato, including popular restaurants like 239 Naples that emphasize fresh, locally sourced ingredients. Whether you're looking to relax, explore, or indulge, Naples delivers a well-rounded spring break experience that

leaves you with unforgettable memories and, of course, a perfect tan.

Orlando, FL

By Eliza Schumacher

Orlando, Florida is the ideal Spring Break destination. From beautiful clear beaches, to fun amusement parks, Orlando offers a wide variety of relaxation and fun for all! Whether you're looking to unwind in the sun, explore iconic attractions, or experience vibrant nightlife, Orlando truly has it all. Spend your days soaking up the Florida sunshine, shopping at trendy outlets, or visiting world-famous parks like Walt Disney World and Universal Studios for an unforgettable adventure. At



night, enjoy lively restaurants, bars, and entertainment that cater to every vibe—from chill and classy to high-energy fun. Orlando is also a great option for groups, offering something for everyone so no one feels left out. For SMU students looking to escape the Dallas routine and create lasting memories with friends, Orlando delivers the ultimate Spring Break experience without the hassle or overwhelming costs. For example, Orlando offers significant discounts for 2026, including up to 40% off Disney resort rooms, 30% off Disney vacation packages, and specially priced kids' tickets. Major savings are available through authorized sellers like Undercover Tourist and AAA, plus Florida resident and military deals for Disney, Universal, and SeaWorld.

Dublin to Ireland to Paris!

By Mae Repstad

This Europe trip is a perfect spring break option for SMU students looking for a mix of culture, sightseeing, food, and nightlife. Visiting three countries in one week allows for a unique experience, starting in Dublin, Ireland, then heading to Paris, France, and finishing in London, England, making the most of spring break while exploring different cities and creating unforgettable memories. Europe is such a unique destination because every stop feels completely different. In Dublin, students can spend their time walking around the city, seeing castles, thrift shopping, and enjoying live Irish music at a pub. It is the perfect mix of relaxed and fun, especially at the start of the trip. In Paris, even when plans

do not go perfectly, like missing a visit to the Louvre, the experience is still incredible. Walking around the city, seeing the Arc de Triomphe and the Eiffel Tower, and just exploring without a strict schedule makes the trip feel even more special. In London, the trip continues with iconic experiences like seeing the changing of the guards at Buckingham Palace, walking through Hyde Park, and visiting historic spots around the city. Each city brings something completely different, making the trip feel like multiple vacations in one.

Fun Fact: The Eiffel Tower was originally intended as a temporary installation for the 1889 World's Fair, it is now the most visited monument in the world.

St. Maarten

By Olivia Teo

St. Maarten was the perfect mix of relaxing and staying active for spring break. Clear blue water, warm weather, and nonstop ocean views set the vibe for the trip. The sun was always shining, so most days were spent outside, making it easy to unwind and come back with the perfect tan. Staying at the JW Marriott St. Maarten Beach Resort & Spa made everything feel easy. Days moved between the beach and pool, with time to explore the island and spend time together. The trip included relaxing and adventurous moments, like jet skiing, ATV riding, and dinners at Bambo House, La Terrasse, Ocean 82, and JAX Steakhouse. St. Maarten offered a fun nightlife scene. One of the highlights was a boat day, with cliff jumping, swimming in open water, and stopping in Anguilla for lunch at

Savi Beach Club. Another standout was Rainbow Café, where lunch turned into a beach afternoon spent jumping off the pier and laying out in the sun. With a balance of beach days, great food, and memorable experiences, St. Maarten created a spring break that is easy and unforgettable.

Spain

By Payton Elsaden

Across cities like Barcelona, Valencia, and Seville, spring break becomes less about escape and more about an expansion of culture, energy, and perspective. Barcelona sets the tone with contrast. Even a rainy arrival turns into something memorable, leading to hidden viewpoints overlooking the city before nights unfold into its vibrant nightlife. By day, the rhythm slows into long walks through the Gothic Quarter, where narrow streets, tapas, and wine create the kind of effortless experience you can't plan. Then comes Valencia, louder, brighter, and impossible to ignore. During Las Fallas, the city transforms into a nonstop celebration filled with towering sculptures, parades, and fireworks. It's where culture and chaos collide in the best way, balanced by long seaside dinners and authentic paella. Seville offers a different pace—warm, romantic, and rich in history, from the Alcázar to Plaza de España. Yet even here, nights carry energy, and spontaneity leads to places like Cádiz, a sun-soaked coastal escape that feels like a hidden gem. Spain doesn't just give you a trip, it gives you a way of experiencing everything more fully.





MUSTANG GLORY

The Rise, the Fall, and the Return of SMU Football

By Megan Ruth Manning

into the SMU Athletics Hall of Fame in 2017.

For many who lived through the 1980s, SMU football is remembered not only for its success, but also for the moment it all stopped. In 1987, the NCAA issued the “death penalty,” shutting down the program for two seasons after illegal payments to players were discovered.

Looking back, Jones sees his time as a pivotal moment in SMU history. “It was a different time, but we were playing at a high level and competing with the best teams in the country.”

Four decades later, SMU football is at another turning point. With the move to the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), many believe the program is entering a new chapter that is bringing back the same energy. Alumni like Jones have noticed the shift. “A few years ago, there were only a few thousand people in the stands. Now games are selling out. That just wasn’t happening before.” In September 2023, SMU raised over \$100 million in just seven days following the announcement of its move to the ACC, with continued support from alumni and fans through ongoing donations. Even in 2026, financial investment remains a priority, as seen by a recent \$50 million donation aimed at recruiting and expanding NIL opportunities. The team has even seen increased success on the field. In their first ACC season, the Mustangs finished 11–3 and were ranked No. 12, earning a spot in the College Football Playoff which was a first in program history.

While today’s college football scene looks different, the spirit of SMU football remains tied to those who remember its peak. Looking ahead, fans remain hopeful but cautious. As Jones put it, “Look, as long as they continue to win, the fan base is going to grow. People follow winners.”



Before the NCAA’s “death penalty” changed SMU football, the program was electric. In the early 1980s, Mustang football was not just a team to watch on Saturdays: it was the identity of the university. Crowds packed Texas Stadium, fans wore red and blue with pride, and excitement was at an all-time high.

One of the players who experienced that era was Rod Jones, a cornerback for SMU from 1982 to 1986. Jones was also a member of the track and field team, balancing two sports while competing for the Mustangs. When asked what it felt like arriving on the Hilltop, he said, “Coming from South Oak Cliff [...] it was a completely different environment. You’re meeting people from all over the country and even the world, so that stood out right away.” Jones also explained why he chose SMU: “At the time, SMU was one of the winningest programs in the country, and I knew if I could play there, I’d have a real chance at getting drafted.”

During early 1980s, SMU won two national championships. In the 1984 season while Jones was on the team, they ended the season with a 10-2 record and No. 8 national ranking. For players like Jones, being on the team was more than wearing an SMU jersey. It meant representing the university on a national stage, with strong support from the Dallas community. “A lot of our fan base didn’t just come from the school. It came from all over Dallas, from Oak Cliff to South Dallas. It was bigger than just campus.” Jones described the team culture simply: “...we weren’t used to losing. That was the mindset. You had to go out there and win.” As a defensive player, he added, “If you weren’t aggressive...you were going to get left out.”

Jones’ success at SMU helped launch a professional career. He was selected in the first round of the NFL Draft by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, later played for the Cincinnati Bengals, and spent 11 seasons in the NFL before retiring. He was inducted



REBUILDING SMU FOOTBALL RIGHT AFTER THE DEATH PENALTY

A DAD AND FORMER PLAYER PERSPECTIVE

By Roman Huemiller

One year after the NCAA pulled the plug, SMU football vanished without warning, a lone case among current college teams. That void erased every game scheduled for 1987, then stretched into an empty 1988 calendar. By the time uniforms reappeared in '89, strict rules had slashed scholarship slots from 85 down to 55, leaving rosters thin, raw, untested. Missing those twenty-four months cost close to two full recruiting cycles, gaps impossible to ignore once play resumed. Results showed quickly: a record of two wins against nine losses stood as proof of how far everything had fallen.

From Allen High School, Tom Huemiller moved on. Football there built habits through repetition, strength, and daily effort. Though familiar with structure, college felt unlike anything before. At SMU, the team lacked numbers; instead of stability, it ran on reconstruction. Because gaps existed across positions; less experienced players took up starting spots early. Growth could not wait, so progress happened faster than planned.

"I remember thinking right away—this isn't the same kind of program I expected. There were gaps everywhere, and you could feel it. It wasn't about fitting in, it was about stepping up and filling whatever role was needed," said Huemiller.

At SMU, he played interior offensive line, a position that rarely gets attention but controls most of the game. Every play started with him and the guys up front protecting the quarterback, opening

lanes, and taking on the most physical battles on the field. It was a role built on toughness and accountability, where mistakes are immediate, and effort is constant.

What made his experience different was the timing. He wasn't stepping into a dominant program. He was part of the group that came in after the SMU death penalty, when the program was still rebuilding from the ground up. There were fewer players, fewer resources, and far less margin for error. Every rep mattered more.

"When you don't have depth, every snap feels heavier. You can't take plays off, and you can't wait for your turn. That's what made it different—we had to grow up on the field right away."

What mattered to Huemiller wasn't praise or milestones. Resilience shaped his time there instead. Remaining while others left defined his role in reviving something discarded by many before him. Lessons stretched past the field: handling obstacles not of your making became routine. Leading without much support turned into daily practice. Staying put, even when leaving felt natural, grew familiar.

It was determined and dedicated players like Huemiller that kept the spirit of SMU football alive – for the future of not only players but also fans.

Editor's note: The writer, Roman Huemiller is the son of the subject of this piece, Tom Huemiller.

How **Jane Becnel** Turned Passion Into a Career at America's Team

By Elliot Cantor

It's March 2020, a Tuesday evening in Addison, Texas, and a group of college seniors are sitting in a restaurant, decks in hand, palms sweating, waiting to present a champagne marketing strategy. The client, none other than 50 Cent, the rapper and actor himself, walks through the door. One of those wide-eyed seniors was Jane Becnel, SMU Class of 2020, and it's a moment she still recounts with equal parts laughter and total disbelief.

"We're going to meet him at this restaurant next week and you are going to present your decks to him," Becnel recalled her professor, Chris Coats, announcing to the class. "I was like, there's no way."

There was a way. And that moment, equal parts surreal and nerve-racking, is a perfect metaphor for the career of Jane Becnel, SMU alumna.

ROOTS, RESILIENCE, AND THE ROAD TO DALLAS

Becnel's origin story starts in New Orleans, a city that shaped her love of sports. Growing up attending LSU football games and Saints tailgates, she absorbed the culture of fandom. Then came Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, and at just seven years old, her family's world shifted overnight. The family moved to Aspen, Colorado, for eight years, travelling back for Saints and LSU games.

The family stayed in Aspen from 2005 to 2015, returning to New Orleans for those final two years of high school. She graduated in 2017 and set her sights on Dallas.

She enrolled at SMU in the fall of 2017. SMU, and specifically the Meadows School of the Arts, would become both her academic home and her professional launching pad.

Becnel's enrollment at SMU as a Public Relations and Strategic Communications Major and Spanish Minor gave her a broad net to discover what she truly wanted. After graduation, she enrolled in grad school. She

chose SMU's Sports Management Master's Program in the Fall of 2021. The Sports Management Graduate program was less than 12 months. She graduated from it in May 2022.

Becnel's time at SMU was not without adversity. A medical withdrawal during her sophomore year following complications from wisdom tooth removal forced her off campus and temporarily off track. She returned to New Orleans, interning with the vice president of broadcast and communications for the New Orleans Pelicans and Saints.

THE CBS MOMENT THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

During her graduate studies, CBS Sports reached out to a select group of students in SMU's graduate program to assist with major college football games at AT&T Stadium. Becnel was among those chosen. The CBS freelance work gave her broadcast-side experience and a line on her resume that opened the next door.

BALLY SPORTS: A CRASH COURSE IN CRISIS LEADERSHIP

After graduating in May 2022, Becnel landed a role as marketing communications coordinator at Bally Sports, formerly Fox Sports, managing the Southwest region. Her portfolio was immediately substantial: the Dallas Mavericks, Dallas Stars, Texas Rangers, OKC Thunder, San Antonio Spurs, and New Orleans Pelicans. She handled marketing campaigns, digital assets, and social media for all six franchises from Bally Sports' perspective. In total, she was responsible for marketing communications reaching a combined fanbase of more than 15 million social media followers across all six franchises, a workload that would typically be split across an entire department.



In March 2023, Bally Sports filed for bankruptcy, and one by one, the people above her walked out the door. What could have derailed a career instead forged one. Becnel emerged from that chapter with something rare, a deep, multidisciplinary understanding of sports marketing operations that she acquired from necessity.

THE DREAM JOB: DALLAS COWBOYS

Since 2025, Becnel has been with the Dallas Cowboys, a destination she describes simply as a dream. This role feels less like an arrival but more like everything she's been building toward.

"It's a dream to work for the Dallas Cowboys. Now I'm here. Things have just come building up after each other — it's an accumulation of everything."



Whitney Williamson

The Power of Communication in Commercial Real Estate

By Jack Mortimer

In commercial real estate, success is not just about numbers. It is about people, relationships, and how effectively you communicate. Whitney Williamson, a Vice President and Market Officer at Prologis, has built her career around that exact idea. With a background in both communication and business, her path reflects how strong interpersonal skills can translate directly into long-term success in a fast-paced industry.

Williamson graduated from Southern Methodist University with a Bachelor of Arts in Corporate Communication and Public Affairs and a Bachelor of Business Administration in Marketing, along with a minor in Art History. Her foundation in communication became a key driver in her professional growth.

Her career began in October 2010 as an intern in the Office of President George W. Bush, where she gained early experience in professional communication. By June 2011, she joined Burson-Marsteller, where she spent over five years (2011–2016) developing skills in client relations, messaging, and presentation. “Communication is such a transferable skill,” she explained. “I lean on those same foundational skills on a day-to-day basis.”

She later earned her MBA from the Texas McCombs School of Business, where she transitioned into real estate. During that

time, she interned with Prologis from June 2017 to September 2017, marking her entry into the commercial real estate industry.

Williamson officially joined Prologis in June 2018 as a Leasing Associate, beginning a steady rise within the company. She was promoted to Leasing Manager (December 2019 – January 2021), then Senior Leasing Manager (January 2021 – March 2022), and ultimately to Vice President, Market Officer in March 2022, a role she has held for over four years.

In her current position, Williamson manages relationships and operations across Central Texas, including Austin and San Antonio. Her work requires constant communication with a wide range of stakeholders, each with different priorities and perspectives. “Everyone’s motivated differently,” she said. “The method of communication matters just as much as the message itself.”

She emphasized that while digital communication is efficient, phone calls and face-to-face conversations remain the most effective in building trust and clarity. A key strength in her role is the ability to simplify complex real estate concepts. “Everything you order online ultimately comes through a warehouse at some point in time,” she explained, highlighting how industrial real estate directly impacts everyday life. This

ability to connect large-scale operations to real-world examples strengthens both understanding and relationships.

Williamson also uses digital platforms like LinkedIn to expand her reach, allowing her to connect with hundreds or even thousands of people at once beyond her daily interactions. This balance between personal communication and digital strategy plays a major role in her continued success.

Another major takeaway from her career is the importance of gaining experience early. From her first internship in 2010, to her MBA internship in 2017, to her growth at Prologis beginning in 2018, her career reflects consistent progression. She encourages students to take advantage of every opportunity available.

“This is such a unique period of your life,” she said. “Talk to as many professionals as you can and take as many internships as you can.”

Williamson’s career shows that commercial real estate is more than just business. It is about communication, relationships, and the ability to adapt. As she puts it, “communication is such a transferable skill... I lean on those same foundational skills on a day-to-day basis.”

<https://www.prologis.com>

Life “Talks”

with Tiffin Jernstedt

By Jeselynn Nunez

In a communications industry defined by competition, fast pivots and constant reinvention, few people rise to the level of shaping the voice of globally recognized brands. Tiffin Jernstedt did just that. A 1999 Southern Methodist University graduate with a Bachelor’s degree in “communications and public relations” as listed on her LinkedIn profile, Jernstedt went on to lead global communications for PVH Corp. and work with powerhouse brands such as Tommy Hilfger, Calvin Klein and Ralph Lauren from 1999 to 2024.

Today, she advises CEOs and founders on how to grow their businesses through bold communications strategies and authentic storytelling while also connecting professionals across the industry through her highly popular “Tiffin’s Talk Shop” events. That track record gives weight to her perspective, but what makes her advice especially relevant for students is that her success was not instant or effortless. She built it through rejection, persistence and a willingness to keep pushing forward in one of the most cutthroat industries there is.

For communications leader Tiffin Jernstedt, success has never been linear. Instead, it has been shaped by risk-taking, persistence and learning to embrace discomfort.

“TAKE REJECTION AS REDIRECTION.”

Jernstedt’s career shows that things do not always work out exactly as imagined. When applying for an internship at Neiman Marcus Group as a junior in high school, Jernstedt was confident she would get the position. With a father in the public relations industry and letters of recommendation under her belt, she believed the opportunity was within reach. Instead, she was turned down.

Although she didn’t receive the outcome she anticipated, she took this rejection as redirection. She continued applying to multiple internships in Chicago and eventually landed her first role at Margie Korshak, a well-known public relations firm near her hometown of Barrington, Illinois.

“You’re not going to get all the internships you apply for,” she says. “So keep applying and don’t take it personally.”

“EVERYTHING WILL WORK OUT – HOW IT’S SUPPOSED TO!”

For Jernstedt, the experience became a full-circle moment when she later returned to Neiman Marcus Group as executive vice president and chief communications officer in 2021, reminding students that everything will work out how it’s supposed to.

“BE PERSISTENT, FOLLOW THROUGH, AND MAKE THE EFFORT.”

When seeking a first internship or job, many students hesitate because they fear coming off as pushy, but Jernstedt challenges that belief.

“It is uncomfortable, but you just need to quiet the butterflies and the nerves, and don’t be afraid to ask for what you want,” she says. “Be persistent, follow through, and make the effort.”

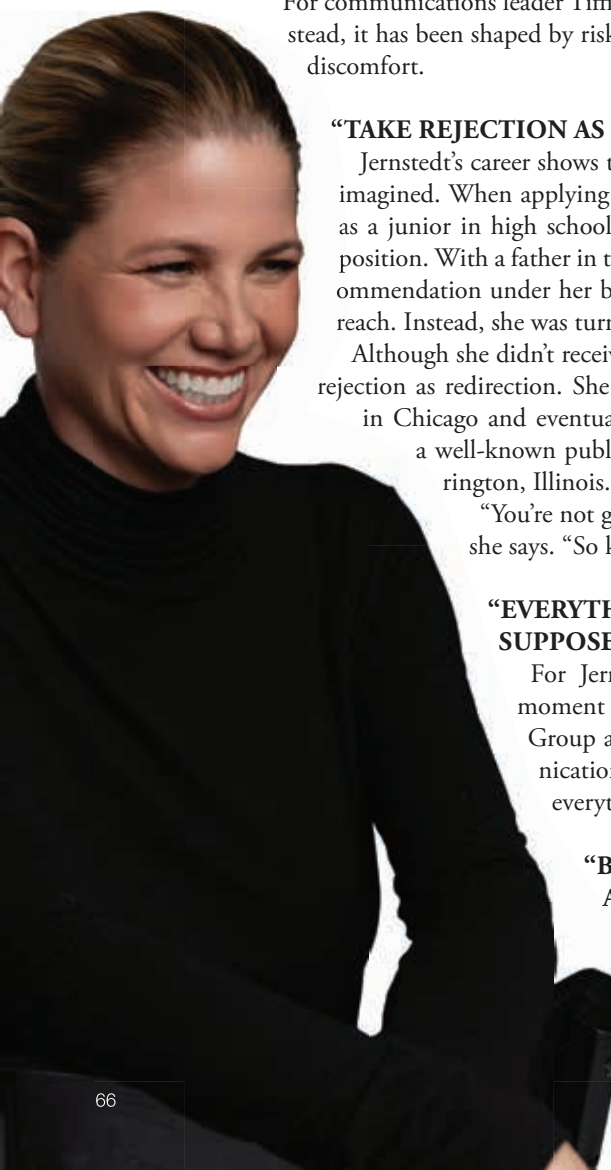
She reframes follow-up as professionalism rather than annoyance, noting that just because someone does not respond right away does not mean they are uninterested. One text or email can open doors later if you take the initiative.

“STAY CONNECTED.”

Jernstedt’s final piece of advice centers on relationships. She points to her friendship with former SMU professor, Dr Rita Kirk, whom she still keeps in touch with today, as proof that the most meaningful professional connections often become something more. She believes staying connected is not about what someone can offer you later in your career but about building real friendships that last.

“Cherish your network and use it,” she said. “Form those relationships beyond surface level because you never know when they can help you, and you can help them.”

Through it all, Jernstedt’s message to students remains the same: keep trying, keep reaching out and keep making the effort. In an industry where rejection is inevitable and success rarely comes easily, she believes persistence, courage and genuine relationships can make all the difference.



Betsy Orton

President of the CCPA Advisory Board

*A Shoutout of “Thanks” to Betsy and Our
Board Members for All of Their Support!*

By Haven Donacio

Betsy Orton, a 2003 SMU graduate, has built an impactful career in nonprofit leadership and advocacy. Originally from Houston, she moved to Dallas for college and has now called the city home for over 25 years. Using her degree in Corporate Communication and Public Affairs (CCPA) with a specialization in nonprofit and arts leadership, Orton has dedicated her career to creating opportunities for others. Today, her work reflects a deep commitment to equity, leadership, and empowering both young girls and future professionals.

As Vice President of Advancement at Girls Inc. and Chair of SMU’s CCPA Advisory Board, Orton uses her background in communication to drive meaningful impact. In her current role at Girls Inc., she oversees communications, marketing, and development, aligning her expertise with a mission she deeply connects to. Founded in 1864, Girls Inc. is a national organization dedicated to empowering young women and equipping them with the tools to reach their full potential.

Orton remains deeply connected to SMU through her involvement with the CCPA Advisory Board. She was invited to join the board in 2018 and eventually stepped into the role of Chair, where she has served for nearly six years. She enjoys connecting with students, offering guidance, and supporting the next generation of communication professionals, an experience she describes as both meaningful and rewarding.

Q: AS A SMU ALUM, WHAT DID CCPA TEACH YOU?

I always joke that I’m a bit of a unicorn. I never changed my major when I got to SMU,

and I still use my degree every day. What CCPA really taught me is that strong writing is such a gift. Being able to communicate effectively and use your words well truly makes all the difference. CCPA provides an incredible foundation for students, no matter what field they go into. It opens the door to a wide range of career paths while equipping you with essential skills. Most importantly, though, CCPA brings people together. The sense of connection it creates encourages us to keep doing what we do and stay involved. It helps you build relationships with people who share similar interests, and those connections continue to grow long after graduation.

Q: WHY SHOULD STUDENTS TAKE ADVANTAGE OF PROGRAMS LIKE CCPA?

Everyone in CCPA is willing to help and genuinely wants to help. I always tell students to take advantage that we’re here and shoot us an email for areas you’re interested in. We love nothing more than to get a cup of coffee or lunch just to have a chance to visit and talk.

Q: WHAT SKILLS DO YOU THINK ARE MOST IMPORTANT FOR YOUNG PROFESSIONALS TODAY?

As someone in the communications field, I believe strong communication skills are absolutely essential for young professionals. One of the biggest conversations right now is around A.I., and I’ll be the first to say I use it, but it’s still incredibly important to know how to write and properly express what we want to convey. As technology continues to advance, we need to learn

how to use it to support and streamline our work, rather than letting it replace us. As communicators, we have a responsibility to understand A.I. and use it thoughtfully. Another key skill is critical thinking. A.I. does not think critically. We need to be able to evaluate information, make informed decisions, and add the human perspective to make the difference.

Q: WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO SMU STUDENTS WHO WANT TO MAKE AN IMPACT IN THEIR CAREERS?

Take full advantage of everything SMU has to offer, whether that’s the Tate Lecture Series, connecting with alumni, or getting involved in campus events. Most importantly, find something you’re genuinely passionate about. No matter what your interests are, learn how to apply the skills you’ve gained at SMU to the things that inspire you. After graduation, you’ll have time to explore different paths, but it’s so important to pursue what truly brings you joy. It’s one thing to want to be successful, but it’s even more important to do something that genuinely makes you happy.

Thank you, Betsy for all of your dedication and support!



4 Things To Do Before Graduating SMU

By Thea Cole

With college lasting only four years, life quickly becomes a routine of classes, studying, and walking across campus. But before that time passes by, make sure to experience these moments outside the classroom. Here are four things many students say you should do before graduating from SMU.

JOIN A CLUB ON CAMPUS

One of the fastest ways to feel connected at SMU is by joining a student organization. SMU offers more than 200 student organizations, ranging from professional and service groups to cultural organizations and club sports.

SMU senior Megan Asure said joining Collegiate Consulting Academy, a student organization in the Cox School of Business, helped her find both community and professional support at SMU. The organization connects members with mentors, networking opportunities and hands-on experience for students pursuing careers in consulting.

“SMU felt a lot smaller,” Asure said.

Students interested in exploring organizations can find directories at <https://www.smu.edu/studentaffairs/student-activities>.

STUDY ABROAD

Another experience many SMU seniors recommend is studying abroad. SMU offers more than 150 study abroad programs in over 50 countries, and about 30 percent of SMU undergraduates participate during college. Most semester programs last approximately four months and allow students to take classes while living in cities such as Madrid, London, or Barcelona.

SMU senior Katherine Doar studied in Barcelona with 10 of her best friends, spending weekends traveling across Europe.

“Traveling with my best friends made the experiences even more unforgettable,” Doar said.

Students interested in programs can explore options at <https://www.smu.edu/abroad>.

EXPLORE TEXAS OUTSIDE OF THE SMU BUBBLE

Texas covers 268,596 square miles, making it the second-largest state in the United States, and full of places to explore as an SMU student.

One of the most common road trips students take is to Austin, about 195 miles

from Dallas. Many travel to the state capital during football season to attend a game at Darrell K Royal–Texas Memorial Stadium, which holds over 100,000 fans, making it one of the largest college football stadiums in the country.

Austin is also home to the Austin City Limits Festival, which takes place over two weekends every October and draws around 450,000 attendees each year to Zilker Park. Senior Cate Morris said traveling to Austin with friends for the festival became one of her favorite memories at SMU.

“It was such a different experience from Dallas,” Morris said. “Travelling to Austin is a must for every SMU grad.”

SENIOR VEGAS TRIP

For many SMU students, the trip everyone talks about months in advance is the senior fall break trip to Las Vegas. Flights and hotels are booked far in advance. The city attracts over 40 million visitors every year, making it one of the most popular tourist destinations in the United States. Because flights from Dallas take about three hours, the trip is relatively easy to plan for a long weekend.

Senior Mila Oliva said the excitement for the trip starts long before fall break, as students plan outfits and nights out. During the weekend, many visit restaurants, walk along the 4.2-mile Las Vegas Strip, and explore the city’s more than 150 casinos.

“The excitement starts months before the trip,” Oliva said. “But the memories will last forever.”

Looking back on four years at SMU, many students say the moments outside the classroom are just as an important part of their college experience. Whether joining a club, studying abroad, taking a road trip across Texas, or celebrating with friends in Las Vegas, these experiences often define a student’s time on campus.



SMU X DALLAS MAVERICKS

By Lulu Mazur, Samantha Weiss, and Davis Kinley



NIGHT OUT AT AMERICAN AIRLINES CENTER

A perfect night out to spend with your friends would be starting your night by sharing an Uber to the restaurant “Mesero.” From there, you can set the tone for your night with dinner and margaritas before your 5-minute walk to American Airlines Center to catch your Dallas Mavericks game. Be sure to arrive before tip-off so that you can find your seats and purchase any concessions. Whether you get a commemorative cup or a brand-new Cooper Flagg Mavericks jersey, your Mavericks experience will be one to remember. However, who’s to say your night has to end after the game? Take you and your friends to the surrounding area of Victory Park, where you can frequent bars and lounges surrounded by other Dallas Mavericks fans. Making everything an easy, all-in-one evening of food, drinks, sports, memories, and nightlife before heading back home to do it all again in the future.

SMU X MAVS PROMOTIONAL NIGHT

SMU promotional nights with the Dallas Mavericks would be a fun, realistic way to get students off campus and into

the Dallas sports scene. With discounted tickets, reduced Uber rides with an average cost of \$25 from to and from American Airlines Center, and drink specials, games become much more accessible. Add in a student section, SMU shoutouts, and co-branded merch, and it turns into a social event students would actually plan around, helping break the campus bubble while building a stronger connection with the Mavericks. If you want to buy tickets to the next mavs game use this link to purchase!

<https://www.nba.com/mavs/tickets>

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AT THE GAME

The night of the game started with about a 20-minute Uber ride from SMU’s campus with a group of three. (Lulu Mazur, Samantha Weiss, and Davis Kinley) slowed a bit by traffic but still easy and convenient. We arrived just before tip-off and found our court-side corner seats, which immediately made the experience feel more intense, being so close to the action. One of the most memorable moments was the player introductions, when the lights dimmed and the entire arena grew loud as the Mavericks prepared to face the Oklahoma

City Thunder on March 1st 2026 at 7:30 PM. Throughout the game, big dunks and fast-paced plays had everyone reacting at once, and being that close made every moment feel amplified. During breaks in the game, grabbing beers and pretzels and watching the in-arena entertainment kept the energy going without any downtime. By the time we left, the atmosphere and shared excitement made it clear that the night was about more than just basketball, but the overall experience of being there live. One thing we wish the Mavs included was a student discount, with this so many more college students could go to the games. The game ended in an almost win but resulted in a loss.

The final score was 100-87 with an Oklahoma win.

Photo Credit: Gettyimages





Photo Credit: Shutterstock



(In the Jackson Hole area (Bridger-Teton region), avalanche activity is high, with hundreds of snow slides occurring annually. The Bridger-Teton Avalanche Center reported 373 observed avalanches during the 2024-2025 season alone. In Wyoming, avalanche fatalities average approximately 2 deaths per year.)

WALLY'S WORLD

A Life Driven by the Outdoors

By Lane Brazell

A LIFE DRIVEN BY THE OUTDOORS

For many high school seniors, choosing a college is as simple as a click—but for me, the decision was shaped by a hometown hero: Mark Wolling. Born in 1950 in Kirkwood, Missouri, to father Spencer and mother Millie Wolling, Mark was one of 18,640 residents. Following his curiosity about outdoor adventure, Wolling attended Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, where he earned a degree in business in 1973.

FINDING HOME IN THE MOUNTAINS

Shortly after graduation, he moved to Jackson Hole, Wyoming, where he fully embraced the mountain man lifestyle and became a ski patroller at Jackson Hole Mountain Resort in 1978. At the summit, it stands 10,450 feet above sea level with 13 chairlifts and one aerial tram that can carry 150 people per trip.

“BIG WALLY” AND HIS IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY

As all great patrollers, he was given a nickname, “Big Wally,” known for his

unmistakable bushy blond mustache. He became an established member of the outdoor community, respected for his generosity as the founder of Goatstock. After surviving two serious paragliding accidents, he was inspired to create the Goatstock fundraiser events to support fellow valley athletes as they recover from sports-related injuries.

TRAGEDY ON THE MOUNTAIN

On January 7th, 2010, while performing his routine avalanche reductions on Route 7 of Chyenne Bowl, Mark Wolling was caught in a scale-three slide, according to the avalanche center. There, he was carried more than 1,000 feet and buried under the snow. With heavy hearts, his friends, family, and the Jackson Hole community said goodbye a few days later.

A LASTING LEGACY

Rachel Kunkle, a fellow patroller who assisted in unbaring Wolling, recalled, “It’s not the way he died but the way he lived.” His role in the community was never unnoticed, and his passion for being part of the mountains inspired many other outdoor enthusiasts.

FOLLOWING IN HIS FOOTSTEPS

Wolling was one of twenty-nine adventurers who lost their lives in the Teton Mountain range, but their passion for the outdoors continues to inspire others through the Friends of RPK Memorial Fund. His legacy has also been present in my own life. My father, a ski patroller at Jackson Hole Mountain Resort, often shared stories about the individuals who risk their lives every day in the mountains. Hearing about these everyday heroes shaped not only my appreciation for the outdoors but also influenced where I wanted to attend college. As I learned more about Mark Wolling during my senior year of high school, I discovered his connection to SMU, which made that decision even more meaningful.

PERSONAL CONNECTION AND REFLECTION

Avalanche safety is a foundational skill taught to teens in the valley through programs and courses at Jackson Hole High School. Even after graduating, the lessons about how to safely navigate winter sports have stayed with me. In 2024, during my senior year of high school, I was selected as a recipient of the scholarship that Friends of RPK raised. I used the award to help cover expenses during my freshman year at SMU while pursuing a degree in corporate communications. Thanks to Big Wally and other adventures, I will be reminded to always share my love for the outdoors and passionately pursue my dreams in life, as Wolling would say, “Wally’s world is not a place, it’s a state of mind.”

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