VOLUME 4 / FALL 2026 ISSUE

PR UNA

+

KYLE NOONAN
How 2 SMU frat bros built Free-Range Concepts

GARRETT HAAKE
NBC's Chief White House Correspondent Living the Dream

JAEMIN CHO
ALO in a Day's Work - A Mindful Movement



Tavia Hunt

Faith. Family. Football.











CONGRATULATIONS, DR. OWEN LYNCH!

Recipient of the Everett Hughes Holle Award for Social Justice and Community Engagement

The Division of Corporate Communication and Public Affairs proudly congratulates our own Dr. Owen Lynch on receiving this prestigious honor from the National Communication Association.

Recognizing his work with the nonprofit urban farming network Restorative Farms, this award celebrates Dr. Lynch's commitment to community engagement, social justice and using communication scholarship to create meaningful, lasting impact.

SMU Meadows **smu.edu/meadows**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Featured Stories:

2
Tavia Hunt

6
Kyle Noonan

10
Jaemin Cho

14
Stacia Phillips

18
Laura Galt

22
Scott Sanford



Pictured (left to right) Chris Alvarado, photographer with Ava, Tavia and Clark Hunt, along with PRuna Editor Virginia McGrew

EDITOR'S NOTE

I am so excited to share our fall 2026 issue of PRuna Magazine. This issue is filled with the most talented individuals in the spotlight written by dedicated CCPA students who put their heart into these pieces. A big thank you to all of the alumni featured. Your time and efforts were greatly appreciated to make this a phenomenal learning experience for our students. Make sure to read each of their inspiring stories! To our SMU Meadows School of the Arts team - thank you for your support. Special shoutout to our CCPA department head, Stacia Philips for the inspiration and more to keep this magazine thriving! A thank you to our dean, Sam Holland for his recommendations on candidates to add to the mix and his enthusiasm for this project - you are so appreciated! A special thank you to our photographer, Chris Alvarado, with SMU OIT Client Systems - such a talent and amazing person! Thank you to our sponsors who help bring the magazine to a beautiful hard copy work of art, along with our talented publishing team at HyperLocal Media Solutions who make the magic happen. And last but not least - a shoutout to my amazing students who start the semester on this journey and finish with stellar results. You are all superstars in every single way!

PonyUp!

Chris Coats

Professor of Practice

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

Meadows Corporate Communication and Public Affairs

Volume 4
Fall 2026 Issue



PRUNA IS LIVE.
READ IT AT
WWW.TEN90.MEDIA



Tavia Hunt:

Faith, Family, and Football

By: Charlotte Hayden

Long before joining one of the most renowned families in football, Tavia Hunt, a philanthropist and advocate for women, was a young girl in Lee's Summit, Missouri, "cutting my teeth on the back of a church pew."

Born on August 1, 1971, Hunt grew up in a faithful family as her grandfather was a pastor. She began dancing at five, and later pursued cheerleading and pageantry, winning a local beauty pageant, Miss Lee's Summit at seventeen (1989), Miss Missouri Teen USA (1990) and Miss Kansas USA (1993). She credits her training with helping her answer hard questions with grace and conviction.

In 1990, as Miss Missouri Teen, she was encouraged to apply for an internship with the NFL Kansas City Chiefs PR department. The then 19-year-old landed the internship. Later, Clark Hunt, son of Chiefs founder and CEO Lamar Hunt, introduced himself to her at the Chiefs Kick-Off Luncheon in August 1991. She had no idea who he was, and they discovered they had both attended Kanakuk camp, one of the largest Christian sports camps in the country located in Branson, Missouri. This indicated to her they had shared values. He asked if she wanted to "hang out sometime."

That internship became an opportunity and a life she could have never imagined at nineteen. Clark and Tavia began their







engagement in December 1992 and were later married on October 23, 1993. After, the two started a family: Gracie (SMU 2020), Knobel (SMU 2025), and Ava (SMU 2029). With the family ownership of the Kansas City Chiefs, FC Dallas, and their other businesses, her responsibilities grew, and so did her importance of balance.

Hunt lives in Dallas and spends substantial time in Kansas City each year. Faith and family are first and from there she invests where she can make a difference. She is director of the Kansas City Chiefs Women's Organization and serves on the boards of Focus on the Family, the Baylor Scott & White Foundation and the FC Dallas Foundation, among others.

On April 11, 2026, she hosted the 44th Annual Sweetheart Ball, “Heart of the Champion,” raising more than $4.7 million for UT Southwestern Medical Center Cardiology Department. Hunt’s involvement in heart health has been a personal cause for years, connected to her father's heart issues. The Sweetheart Ball has been a longstanding Dallas charitable event benefiting cardiovascular research and patient care. Hunt had 40 championship trophies ranging from Super Bowl to PGA, even the Stanley Cup, which was flown in from New York with its own handler. Held at Brook Hollow Country Club in Dallas. "It was a lot of work," she said, "but it was an incredible and amazing night."

> “MY FAITH ISN'T JUST ONE PART OF MY LIFE; IT IS THE FOUNDATION FOR EVERYTHING ELSE.”

The Hunt family’s connection to SMU extends back generations. Lamar Hunt (SMU 1956), a major figure in American sports and at SMU, founded the American Football League, The Dallas Texans, which later became The Kansas City Chiefs, and helped launch professional soccer leagues in the United States.

Lamar contributed toward Gerald J. Ford Stadium (2000), the Paul B. Loyd Jr. All-Sports Center (2000) and the Lamar Hunt Memorial (2008), among other SMU initiatives. Clark had a mission to continue that legacy his father started at SMU. He graduated first in his class (SMU 1987) and was a four-year men's soccer letterman and captain of the Mustangs' nationally ranked soccer team.

He has served on the SMU Board of Trustees since 2008 and received SMU's Distinguished Alumni Award in 2020. The passion for soccer has been prevalent in the Hunt family aside from football, which led to acquisition of the pro soccer club FC Dallas in 2003.

Clark Hunt’s uncle and aunt, Ray and Nancy Ann Hunt (SMU 1965 grads), founded the Hunt Leadership Scholars Program in 1993 to support and develop future student leaders. “SMU means so much to our family because it has become far more than a university we support, it is a community we feel deeply connected to."

From Hunt's heavy involvement with the Chiefs to her dedication to charitable work, her steadfast faith she built long ago remains her priority. "My faith isn't just one part of my life; it is the foundation for everything else." She and Clark have taught their children that identity is not found in achievement or a family name, but that every opportunity comes with responsibility.

Hunt's mantra reflects the verse, Luke 12:48, "To whom much is given, much is required." The world around her looks different than it did for the little girl in Lee's Summit, but underneath it all, she still guides her decisions by the faith she found in her grandfather’s church pew.

FROM SMU TO THE WHITE HOUSE

How Garrett Haake became NBC's Chief White House Correspondent

BY: VIRGINIA MCGREW

In the summer of 2006, Garrett Haake took a flight into New York City and landed in a tiny room at the Upper West Side YMCA, where he would stay while working 10 weeks as an intern for "NBC Nightly News." Haake considers this experience "a real case study of how hard do you want to work, how much do you really want this job."







BUILDING A FOUNDATION IN JOURNALISM

Before becoming NBC's Chief White House Correspondent, Garrett Haake began his first year at SMU in August 2003, majoring in Journalism and minoring in Political Science before adding on a second minor in Religious Studies. Haake quickly became immersed in life at SMU, including working with SMU TV and being involved with Greek life and the President's Scholars program

SMU's Journalism department gave Haake a strong foundation for life after graduation. Lucy Scott, an Executive-in-Residence with the Journalism program, taught Haake about network television and production while helping him land an internship with "NBC Nightly News" in New York.

Waking up around six a.m. to film a morning show for SMU TV might not be popular for the average college student, but for Haake, it served him well. Now, Haake considers this time to be "late," as he is up around five a.m. to be ready at the White House by 6:15 a.m for NBC's "TODAY." Haake credits his SMU TV experience for learning the discipline of what it takes to get ahead.

POST-GRAD AT NBC

After graduating from SMU in 2007, Haake returned to "NBC Nightly News" as a Desk Assistant, a one-year assignment where journalists either get promoted or leave the company. Being on the clock made Haake learn how hard he had to work to make it in the industry. "It really kind of lit a fire under me to make myself useful and indispensable and to hustle, and that became probably the most useful part of that," Haake says.

Now, having spent nearly 10 years back working for NBC, Haake is thankful for the people at the company. "There was an investment in me even when I was young and upcoming." Having gained more experience in the field, Haake is now on the other side, helping to mentor young journalism professionals. "That culture of mentorship meant a lot to me coming up," Haake says. When thinking about NBC, Haake says "it's the place I keep coming back to."

COVERING THE ROMNEY CAMPAIGN

In 2012, Haake was given the opportunity of a lifetime to spend 18 months traveling to 36 states for Mitt Romney's Presidential Campaign. Looking back, Haake considered this job to be equally challenging and fun. "I tell people it's one of the best jobs, if not the best job, you can have in journalism when you're young." Only visiting New York once a month to rotate his clothing for the seasons, Haake spent those 18 months living out of a backpack. Day-to-day, Haake was living "sealed inside an airplane," where he would wake up in one state, visit two or three more throughout the day, and finish in another state.

HIGH-STAKES POLITICS

Working in a high-stakes political environment, Haake believes the most challenging part of the job is only having one shot. "So much of what we're doing is a first draft of history," Haake says. Throughout his career, Haake has covered high-stakes news moments including four Presidential elections, three Trump campaigns and the January 6 attack on the Capitol.

Because of social media, Haake believes that journalists now have added pressure to be responsible with their reporting, as a 140 character Tweet "may be the only thing that somebody's going to see out of my reporting," says Haake. Haake recognizes that "there are people who will watch me do a minute-long breakdown of something on TikTok who would never sit down and watch 'Nightly' at night."

ADVICE FOR WORLD CHANGERS

From SMU classrooms to the White House, Haake is proof of how SMU shapes world changers. "There will always be reasons not to take big swings in your life or in your career, but I think the opportunities to really bet on yourself and to try to make the most of the opportunities that will put themselves in front of you are something you're never going to regret, even if it doesn't work out," says Haake. "Give it a shot. The worst thing that could happen is you start over."









KYLE NOONAN '02

IS NOT SELLING FOOD; HE IS SELLING AN EXPERIENCE.

By: Ryan Lucas



In 2011, most bowling alleys looked the same: sticky floors, stale beer, fluorescent lighting, and a hot dog roller for anyone who wanted a meal. Kyle Noonan, co-founder and co-CEO of FreeRange Concepts, saw an opening. No one had put a high-quality restaurant and bar in the middle of a bowling alley and treated the lanes as an amenity rather than the main attraction.

That mindset has put Noonan at the forefront of the restaurant industry and earned him the Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year award in 2025. Noonan earned a bachelor's degree in fine arts, concentrating in painting and sculpture, and is the co-founder and co-CEO of FreeRange Concepts, the Fort Worth-based hospitality company he started with his SMU roommate, Josh Sepkowitz. What began as a conversation about building something someday has grown into five concepts and 14 locations: Bowl & Barrel, The Rustic, The General Public, Joe Leo Fine Tex Mex, and Birdies Icehouse, which opened in March 2026 at Houston's East River 9 golf course.

EARLY YEARS

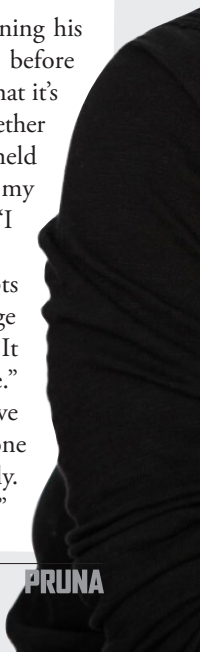
Born in Santa Fe, Noonan moved several times before settling in Houston, where he graduated from Second Baptist High School in 1998. His mother was an entrepreneur who ran a wellness and supplements business. Noonan's grandfather, Joe Leo, who owned several businesses, taught him to cook. He vividly recalls his grandfather teaching him to make tortillas, which inspired his love of food and hospitality. Noonan named his restaurant Joe Leo Fine Tex Mex in honor of his grandfather.

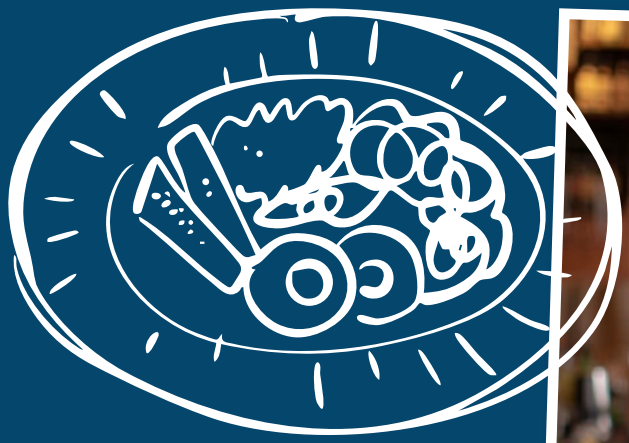
SMU

Noonan came to SMU in the summer of 1998 to play tight end on a football scholarship, but a career-ending injury changed the course of his college experience. He turned his focus to art, studying under his favorite professor, Barnaby Fitzgerald, who taught courses in drawing and painting in the Meadows School of the Arts (and recently retired after 39 years at SMU). His favorite time at SMU was the semesters he spent abroad in Italy during the spring and summer of his sophomore year. Noonan and Sepkowitz met in their freshman year as Phi Gamma Delta pledges. Sepkowitz served as chapter president and treasurer, while Noonan was vice president and social chair.

Noonan spent 13 years at Pappas Restaurants, beginning his junior year at SMU and continuing after graduation, before launching his company. "What you learn in business is that it's not about having a clever idea," he said. "It's about whether you can execute on the idea." The job he could have held for 20 years was not enough. "I didn't want to spend my career executing somebody else's ideas perfectly," he said. "I wanted my name on the outcome, good or bad."

Noonan and Sepkowitz launched FreeRange Concepts in 2011 and opened the first restaurant in the FreeRange Concepts family, Bowl & Barrel, in December 2012. It taught them what Noonan refers to as the "dwell time." "Most restaurants get 70 minutes," he said. "If you can give a guest a reason to stay for three hours and enjoy every one of them, the economics of the building change completely. We call that dwell time, and we talk about it constantly."







"What you learn in business is that it's not about having a clever idea. It's about whether you can execute on the idea."



PHILOSOPHY FOR SUCCESS

Noonan believes a concept must pass three tests: It has to serve an occasion no one else does, be the best in its market, and give guests a reason to return several times a year. The Rustic, one of the busiest restaurants and bars in Texas, hosts more than 500 live shows a year, almost all without a cover. Over the next three years, FreeRange plans to grow from 14 locations to 25 nationwide, including new locations in San Diego, Nashville, and Scottsdale.

In 2016, the National Restaurant Association named Noonan the New Restaurateur of the Year. His proudest moment came in 2020, when he and Sepkowitz guided the company through the COVID-19 pandemic, with thousands of livelihoods on the line, and kept the team employed.

Today, FreeRange Concepts employs 1,500 team members. Despite the awards and recognition, Noonan is the first to admit that "entrepreneurship is a lot of unglamorous years where nobody is clapping." As co-CEO, he focuses on real estate, raising capital, and design, planning two to three years ahead. This past year, he also earned his MBA from Harvard Business School.

INSPIRATION FOR STUDENTS

Noonan hopes students take one lesson from his story of how two SMU fraternity brothers built FreeRange Concepts: "We did it because we built a great network, we worked hard, we didn't quit, and we remained obsessed with what we do," he said. "That opportunity is available to anyone who wants it."

Betsy Killough Pepe's Journey

From SMU to Lela Rose

By: Lauren Levi

Betsy Killough Pepe has a simple way of explaining her job at the New York luxury fashion house Lela Rose: "If it has a tag, I work on it." As chief fashion and merchandising officer, she helps shape each season's collection by considering sales, what customers want and where fashion is heading. After joining the company in August 2007, Pepe has built a career at the intersection of creativity and business, serving in a range of leadership roles.

Pepe grew up in Lawrence, Kansas, about 40 miles west of Kansas City. Surrounded by creativity, her mother and grandmother were always fashionable, and shopping with them made clothing feel fun.



She took art classes, danced throughout her childhood and began working at a clothing store when she was about 15. Even then, she liked to challenge herself. During her senior year of high school, she tried not to repeat the same outfit combinations, finding different ways to put together and style the clothes she already had, a goal she admits mattered to no one but her.

More important than any outfit, Pepe said, was the confidence her family gave her. Her parents, sister and grandparents supported her ideas and taught her that she could figure things out if she worked hard. Failure never felt like a reason not to try.

Pepe enrolled at SMU in the Fall of 2001, she joined an undergraduate community of nearly 6,000 students. The Corporate Communication and Public Affairs (CCPA) program appealed to her. But the decision ultimately came down to intuition. When she visited SMU, it just felt right.

"More important than any outfit, Pepe said, was the confidence her family gave her. Her parents, sister and grandparents supported her ideas and taught her that she could figure things out if she worked hard. Failure never felt like a reason not to try."

A class assignment her freshman year, a professor asked students to interview someone with their dream job. Pepe chose Ken Downing, then the fashion director at Neiman Marcus, and called his office herself. His assistant made an exception and arranged a 30-minute meeting. At the end of the interview, Downing offered Pepe an internship.

The opportunity introduced her to luxury fashion and showed her how many careers existed beyond designing clothes.

"I think that is where ignorance is bliss," Pepe said. "I was young and new to the industry. I didn't know enough yet to be intimidated by it, I just picked up the phone and asked."

By the time she graduated in May 2005 with a Bachelor of Arts in CCPA, Pepe had completed several internships, participated in volunteer work, joined Kappa Kappa Gamma and danced in Mus-

tang Marathon - SMU's 24-hour fundraiser benefiting seriously ill children and their families.

After graduation, Pepe moved to New York and began working for Dolce & Gabbana. She started in an assistant-level role before moving into women's wholesale, where she worked with buyers from major retailers including Bergdorf Goodman and Saks Fifth Avenue.

Pepe wasn't looking to leave the company when she was invited to meet Lela Rose and the company's president. She took the meeting anyway. Leaving an established European fashion house for a much smaller company felt risky, but she connected with Rose and saw an opportunity to help build something. She joined Lela Rose in August 2007 as a senior account executive.

Lela Rose is a New York-based luxury fashion brand known for colorful fabrics, sculptural silhouettes and feminine clothing designed for everyday and special occasions. Its current ready-to-wear pieces range from about $340 to $3,890, while its made-to-order bridal gowns begin at $6,000. High-profile women who have worn the label include Gwyneth Paltrow, Anne Hathaway, Jessica Chastain, Michelle Obama and Catherine, Princess of Wales.

From August 2007 through October 2010, Pepe worked in that role before becoming director of sales in October 2010. She served as director of sales through December 2012, gaining experience across the company's wholesale business and strengthening her understanding of how products, retailers and customers connect.

Pepe has held various leadership roles as the company and her responsibilities have evolved. Her work has expanded from sales and merchandising into shaping the fashion direction, product, design and overall creative and business strategy of the brand. She now sits at the intersection of the creative and commercial sides of the business.

"I joined Lela Rose early in my career, so in many ways I grew up professionally there," Pepe said. As the company evolved, so did her role. "I kept raising my hand and taking on things that weren't necessarily part of my job yet, and over time that gave me an understanding of almost every part of the business."

She believes one of her strengths is having "a really strong instinct for fashion and product, but I also understand the commercial side of the business. I love thinking about what feels new, what the customer is going to want next and how we push the product forward. The numbers are an important part of that, they tell you what has worked, but they can't tell you where fashion is going. That's where instinct comes in."

Her advice for handling the fashion industry's constant change is direct: "Get comfortable being uncomfortable."

Pepe remains connected to SMU through the CCPA program and professor Chris Coats, the Fashion Media program and many other professors. She has spoken on SMU panels in New York, hosted students in her office and worked with many SMU interns over the years. Mentoring students and staying involved with the university have become meaningful parts of her relationship with SMU.

Her advice to SMU students returns to the action that opened so many doors for her.

"Put yourself out there. Pick up the phone, ask for the meeting, take the coffee, raise your hand. Don't wait until you feel completely ready or know exactly where something is going to lead. So many of the best opportunities in my career have come from just having the conversation and seeing where it takes me."









The Career She Never Planned

By: Lauren Middleton

Long before Jaemin Cho, 25, was creating viral social media content for NBA teams, famous NFL players and a global athleisure brand, she was making birthday videos for friends and experimenting with Instagram Stories in middle school. When Cho arrived at Southern Methodist University in 2019, she pictured herself on Capitol Hill or in law school, following in the footsteps of her father, an immigration lawyer. Instead, an unexpected 2021 internship with the Dallas Mavericks put her on a career path she never saw coming.

Cho dreamt of attending SMU after helping a family friend move into the dorms in 2015. Having moved to Dallas in the eighth grade, she was drawn to SMU's small class sizes of around 30 students and close relationships with professors. She pursued degrees in Public Relations and Strategic Communication and Corporate Communication and Public Affairs on the Political Communication track. An avid fan of NBC's Law & Order, Cho imagined serving her community by solving complex issues.

> Success is no longer just about where I work, but the kind of person I am while I'm there.





At SMU, Cho served as a resident assistant (RA), orientation leader and member of the Emerging Leaders Program, roles that introduced her to lifelong mentors. One of the most influential was Chris Coats, her Introduction to Newswriting for Public Relations professor. In CCPA 2308, Cho was assigned the Baltimore Ravens as a client and discovered how creative sports content could be. In 2021, during her junior year, she applied for a Dallas Mavericks internship despite only knowing basketball involved "shooting an orange ball."

Cho spent her first few weeks at the Mavericks memorizing players' names, watching film and asking questions. She analyzed how fans responded to posts and tweaked content to gain more traffic. After just a few months, Cho was trusted with managing the Mavericks TikTok, an experience that would skyrocket her career.

The next opportunity meant leaving Dallas altogether. In April of her senior year, Cho accepted an offer to help run social media for the LA Chargers. With her friends staying in Dallas, she saw LA as an opportunity to challenge herself, and what once felt like a foreign city soon became home.

As a vertical video producer, Cho created content that made players relatable beyond the face masks and pads. She asked players "questions everyone could relate to" and created humorous content that resonated with non-football fans, helping the Chargers reach a new audience on TikTok.

After nearly three years with the Chargers, Cho wondered what her career could look like beyond sports. Through a mutual friend, she learned of an opportunity at ALO, a clothing and wellness brand. In January 2026, she took the leap, trading the football field for campaign sets as a content creator for the global athleisure brand.

At ALO, Cho brainstorms TikTok concepts, sources creators and works on campaign sets. In only a few months, she has travelled internationally and worked on ALO's largest campaign yet, its yacht launch in June.

Cho's definition of success has evolved alongside her career. At SMU, working for an NBA team or major company felt like signs that she had "made it." Now, she values the relationships she builds and her impact on others. Success is no longer just about where she works, but the kind of person she is while she is there.

After a career spanning Dallas, Los Angeles, professional sports and fashion, Cho is not sure what comes next. Rather than mapping out every step as she once did at SMU, she remains open to unexpected opportunities. She holds close a Ruth Bader Ginsburg quote: "real change, enduring change, happens one step at a time."

CHO'S ADVICE FOR THE FUTURE

Enjoy being a student.
Enjoy being a college student, you only get to experience this chapter once.

Ask questions.
Don't be afraid to ask questions when entering a new job, team or unfamiliar environment.

Embrace failure.
Failure is part of learning how to adapt and find your place within a new role.

Know your audience.
Stay current on trends and changing algorithms, but always analyze the audience you are trying to reach.

Be adaptable.
Learn to quickly find your place within a new job, team and culture rather than shying away from unfamiliar opportunities.



FROM A LEGACY OF SUCCESS,

Scott Summerall Paved His Own Path Making His Mark on the World.

By: Faith Lungu

Scott Summerall grew up an only child surrounded by generations of entrepreneurship. In Corsicana, Texas, about an hour south of Dallas, Summerall's entrepreneurial roots date back to the 1800s, when his ancestors struck oil—contributing to the first oil boom west of the Mississippi River.

Summerall's grandfather founded Summerall-Beauchamp Wholesale Drug in the 1950s, growing it from a garage into a multimillion-dollar distributor supplying stores across Texas and the Southwest. In 1964, he helped found Community National Bank, planting another business in the city.

Summerall joined Community National Bank's board in 2019, where assets have since grown from $750 million to $1.6 billion.

Despite this legacy of success, Summerall still had to find his own path. "I had to think about how I was going to make my own mark on the world," he said.

His answer was to embrace his own entrepreneurial spirit. After graduating top of his class from Corsicana High School, he enrolled at SMU in fall 2004.

FINDING HIS PATH AT SMU

After his first year, Summerall realized his strengths lay in communication, writing and public speaking. A conversation with his academic counselor led him to the Corporate Communication and Public Affairs (CCPA) program in the Meadows School of the Arts.

"It was like somebody flipped on a light switch. CCPA was made for me," he said.

Summerall studied organizational communication and advertising, minoring in sociology. He stayed close with professor Dr. Rita Kirk and credits SMU's chief cultural intelligence officer, Dr. Maria Dixon Hall, as a key mentor. Dixon Hall modeled an open-minded approach to life, offering "wisdom and guidance that really helped shape my personal and professional journey," Summerall said. She remembers him as a "rare talent who is going to be a force for good in the world."



> “Taking very complex subject matter and turning it into simple, digestible communication is where I’ve always excelled.”

Summerall also connected with Ray Francis, an alumnus, investor and real estate broker who became another mentor. Francis encouraged him to earn his real estate license and sponsored him as his broker until Summerall launched his own company in 2012—feeding both his entrepreneurial drive and his communication skills.

BURSON-MARSTELLER

During his senior year, Summerall attended a talk by Harold Burson, co-founder of global PR firm Burson-Marsteller. A family friend in attendance, Mike Lake, who chaired the firm’s Southwest office, helped him land an internship serving clients like Merrill Lynch, Reliant Energy and U.S. Trust.

After graduating in 2008, Summerall joined Burson full-time, eventually specializing in financial communications. “For several years, I had to be an inch deep and a mile wide,” he said. He managed up to 10 accounts simultaneously and, over nearly seven years, earned five promotions—ultimately joining the global leadership team for the Bank of America Merrill Lynch PR program, overseeing 24 employees across 17 markets supporting more than 100 financial advisers.

CHILDREN’S HEALTH DALLAS

In 2014, Summerall joined Children’s Health in Dallas as external communications manager, growing a one-person operation into a four-person team while training medical experts to speak effectively with media.

“Taking very complex subject matter and turning it into simple, digestible communication is where I’ve always excelled,” he said. He also pushed the organization from reactive crisis response toward proactive outreach—though being constantly on-call was demanding.

BUILDING TI’S BRAND VOICE

In 2018, Summerall joined Texas Instruments. Today, as head of worldwide brand content and thought leadership, he oversees speaking engagements, podcasts, content creator marketing, the company blog, case studies and more. His nine-person team tells the story of semiconductor technology found in nearly every electronic device on earth.

Among his biggest contributions is TI’s content creator marketing program, connecting with online creators to reach global engineering audiences. “We were one of the first semiconductor companies to do creator marketing, and the program has continued to successfully grow and scale globally,” he said. He’s now helping shape TI’s brand narrative ahead of its 2030 centennial.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Two decades after first wondering how he’d make his mark, Summerall’s answer isn’t one job—it’s a career built on entrepreneurship, communication and storytelling.

He lives by a James Bond-inspired mantra: “The world is not enough.” As he puts it: “Good is never good enough. I constantly think about how I can better myself and grow... you are never finished, so always ask what’s next.”







Always a passport in her purse

"adrenaline junkie"

STACIA PHILIPS

PACKED HER BAG. NOW SHE PACKS THEIRS

By: Lauren Rader

Early in her career, Stacia Philips never drove anywhere without a passport in her purse and a suitcase in her trunk. At CNN, it was called a "go bag" kept ready for when news breaks without warning, because whoever is ready gets the story. But long before the go bag, Philips arrived at SMU in 1986 planning to be president of the United States. After an intro to political science class lost her interest, Philips visited the counseling center, where a career test showed she was a better fit for journalism than politics. It pointed her toward covering power rather than seeking it. Today, she is back on campus as chair and Distinguished Professor of Practice in Corporate Communication and Public Affairs.



In an intro to newswriting class, Philips found a mentor in Professor Kathy Latour. "She believed in me before I believed in myself," Philips said. In spring 1989, when SMU limited the Washington Semester Program to political science majors only, Philips successfully petitioned for an exception, becoming the first SMU journalism student admitted. The experience led to an internship at CBS's "60 Minutes", the news magazine known for in-depth investigative reporting.

Post-graduation, Philips returned to "60 Minutes," where she realized they could spend up to a year on a single story, which felt too slow for a self- described "adrenaline junkie." During that time, Philips kept wandering into the network's Washington bureau where producers shouted over breaking news, and she knew she found "her people." Philips eventually joined CNN, where she covered stories from domestic plane crashes to international crises abroad.

In 1999, while visiting her mother in Italy, she took a train from Italy to visit a friend covering the Macedonian refugee crisis, where a million people had fled from Kosovo. It was that trip that introduced her to her eventual husband, and she later joined the United Nations press office in Kosovo as a public affairs officer. While she was in Kosovo, the September 11th attacks unfolded half a world away. It was then that her Irish boss told the press office they needed to stop watching new coverage. He told everyone to get back to work as he said, "Welcome to the rest of our lives."

After four years in Kosovo, Philips returned to CNN's Dallas Bureau where she led their coverage of Hurricane Katrina. Eventually she returned to Washington, DC, to cover the Obama administration, which took her around the world, from Japan to South Korea, to Australia and Indonesia. In 2014, she joined ABC News as deputy bureau chief, then was promoted to VP of ABC Audio and eventually rose to executive vice president and executive editor of the news division.

In 2025, after 35 years in the news, she retired and started her own advisory company. She spent much of



2025 in Bangladesh advising the interim government press office on how to respond to international crises, write international op-eds, and identify and combat mis/disinformation.

In 2026, fresh from Bangladesh and ensconced in her cabin in West Virginia, Philips received an email asking her to mentor a Meadows student. Eventually, she reached out to CCPA Professor Rita Kirk about SMU opportunities. Within two weeks, she found herself in Dallas teaching a class on political rhetoric, using Bangladesh as her example. After meeting faculty, the advisory board, dean, and provost, she had an offer. "It just felt like something that was meant to be." She started August 1, 2026.

Now she is on what she calls a "one woman mission," with a goal of every SMU CCPA graduate having a post-graduate plan that includes a job, graduate school, or something else, in place before commencement.

Today, the suitcase is packed away, but her mantra has not changed: " The possibilities are endless when you say 'yes'. The door shuts when you say 'no.'" Now she is helping a new generation get packed.

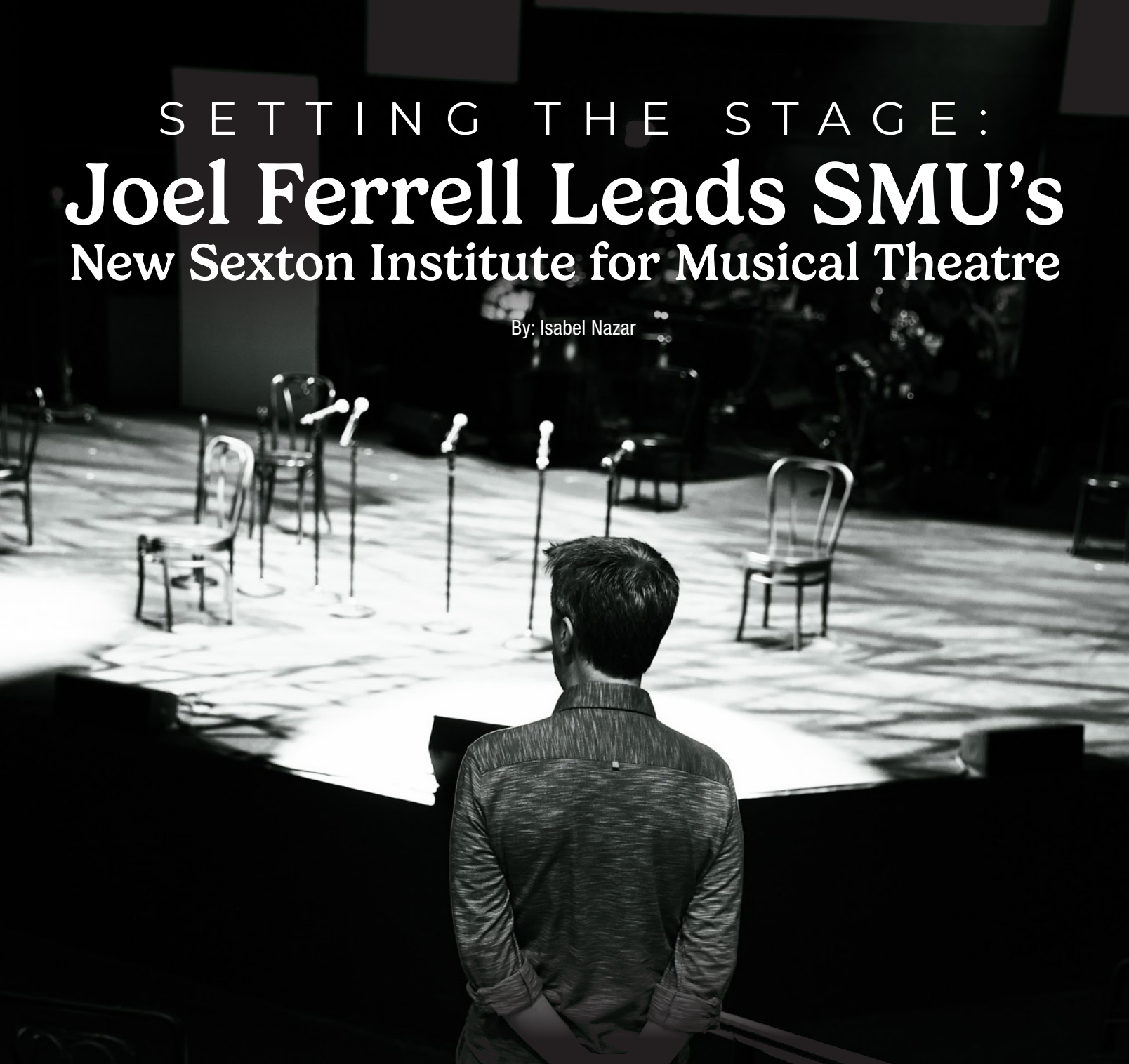
"The possibilities are endless when you say 'yes'. The door shuts when you say 'no.'"

One woman mission



SETTING THE STAGE:
Joel Ferrell Leads SMU's New Sexton Institute for Musical Theatre

By: Isabel Nazar



Long before he commanded rehearsal halls across the nation, Joel Ferrell staged elaborate plays across his family living room floor. Born in Waco, Texas, to an itinerant Methodist preacher and a schoolteacher, Ferrell spent his childhood packing up household belongings every five to seven years as his father received reassignments to new congregations. During those moves, Ferrell became fascinated with acting and listened to cast albums on a record player many times until the records were worn out. Social barriers kept him from dancing publicly as a young man in the late 1960s in Texas, but he attended dance classes in secret. His persistence led to a prestigious seven-week summer scholarship at age 15 to study at George Balanchine's prestigious School of American Ballet in New York City.

That transformative summer solidified his calling. Ferrell completed high school, enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin, and earned a bachelor's degree in English communications while performing continuously. At 21 years old, he secured his professional Actors' Equity card during a grueling summer stock season at Casa Mañana in Fort Worth. Craving bigger stages, Ferrell sold his pickup truck in March 1982, packed two suitcases, and flew to New York City without a safety net.

A month after moving to New York City, Ferrell got his first national tour on Broadway by auditioning. This led to a 40-year career as an actor, choreographer, and director. Alongside survival jobs modeling fragrance, waiting tables, and cutting hair, Ferrell systematically expanded his craft. He parlayed dance performance into choreography, subsequently stepping into the director's chair across respected regional stages including Denver Center Theatre,

Portland Center Stage, and North Shore Music Theatre. In North Texas, his footprint expanded significantly: he served as Artistic Director of Casa Mañana Musicals from 1996 to 2001, guided the Dallas Theater Center as Associate Artistic Director for 10 years between 2011 and 2019, and currently maintains an appointment as Director in Residence at Theatre Three, alongside directing credits for Stage West, Circle Theatre, Trinity Shakespeare Festival, and Lyric Stage.

Today, Ferrell draws on years of regional musical theater experience to teach and lead as professor of practice and founding director of Southern Methodist University's Sexton Institute for Musical Theatre at the Meadows School of the Arts. Ferrell designs comprehensive curriculum, recruits active industry mentors, secures shared rehearsal studios between the dance and theatre divisions, and coaches incoming performers daily. Unlike the roughly 120 musical theater programs nationwide, Ferrell's program is housed within the university's acting department and pairs vocal performance with classical Shakespeare, scene study, and camera technique.

"The artists that I look to in the world as the ones I would want our students to emulate really have done tons of musical theater," Ferrell explains. "They've also done difficult dramas. They've done TV, they've done films, they've done Shakespeare. The more versatile you feel, the more grounded in a craft you remain. And to me, that starts with acting."

The institute took shape following a $15 million endowment gift from Broadway producer and philanthropist G. Marlyne Sexton. Following the pandemic, Ferrell spent months conducting comprehensive research, interviewing roughly 100 artists, faculty members, and alumni to pinpoint gaps in standard conservatory training. He chose to produce new work as well as Traditional musical revivals. Ferrell hired fellow Meadows School of the Arts alumna Kimberly Grigsby as an adjunct instructor. Grigsby, who has directed music for 25 years of Broadway shows, including Spring Awakening and The Light in the Piazza, into campus rehearsal rooms.

This semester, Ferrell hosts the institute's first class of 12 selected students from around the country, including Miami and Kansas, and other places, with just one Texas native. Ferrell considers the 12 students to be partners in the institute's educational program rather than regular students. "We don't want cookie cutters," Ferrell emphasizes. "We want students who come with opinions, ideas, and a sense of their unique self. Every director wants an actor who brings ideas into the room. We challenge them not to worry about a former actor's interpretation but find what they alone can bring to the role." Looking toward future semesters, Ferrell plans to expand partnerships with professional venues across Dallas, transition student work into external civic spaces, and helm new adaptations of classical dramatic literature.

"You have to be brave enough to fail if you're going to make something extraordinary," Ferrell says. "The American musical literally could not possibly have happened in any place but America. And the more technology rules our time, the more potent our need for human connection in an analog sense."







LAURA GALT TAKES THE STAGE

This Tony Award Winner is Making Her Mark on "The Great White Way!"

By: Samantha Hosp

When Laura Galt '91 was in preschool, she asked her mother to rent the arena at the Myriad Convention Center in Oklahoma City for her birthday. Her mother asked what she would do there. "Well, I would perform," Galt said. Ironically, this love for the stage carried throughout her life including the Broadway stage winning awards like Best Musical as a co-producer of The Outsiders at the June 16, 2024 Tony Awards. Galt was born to be in the spotlight. She began dancing as a toddler and was accepted at 12 into the prestigious Oklahoma Summer Arts Institute.

After countless classes and auditions while at the institute, she landed a role as Carrie on Saved by the Bell: The New Class. She graduated from SMU in the class of 1991. She chose SMU because it was close enough to drive home, was located in a city with a vibrant performing arts scene, and had a strong theater program. Galt auditioned for the theater program but did not get in, so she studied broadcast journalism. The actress still found ways to perform throughout her time at SMU, including in a campus production of The Fantasticks.





> "I did find myself always kind of going back to dance or going back to theater."

After graduating from SMU, she moved to LA with a friend. Her first job was as a receptionist for legendary actor, Burt Reynolds. Galt wanted to learn more of the business side of Hollywood and eventually handled publicity for A-list actors like Robert Downey Jr.; Julia Roberts; and Nicole Kidman.

In Los Angeles, she kept returning to dance and musical theater. But she also expanded her interests. Galt took a job with the UCLA Resnick Neuropsychiatric Hospital as a case manager. There she discovered an important strength: connecting with people.

The Stage Kept Calling

When her mother, Joan Davidoff, was diagnosed with ovarian cancer, Galt moved back to Oklahoma to care for her. The draw she felt working at UCLA led her to specialize in speech pathology graduating with a Master's in Communications Sciences and Disorders from the University of Oklahoma. Galt branched out into a career as a speech pathologist moving to Austin and working for area school districts.

Yet, always the creative, she also began producing both musical productions and films, founding ATxRandom Productions/ Galt and Company. A company collaboration with other industry connections brought The Prom to Broadway in 2018 where it was nominated for a Tony Award for "Best Musical."

Currently, Galt is excitedly working on two projects focusing on legends – a Dolly Parton Musical and a play on the world-renowned chef Julia Child – both in development. Her advice to students who do not know where to begin is to follow what interests them. Galt's success clearly illustrates this philosophy – a powerful combination of creativity, lifelong learning, and business into an award-winning formula. With this winning mindset and a glimpse of her current projects, this star keeps rising. But then again, Galt always knew Broadway was her destiny since she was a kid with big dreams in Oklahoma. She's just taken the stage. And has no plans of leaving.

"If there's a door open and you say, 'Oh, that sounds interesting,' like, walk through it and see what happens."



PonyUp!

Galt's daughter, Campbell Snavely, is also an SMU alumna, who graduated December 2024 with a BBA in marketing and a minor in history.

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION:

Cassandra Lazo's Journey Behind the Scenes

By: Emily Cerde



On an NFL game day, millions of viewers watch the action unfold on their screens, but Cassandra Lazo is behind the scenes helping bring it all together. Working for NBCUniversal Telemundo Enterprises in Miami, she prepares for interviews with players like quarterback greats Patrick Mahomes and Dak Prescott, while helping tell the stories happening on and off the field.

Lazo grew up in Houston - born August 18, 2001, and raised in a bilingual household as the daughter of a Salvadoran father and Mexican mother. Though she grew up in public schools expecting to become a marine biologist—even earning her scuba diving certification in eighth grade—her trajectory shifted during her sophomore year at Clearbrook High School. Taking an introductory television course and expecting an easy elective, she learned camera operation, writing, lighting, and editing. The experience sparked an immediate calling for filmmaking following her high school graduation in May 2019.

That passion brought her to Southern Methodist University (SMU). Encouraged by her mother to visit, Lazo fell in love with the campus. One of her highlights of the tour was meeting Chair of Film and Media Arts Professor Mark Kerins, who personally showed her the film department and equipment cage.

During her time at SMU from 2019 to 2022, Lazo pursued a B.F.A. in Film and Media Arts alongside minors in Arts Entrepreneurship and Arts Management.



She was a member of the Gamma Phi Beta sorority house and gained industry experience with Mustang Vision Production, part of SMU Athletics, from August 2021 to May 2022, filming soccer matches and editing volleyball jumbotron packages. When the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted campus during her freshman year in 2020, Lazo adapted by taking 18 credit hours per semester, accelerating her studies to graduate in just three years on May 14, 2022.

Her SMU coursework proved transformative. A collaborative short film class helped her realize that directing wasn't her passion, but she discovered a love for gaffing instead. Recognizing her talent, Professor Troy Perkins built a custom independent study in lighting design specifically for her.

Lazo's career began in a whirlwind. While applying for junior-year opportunities, she accidentally submitted an application for a full-time position instead of an internship. Though the production assistant role at NBC Sports asked for four years of experience, Lazo trusted her knowledge and interviewed confidently. Nine days after graduating, she moved to Connecticut to join NBC Sports and started working May 23, 2022.

In Connecticut, Lazo curated cinematic archival teases for Sunday Night Football under intense weekly deadlines and drew live halftime tactical graphics for Premier League broadcasts with two-minute turnarounds. Facing a severe reprimand after a mistake two weeks into her job, she learned to process emotions privately and return to work stronger, vowing never to repeat the error.

In July of 2023 Lazo transitioned to NBCUniversal Telemundo Enterprises in Miami gaining her first Sports Emmy Award for her work. Her impressive career includes serving as associate producer for Sunday Night Football en Español, producing content for the Paris 2024 Olympics, working Super Bowl LIX, and acting as assignment coordinator for the 2026 FIFA World Cup, where she manages logistics across 22 field crews.

When asked about the future, Lazo is not focused on following a strict plan. She is happy where she is planted and wants to continue taking opportunities as they come. That mindset reflects a phrase she has carried with her throughout her life: "ponte las pilas." Meaning "get going," "step it up" or "put your mind to it." This family mantra has become a source of motivation. From taking a chance on a full-time position to stepping into new roles, she embraces every life lesson that comes along the way and the experiences.

It is a lesson she hopes other SMU students remember as they begin their own careers. "Do not count yourself out before applying. The worst they can tell you is 'no.'"







WINNER! WINNER!

WITH AN EMPHASIS ON PRODUCING COMMUNITY DRIVEN JOURNALISM,

IT'S NO SURPRISE THAT SMU ALUM **SCOTT SANFORD** IS A REGIONAL EDWARD R. MURROW AWARD WINNER

By: Lucas Willard

When dreams as a kid of becoming a pro athlete didn't pan out, SMU alum Scott Sanford credits his drive for sharing stories whether within sports or the world as leading him into a career in journalism.

Sanford was born in Pittsburgh on July 28, 1992, and lived there until he was nine, when his family moved to Los Angeles. Growing up in Southern California eventually helped lead him to SMU, in 2011 as a freshman studying journalism through Meadows School of the Arts.

Sanford knew early on that he wanted to work in journalism and gained experience through SMU's Daily Update, and through an internship with the Dallas Cowboys, while he was still a student. After graduating from SMU in 2015, he started his career at KXXV-TV (25 News), an ABC-affiliated television station serving the Central Texas area, including Waco, Temple, and Killeen. At KXXV, owned by The E.W. Scripps Company (one of the nation's largest local TV broadcasters), Sanford worked his way from production assistant to producer and eventually assignment manager.

Sanford later returned to the Dallas area during October 2018, working at FOX 4 Television before moving to CBS News Texas, owned by CBS News and Stations (a division of Paramount), where he now works as an assignment editor. He credits the experience he gained at SMU for helping him build a successful career in television news.

PRuna Magazine caught up with Sanford in order to dive into life while at SMU and his plans for the future.

OUR VIEWERS ARE MOST IMPORTANT, SO I WANT TO DO EVERYTHING IN MY POWER TO PRODUCE CONTENT THAT HELPS THEM.



Q: Growing up in Pittsburgh and then Los Angeles, what were your dreams as a kid?

A: Like a lot of kids, I wanted to be a professional athlete. I was especially interested in football and baseball. When I realized playing professionally probably wasn't going to happen, my love of sports helped lead me toward sports journalism.

Q: Why did you choose SMU?

A: I was considering USC and SMU. After visiting SMU and hearing good things about it from the large SMU alumni network in Southern California, I fell in love with the campus and Meadows School of the Arts and decided it was where I wanted to go. The internship opportunities in a city like Dallas were also a driving factor in my decision.

Q: How did you first get involved in journalism at SMU?

A: I started writing for the Daily Update and learning from older students. I also worked on Press Pass and wrote for Scout.com. A fraternity brother helped connect me with the Scout opportunity, which showed me early on how important networking could be.

Q: Did you always expect to work in television news?

A: I originally thought I would pursue sports journalism because sports were what got me interested in journalism in the first place. Eventually, I realized there were more opportunities available in the news and moved in that direction.

Q: What was your first job after SMU?

A: My first full-time job was at KXXV in Waco in June 2015. I started near the bottom, making around $8.50 an hour and doing a lot of the grunt work.

Q: How did your career progress at KXXV?

A: I worked my way from production assistant to producer and eventually became an assignment manager. It was a process of continuing to work and taking on more responsibility.

Q: What does an assignment editor actually do during breaking news?

A: A big part of the job is figuring out how serious the situation is and what resources need to be sent. That can mean deciding how many reporters or photographers should respond and communicating with police departments, public-information officers, and other sources to confirm what is happening.

Q: How have you changed after spending more than a decade in the news industry?

A: Experience has helped me become calmer during breaking-news situations. After doing it for years, you learn to trust your experience and instincts instead of panicking when something unexpected happens.

Q: What is one of the accomplishments you're most proud of?

A: One major accomplishment was receiving a Regional Edward R. Murrow Award in 2018 for helping to write and produce a documentary at KXXV about the anniversary of the Jarrell, Texas, tornado outbreak during May 27, 1997.

Q: The Jarell tornado was one of the highest and most powerful tornados, taking 27 lives, why was documenting this tornado so meaningful to you?

A: It was an emotional story because we were looking back at the destruction and the people who died. At the same time, we were able to show how the community rebuilt afterward.

Q: How have your priorities changed as your career has progressed?

A: My personal life has become increasingly important. I have a wife and a toddler now, so putting down roots in the Dallas–Fort Worth area is important to me. Professionally, I want to continue putting more and more emphasis on producing community-driven journalism. Our viewers are most important, so I want to do everything in my power to produce content that helps them.

Q: What advice would you give current SMU students?

A: Take advantage of the SMU network. Networking helped me find opportunities during college and after graduation, and networking never really stops.

MELISSA CHESSHER

On the Heart of Journalism & Keeping the Art of Storytelling Alive



By: Scarlett Barnett

For Melissa Chessher, SMU's dean of Honors and Scholars and a professor in the Division of Journalism, writing always existed as the best possible career outcome. She possesses more than 30 years of experience in the magazine field as both a writer and an editor. And, for her, journalism has never been simply about reporting the facts. It is about finding the humanity behind a story, giving people a voice, and creating something readers remember long after turning the page. From her early work as a travel writer and editor for American Airlines' inflight magazine to contributing to award-winning journalism about the challenges of women undergoing breast-cancer treatment at work, Chessher has built a career around the power of storytelling.

Chessher discovered her love of writing early, but it took a while to decide to pursue it as a career. Her mother, a fourth-grade teacher who, thanks to their small town, also became Chessher's teacher, an experience that prompted some early career decisions. Namely, that teaching wasn't a profession for consideration because her mom would never call on her.

In college, she spent a semester as a pre-med major and then business, but it wasn't until she pursued courses that required a lot of writing that she found her academic home. She graduated from Baylor University with a double major in English and journalism and then continued to complete a Master of International Journalism.

"I finally just decided I was gonna do the thing that I loved," Chessher recalled.

> "The thought that anybody would pay me to travel and write was like the best job on earth."

Chessher began her journalism career at *American Way*, American Airlines' in-flight magazine, where she edited writers such as Paul Theroux, Robert Draper, Mary Roach, and Jon Pareles and traveled internationally for her own stories. "The thought that anybody would pay me to travel and write was like the best job on earth," she said.

Then, she transitioned to Time Inc., working for a range of food and women's interest publications, and began freelancing for more than a dozen national publications, including Self, Glamour, Allure, Marie Claire and Health. She also helped launch magazines such as Real Simple and Gusto.

Throughout her career, Chessher developed an appreciation for narrative journalism. Magazine writing allowed her to explore complex issues, connect with her subjects and uncover the deeper meaning behind their experiences. According to Chessher, exceptional journalism requires more than compelling prose. The most memorable writers combine distinctive voices with thorough, what the editor of Esquire once referred to as "scorched earth" reporting.

That philosophy shaped her 2007 *Self* magazine piece, *Working Through It*, which served as the anchor piece for a service package that won a National Magazine Award from the American Society of Magazine Editors. Chessher interviewed about 25 sources, including many breast-cancer survivors who shared the challenges they encountered in the workplace. For her, the assignment highlighted journalists' responsibility to tell deeply personal stories with the utmost care and accuracy. The story also demonstrated how journalism can bring attention to issues that are often



overlooked, giving a voice to women whose experiences might otherwise go unheard.

“People have faith and confidence and hope that you’re gonna tell their story right and well and fully,” Chessher explained.

Beyond writing, Chessher found fulfillment in editing and teaching (despite her experience in fourth grade). Before joining SMU, Chessher served as a chair, professor, and associate dean at Syracuse University’s S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications. There, she earned several teaching awards, including the Newhouse School’s Senior Class Award for Teaching Excellence, the Empire State Scholastic Press Association’s Advisor of the Year and the Laura J. and L. Douglas Meredith Professorship for Teaching Excellence, the university’s highest teaching honor. She believes the relationship between editors and writers resembles that between educators and students, with both focused on helping others improve.

“I believe that often the best editors are also the best teachers,” she wrote in the cover letter for her first professor job at the Newhouse School.

Now, as journalism continues evolving through digital media and independent publishing, Chessher encourages aspiring professionals to recognize the opportunities available to them.

Rather than waiting for an editor’s approval, young journalists can and should establish their own platforms, explore subjects they love, and develop distinctive professional identities.

“You don’t need anyone to grant you permission,” she emphasized.

For students preparing to enter an uncertain industry, Chessher offers another important perspective: success rarely follows a predictable timeline. “This is a long game,” she said, explaining that unexpected opportunities can often lead to the most rewarding experiences.

Her advice is to embrace uncertainty, pursue work that inspires curiosity, and recognize when it is time to move forward. For Chessher, the most valuable career lesson is also the simplest. Success begins with taking the first step, remaining open to unexpected opportunities, and never losing the willingness to learn.

Passionate storytellers and leaders like Chessher offer hope for journalism’s future, proving that even in an increasingly digital world, the most meaningful stories remain rooted in human connection. Her commitment to authentic, human-centered reporting reminds the next generation of journalists that the heart of the profession has always been, and will always be, the people whose stories deserve to be told… and the teachers and leaders like Melissa Chessher continue to carry that passion forward.

FROM THE HILLTOP TO THE NEWSROOM

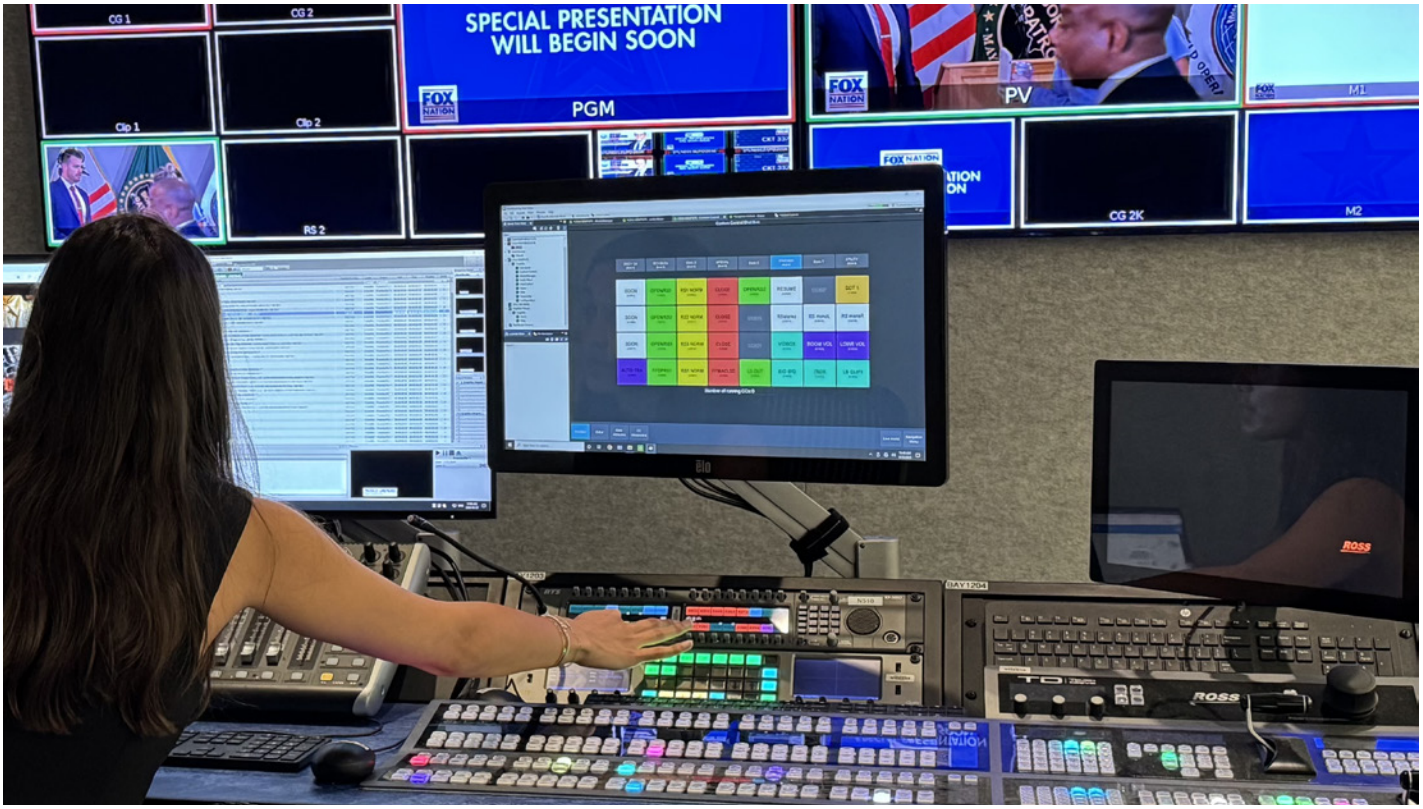
Mia Verrochi's Journey from SMU to Fox News

By: Anya Leland



For Mia Verrochi, opportunity was never something to wait for; it was something to chase. Verrochi, a Southern Methodist University (SMU) alumna, graduated with a degree in Corporate Communication and Public Affairs with a minor in Journalism in May 2025. Since graduation, Verrochi has worked as a production assistant at Fox News Media in New York City and as of October 2026, continues her career with Fox Nation, Fox's subscription streaming service with over 2 million subscribers. Her journey to Fox began at SMU, where classes, professors, internships, and hands-on experience helped shape the career she was determined to build.

Verrochi was born in Boston on December 11, 2002. Around the age of six, she moved to New York, where she attended Portledge School, a college preparatory school in Locust Valley. During her senior year in 2020, she visited Dallas with her mother and despite initially having little interest in attending SMU, quickly fell in love with the city's southern charm and welcoming community. The visit changed her perspective and ultimately led her to enroll at SMU, where she began her college career after graduating from Portledge in 2021.



During her four years at SMU, Verrochi took Professor Jacqueline Fellows' *Intro to Basic Audio and Video*, a course that helped her develop technical skills she would later carry into her career. "I learned skills and took them with me to my job out of college, and I was able to do a lot more than other people because of the technical skills I learned from that class."

Verrochi had always known she wanted a career in news, "SMU-TV really made me want to work in production." Getting a behind-the-scenes look at what goes into putting a television broadcast together made her eager to pursue a career in the field.

Verrochi says her favorite professor at SMU was Chris Coats. "She was a huge influence on me and showed me the importance of networking, which has become one of the biggest factors in my career."

Verrochi also gained experience through SMU's alumni networking program and regularly visited the Hegi Family Career Development Center. "During my job search through the Hegi Family Career Development Center, I would reach out to different alumni, introduce myself and express my interest in learning more about their careers and experiences."

Verrochi showed grit during her job search, applying to various internships. From May 2024 to August 2024, she interned at Barstool Sports in New York City as a Production Operations Intern. Barstool Sports is a top digital media and pop culture company with over 17 million followers on Instagram, focused on sports, comedy, and personality-driven content. During her internship, she created trending videos, assisted editors and supported the production team with day-to-day tasks.

Verrochi also worked an internship at Tony Fay Public Relations, from August 2024 to January 2025. The mentors Verrochi met through networking helped lead her to a position at Fox News. After three rounds of interviews, she began working remotely in April of her senior year, just before graduation. "My amazing professors taught me skills that I use all the time to this day."

Since then, she has transitioned to Fox Nation's long-form streaming team, where she helps create documentary-style content for the platform. As a production assistant, Verrochi works across several shows, communicating with editors, gathering production elements, greeting guests, booking travel, and supporting the behind-the-scenes work that brings each documentary to life. She also travels for interviews, including a recent trip to Ohio to assist with an interview with Meredith Gaudreau, the widow of NHL player Johnny Gaudreau, who passed away in a cycling accident on August 29, 2024.

Looking ahead, Verrochi hopes to continue growing in her career, gaining experience in the production industry and traveling the world. Her advice to students looking for future opportunities is simple: build and maintain strong connections

"Networking plays a huge role in building your career and getting from place to place and staying in contact with people who motivate you, inspire you and will help you down the road!"



Verrochi had always known she wanted a career in news, "SMU-TV really made me want to work in production." Getting a behind-the-scenes look at what goes into putting a television broadcast together made her eager to pursue a career in the field.

From SMU to Broadway and Back:

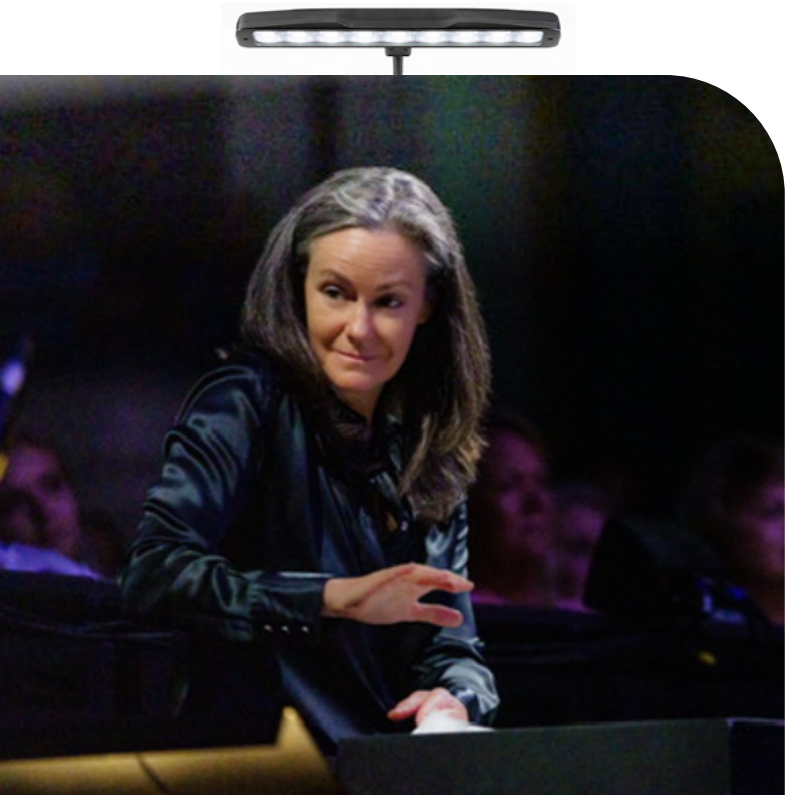
KIMBERLY GRIGSBY'S FULL-CIRCLE JOURNEY



By: Cates Lyman

For Kimberly Grigsby, returning to SMU as a professor in August 2025 marks a full-circle moment in a career that has taken her from piano practice rooms to Broadway productions and, eventually, back to the university where she first discovered her passion for musical theater. Grigsby graduated with a Bachelor of Music in 1991 after studying piano performance in the Meadows School of the Arts.

Over 30 years later, when Grigsby walks through the halls of SMU today, she sometimes has to remind herself that she is now a professor and not a student.



Finding Her Path

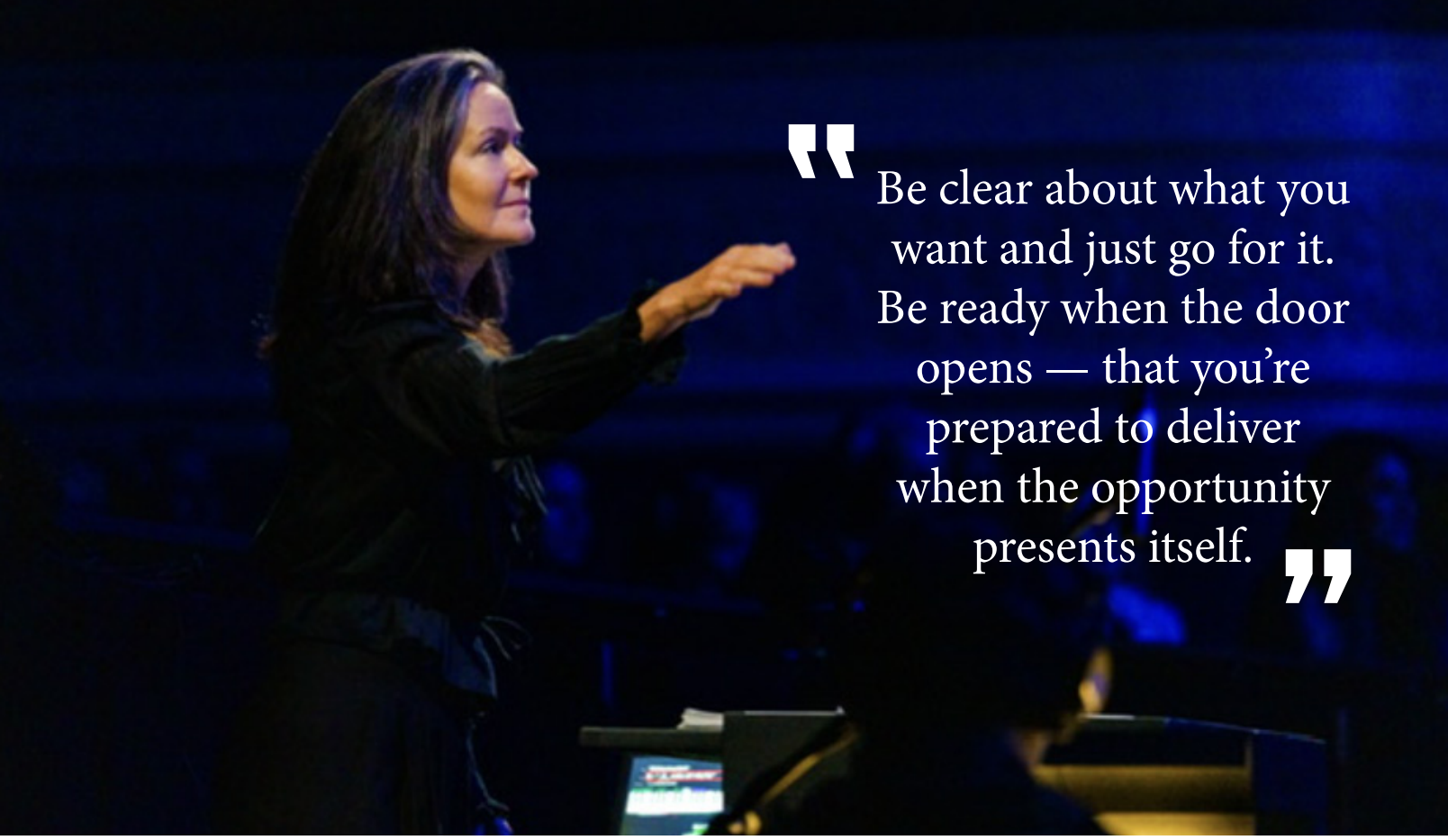
Grigsby's relationship with music started early. She began playing piano at 5 years old and later played oboe in her high school band and piano for both the choir and theater department. Still, she never imagined music as a career.

Her path to SMU began in the fall of 1984, during her sophomore year at Hayfield Secondary School in Alexandria, Virginia. While attending the Virginia State Thespian Conference, Grigsby played piano for her school's entry, "The Diary of Adam and Eve" from "The Apple Tree" by Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick.

There, Dr. Charley Helfert heard her play. Helfert, then director of admissions at SMU's Meadows School of the Arts, began recruiting her. Two years later, Grigsby auditioned and chose SMU.

At the time, SMU did not offer a musical theater program, so Grigsby studied piano performance. Despite the lack of a direct path into musical theater, she credits the Meadows faculty with recognizing her interests and creating opportunities for her.

That support led to a turning point during her junior year, when André De Shields came to SMU to direct "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum." Grigsby began as the rehearsal pianist and eventually became the production's music director.



The experience showed her how different theater felt from practicing piano alone.

"When you're a musician, it is very solitary. But doing theater, you're telling a story with other people."

Suddenly, her future started to make sense.

From SMU to Broadway

By her senior year, Grigsby had already started earning money as a musician. She moved to New York after graduation and attended the Manhattan School of Music, earning a master's degree in collaborative piano.

Her career eventually brought her back to De Shields in an unexpected way. Eleven years after working together at SMU, Grigsby reunited with him professionally on the original production of "The Full Monty," where De Shields was a member of the cast.

Grigsby served as conductor for the production when it premiered at The Old Globe in San Diego in 2000 and continued in that role when the show moved to Broadway later that year. With Tony Award winning Ted Sperling serving as music director Grigsby conducted the Broadway production for its entire run, which ended in the fall of 2002.

Her work extended well beyond Broadway. In 2004, she served as music director for "Caroline, or Change" at the Ahmanson Theatre in Los Angeles, work that earned her the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award for Musical Direction. The following year, she received the 2005 Barrymore Award for Best Music Direction for Philadelphia Theatre Company's production of William Finn's "Elegies."

Grigsby went on to work on numerous Broadway productions, but serving as music director of the original Broadway production of "Spring Awakening" remains one of the highlights of her career.

The production meant more to her than professional success. Many of its young cast members ranged from about 15 to 21 years old and played characters facing issues similar to those of young audience members.

"We were helping create a dialogue for young people and their parents, their grandparents, and people in their lives."

Coming Home

Even as her professional career took her across the country, Grigsby continued returning to SMU to give master classes and workshops. Those visits allowed her to remain connected to the university and the community that helped shape her career.

After years in professional theater, Grigsby received opportunities to teach at universities but turned them down. SMU felt different.

"SMU took care of me and helped nurture me. I would like to be a part of merging these two worlds at the school, in the community that helped me find my path."

In August 2025, Grigsby officially returned to SMU as the inaugural music director of the Sexton Institute for Musical Theatre. In the role, she helps bring together the university's music, theater and dance disciplines while giving students the kind of interdisciplinary musical theater training she once had to learn for herself.

"We're walking into someplace that's already been established. I think it really has potential to be a competitive program in this country for musical theater."

Grigsby's career never followed a perfectly mapped-out path. Instead, one unexpected opportunity led to another, eventually bringing her back to the university where much of it began. That experience now shapes the advice she hopes to pass along to students still trying to figure out what comes next.

"Be clear about what you want and just go for it. Be ready when the door opens — that you're prepared to deliver when the opportunity presents itself."



FROM PLAYING THE GAME TO *Representing the Game*

How SMU volleyball alumna Lily Heim turned her passion for sports, relationships and public relations into a career at WME Sports.

By: Isabella Castillo

For Lily Heim, sports have always been a part of her life. But what began as a passion for volleyball eventually led her to a career she never imagined. Today, the former Southern Methodist University volleyball player works at WME Agency in Los Angeles, helping athletes navigate opportunities beyond the game.

Growing up in Omaha, Nebraska, Heim never pictured herself attending SMU, mainly because she had never heard of it. Volleyball recruitment introduced her to the university, and by her sophomore year of high school, she had committed to playing for the Mustangs.

During her time at SMU (2018–2022), Heim was named American Athletic Conference Setter of the Year and First Team All-Conference, finishing her career with more than 3,000 assists.

While volleyball brought her to SMU, her mother helped her discover public relations (PR).

After reading an article about the growing PR industry, Heim's mother encouraged her to explore the major. Having always enjoyed writing, building relationships and connecting with people, Heim realized the field aligned with her interests.

What she didn't know was how much those skills would shape her future.

As graduation approached, Heim stumbled upon Endeavor, the global entertainment and sports company whose portfolio included WME, UFC, On Location, 160over90, and IMG Models. Through a connection at IMG Models, she learned about an assistant position supporting Senior Vice President of Communications Kim Ulrich and landed the role in June 2022, just weeks after graduating from SMU with a degree in Public Relations and Strategic Communications and a minor in business.

After moving to New York City, she joined WME Co-Chairman Christian Muirhead's team as his assistant four months later.

For the next two years, Heim was immersed in talent representation, experiencing the industry's highs and lows.

From coffee runs around New York City and rolling calls for Christian to prepping him for meetings, attending events and keeping a pulse on the who's who of the industry, no two days looked the same. Add in an endless stream of emails, and it was her own real-life *The Devil Wears Prada*—with a front-row seat to the inner workings of the entertainment business.

As she explored departments, she began asking herself a question: What could she bring to the table? What could she speak to with confidence and hold her own in a room full of industry veterans? The answer was sports.



Don't be afraid to make noise.

Drawing on her collegiate athletic experience, Heim connected with WME Sports Head Josh Pyatt. That conversation led her to Los Angeles in August 2024 to learn the business of sports representation firsthand.

Heim spent nearly a year working alongside Pyatt, whose work building production companies for some of the world's biggest athletes, including Peyton Manning, Lionel Messi, Derek Jeter, Draymond Green and Luka Dončić, opened her eyes to the business opportunities athletes can build beyond their playing careers. During that time, she discovered a passion for brand partnerships. In July 2025, she joined WME Partner Rob Koslowsky's team, working across the brand businesses of talent including Luka Dončić, Jimmy Butler, Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone and Keanu Reeves.

In July 2026, Heim was promoted within WME's Brand Partnerships group, where she now builds her own roster, including Olympic runner Parker Valby, volleyball players Andi Jackson and Jordan Thompson, supermodel Anok Yai and actor Cole Sprouse.

One of the highlights of her work so far has been bringing together two of her longtime interests: sports and fashion. As luxury fashion houses increasingly partner with athletes, Heim has made it a focus to help bridge those worlds. When Zegna approached her to identify talent for its Spring/Summer 2027 campaign, she ultimately secured a partnership with NBA legend Scottie Pippen.

After pitching athletes to high-fashion brands and hearing plenty of "no's," landing that first "yes" was especially rewarding. Heim accompanied Pippen to the campaign shoot, alongside Rami Malek, Stellan Skarsgård, Paul Dano and Roman Coppola.

"There was definitely a pinch-me moment when I found myself sitting on a couch between Paul Dano, Rami Malek, and Scottie Pippen," Heim said.

The following day, she joined Pippen at Zegna's fashion show on the Malibu Pier. For Heim, the experience captured exactly what excites her about brand partnerships: creating opportunities for athletes to show up in new spaces and connecting sports, fashion and culture in ways that feel authentic.

For Heim, representation goes beyond partnerships. It's about building relationships, shaping stories and helping athletes see what's possible beyond their sport.

"When I finished playing, I had spent my entire life identifying as an athlete, and I really struggled with figuring out who I was outside of volleyball," Heim said.

That experience inspired her to help athletes build identities beyond their performance, focusing on their stories, passions and futures—and creating relationships based on trust rather than transactions.

Looking back, Heim credits SMU's PR program and her experience as a Division I volleyball player with laying the foundation for her career, lessons she continues to carry into her work today.

Heim may no longer be competing on the volleyball court, but she has found a new way to be part of the game.

Her advice to her younger self, particularly as a woman entering a male-dominated industry, is simple.

"Don't be afraid to make noise," Heim said. "Have an opinion, ask for what you want, challenge yourself, and take up space. You don't have to wait until you feel completely ready or until someone gives you permission. Trust yourself, advocate for yourself, and remember that you belong in those rooms just as much as anyone else."





A LIFE WITHOUT A SCRIPT

Stephanie Machado's Journey

FROM STAGE TO CLASSROOM



By: Mia Faul



Long before Stephanie Machado stepped onto a professional stage as an actress or into a New York City classroom as a professor, she was a girl in Miami who caught a teacher's attention.

Machado was born and raised in Miami. As a child, she was in an elementary school music class when her teacher noticed something different about her voice. He introduced her to another teacher who directed a musical theater group for children, beginning the career Machado has pursued ever since.

"I started theater when I was nine and since then, I've never let it go."

That introduction began a career Machado has pursued for more than two decades. As a first-generation American from a Brazilian family, she found community in theater early on. She attended New World School of the Arts, a public high school and college-level arts conservatory combining academics with intensive arts training.

Admission was competitive. In 2011, New World received 1,268 applications for 140 spots, an acceptance rate of about 11 percent. Students were admitted through auditions for performing arts programs or portfolio reviews for visual arts.

New World was not a traditional high school; it combined academics with specialized theater and arts training. For all four years, she lived far from campus and woke at 4 a.m. to commute.

"I really felt very passionate about the career choice that I had chosen," Machado said. "I was determined to make this happen."

Machado auditioned for other musical theater schools, but none felt like the right fit. Then, unexpectedly, Southern Methodist University (SMU) found her. At a theater conference, SMU representatives encouraged her to apply.

At SMU, she studied under professors including Benard Cummings, Theatre Associate Professor and head of recruitment; Michael Connolly, who served as head of the acting program for 15 years; Blake Hackler, Head of Acting Professor; Anne Schilling,





Associate Professor; and Jack Greenman, Speech and Voice Professor. She credits all of them with having a tremendous impact on her development as an actor.

Machado also received SMU's Greer Garson Award in 2015, given to junior and senior students who demonstrate "excellence, aptitude and dedication" in acting.

By senior year, her professors encouraged her to continue her education. She had planned to move to Chicago after graduation but, on a whim, applied to the Yale School of Drama in New Haven, Connecticut and was accepted.

Machado attended Yale from 2015 to 2018, earning her MFA in Acting. During those three years, she built connections that helped launch her career in New York. In her final year, she appeared in Yale Repertory Theatre productions, including An Enemy of the People.

Machado soon realized an acting career does not always follow a predictable schedule.

"I'm just not the kind of person that can wait around for the next job."

That mindset led her to education, where she found another passion: teaching and mentoring young artists as they develop their craft.

Today, Machado teaches speech at New York University and is co-director of the Yale Summer Conservatory for Actors, where she has taught since 2016 and has worked with hundreds of students.

Her professional acting resume spans theaters across New York and the country, including The Public Theater, Playwrights Horizons, Manhattan Theater Club, Ensemble Studio Theater, Rattlestick Theater, Actors Theater, Hartford Stage, Fiasco Theater, Miami New Drama, Yale Repertory Theater, the Denver Center and Portland Stage, among others. She has also worked extensively in commercials and appeared on CBS's Evil. This summer, she added a milestone, working as a supporting actor in her first independent feature film, Guilt, shot in Miami.

Machado balances acting with teaching and coaching corporate professionals in speech and presentation skills.

"I am first and foremost an actor. So if I get a gig, I am able to leave those jobs temporarily and come back when I can."

That balance has brought Machado full circle. The young girl encouraged by a music teacher in Miami is now teaching the next generation of actors in New York while continuing to build her career onstage, onscreen and in the classroom.

As Machado's career evolves, one idea remains at the center of how she approaches acting and teaching: "I have nothing to prove, I have everything to give."



The Quiet Persistence of NICOLE KISER

By: Nathan McGill

When a reader searches Amazon for a new book from one of the imprints Nicole Kiser works on, the title, price, and on-sale date that appear are there because she put them there. As an associate managing editor at Penguin Random House, one of the five largest publishers in the United States, Kiser works in managing editorial to designers and the production team to get a book or reprint to print. She also checks e-books across many of the company's imprints.

She earned that seat without a single industry connection. Growing up in DFW, Kiser was raised by a stay-at-home dad who never said "no" to a book. Then she read A School Story, a novel about a girl whose mother works at a publishing house. "I loved the idea of being that girl," she says. "I was like, oh, I want to do that."

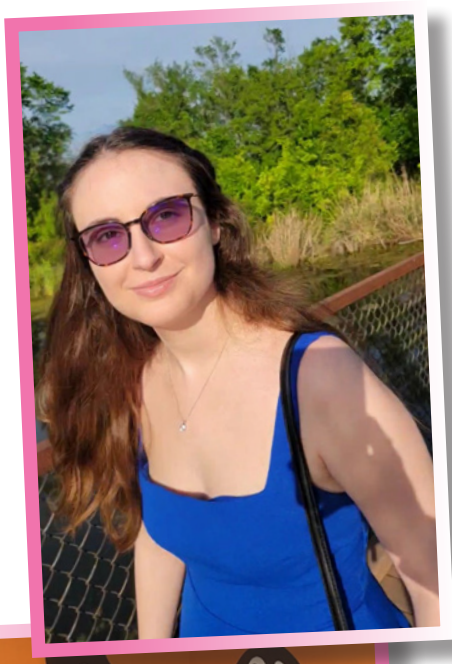
At Southern Methodist University, she chased experience wherever she could find it. In 2018, she interned at Brown Books Publishing Group in Dallas, critiquing manuscripts and writing back cover copy. In 2019, she wrote four study guides of more than 3,000 words each for the Dallas Theater Center's education program.

She also found a mentor in Dr. Doric Earle, Meadows School of the Arts professor of practice. "He was always a professor you could go up to and say, 'I have a weird question,' and he would sit with you and try to answer it."

In February 2020, her final semester, Kiser joined The Stewpot, a Dallas homeless services nonprofit, to take over STREETZine, its monthly 12-



> Networking makes it easier, but if you're introverted and you struggle with it, it's not the only way. I knew no one at Penguin Random House when I got hired. I was quietly persistent.







page street newspaper. The editor had planned to retire but passed away before the handoff, and Kiser rebuilt the paper largely on her own. "I got really good at InDesign," she says. "No one else knew how to use it, so I was by default the best at it." Her first issue came out in April 2020.

Weeks after she started, the pandemic hit. SMU went into lockdown on March 13, 2020, right before spring break. "We never came back from spring break," she said. Kiser finished her classes on Zoom while keeping the paper going, graduating in May 2020. Her reporting turned to the crisis, including how COVID relief funded housing for people experiencing homelessness.

In February 2021, Earle, who also helped run Restorative Farms, an urban farm in Dallas, pointed her toward a story idea that Kiser wrote on Dallas food deserts. Her piece found that food insecurity in Dallas County ran 47% higher than the national average. It ran as a cover story on STREETZine and made a powerful impact on the true state of area food insecurity.

After Winter Storm Uri hit that month, she reported how The Stewpot and its partners kept 850 guests sheltered and fed. She wrote and designed every issue while working full time as a technical writer. Putting out STREETZine, she says, "is exactly what publishing is like when it's books."

Her big break came in January 2022, when Penguin Random House hired her as a managing editorial assistant. She checked publisher websites weekly and made a Twitter account just to follow people in the industry, which is how she found the opening. "It's the very not hopeful answer of I just kept applying until they took me," she says. She was promoted to assistant managing editor in June 2024, then to associate managing editor in August 2026.

Bringing forth as a publisher the creative talent of writers is the biggest reward. It's the manuscript to book projects like Last Chance Live!, Helena Haywoode Henry's 2025 young adult novel debut (Penguin Random House) about an 18-year-old on death row fighting for her freedom on a reality show. "There's always someone's story that will matter," she says. "You just try to make sure that story makes it to that person." Indeed, the novel resonated with the masses nabbing thousands of 5-star reviews and awards like "Best Books of 2025" by NPR and Booklist.

As AI spreads through publishing, she believes that mission depends on readers trusting that a major publisher's books are written by people, not AI. "Publishers are also upholding the last stand of human creativity."

Her advice to students: "Networking makes it easier, but if you're introverted and you struggle with it, it's not the only way," she says. "I knew no one at Penguin Random House when I got hired. I was quietly persistent."



IT'S MORE THAN A SALE

By: Elise Holzemer

On gamedays for the Texas Legends, the NBA G League affiliate of the Dallas Mavericks, Alex Brody, Senior Director of Sponsorships, arrives as early as 10 a.m. and can leave as late as 11 p.m. Brody graduated from Southern Methodist University in 2022, where he earned a B.S. in Sport Management and a B.A. in Public Relations and Strategic Communication. He spends those 13-hour days sending tickets to prospects, checking sponsor activations, and helping with ticket operations, all while staying connected to a 14-person staff over a walkie-talkie.

On a day-to-day basis, Brody focuses on corporate partnerships and sponsorship opportunities. The Legends play their home games at Comerica Center in Frisco. The team earned the 2024-2025 NBA G League Franchise of the Year honor.

Despite working in sales, Brody's philosophy has little to do with simply making a sale. His approach traces back to studying public relations at SMU, where he learned the importance of one-way and two-way communication. Brody believes that sales can easily become transactional, so he focuses on active listening and asking the clients, "How can we help you?"

THE EARLY YEARS

Brody grew up in Dallas before moving to the Bay Area at age 12. He attended the Stevenson School, a boarding school in Carmel, California. With 65%





> Don't just take the opportunities that are given to you; go search for them.

international students, the school gave him the opportunity to meet students from China, Japan, and Venezuela. Despite their different backgrounds, Brody discovered they had more similarities than differences and found true connections through sports.

Brody returned to Dallas in 2018 to attend SMU. He immediately got involved on campus; he worked at the Hegi Career Development Center as a consultant, was a CCPA fellow writing weekly blogs, and served as the executive vice president of SMU's PRSSA chapter. Outside of school, Brody immersed himself in sports and communications through a series of internships. He gained experience through the Northern Texas PGA, Texas Rangers, Sportstars, Athelo Group, and the Dallas Stars.

In the fall of 2021, Brody balanced 15 credit hours, two internships, his job at Hegi, and his communications fellowship.

"Don't just take the opportunities that are given to you; go search for them," Brody said.

FROM MUSTANG TO LEGEND

From 2021to 2022, Brody was the sponsorship intern for the Dallas Stars. This helped him identify the career he wanted. Working in partnership activation for the Stars, he saw how partnerships connect brands with their fans in a way traditional advertising could not. "You're not going to get anything like sports," Brody said. "When you are in an arena, you get a different emotional feel than you are going to get driving past a billboard." This experience helped turn Brody's lifelong passion for sports into a career.

After graduating in May of 2022, Brody reached out to the Texas Legends after learning about them through an SMU Cox networking event. His current boss responded directly: "Hey Alex, send me your resume." Brody interviewed a week later and got the job with zero previous sales experience. He joined the Legends as a Director of Business Development in December 2022; he then moved to Senior Director of Business Development a year later, and became Senior Director of Sponsorships in July 2026.

MORE THAN A JERSEY PATCH

Just one year into his career at the Legends, at 24 years old, Brody sold the sponsorship he considers his proudest accomplishment: an away jersey patch for DisposeRx, a company focused on medication disposal and preventing prescription drug misuse. Since the patch followed the Legends on the road, it reached 30 markets outside Dallas, from California to New York, and internationally to Toronto and Mexico. This partnership later expanded into the Safety Legends program, a season-long initiative promoting prescription drug safety through education and a safety pledge shared online and at Legends home games.

"The message of the jersey patch and the story it told was the biggest win out of them all," Brody said.

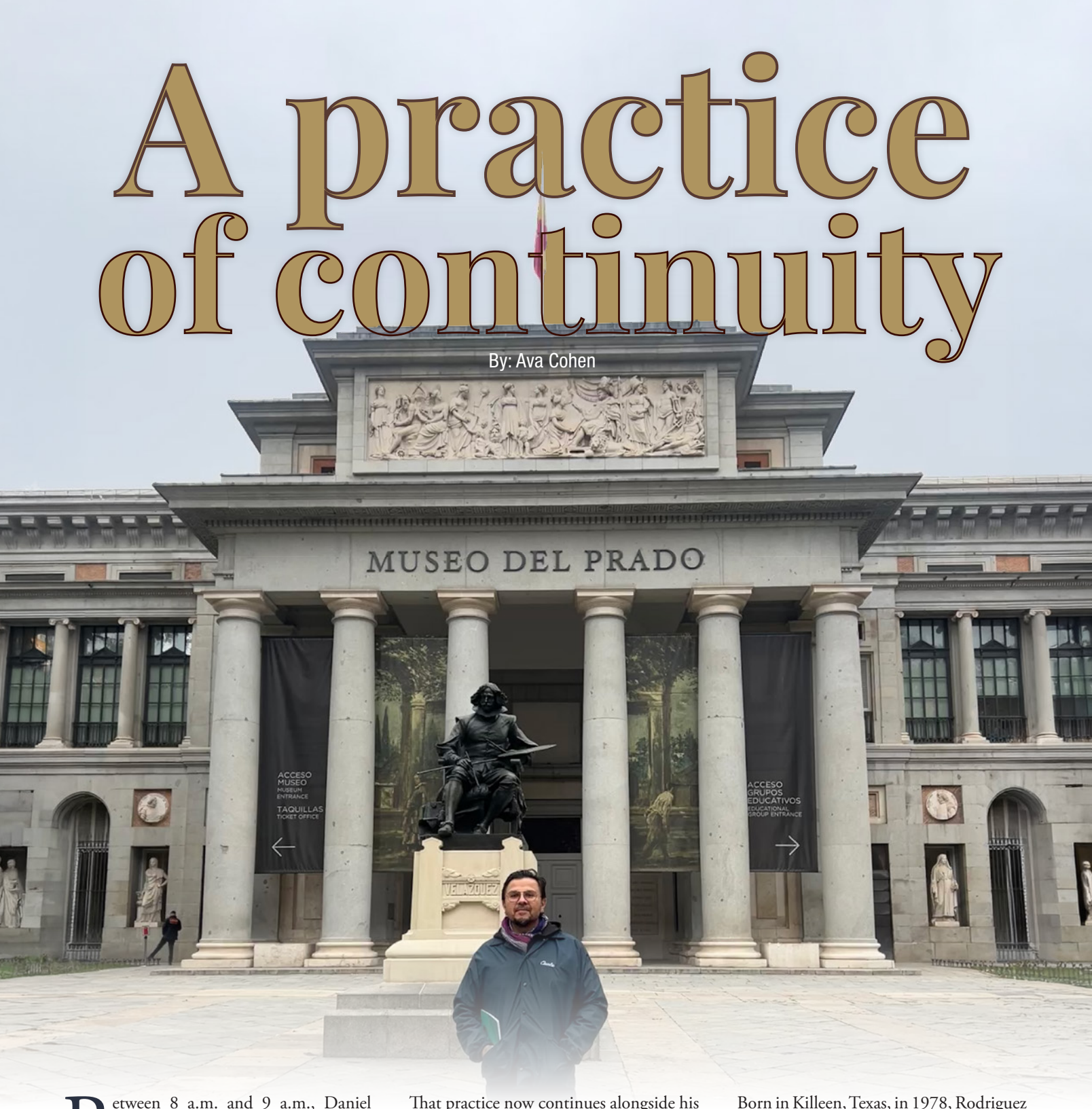
WHAT'S NEXT FOR BRODY

Brody wants to continue his education, grow as a leader, and eventually lead a sports revenue team at the executive level. He hopes to secure more jersey patch partnerships and create meaningful experiences that fans will remember long after the game ends. The goals Brody has for his future bring him back to the philosophy that got him from SMU to the Legends: seek opportunities, be adaptable, and build authentic relationships.

"Be open to what opportunities may come, don't be stagnant, always be open to the next opportunity, and most importantly, be your authentic self."

A practice of continuity

By: Ava Cohen



Between 8 a.m. and 9 a.m., Daniel Rios Rodriguez arrives at his studio located at Owen Fine Arts. He spends about 10 minutes drawing, then turns to painting before his 2 p.m. office hours.

His paintings bring together images, textures, and materials, from ancient spirals and suns to beads and scraps of wood. He calls his approach "continuity," carrying images and forms from the past into the present and future.

That practice now continues alongside his teaching at Southern Methodist University's Meadows School of the Arts in Dallas, where he joined the faculty in 2025. The Mexican American painter's path to the classroom began with military service and drawing and painting classes at a community college. He went on to earn a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Illinois Chicago in 2005 and a Master of Fine Arts in painting from Yale University in 2007.

Born in Killeen, Texas, in 1978, Rodriguez grew up in an Army family. His father immigrated from Mexico and enlisted at 17. The family lived in Panama, California, Killeen, Texas, and Germany, moving every few years.

Rodriguez attended an American high school on a military base in Germany and graduated in 1997. He grew up around families who were Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Hawaiian, Samoan and Filipino.





After high school, he enlisted in the military but could not picture making it his career. He identified Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, as the base where he completed his service. When his enlistment ended, he enrolled in drawing and painting classes at a community college.

About a year and a half later, he moved to Chicago, hoping to attend the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC). However, paying his own tuition meant he had to find a more affordable option. He enrolled at the University of Illinois Chicago, a public university. "SAIC was not affordable,". He said, "UIC was both exceptional and affordable." There, painter and professor Kerry James Marshall encouraged his ideas and discussed painting with him outside of class.

As an undergraduate, Rodriguez attended the Yale Norfolk School of Art after a faculty nomination. The experience helped him imagine pursuing an MFA. "Norfolk gave me a taste of what a rigorous MFA program was like, so I applied the following year and was fortunate to get in," .

He earned his MFA from the Yale School of Art in 2007. He also emphasized the relationships he formed there: "All my closest personal and professional relationships were created during my time in the Yale School of Art MFA program."

After graduating from Yale in 2007, Rodriguez worked in arts administration in San Antonio, including as a curatorial assistant and director of an arts education program. He wanted more time to paint.

In 2010, he moved to New York with his family so his then-wife could study library science at Pratt Institute. Curator Matthew Higgs visited his studio and offered him his first solo exhibition at White Columns, a nonprofit art gallery in New York City. The show ran from May 26 to July 16, 2011.

Raising two children while working as an artist in New York proved difficult, and the family returned to San Antonio in 2013. His connection to the New York art scene continued after an art collector connected him with Sargent's Daughters, a newly opening art gallery in New York. The gallery presented his second solo show in the city, "Crosseyed and Painless," from March 2 to 30, 2014. It was also the gallery's inaugural solo exhibition.

Living within a quarter-mile walk of the San Antonio River, Rodriguez collected plastic and beads that sometimes became part of his paintings. He wanted texture, "a different sensation in the paint itself." A cabinet shop beside his rented house discarded wooden panels. He bought a saw and cut scraps into starbursts and mountain shapes. He compares choosing materials to seasoning a sauce, balancing rough and smooth surfaces, light and darkness. His Mexican American heritage, he said, is inseparable from how he sees and makes art.

At SMU, Rodriguez teaches two courses each semester, introductory drawing and a graduate seminar. SMU provided him with a studio, giving him space to continue working while teaching. Most of his introductory drawing students are not art majors. He encourages them to fill their sketchbooks beyond assigned exercises, building patience and confidence through practice.

Rodriguez's work is currently featured in "Open This Wall," a solo exhibition presented by Ruby City, a contemporary art museum in San Antonio. Held at its Studio exhibition space in Chris Park, the show opened Oct. 25, 2025, and runs through Oct. 4, 2026. The exhibition brings together 12 years of his work. Seeing older paintings again made him proud that they still held up.

In February 2027, Rodriguez will have his fourth solo exhibition of paintings with Nicelle Beauchene Gallery in New York City. The exhibition will also mark his 10th year working with the gallery.

His current canvases range from about 8 by 10 inches to 16 by 20 inches. His recent paintings draw on museum photographs from his travels to Madrid, Crete, Istanbul, Athens, Paris and London. He calls his approach "continuity," carrying images and ancient forms, including spirals and suns, into the present and future.

For Rodriguez, success means sustaining his interest in making work that is his own. His advice is to think carefully, then get started. "Think deeply about what you want to do and then when you decide, don't overthink the doing of it."



A CAREER BUILT ON CHANGE

By: Brooke Kovacs

ELIZABETH STRINGER

Until she had her first child, Elizabeth Stringer had never lived in the same physical location for more than a year. Her father flew an F-4 Phantom in the Air Force, taking their family throughout the United States and Europe, including West Germany before reunification. Constantly moving taught Stringer how to adjust to change from a young age. "I'm used to change, and I'm used to travel, and I'm used to meeting new people and making new friends wherever I go," Stringer said. "And that skill has helped me more in life, I think, than any other thing my parents intentionally tried to teach me."

That comfort with change followed Stringer into a career she never expected. In 1994, Stringer graduated from the University of Southern California with a Bachelor of Arts in Communication Arts and Sciences. She planned to enter the film industry, but after graduation, an agent placed her in a temporary position at Xatrix Entertainment, a small Burbank production company that had previously worked mainly on commercials and television. Xatrix had just signed a deal to make a computer game. Stringer, who had grown up playing computer games and building computers with her father, was asked to stay full time and eventually manage the project at just 22 years old.

The game was *Cyberia*, a 2D action-arcade PC game that combined genres at a time when hybrid games were uncommon. With no established process to follow, Stringer's team brought together animators from Disney, artists from ArtCenter and programmers from Silicon Valley and France. "We literally made the entire pipeline up ourselves," Stringer said. Released in November 1994, *Cyberia* sold more than 1 million copies. The success helped launch Stringer's career, but rapid changes in gaming technology soon forced her team to adapt.

In 1996, Activision, a major video game developer and publisher, recruited Stringer as an executive producer. She oversaw studios of more than 100 developers and worked on franchises including *Zork* and *Dark Reign*. In 1999, she became director of development at Atari/Humongous Entertainment/Cavedog Entertainment, managing teams of more than 150 developers. By the end of her commercial gaming career, she had contributed to more than 30 titles.

Stringer and her husband, who also worked in gaming, moved to Dallas in 2002. After having her daughter, Stringer was invited to give a guest lecture at SMU in 2003. That opportunity led her to become an adjunct instructor at SMU Guildhall in 2004 and a full-time lecturer in 2005. Her role continued to grow. Stringer became deputy director of academics and a clinical professor in 2013 and director of academics in 2019. During her time at Guildhall, she has executive produced more than 180 games with student development teams.

In 2026, Stringer became director of the Division of Design in SMU's Meadows School of the Arts and chair of the Department of Game Development at SMU Guildhall. Guildhall has graduated more than 1,000 master's students, many of whom now hold senior positions throughout the gaming industry. Guildhall also launched its undergraduate game development major in August 2026, expanding the program beyond graduate education.

Looking forward, Stringer is excited about the opportunities that come with Guildhall becoming part of Meadows, especially learning from and incorporating teaching approaches used across its departments, including Corporate Communication and Public Affairs (CCPA). The Department of Game Development has proposed a new Bachelor of Fine Arts in Game Design and is developing an online Master of Science in Technical Art. The Division of Design is also working on a proposal for a minor in Human-Centered Design through the Department of Design and Innovation.

Stringer's career has repeatedly grown from opportunities she never planned for. "Go try a bunch of things," Stringer said. "When you are willingly putting in hours and time flies by, that's a good sign that you are doing something that you are truly passionate about."







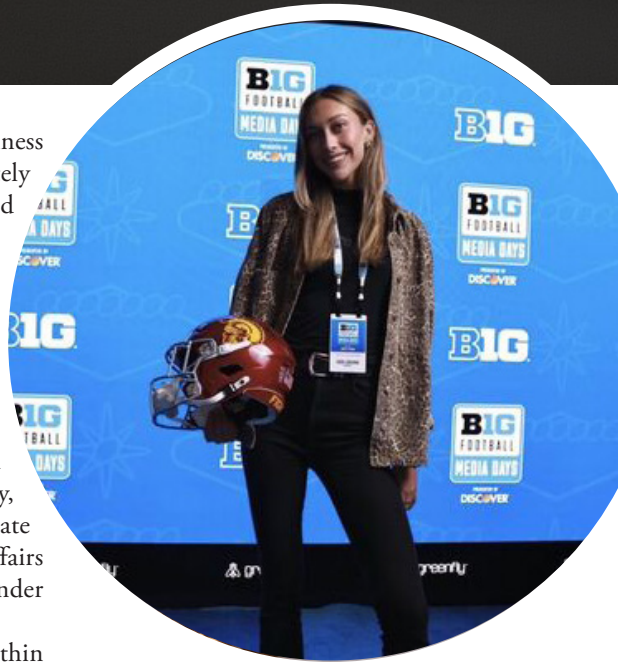
DURING HER TIME AT GUILDHALL, SHE HAS EXECUTIVE PRODUCED

MORE THAN 180 GAMES

WITH STUDENT DEVELOPMENT TEAMS.

On the Fast Track: How SMU Shaped Cassie Ackemann's Career

By: Scarlett Barnett



For Cassie Ackemann, choosing Southern Methodist University (SMU) started with track and field. What she did not know at the time was that the decision would eventually lead her to a career combining nearly every part of her college experience: athletics, communications, social media and advocacy.

Born August 8, 1999 and raised in Santa Cruz, California, Ackemann had no friends or family who had attended SMU. She first discovered the university as a high jump athlete during high school while competing. During her senior year, she traveled to Dallas for an official visit, where she met the track and field team and coaches, toured campus and learned more about SMU's academic programs.

"I loved the women on the team, the coaches and the campus."

Once at SMU, Ackemann had to decide what she wanted her experience to look like beyond athletics. While many athletes around her chose sports-related majors, she found herself deciding between business and communications. She ultimately chose strategic communication and public relations.

"I loved the opportunity that I had to represent organizations, to use my voice as kind of a vehicle and use my voice for advocacy."

Her academic interests extended beyond communications. Ackemann also took courses in Human Rights and Women & Gender Studies. Ultimately, Ackemann decided to pursue a Corporate Communication and Public Affairs (CCPA) major and a Women & Gender Studies minor.

Ackemann credits professors within SMU's CCPA program with helping shape her career, and Dr. Sandra Duhé who mentored her through the graduate school application process, even writing a recommendation letter.

The opportunities Ackemann found at SMU also began introducing her to the professional side of sports. During her spring 2020 semester with Professor Chris Coats, classes worked with SMU alumna Sana Merchant Rupani, with the NFL, who oversees the league's social and digital media. Classes tackled content and strategy

projects. That summer when internships were nonexistent due to COVID, Professor Coats reached out to an industry friend, Jeff Crilley, owner of Real News Public Relations in Dallas who heroically came through with a public relations summer associate opportunity.

In August 2020, Ackemann began a five-month internship with SMU Athletics. She worked with the Mustangs through December 2020, gaining experience in collegiate sports communications while also competing as a Division I athlete.

After graduating from SMU in 2021, Ackemann's interests fell into place. She pursued graduate study in global media and communications through the London School of Economics and the University of Southern California.

During graduate school, Ackemann also landed an internship with NBC Sports in social media marketing. She entered the role to learn the analytical side of social media.

Her boss at NBC Sports described social media as being as much a science as an art, an idea Ackemann took seriously. She asked to work on projects that would challenge her and allow her to understand the strategy and data behind successful social content.

In January 2023, the internship turned into a full-time position.

Ackemann worked with Team USA athletes through an NBC growth program designed to help athletes expand their social media engagement and build their individual fan bases. Over the next eight months, Ackemann helped develop individualized content and audience-growth strategies for Olympic and Paralympic athletes. Project Fortius helped 15 Olympians and Paralympians gain a combined 3.8 million new social media followers ahead of the 2024 Paris Games.

The role also introduced her to Greenfly, a software platform designed to help sports leagues, teams, entertainment companies, and brands manage their short-form content from start to finish.

NBC Universal was already a Greenfly customer, so Ackemann had experience with the platform before joining the company in August 2023. Moving to Greenfly also marked a career shift. After working directly in social media at NBC Sports, she moved into a more sales-focused position and now works in business development.

Greenfly is a software platform designed to help sports leagues, teams, entertainment companies, and brands manage their short-form content from start to finish. Ackemann describes it as a "content operations tool."

Ackemann has worked with many pro athletes over the years, including Paralympian gold medalist and current "Dancing with the Stars" contestant Ezra Frech and this year's No. 1 NBA Draft Pick, AJ Dybantsa, with the Washington Wizards. She has also signed deals with notable organizations like the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), League One Volleyball (LOVB), Unrivaled Basketball, University of Alabama Athletics, F1 Las Vegas Grand Prix, and more.

During her first year at Greenfly, Ackemann averaged more than 170% quota attainment for three consecutive quarters and became the highest-performing business development manager in company history.

Now, Ackemann is preparing for the next chapter of her career as the Business Development and Strategic Partnerships, Sports Vertical Lead at ShopMy, a creator marketing platform.

> "I loved the opportunity I had to represent organizations, and to use my voice as a vehicle of advocacy and change."

In her new role, she will lead the company's expansion into the sports industry, developing strategic partnerships with professional athletes, sports content creators and brands. Reporting directly to ShopMy's co-founder and chief business development officer, Ackemann will oversee the partnership process from identifying opportunities to negotiating and securing deals.

As far as advice for the future, Ackemann encourages students to search LinkedIn and alumni networks for people doing work they find interesting, even if they have never met them. A single SMU connection can provide a reason to start a conversation.

Ackemann knows how valuable those conversations can become. Someone she originally met through a coffee chat later endorsed her application for the NBC Sports internship, a major turning point in her career.

"Network, network, network. I don't think there's anything wrong with a cold LinkedIn DM…you never know what will come from those conversations."





ALWAYS LOOKING AHEAD

SMU ALUM BRANDON COHANIM TURNED AN IDEA FROM HIS COLLEGE YEARS INTO A GROWING DALLAS HOSPITALITY GROUP-AND HE IS ALREADY THINKING ABOUT WHAT COMES NEXT.

By: Ryan Sarriedine

HEAD START

While many college students were busy getting going to classes and social circles as well as just taking it easy for the first year away from home, Brandon Cohanim was thinking about opening a restaurant.

Brandon Cohanim is a Southern Methodist University graduate, who moved from LA to Dallas in 2015 to go to school. He grew up surrounded by food. All three generations before him have been cooks: his great grandmother, grandmother, and mother. His family's travels also allowed him to experience many different types of restaurants around the world. After moving to Dallas, he realized that one type of cuisine was missing: Poke. Poke has become very popular in Los Angeles, but in Dallas, it didn't exist.

"There was no plan to open a restaurant or even get into that business when I started in school at SMU," Cohanim said. But he saw an opportunity. "People in Dallas wanted more. They wanted what they saw in L.A. They wanted what they saw in New York."

Seeing this need and wanting to fill it, Cohanim decided to open Pōk the Raw Bar in the West Village area of Dallas' downtown shopping district in 2017 while he was still an SMU student, later graduating with a degree in Economics in May of 2021.

> "I wanted to be so far ahead of everybody else by the time I graduated."

Cohamin's decision to begin so early was a deliberate choice.

"I want to be so far ahead of everybody else by the time I graduate," Cohanim recalled telling himself. "There's people that I look at right now, and they're in their 50s. And I say to myself, I want to be there when I'm 40."

BUILDING BEYOND ONE IDEA

Cohanim, along with his brother Henry, created **Feels Like Home,** a Dallas hospitality group that houses **Namo, Bar Colette, Mamani,** and **The Bread Club**. The group has continued to gain recognition in Dallas' restaurant scene, with Mamani earning a

Michelin star in 2025. As cofounder and managing director, Cohanim helps oversee the development and growth of the group's restaurant concepts, from creating new ideas to building the teams that bring them to life. As these new venues expand their reach, they reflect Cohanim's ability to advance past one successful venture.

After a 600-square-foot space opened up beside Pōk, what originally was going to be a hand roll bar ended up being a full-fledged sushi restaurant focusing on higher-quality ingredients.

After the COVID pandemic, Cohanim chose to end the original poke concept and turned the space into Bar Colette.

Instead of constantly opening versions of the same restaurant, Cohanim continued to explore different styles of cuisine. He decided to bring in more Italian, French and bakery style foods to Dallas. This desire eventually led to other concepts such as Mamani and The Bread Club.

However, there were many "mistakes" throughout this process. When Cohanim first began working in the restaurant industry, he had very little experience and learned most of what he knew about the industry through trial-and-error.

"I wish that I had hired somebody who had the experience or that I had the experience myself," he said. "I probably wouldn't have made a lot of the same mistakes."

These lessons guided Cohanim as he grew his business. He believes that having a strong team and talented staff members are essential for success in any business.

"We have, like, a dream team," he said. "I think the people that you surround yourself with, it's super, super, super important."

WHAT COMES NEXT

Cohanim also has future aspirations. He wants to add more locations to Feels Like Home, possibly six to seven locations in the DFW area before expanding outside of that market.

In addition to expanding restaurants, he has plans to incorporate hospitality with real estate development. Eventually, he wants to break into the hotel industry.

For the entrepreneur who wanted a head start before he even graduated, the next idea may already be taking shape.

"I would love to design, develop, and operate a hotel," Cohanim said.

> "I would love to design, develop, and operate a hotel."



FROM THE SMU HILLTOP TO AT&T:





AVERY COOPER'S CAREER BUILT ON CONNECTION, IMPACT, AND CURIOSITY

By: Loreta Gonzalez

Before the average person's day officially begins, Avery Cooper has already caught up on news and served her morning coffee. From her home just east of Dallas in Mesquite, Texas, the AT&T public relations specialist starts her mornings by keeping up with the news cycle, which she explains is "24/7."

Cooper lived in Plano until she was about 6, then in Frisco until she was 15. She began dancing at age 2; at age 10, she joined a competitive dance team. While in her freshman year of high school, she was enrolled in an online public school in Frisco because she was pursuing her dance career. Her family later moved to Parkland, Florida, that summer.

Dance remained part of her life for 20 years. It taught her about time management and discipline, but she also saw it as a type of storytelling. "I am a storyteller at my core," she said.

Her mother worked in PR, and as a blog writer, she would write content on behalf of various companies; this included travel writing, introducing Cooper to the PR profession. Cooper loved writing short stories in English class as well. She considered studying psychology and dance; she decided she wanted a career that combined business and creativity.

After graduating from high school in 2017, Cooper returned to Dallas to attend Southern Methodist University. Ironically, neither SMU nor PR was originally part of Cooper's plan.

"I am not going to SMU. I am not going to work in PR," she recalled thinking.

At SMU from 2017 to 2021, Cooper studied public relations and corporate communication, fashion media, and journalism and minored in psychology. She was membership vice president of Gamma Phi Beta and vice president of programming for the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA). She was in charge of inviting professionals to talk to the students; she formed many relationships that she still maintains.

In the summer of 2019, Cooper studied abroad in London and participated in Hilltop on the Hill in Washington, D.C., that October. She was a corporate communications fellow and worked under Professor Steve Lee, whom she still considers a mentor.

To make time for work, Cooper scheduled her classes on Tuesday and Thursday. In 2021, after she graduated, she would go back to her class notes from her SMU days and use them as guidance for press releases, media relations, and communication plans. When asked how SMU helped prepare her, she said, "literally everything."

The first job she had after she graduated was at a PR agency named TRIZCOM. A few months later, she was sent to Las Vegas for a convention to arrange media interviews and represent a client.

"I think I know what I am doing," Cooper recalled telling herself.

Cooper later worked at Jackson Spalding, CKP Group, and TruePoint Communications, which helped her gain experience across some PR fields. This linked her to what she was truly interested in: technology.

Today, the storytelling abilities Cooper developed through dance and public relations, where the stakes are much higher. Cooper began working at AT&T on the company's issues management team in May of 2024. Now, Cooper handles about 50 to 70 customer escalations and media inquiries a month. She also takes charge of network outage duty around four times a year. She calculates that her team's work prevents around 90% to 95% of potential negative outcomes from being published each quarter.

Today, the storytelling abilities Cooper developed through dance and public relations, where the stakes are much higher. Cooper began working at AT&T on the company's issues management team in May of 2024.



Cooper hoped to someday lead and mentor others just as she was mentored. She also has set the goal for herself to publish a poetry collection. Both of her ambitions present an idea that she carried from her dancing days to her communication career: stories can leave a lasting impact. "If I can have an impact on a few people, then I lived my life well," Cooper stated. "I want to make my mark the best that I can."

Keeping It Real On Air

KELLIE RASBERRY

By: Rihanna Alaqrabawy

At 19 years old, Kellie Rasberry never planned to pursue a career in radio. Born and raised in Florence, South Carolina, Rasberry dreamed of a career in Hollywood, specifically as a sitcom actress. After attending a talent convention, a radio station owner noticed her infectious personality and suggested she try radio. Soon after, she was hired to assist with the local morning show. "I just never thought about being on it," Rasberry said.



THE KIDD KRADDICK MORNING SHOW



> "WHEN YOU'RE YOUNG, AND YOU DON'T HAVE A MORTGAGE AND RESPONSIBILITIES, TAKE ALL THE RISKS. BECAUSE WHAT'S THE WORST THAT CAN HAPPEN?"



That unexpected opportunity launched a career spanning nearly four decades. Rasberry joined The Kidd Kraddick Morning Show in Dallas in 1994 and has remained a co-host for 32 years. Today, the show is nationally syndicated and can be heard worldwide. The show airs every weekday from 6 to 10 a.m. Her path to a successful and lasting media career was anything but simple.

Before her big move to Dallas at 27, she was living with her parents in South Carolina, working three jobs: hosting a radio show, presenting weekend weather for a CBS affiliate, and managing her parents' shop. Her experience taught her that students do not need to have their careers and timelines planned out before betting on themselves.

Staying Real in a Changing Media World

HOW RASBERRY HAS ADAPTED WITHOUT LOSING HER AUTHENTICITY



Taking risks may have launched Rasberry's career, but her authenticity has sustained it.

The media landscape she entered in the 1990s looks dramatically different today. Radio was primarily an audio medium. Now, Rasberry's job extends to video, Facebook, Instagram, podcasts, and direct interaction with listeners online. She said social media has become an essential part of both maintaining audience relationships and satisfying commitments to advertisers.

The way Rasberry tells stories has also evolved. When she started, Rasberry said a single radio story could stretch for 30 minutes. Today, audiences have shorter attention spans, requiring her to get to the punchline much faster. What has not changed is her belief that audiences value authenticity. When Rasberry first joined The Kidd Kraddick Morning Show, her previous radio bosses had encouraged her to dilute her Southern accent to become more of a stereotypical radio personality.

However, Kidd Kraddick took the opposite approach. He liked that she was herself. That authenticity now goes beyond what she says on air. Rasberry considers whether advertisers and trends align with her personal brand before participating. She has even rejected advertising opportunities when she did not believe in or personally value the product or company. For her, maintaining audience trust and building lasting relationships is more valuable than accepting every opportunity.



> "I LOVE HOW MUCH THE ALUMNI TAKE THE STUDENTS UNDER THEIR WINGS AND WANT TO SEE THEM SUCCEED."

For students getting ready to enter an increasingly crowded industry, Rasberry does not sugarcoat the hardships. Radio, she said, has become more competitive as digital platforms, technology, and syndication compete for attention. Her advice is to be indispensable: volunteer for the weekend shift, learn new skills, and be willing to wear multiple hats.

After nearly 40 years in the industry, Rasberry has become a familiar voice across Dallas-Fort Worth, accompanying generations of North Texans on their morning commutes to school and work. In 2026, Rasberry's connection to Dallas came full circle when her daughter transferred to SMU. Now in her first year on the Hilltop, Rasberry hopes she will build the same lasting relationships that have shaped her own career.

AVENUE 8 COCKTAILS



BEST IN CLASS FOUNDER TIFFANY JONES

The women behind Avenue 8 cocktails

By: Lulu Mazur

Changing the Face of the Industry

WHO IS TIFFANY JONES?

Tiffany Jones calls herself "probably the least likely person you would ever expect to start a cocktail company." She spent 22 years as an interior designer and raised two daughters, shuttling them to volleyball and dance along the way. Then came her second chapter: founder of Avenue 8 Cocktails.

That design background still shapes how she works. "The world of interior design is very much about the details," she says, and she brings that same eye to everything at Avenue 8, from the formula to the box on the shelf.

The idea came to her after a parents weekend in September 2023. By October, she was researching the industry, and in January 2024 she decided to go for it. Fourteen months later, in March 2025, Avenue 8 hit the market.

Jones was born in Dallas. Though she has "moved a million times," she has spent more than half her life in the city and raised her family there. She earned her MBA from SMU in 1995 and is a wife and mother. She chose to build Avenue 8 in Dallas because of what she calls the city's "incredible entrepreneurial community and spirit."

For Jones, success now means something close to home. "It's really important to me that my daughters see that women can do whatever they want," she says. "You don't get to a certain age and stop. You can keep going. It's chapter two."



"There are a lot of people that are going to tell you why you can't do it. For me, that's a bigger motivator to want to keep going and prove them wrong. Always prove them wrong."





THE AVENUE 8 JOURNEY

A better drink in a can.

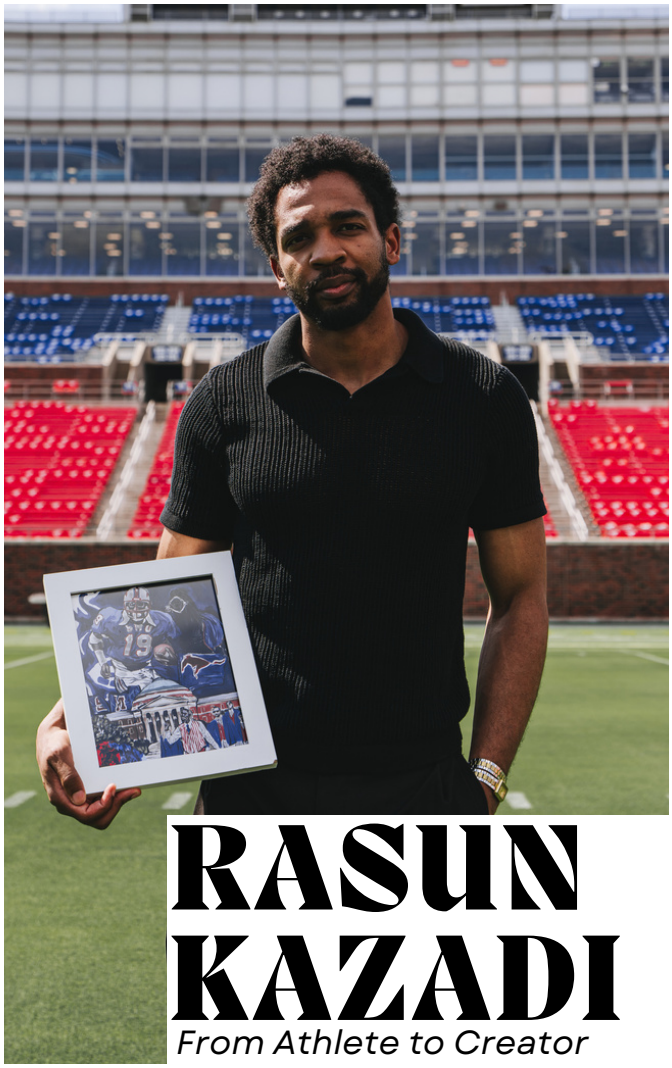
The idea began at college parents' weekends. Over eight years of visiting her daughters, Jones got to know canned cocktails like High Noon. She loved how easy they made tailgates and travel. "But I didn't love what was in the can," she says. At the same time, the wine and champagne she had always enjoyed stopped sitting well with her because of "too much sugar and too many additives and too many fillers." She wanted "a cocktail without having to make a cocktail" and couldn't find one.

EARLY WINS

Less than 90 days after launch, Avenue 8 won a Double Gold and was a Best in Class finalist at the San Francisco World SpiritsCompetition. When the email came, she opened it twice. "They can't really be talking to me. We just launched," she remembers thinking. The brand then won 2025 Best New Ready-to-Drink at the same competition.

A WOMAN FOUNDER IN A MAN'S INDUSTRY.

Men lead the biggest companies in alcohol, and Jones saw an opening in that. "There was an opportunity to have a different voice at the table," she says. She was building for two customers the industry had overlooked: herself and her daughters. "Two different demographics, but the same female consumer, and neither was being served." She sees that as her edge. Decisions about how women's bodies handle sugar and carbonation, she argues, are not ones a conglomerate boardroom can make well. "We come from a completely different perspective."



RASUN KAZADI

From Athlete to Creator

For Ra Kazadi, creativity and competition were never two separate worlds. Ra was born in St. Louis, Missouri, where sports were a major part of his life from the start. At the time, his father was playing for the St. Louis Rams. His family later moved several times through Kansas, Florida, Texas, and Arkansas before his athletic career eventually brought him to SMU to play football. Growing up, Kazadi experimented with nearly every sport he could, from football and basketball to boxing, track, and even hockey.

However, art was another major interest that began in Kazadi's early years and stayed with him. Art felt like another way for him to experiment and use his creative abilities. As a kid, Kazadi would sit with his comic books, sketching the pages and trying to imitate the artists behind them. Before long, he became known as "the artist"—or, as he jokingly remembers, "a drawer."

Looking back, Kazadi doesn't see an athlete and an artist as competing identities. To him, they were "always the same," both driven by his passion and love for attempting new things.

WHERE SPORTS MET CREATIVITY

SMU gave Kazadi exactly what he wanted: the chance to play Division I football, get a strong education, and live in a major city. Dallas also gave him the chance to explore interests outside football. At SMU, he initially wanted to pursue a degree in business because he knew he wanted freedom in his future career and eventually wanted to work for himself.

However, after discovering advertising, he decided to change directions and major in it. The switch in interest started when Kazadi met professors within SMU's communications and advertising programs, including Willie Baronet. Through a directed study with Baronet, he strengthened his creative skills and discovered how his interest in art could translate into advertising. Eventually, Kazadi became interested in what he calls turning "creativity into commerce."



Kazadi shared on his podcast for Meadows on the Mic that balancing creativity with Division I football came with many challenges. Kazadi said he remembers one day when practice ended minutes before class. He rarely had time to fully change before heading to class. He would sprint from the field to the classroom and would occasionally have to give advertising presentations while still wearing his football pants. Looking back, he remembers it as funny, but it also showed how closely his two worlds overlapped.

Kazadi believes football built a mindset that followed him far beyond his college years. He describes it with three words: "consistency, momentum, and energy." He learned to adjust when things went wrong, stay consistent, and keep moving forward, skills that became just as important in his creative career as they were in football.



"TRY NOT TO LIMIT YOURSELF."
– RA KAZADI '22

CREATING SOMETHING OF HIS OWN

Kazadi has never limited himself to a single career path. After graduating from SMU, he found ways to combine his interests in art, advertising, music, and culture. On the Meadows on the Mic podcast, he shared advice: "Meet as many people as you can, increase your network, stay focused, and don't take it too seriously." In 2024, Kazadi and Rob Grass, a fellow former SMU football player, co-founded Nostalgia & Noise. Nostalgia & Noise is a creative space in Dallas that brings together art, music, brands, and community.



The company became not only a place for showcasing his work but also an outlet for others to connect. As the idea grew, Kazadi expanded into events, collaborations, and creative projects, including collaborations with Red Bull and the Kansas City Royals. He has also worked on partnerships surrounding event weeks like Formula 1 and Art Basel. As a former SMU football player, Kazadi partnered closely with SMU Athletics. Moreover, he selected other Dallas-based artists to help create original apparel and posters. Kazadi has also worked on murals in Dallas, including ones for SMU. Through these projects, Kazadi has continued to bring his passions for sports and art together, building a career that reflects both sides of who he is.



BACK WHERE THE MAGIC BEGAN

KAYLIN THOMSON'S FULL CIRCLE JOURNEY TO DISNEY

By: Maddie Roy



For many students, whether they are seniors quickly approaching graduation or underclassmen seeking a major, one key question lingers: How can I turn my passions into a successful and fulfilling career? For SMU alum Kaylin Thomson, the answer came through an unexpected path, following her passion for theme parks led her from selling popcorn at Disney to helping guests create unforgettable memories at EPCOT.

An Unexpected Beginning

Kaylin spent her childhood in New Orleans, which is where she discovered a love for theater and the arts. Initially, she envisioned a future in law or diplomacy. However, everything changed when she leaned into her passion for theme parks and joined the Disney College Program in 2022 during Walt Disney World's 50th anniversary celebration.

When Kaylin decided to enroll in the Disney College Program, she was taking a leap of faith. Participants are not guaranteed their preferred role, and the program did not provide her with college credit.

Even while stationed at a popcorn stand and working 60-hour weeks, Kaylin embraced the opportunity, immersing herself in the inner workings of one of the world's most recognizable entertainment brands.

This experience helped Kaylin realize where her interests truly lied, and from there, she applied to SMU with a major in public relations and a minor in advertising. She credits courses with Professor Anderson and Chris Coats with allowing her to build skills she could immediately apply outside the classroom.

Transforming Passion Into Experince

During her time at SMU, Kaylin often found herself reminiscing about her experience with the Disney College Program and longing for another opportunity to gain real-world experience in the theme park industry. When she applied to Six Flags, she initially had her sights set on an attractions role.

In January 2023, her public relations studies at SMU, combined with her previous Disney experience, opened the door to a communications role at Six Flags while she was still an undergraduate.

Kaylin notes that her most rewarding project was building the campaign around the Aquaman attraction at Six Flags. This was her first hands-on campaign experience, where she gained key communications and marketing skills. Specifically, this fast-paced position taught her three skills she continues to rely on today: management, communication and flexibility.

The Full Circle Moment

The knowledge Kaylin gained early in her career ultimately brought her full circle, leading her back to Disney as a Guest Relations Hostess at EPCOT in January 2025, where her passion for the theme park industry was born.

Her current role involves assisting visitors with everything from ticketing and annual passes to ride information and accessibility services. While she mainly works at EPCOT, Kaylin's role still spans across Disney World's four theme parks, and two water parks, Disney Springs and ESPN.





For Kaylin, Disney has allowed her to not only pursue her passion for theme parks for the past five years, but also understand how impactful branding goes beyond marketing and messaging. She emphasizes that Disney creates a one-of-a-kind experience for both its guests and cast members. From remembering individual guest preferences to creating an unmistakable sense of pride among employees,

"Disney's magic comes from making people feel connected to the stories they love."

Taking the Leap

From theater, to a popcorn cart, to the SMU classroom, to communications management and back to Disney, one commonality exists: a willingness to take opportunities will get you far no matter what point you're at in your career.

For students looking to pursue a career that aligns with their passions, Thomson's journey serves as a reminder that taking a leap of faith can lead to opportunities you never expected and ultimately bring you exactly where you are meant to be.

Beyond the Ballpark

HOW CAROLINE WILLIAMS '22 TURNED A LACK OF DIRECTION AND A LOVE FOR SPORTS INTO A CAREER WORKING BEHIND THE SCENES FOR THE ATLANTA BRAVES

By: Ava Zarrillo

Still don't know what you want to do after graduation? Caroline Williams '22 didn't either.

Growing up, she wanted to be a veterinarian, a marine biologist, a teacher, even a church worker. "I was all over the place," she says. "I was pretty good at school, so everything seemed possible." Through the ever-revolving door of passions, however, one thing remained constant: her love of sports.

DON'T PICK JUST ONE THING

When asked if she knew what her career would look like at SMU, she says, "Absolutely not. Which is why I loved SMU." She combined Communications, Sports Management, and Advertising, and followed her wish to help people into the nonprofit and social engagement track in Corporate Communication and Public Affairs.

In Business and Professional Communication, she practiced mock interviews, résumés, and cover letters, then gave a persuasive presentation on the Atlanta Braves Foundation, which she now works alongside–talk about manifestation!

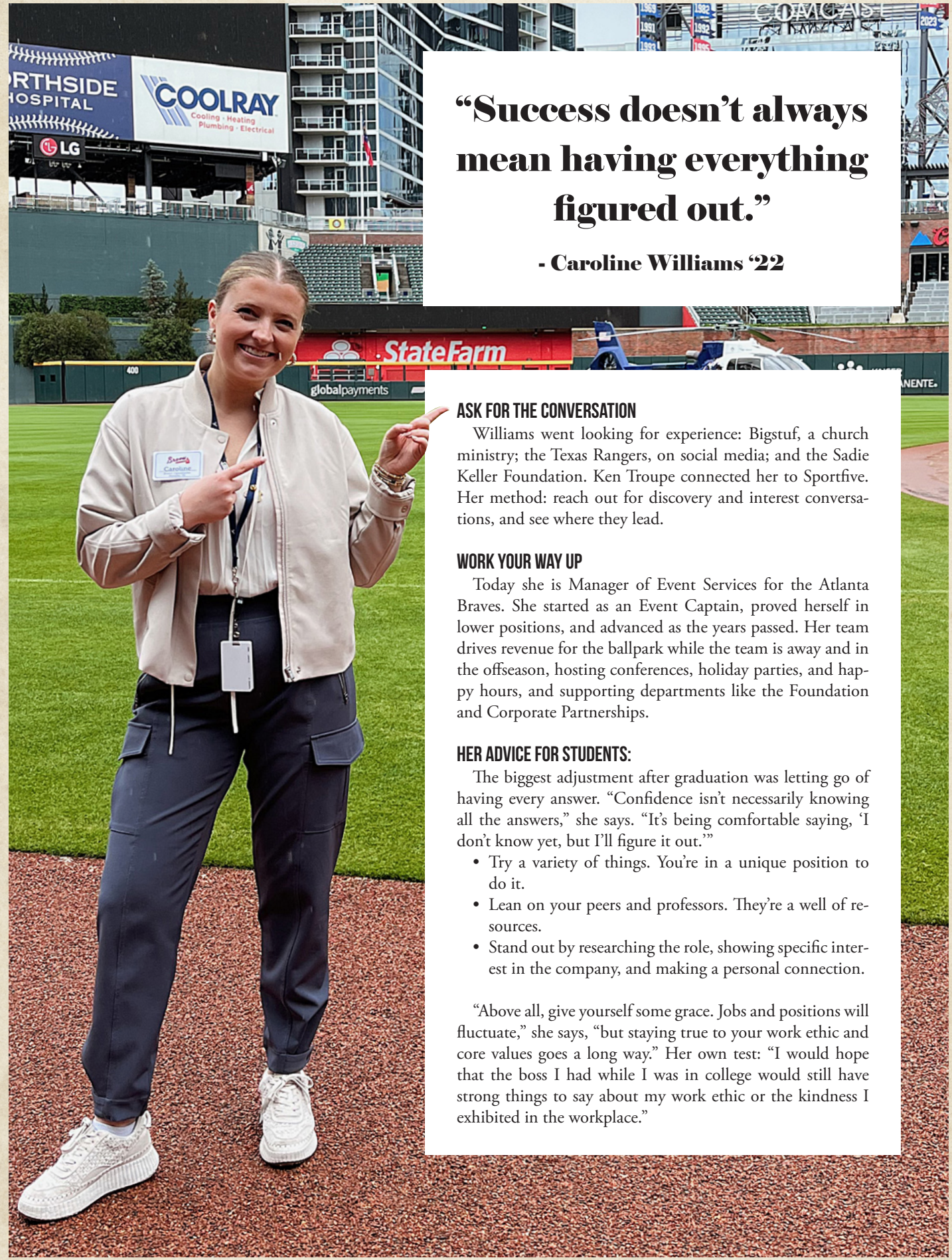
Dr. Ryan Kota's revenue in sport class brought encouragement and a recommendation letter for the college brand ambassador program.

YOUR EXTRACURRICULARS COUNT

Sorority recruitment meant talking with hundreds of potential new members every year. Greek life and Student Foundation made her responsible for her own schedule. "A lot of the things I did at SMU that felt like extracurriculars at the time actually ended up being professional preparation," she says.







"Success doesn't always mean having everything figured out."

- Caroline Williams '22

ASK FOR THE CONVERSATION

Williams went looking for experience: Bigstuf, a church ministry; the Texas Rangers, on social media; and the Sadie Keller Foundation. Ken Troupe connected her to Sportfive. Her method: reach out for discovery and interest conversations, and see where they lead.

WORK YOUR WAY UP

Today she is Manager of Event Services for the Atlanta Braves. She started as an Event Captain, proved herself in lower positions, and advanced as the years passed. Her team drives revenue for the ballpark while the team is away and in the offseason, hosting conferences, holiday parties, and happy hours, and supporting departments like the Foundation and Corporate Partnerships.

HER ADVICE FOR STUDENTS:

The biggest adjustment after graduation was letting go of having every answer. "Confidence isn't necessarily knowing all the answers," she says. "It's being comfortable saying, 'I don't know yet, but I'll figure it out.'"

- Try a variety of things. You're in a unique position to do it.
- Lean on your peers and professors. They're a well of resources.
- Stand out by researching the role, showing specific interest in the company, and making a personal connection.

"Above all, give yourself some grace. Jobs and positions will fluctuate," she says, "but staying true to your work ethic and core values goes a long way." Her own test: "I would hope that the boss I had while I was in college would still have strong things to say about my work ethic or the kindness I exhibited in the workplace."

Timmie Hathorn

Helping Students Find Their Way

By: Riley Scallen



For many college students, figuring out what to do after graduation can be overwhelming.

Timmie Hathorn, Assistant Dean of Alumni and Career Success, knows this feeling firsthand. After graduating from Spring Hill College, Hathorn attended grad school at Southern Methodist University. Still, she was unsure of where her career would take her. Today, she uses that experience to help students at SMU's Meadows School of the Arts feel more confident about their futures.

With more than a decade of experience in alumni relations and higher education administration, Hathorn has dedicated her career to helping hundreds of students build professional relationships and prepare for life after college.

In her current role at Meadows, Hathorn is responsible for creating and implementing alumni engagement and career development strategies. She established the school's Office of Alumni and Career Success (ACS), which connects students with alumni who can offer career advice, mentorship and professional opportunities.

Unlike a traditional career center, the office focuses on connecting students to alumni mentors who can help them explore different career paths. Since the office's launch four years ago, Meadows has seen student participation in career counseling services at the Hegi Center increase fourfold, growing from an 11.5% rate of engagement in 2022 to 50% last academic year. Hathorn hopes to eventually see 100% of Meadows students participate in career counseling services.

Her passion for helping students comes from her own experience of not knowing what she wanted to do after college and graduate school.

A native of Dallas and the eldest of five children, Hathorn grew up attending Ursuline Academy of Dallas, an all-girls school. She enjoyed spending time with friends, playing sports and cheerleading for Cistercian Preparatory, a local all-boys school.

After high school, she attended Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama, where both of her parents had studied. Although she originally wanted to become a preschool teacher, Hathorn discovered her love for history and changed her major. She graduated in May 2007 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in history. During her time at Spring Hill, she also met her future husband. Still unsure of her career plans, Hathorn decided to continue her education. After applying to six graduate schools, she received a full-tuition scholarship to SMU. She graduated in August 2009, at the height of the Great Recession, with a Master of Arts degree



in history and little to no professional experience on her resume.

After SMU, Hathorn moved back to Mobile, Alabama, where she began working as an administrative assistant at an accounting firm. While working there, she volunteered with Spring Hill's alumni relations office, helping plan events and activities. Her volunteer experience eventually landed her a position as assistant director of alumni and advancement at Spring Hill.

In 2013, Hathorn returned to Dallas and joined SMU's Office of Alumni Relations as an assistant director of alumni engagement. Before moving to Meadows in 2017, Hathorn had worked for nearly five years in alumni affairs at the central University level, ultimately serving as the team's Director.

When an alumni relations position opened at Meadows, Hathorn was enthusiastic about the opportunity to work for Dean Sam Holland. She had heard through her network that Dean Holland was a visionary leader who empowered his team and colleagues to do their best work.

When she started at Meadows, her main goal was to earn the trust of the dean and her coworkers by working hard and expanding and improving programs that fell under her portfolio. Working together, they expanded alumni engagement to include mentorship and student career development.

Today, Hathorn uses the challenges and uncertainty she faced after graduation to help students navigate their own career decisions. She encourages them to pursue internships, make professional connections, and take advantage of opportunities even when they are unsure of their next steps. In addition to introducing career counseling and alumni mentorship programs that are tailored to serve Meadows majors, the Office of Alumni and Career Success has generated more paid internship opportunities for students. In 2025, ACS launched an intern fellowship program, which provides stipends for Meadows students to complete summer internships with local arts, media, and communication organizations.

Finding the right career takes time, and students should not be afraid to put themselves out there.

Last summer, eleven students participated in internships with nine area employers, including the City of Dallas Office of Arts and Culture, D Magazine, the Dallas Opera, and the Nasher Sculpture Center. For Hathorn, the most rewarding part of her job is seeing how these connections can change students' lives. Looking ahead, she hopes to expand the Office of Alumni and Career Success, involve more alumni as mentors, and create more paid internship and fellowship opportunities for students in the arts, communication, media, and design.

Outside of work, Hathorn is a mother of three. She considers balancing her career and family one of her greatest accomplishments. As she continues helping students prepare for their futures, Hathorn wants them to understand that finding the right career takes time and that they should not be afraid to put themselves out there. Her advice to students is simple: "Don't count yourself out until you try," and "follow every lead to its end".

HOW TO ENTERTAIN THOSE FRIENDS AND FAM WHO COME TO BIG D!



By: Lauren Alessini

Dallas is one of the largest cities in the country, filled with places to venture. Be prepared for the onslaught of friends and family ready to visit for a quick weekend as you're now in the role of tour guide! SMU is in the heart of the city and has countless activities and restaurants to explore. Having your loved ones in town gives students the chance to show off their new home. But where do you take them? Whether the weekend mission is shopping, dining or experiencing SMU culture, these places deserve a spot on your itinerary.

Highland Park Village

Highland Park Village is a staple when it comes to a must-see stop. Opened in 1931, Highland Park Village has been a Dallas landmark for more than 90 years. Even if you are not looking to buy anything, it is a beautiful place to walk around and stop in some shops. During special SMU weekends, many shops will have vendors outside of their stores giving away drinks such as complimentary matcha outside of Alice and Olivia. Love Shack Fancy and Frame at times will offer complimentary embroidery. It is just minutes away from SMU and is also home to amazing restaurants that book up quickly during this time.



Mi Cocina is a must-stop when visiting Highland Park Village with origins tied to notable SMU alumni. It is known as one of the best Mexican food restaurants in Dallas and has a festive atmoshphere for celebrating any occasion. Highland Park Village is just one of its locations across the Dallas area. The Mi Cocina menu offers a large variety of award-winning Tex-Mex dishes, along with their famous Mambo Taxi margarita.

Knox-Henderson

Knox Street is a Dallas favorite and is the perfect mix of shopping, eating, and getting your steps in. It is known for being close to the Katy Trail and very walkable, especially from campus. If you are coming from SMU, you can hop on the trail and walk down to Knox (It is approximately a 20-minute walk from the trail). You can start the morning with an Almond Berry Bliss Muffin from Village Baking Co. and a Brown Butter Latte from Foxtrot then walk to Anthropologie or Roller Rabbit.

RH Rooftop Restaurant is located right in Knox and a go-to for taking visitors. The atmosphere of RH - while its ground floor is a high-end furniture store - its top floor is a jaw-dropping experience that is sure to impress Mom and Dad with its glass-enclosed, skylit dining area that lies within a garden setting. Customers rave about their menu items ranging from Grilled Shrimp and Vegetable Salad to the RH Burger and the Shaved Rib-Eye Dip Sandwich. It is a great place to go if you and your family want to get dressed up before the Boulevard or anytime.



The Boulevard

If your fam comes during football season, it would not be complete without taking them to the Boulevard. This is one of SMU's biggest traditions and is a spin-off of other schools' traditional tailgates. For many SMU families, this tradition is more than just football; it is an opportunity to connect with friends and celebrate school spirit. Tents range from Greek Life to alumni to business collaborations. This is where you will really get to see the SMU school spirit in action and how much students truly enjoy being a Mustang. It is a great atmosphere because students and parents are so excited to be together with their friends and family. During the spring, the fun continues as SMU Athletics also hosts other spirit-filled events for our teams!

Al Biernat's

Sometime during the visit, get glammed and head to the legendary Al Biernat's Steakhouse – a great spot to eat dinner while also catching a celebrity dining at a nearby table. This award-winning steakhouse is known worldwide for its prime-aged steaks and seafood. The restaurant has an amazing culture that was started by the late Al Biernat when he created the famous steakhouse in 1998 then a second location in North Dallas in 2017. Al Biernat was known as an amazing man who loved what he did, hosting famous celebrities and athletes such as Tom Brady and numerous famous Dallas Cowboy players. SMU families have been going there for decades as the Director of Operations, Brad Fuller said "We love having SMU families come visit, and it's especially meaningful to see second-generation families returning, this time with their own children attending SMU." You can feel the culture through the food; Al Biernat's is a must on your itinerary.



Hope these tips help you navigate your new college home and play tour guide! Whether shopping in Highland Park Village, exploring Knox-Henderson, or celebrating on the Boulevard, enjoy this time with family and friends and the opportunity to create lasting memories.

WHAT'S HOT ON THE HILLTOP

By: Shayenne Behdar

Life on the Hilltop extends far beyond the classroom. Campus culture is shaped by the places students go, trends, and traditions. Each semester brings a new mix of what's popular. Here's what's hot and happening on the Hilltop!

See you on the boulevard!

Fall on the Hilltop means gameday! Since 2000, boulevarding brings together spirit, fashion, music and the social scene long before kickoff at Ford Stadium – four hours before kickoff! Chic looks dominate, red and blue, and packed tents taking over campus with over 30k of fans ready for pregame festivities making the Boulevard a football and social tradition!





For the Well of It!

Sweating = Social. Pilates, group fitness classes, running and wellness-focused activities are becoming increasingly social, with 62% of Gen Z exercising as another form of socializing. Fitness studios surround campus for a reason. The wellness culture continues to grow. Workouts are finding their way onto the social calendar.



Where to Weekend!

The Hilltop social scene is beyond campus. The weekend starts on Thursday at Home Bar; and Friday and Saturday are reserved for hot spots like Milo Butterfingers, Barley House, and Chelsea's Corner. Weekend routines have developed a culture of their own. The destination might change, but deciding where the night is headed next is half the fun.



A Matcha Made in Heaven

Coffee may be a classic; but matcha is having its moment! What started as an alternative to the usual coffee order has quickly become a campus favorite, showing up in cups between classes, during study sessions, and all over social media. The obsession isn't slowing down either, with Rollin Joe's, a new coffee and matcha concept set to open just across from SMU on Asbury Street.



COMMUNITY NATIONAL
BANK & TRUST OF TEXAS

Member FDIC

There's a reason **COMMUNITY COMES FIRST** in our name.

MyBankTX.com

Bonham • Buffalo • Centerville • Corsicana • Fairfield • Frost • Ft.Worth
Lake Worth • Leonard • Melissa • Mineral Wells • Possum Kingdom
Red Oak • Trenton • Waxahachie • Weatherford

"Best Pizza in Texas"

-USA TODAY

OLIVELLA'S
PIZZA & WINE

One of the oldest pizza families from
Naples, Italy is across the street from campus...

... but it only begins there... full-service Italian with old family recipes...

• DAILY SPECIALS •

EVERY DAY:

SMU SPECIAL 15% off Food
with Valid SMU ID

TUESDAY:	WEDNESDAY:	THURSDAY:
Half-price Wine Bottles	BOGO 50%-off Wine Glasses	BOGO 50%-off Pastas

3406 McFarlin, Dallas | 214-528-7070 | olivellas.com

Mesero

Mexican Spirit | American Life











AWARD WINNING FLAVORS

ENJOY THE SPACE. ENJOY THE FOOD. ENJOY EACH OTHER.

PRESTONWOOD
5505 BELT LINE RD, DALLAS
(972) 788-8180

LEGACY WEST
7501 WINDROSE AVE, PLANO
(972) 788-8158

SOUTHLAKE
1471 E. SOUTHLAKE BLVD, SOUTHLAKE
(817) 952-9705

INWOOD VILLAGE
5330 WEST LOVERS LANE, DALLAS
(214) 654-0185

PRESTON HOLLOW VILLAGE
7825 FIREWALK WAY, DALLAS
(214) 716-0524

OKLAHOMA CITY
2121 NW 50TH ST, SUITE 200, OKC
(405) 666-0862

VICTORY PARK
2375 VICTORY PARK LN, DALLAS, TX
(214) 821-6426

CLEAR FORK
5203 MARATHON AVE, FT. WORTH, TX
(817) 402-0744

NASHVILLE
2803 12TH AVE S #202, NASHVILLE, TN
(629) 777-1093





An SMU neighborhood steakhouse tradition for over 25 Years!

AL BIERNAT'S
OAK LAWN

4217 OAK LAWN AVE | 5 MINUTES FROM CAMPUS

WWW.ALBIERNATS.COM | 214-219-2201