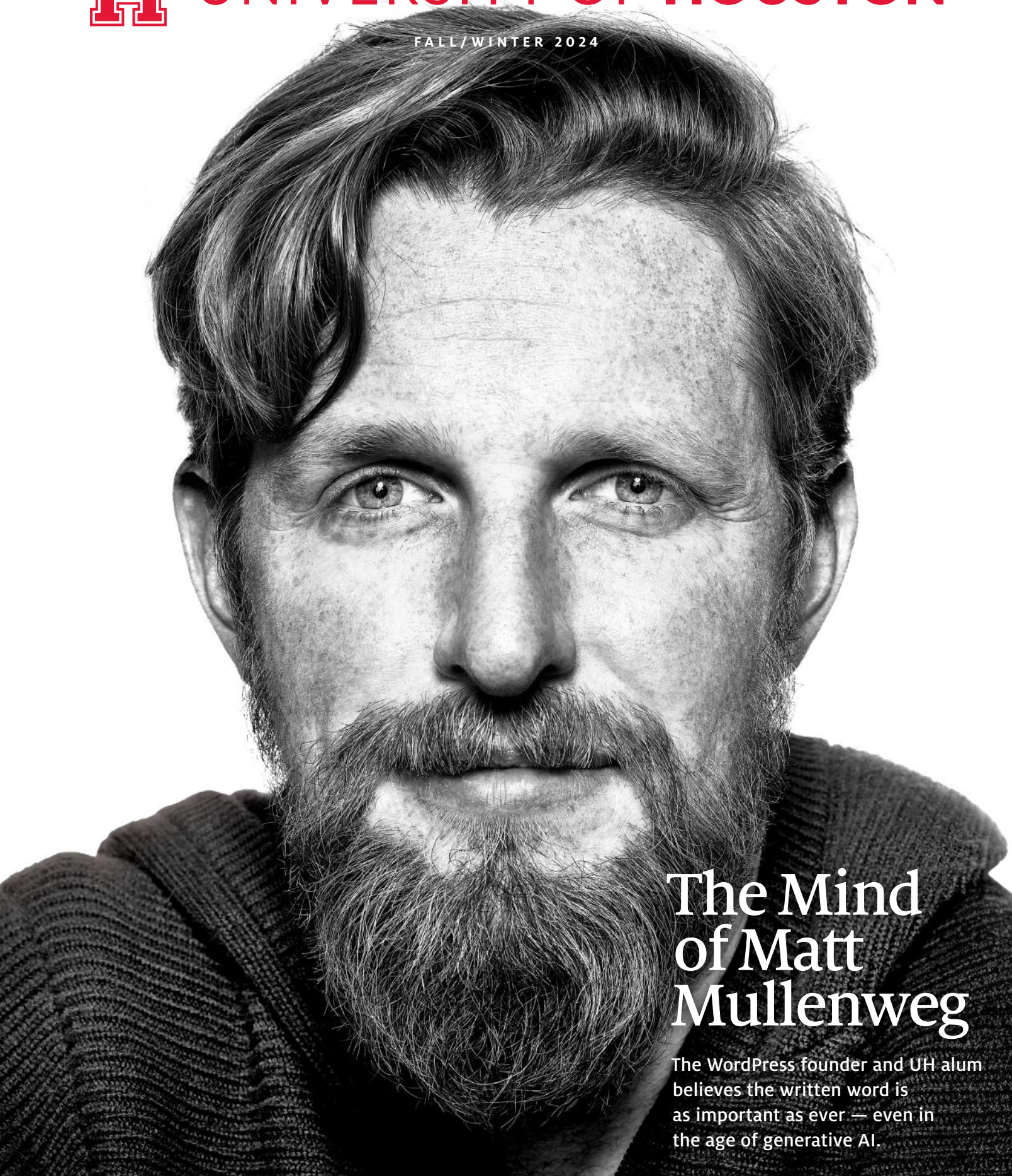
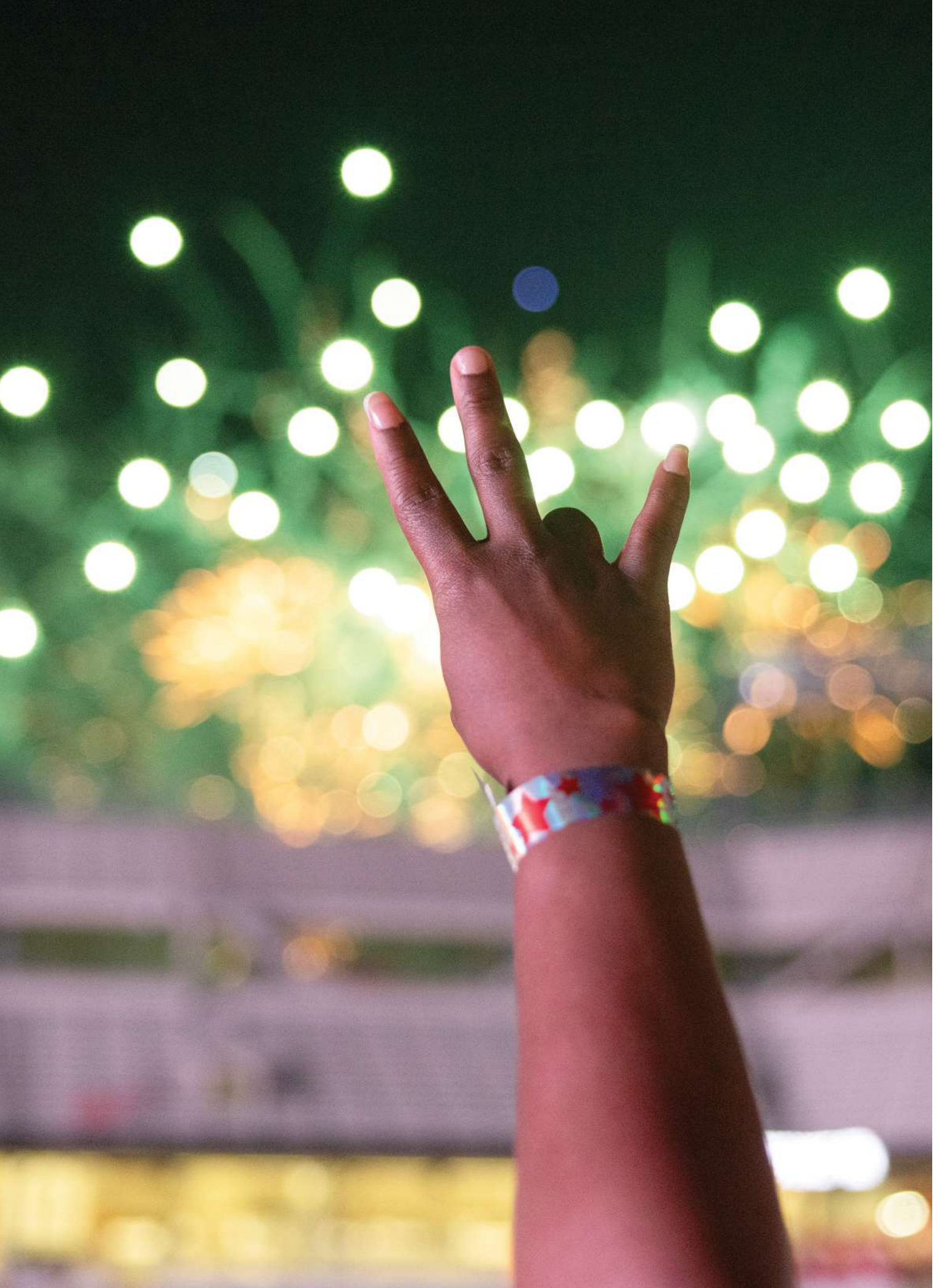
UNIVERSITY OF **HOUSTON**

FALL/WINTER 2024



The Mind of Matt Mullenweg

The WordPress founder and UH alum believes the written word is as important as ever — even in the age of generative AI.



JON BURKE / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Cougars and Friends,

WE MADE HISTORY this fall with the University of Houston's largest freshman class ever (page 4). More than 6,200 freshman students made UH their college of choice, and we also saw an increase in transfer student enrollments.

While our stellar programs and research undoubtedly contribute to this growth, the heart of our success lies in the UH community's advancing our University and world. For example, Cristina Rivera Garza, director of UH's creative writing program in Hispanic Studies, won a 2024 Pulitzer Prize for her gripping memoir, "Liliana's Invincible Summer: A Sister's Search for Justice." Rivera Garza shares how crafting the book brought her healing and restorative justice for her sister's untimely death (page 53). Another influential Cougar, Robert Stewart, is working to do the same for residents of Fifth Ward. In collaboration with community groups, the UH geophysics professor and his team are helping restore the historic Evergreen Negro Cemetery (page 34). Through ground-penetrating radar, "They uncovered numerous unmarked graves, revealing the final resting places of individuals who had been forgotten by history."

Powerful things happen when people work together toward a positive cause.

One of the most powerful causes in my purview is helping students excel. In this issue (page 40), we explore the many ways UH is doing just that. From counseling to our Cougar Cupboard food pantry, we're elevating our student body as students graduate faster today than they did a decade prior.

In our cover story (page 28), learn how the late political science professor Ross Lence influenced alum Matt Mullenweg when he was just an undergrad developing WordPress. Mullenweg, whose company powers an impressive 40% of the web, talks artificial intelligence, open-source programming and the power of hitting pause. While many raise concerns about AI and the freewheeling internet, Mullenweg offers a brighter take.

Optimism, ingenuity and passion for positive change are on full display throughout this issue. The engine driving our ascension is our vibrant UH community, which this magazine beautifully celebrates. Enjoy!

With warm regards,

Renu Khator
President, University of Houston

BEN CORDA / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

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UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

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6,200 New Freshman Coogs and Counting

Biggest. Freshman. Class. Ever.

THE FALL 2024 semester kicked off with a little more energy and excitement than usual, fueled by the arrival of the University of Houston's largest-ever freshman class: More than 6,200 new freshmen are enrolled at UH this semester — a population 10% larger than any other enrolled freshman class in UH history. This growth reflects the University's reputation as a destination institution for students seeking a world-class education in a vibrant urban setting.

Here's a look at the class of 2028 by the numbers.

6,256
New freshmen

33,000
Prospective students applied

4,726
New transfer student enrollments

44.1%
Male freshmen

55.9%
Female freshmen

39.6%
First-generation college students

1252
Average SAT score

28.3%
Ranked in the top 10% of their high school classes

Top 10 Majors

Pre-Business Administration
11.99% (745 students)

Biology
7.4% (460 students)

Psychology
6.6% (410 students)

Health
5.81% (361 students)

Computer Science
5.21% (324 students)

Integrated Studies
3.69% (229 students)

Arts
3.64% (226 students)

Architecture
3.36% (209 students)

Economics
3.2% (199 students)

Psychology
3.14% (195 students)

UH attracts Coogs from around the world. No one high school contributes more than 1.6% of our student population.

What's New and Noteworthy on Campus and in the Classroom

CAMPUS BULLETIN

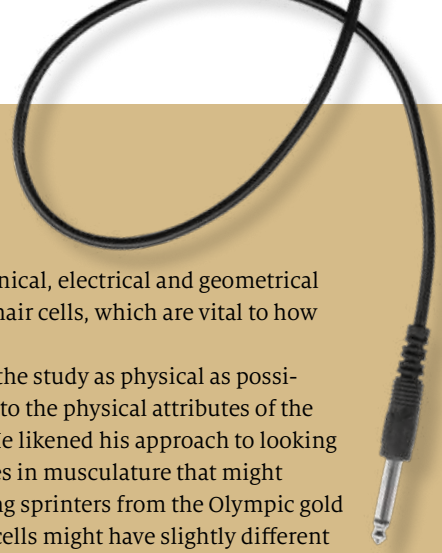
FROM THE LAB

The Science of Playing by Ear

Using the practical approach of a mechanical engineer, UH's ***PRADEEP SHARMA*** *set out to discover why some people pick up music more naturally than others.*

By ***SAM EIFLING***

JON BURKE / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON



WHEN PRADEEP SHARMA wanted to learn to play the piano more than a decade ago, he bought a keyboard and began to plink. He didn't have sheet music for his favorite Bollywood songs and decided to sound them out by ear.

As he played around, he learned that, unlike him, his wife had the ability to hear a song and easily pick out the correct keys to play it — even though she had no formal musical training.

"She could figure out the melody in two minutes flat," says Sharma, dean of the University of Houston Cullen College of Engineering and Hugh Roy and Lillie Cranz Cullen Distinguished University Professor. "That made me wonder what is so special about her that she can hear music so much better than I do."

With that spark of curiosity, Sharma set out to learn why some people seem to possess a natural gift for hearing music. He approached the question from the perspective of a mechanical engineer and physicist who specializes in materials, computational nanoscience and electricity.

He took a mechanistic approach (rather than, say, sociological or neurological) to investigate how physical differences in special cell structures change our ability to discern between two tones. The more sensitive a person is to subtle differences between similar tones, he reasoned, the better they can identify distinct musical notes.

The result was a paper titled "A minimal physics-based model for musical perception," published in January 2023 in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, a peer-reviewed journal of the National Academy of Sciences.

Then, more good news: This spring, PNAS recognized Sharma's paper, from among thousands, with the prestigious Cozzarelli Prize in the award's Engineering and Applied Sciences category. The prize honors researchers whose PNAS articles display scientific excellence and outstanding originality.

The paper's coauthors all studied under Sharma at UH. Qian Deng was a postdoctoral researcher; Fatemeh Ahmadpoor and Kosar Mozaffari were doctoral students. "We did not really have any funding for it," Sharma says. "So we kind of just did it on the side, slowly. It took me about 10 years."

The crux of their model examined the mechanical, electrical and geometrical design properties of hair cells, which are vital to how ears gather sound.

"I wanted to make the study as physical as possible, to directly link it to the physical attributes of the cells," Sharma says. He likened his approach to looking at physical differences in musculature that might separate merely strong sprinters from the Olympic gold medalist. "Your hair cells might have slightly different physical properties. All of that could actually lead to a pronounced difference in how well you'll hear music versus me."

Sharma boiled down the question of how humans discern tones to the components of cells that are partly responsible for hearing. He knew that those specialized cells have bundles of tiny cylinders, called stereocilia, that react to sound waves that enter your inner ear.

Even though they're vanishingly small — maybe as long as a human hair is wide — stereocilia nonetheless abide by the principles of physics.

Sharma and his colleagues applied principles of fluid mechanics and electromechanics to build a new model that explains, in physical terms, how differences in stereocilia affect how the stimulus of sound moves them. Those microscopic movements are crucial to our ability to hear.

One key to that understanding is a phenomenon called flex electricity, or the electricity generated when mechanical forces differ across the surface of any object. In tiny, sensitive structures such as stereocilia, that electricity in turn creates signals that our brains interpret as sound. Thus differences in the physical properties of the stereocilia mean differences in their flex electricity, leading to different levels of sensitivity to sound.

"We are talking about things like bending the cell membrane," Sharma says. "If you bend the cell membrane, you produce electricity because of that."

Even at the microscopic level, small divergences in structure matter. "How stiff is your cell wall? What is the average length and diameter and structure of those stereocilia? Of course, everybody's values will be around the same average roughly, because we are all human," Sharma says. "But there'll be some differences. And those differences will account for the differences in our hearing."

Sharma boiled down the question of how humans discern tones to the components of cells that are partly responsible for hearing.

STUDIES SHOW

X-ray's New Image

Groundbreaking technology developed at UH enhances X-ray image contrast.

By ***KATIE STROH***

BREAKTHROUGH Enhanced image contrast leads to better diagnostics and improved security screening.

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON researchers recently debuted a groundbreaking advancement in X-ray technology that enhances image contrast. The breakthrough makes imaging more accessible and practical, and leads to better diagnostics and improved security screening.

Mini Das, Moores Professor at the College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics and Cullen College of Engineering, and Jingcheng Yuan, a physics graduate student, unveiled the technology in a paper featured on the cover of Optica, a leading journal in theoretical and applied optics and photonics.

"Older X-ray technology relies on X-ray absorption to produce an image," Das says. "But this method struggles with materials of similar density, leading to low contrast and difficulty distinguishing between different materials, which is a challenge across medical imaging, explosive detection and other fields."

Das and Yuan's new light transport model enables an understanding of contrast formation and how multiple contrast features mingle in acquired data. It allows for the retrieval of images with two distinct types of contrast mechanisms from a single exposure — a significant advancement over traditional methods. Their design uses an X-ray mask with periodic slits, creating a compact setup that enhances edge contrast.

According to Das, the next step is to integrate the technology into portable systems and retrofit existing imaging setups to test it in real-world environments, such as hospitals, materials and industrial engineering.

"Our research opens up new possibilities for X-ray imaging by providing a simple, effective and low-cost method for enhancing image contrast, which is a critical need for nondestructive deep imaging," she says.

JON BURKE / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

BLEACHERS

‘Plucky Underdogs’ Win It All in Wheelchair Tennis

The No. 3-ranked Cougars defeated No. 1 San Diego State to secure UH’s first national title.

By ***KATIE STROH***

IN A GRUELING three-hour match, the University of Houston took home its first national wheelchair tennis title at the United States Tennis Association National Campus in Lake Nona, Florida, the premier competition in collegiate wheelchair tennis. The two-player team, Jose Arriaga and Nicholas Tijerina, won the doubles match 8-6, while Arriaga secured a 6-2, 5-7, 10-6 victory in the first singles match.

The victory is even more impressive given that, with just two players on the UH roster, Tijerina and Arriaga had to play twice in every match — together in doubles and individually in singles. Most of the

WINNERS Nicholas Tijerina (left) and Jose Arriaga brought home the national title in wheelchair tennis — the first for UH.

other teams had bigger squads and could rotate players in and out.

"We were kind of the plucky underdogs, and there were a lot of institutions ranked ahead of us early in the season," says Michael Cottingham, associate professor of health and human performance and director of Adaptive Athletics at UH. "But Nick and Jose had a really great run, and it's exciting for us to have that first national championship."

In the national championships, teams are allowed one student and one non-student athlete. Tijerina, who's earning his master's in engineering, was the student player; Arriaga, a Houstonian who has been training with the UH program for several years, was the nonstudent player.

Cottingham says he hopes this victory will propel the program to new heights. Soon there will be a fully funded scholarship for one student-athlete through the One Step Closer Foundation. And over the summer, UH hosted the best 11- to 18-year-old wheelchair tennis players in the world at the ITF Junior Camp of the Americas.

"Our goal is to be a destination program, and with the resources we're putting in place, I'm excited for the future," Cottingham says.

OLYMPIANS: UH ATHLETICS

Cougars in Paris

UNIVERSITY of Houston Olympic athletes are bringing home hardware! Congratulations are in order for UH sprinters **Shaun Maswanganyi** (South Africa) and **Louie Hinchliffe** (Great Britain), who won silver and bronze, respectively, in the men's 4x100-meter relay during the 2024 Paris Olympic Games in August.

Training at UH under famed Olympian and head coach Carl Lewis, Maswanganyi (above, top) and Hinchliffe are the first UH Olympians to medal since 2016, when Tania Cagnotto won silver in synchronized diving and bronze in diving.

Other UH athletes who competed in the Summer Games:

- **Tristan Evelyn**, Barbados, track and field
- **Jane Figueiredo**, Great Britain, diving
- **Elizabeth Jiminez**, Dominican Republic, swimming
- **Alondra Ortiz**, Costa Rica, swimming
- **Cecelia Tamayo-Garza**, Mexico, track and field

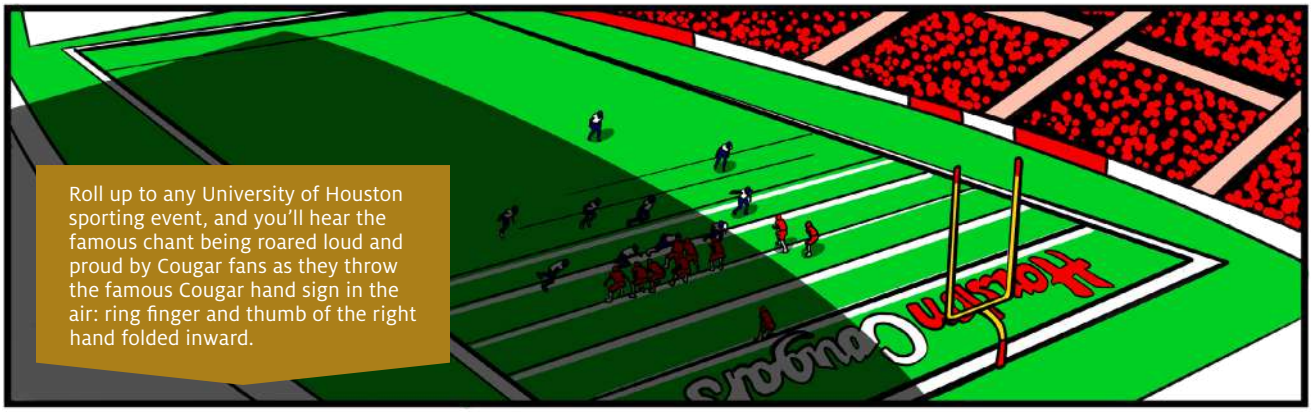
Congratulations to all the competitors!

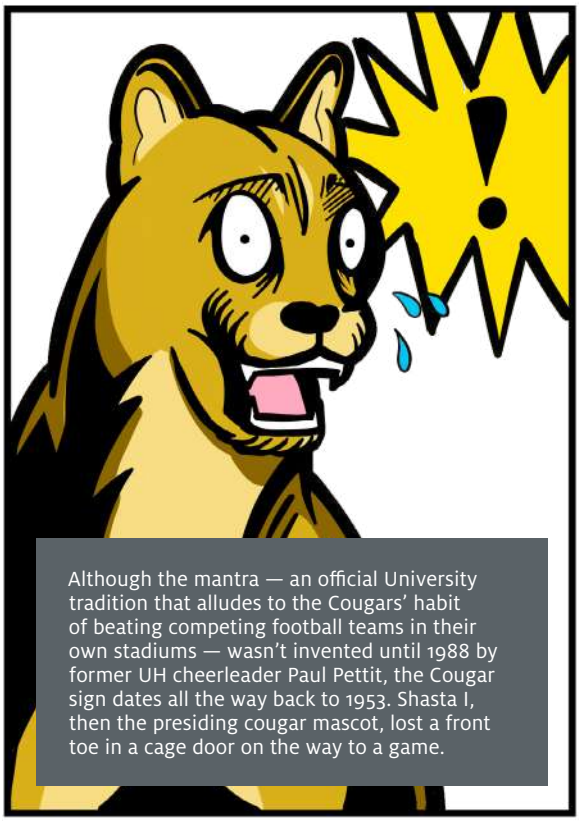
COUGAR LORE

‘Whose House? Coogs’ House!’

The real story behind UH’s iconic chant and hand sign.

Illustration by ***KEVIN KAO / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON***





NOTABLE NEWS

The Latest Headlines From Around UH

JON BURKE / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

Eddie Nuñez Joins Team as Head of Athletics

FOLLOWING AN EXTENSIVE national search, the University of Houston tapped Eddie Nuñez as the school's vice president for intercollegiate athletics. Nuñez, who has held successful leadership positions at Louisiana State University and, most recently, the University of New Mexico, was selected for his track record as an innovative leader capable of building a nationally competitive program during a transformative period.

"Eddie's leadership will be critical as we continue to elevate our athletics programs, enhance the student-athlete experience and build on the tremendous momentum at the University of Houston," says UH president Renu Khator.

Moving On Up

THIS JUST IN: The University of Houston has risen 22 spots to rank **No. 46 among public universities** on the Forbes list of America's Top Colleges for 2025. Among all colleges and universities, UH rose 37 spots to land at No. 115 and came in at No. 85 of the top 100 for research-focused universities.

The annual Forbes list ranks 500 schools that produce successful, high-earning and influential graduates from all economic backgrounds, with less student debt. The rankings are based on several key metrics, including alumni salary and success, student debt, graduation rates, and return on investment.

"This latest ranking demonstrates the University of Houston's commitment to student success and world-class academic programs," says Diane Z. Chase, senior vice president for academic affairs and provost. "Inclusion in Forbes' list of America's Top Colleges is yet another accolade we can be very proud of. It's another reminder of the momentum gained each day through the hard work and persistence of our campus community."

Introducing 'Houston Blue'

ON NOV. 1, the University of Houston introduced "Houston Blue" for UH Athletics teams in a limited number of designated games, including the Nov. 23 football matchup between UH and Baylor University. Other UH teams will wear Houston Blue uniforms at special events throughout the year.

Light blue has been woven into the fabric of Houston's identity for more than a century, seen most notably in the city's flag, adopted in 1915, and the iconic white-and-blue mosaic curb tiles marking intersections and addresses beginning in the late 1920s. The Houston Police Department even drove unmistakable blue cruisers and wore light blue uniforms for many years. Earlier this year, the Houston Texans incorporated "H-Town Blue" in their new uniforms.

UH's version of Houston Blue emphasizes the University's connection to the city's heritage. Now, UH fans can support their teams with new Houston Blue merchandise available for purchase through the UH Campus Store and other area retailers.

CAMPUS LIFE

Centennial Plaza Sneak Peek

Design plans are underway to revitalize the University's historic center with improvements intended to boost sustainability, beauty and walkability.

By ***KATIE STROH***

THE UNIVERSITY of Houston will celebrate its 100th anniversary in 2027, but the Cougar community will have more than just this major milestone to celebrate. To mark the occasion, UH has invested $40 million to renovate several areas of campus, including a new gathering space in the school's historic center: Centennial Plaza.

The renovation, which is intended to enhance the student and pedestrian experience on campus, will also include a reimagination of University Drive, the revitalization of Wilhelmina's Grove and the installation of monument gateways at several campus entrances. New sustainable landscaping and stormwater management throughout will help beautify the campus and improve water runoff.

"Our centennial plan is a transformative project," says UH President Renu Khator. "The University of Houston is a crucial part of the fourth-largest city in the country, and having a welcoming campus that everyone can be proud of is paramount. This reimagination will create a sense of place, community and learning, while also promoting health and well-being not only for our students, but for all Houstonians."

Spearheading the Centennial Plaza project are UH Facilities/Construction Management and OJB, a highly awarded landscaping and design firm whose work is known for creating natural environments that adapt to the changing needs of people and can grow and transform over time. The design process is currently underway, and construction is expected to start by winter 2024. The project is slated to be completed by the end of 2026, just in time for the University's centennial celebrations.

"So much of the student and campus experience is found in the spaces in between buildings — its landscape and open spaces," says Chip Trageser, partner in charge for OJB. "We know that spending time outdoors is beneficial for social connection, as well as improved mental and physical health. ... The Centennial plan strengthens these experiences, not only from a physical point of view, but also as an expression of the University of Houston's values and mission."

$40M

UH investment to renovate several areas of campus, including Centennial Plaza

The new area will include shade trees and inviting seating areas designed to encourage communal gatherings and foster a sense of camaraderie and connectivity. The use of native trees and low-maintenance plantings will enhance both campus sustainability and aesthetics.

OJB

COME ONE, COME ALL
Plans for Centennial Plaza include shade trees and inviting seating areas designed to foster a sense of camaraderie and connectivity.

OFFICE HOURS

The Awards Whisperer

***BEN RAYDER** connects ambitious students with awards opportunities, raising UH's reputation as a top producer of research scholars and fellows.*

*By **KATIE STROH***

JON BURKE / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

AS A FULBRIGHT Top Producing Institution for 2023–2024, the University of Houston consistently turns out winners of the Fulbright U.S. Student Program: a highly competitive and prestigious fellowship that sends students to study, conduct research and/or teach abroad. In 2024, the UH Fulbright cohort rose to an astonishing 14 students. Another student, Mielad Ziaee, was named a Truman Scholar — one of only three UH students ever to receive this public service-oriented honor.

But these impressive numbers didn't happen by accident. They're the result of years of hard work by Ben Rayder, UH's executive director of undergraduate research and major awards. As a Fulbright recipient himself in his undergraduate years, Rayder knows firsthand the impact a fellowship or scholarship can have on a student's journey and sense of self-confidence.

"Because it's such an intensive process, anybody who goes through a fellowship application gains a greater sense of accomplishment whether they're a recipient or not," Rayder says. "Some people get really hooked on the whole process and want to apply for more awards. To manage a project of that nature is a really rewarding feeling."

The bulk of Rayder's work involves identifying and reaching out to potential fellowship candidates, encouraging them to apply and guiding them through the (often-extensive) application process, which might include filling out detailed application materials, writing multiple essays and preparing for interviews.

"It really comes down to building relationships with faculty and staff across the University," he says of identifying prime awards candidates and pushing them to apply. "I'm based in The Honors College, but we try to promote the fact that fellowships are for everyone. I do my best to try to get as much buy-in as possible from other people on campus and explain to them why everyone can win from this, whether it's the students themselves, a different college or the University as a whole."

Rayder credits Houston's status as an international city and the UH student body's rich diversity for providing a healthy pipeline of potential scholars, fellows and award winners.

"We have people who come from all walks of life, not just from different demographic groups," Rayder says. "I get to learn what it's like to be a nontraditional student or what it's like to come from another country as a refugee and seek asylum in a place like Houston. That's just something that's not afforded to many of my colleagues at other universities."

He also says the University itself has plenty of pieces in place to become a top producer of scholars and fellows: a vibrant undergrad research culture, especially engaged and motivated students, and a flourishing public service learning program.

Rayder strives to evangelize the successes of previous awards recipients to inspire other undergrads to seek out and apply for programs like the Fulbright or the Truman.

"We try to let the campus community know as much as possible about these awards because we want other students to be inspired by the successes of others who have come before them," he says. "At a school like UH, which is aspiring and ambitious, it helps a lot to see that there's a goal others can strive for. I'm really grateful the school continues to dedicate resources to creating a strong fellowships culture."

SUPERSTAR SCHOLARS
Recent UH recipients of highly prestigious national and international scholarship opportunities:

Mielad Ziaee '24
Truman Scholarship

Sondos Moursy '22
Key Into Public Service Scholar by The Phi Beta Kappa Society

Phillip Kieval '21
Gates Cambridge Scholarship

Jaelyn Walls '21
Knight-Hennessy Scholarship

RESEARCH ON ICE Journalist Daniela Hernandez (left) and former UH researcher Minako Righter were among the team who visited Antarctica in 2017.

COURTESY OF MINAKO RIGHTER

AROUND THE WORLD

Studying Antarctica's Retreating Glaciers

New research from UH suggests a melting glacier in Antarctica could be having a major impact on rising global sea levels.

By ***KATIE STROH***

THE WESTERN EDGE of Antarctica is home to Thwaites Glacier, the world's widest at about 80 miles. But despite its size, it's losing approximately 50 billion tons of ice per year.

A new study published by University of Houston researchers in the journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences suggests that significant thinning and retreat of both the Thwaites Glacier and another Antarctic glacier, Pine Islands, began in the 1940s. The trend was likely kicked off by an extreme El Niño climate pattern that warmed West Antarctica.

Since then, the authors assert, Thwaites has not recovered, and it is currently contributing to 4% of all global sea-level rise (assuming 3.5 mm annual sea-level rise).

"It is significant that El Niño only lasted a couple of years, but the two glaciers … remain in significant retreat," said corresponding author Julia Wellner in a previous interview. The UH associate professor of geology is the U.S. lead investigator of the Thwaites Offshore Research project, an international collaboration whose team members authored the study.

To conduct their research, Wellner and the THOR team took a trip in 2019 to the Amundsen Sea near Thwaites aboard the Nathaniel B. Palmer icebreaker and research vessel to collect marine sediment cores. They then used the cores to reconstruct the glacier's history from the early Holocene epoch to the present.

"The glacier is significant not only because of its contribution to sea-level rise, but also because it is acting as a cork in the bottle holding back a broader area of ice behind it," Wellner said. "If Thwaites is destabilized, then there's potential for all the ice in West Antarctica to become destabilized."

If Thwaites Glacier were to collapse entirely, global sea levels are predicted to rise by 25 inches. To put this in context, the global sea has risen 6–8 inches over the past 100 years.

"What is especially important about our study is that this change is not random nor specific to one glacier," said lead author Rachel Clark, who earned her Ph.D. in geology at UH. "It is part of a larger context of a changing climate. You just can't ignore what's happening on this glacier."

This wasn't the first trip to Antarctica for UH. Minako Righter, a researcher in the Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences, and her team of six took their own expedition in 2017 to recover 219 meteorites for study. And Wellner recently participated in a 2022 Antarctic expedition to deploy an unmanned submersible that created the very first maps of the underside of a glacier, revealing further clues about future sea-level rise.

DEEP DIVE

Small Business, Big Impact

A look at UH's profound effect on small business in the Gulf Coast region.

THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON Texas Gulf Coast Small Business Development Center Network, a program within the C. T. Bauer College of Business, helps entrepreneurs and small business owners start or expand their businesses by accessing capital, bringing innovative ideas to market, improving productivity and increasing profitability — all at no charge to participants.

The Small Business Development Center recently released its 2023 Impact Report, and the annual numbers are no less than stellar.

To read the full report, scan the QR code.

1,735

Business clients consulted

$188.9M

Startup and expansion capital secured

4,814

Jobs created and retained

$21M

Additional taxes contributed

383

New businesses started

$180.2M

New sales generated

15.8%

Client employment growth achieved

JON BURKE / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

SNAPSHOT

Frank Stella, 1936–2024

The late artist's 'Euphonia' remains a cherished piece of art and history at UH.

RENOWNED PAINTER and sculptor Frank Stella died May 4, 2024, at the age of 87. In his six-decade career, Stella established himself as a master of mixed media and unconventional canvases. In his obituary, The New York Times called him a "towering artist and master of reinvention."

His legacy lives on at the University of Houston, where he was commissioned to create "Euphonia," the colorful, immersive collage of abstract imagery and swirling patterns that spans more than 5,000 square feet of the Moores Opera House.

Stella worked with dozens of local artists, including UH students, to complete the work over seven months in 1997. In addition to being the largest piece in the Public Art of the UH System collection, "Euphonia" is also one of the largest works Stella produced in his lifetime.

"Frank Stella truly left an extraordinary legacy for the University of Houston with his monumental work, 'Euphonia,'" says Rachel Mohl, executive director and chief curator of Public Art UHS. "The mural stands as a testament to the artist's pioneering innovations and collaborative spirit."

ART CREDIT

SIT IN PEACE Valente Zambrano's plush, cushy armchair — which he named Lunda — took first prize in this year's Bienenstock Furniture and Interior Design Competition.

Distinguished Design

Students from UH's Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture and Design are turning out award-winning product prototypes at an impressive rate.

By ***SAM EIFLING***

THE PROMPT sounds humble enough: Submit a design for a chair. Something aesthetically pleasing and practical for mass production. For the best entry, the Bienenstock Furniture Library will award a $5,000 scholarship.

Valente Zambrano, a third-year industrial design student at UH's Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture and Design, sized up the assignment and decided his design would impart a sense of peace. He drew on an unlikely inspiration — puffins, with their rounded beaks and bodies — as he sketched, sculpted, refined and eventually prototyped a plush, cushy armchair he named Lunda. It went on to take first prize in this year's Bienenstock Furniture and Interior Design Competition.

"The junior year chair was the project I had been looking forward to since I entered the industrial design program," Zambrano says. "I put everything I had into it. Working on it within the studio walls, day and night, to finish on time was one of the most exhausting — and fun — experiences I've ever had."

> **"Working ... within the studio walls, day and night, to finish on time was one of the most exhausting — and fun — experiences I've ever had."**
>
> — VALENTE ZAMBRANO

Zambrano's win was the second in as many years for Hines College students in the annual Bienenstock competition. In 2023, Ilse Mariana Anzures Puga won for a swirling wooden design that evoked a traditional Samoan fire dance. Additionally, Hines students Anna Bibikova and Michael L. Dillon won the competition in 2021 and 2018, respectively. The competition draws entries from accredited college design programs from around the country.

Hines College, which dates back to the 1945 founding of the UH College of Architecture, was recently ranked the No. 3 best value among U.S. architecture schools by College Factual. Its students are likewise stacking accolades. In design competitions, Hines' brightest are proving themselves among some of the best young talent anywhere. They're bringing the school's integrated disciplines of architecture, interior architecture, environmental design and industrial design to bear on the world design stage with impressive results.

VALENTE ZAMBRANO

TAKING FLYTE
For the structure and pattern of his double award-winning basketball shoe, Toluwalase Adedipe gathered inspiration from the natural world, including geckos' feet and dragonfly wings.

CONSIDER ALSO the 2023 Global Footwear Awards. There, Toluwalase Adedipe, a recent industrial design graduate, entered his senior design project and won in the student sports performance category with a basketball shoe he called Flyte.

In the color scheme, his green-on-black-on-white prototypes read a bit like a Boston Celtics alternative look. But for his structure and pattern, Adedipe gathered inspiration from the natural world. He aimed to mimic butterflies for lightness and geckos' feet for traction. He researched dragonfly wings, looking at the changes in density and rigidity. He figured that a point guard slashing to the hoop isn't so fundamentally different from a zipping insect.

"The challenge was creating a unique and functional design, particularly in footwear with predefined expectations," Adedipe told the Houston Defender after his award. "A breakthrough came when a professor suggested imagining a shoe designed by nature, pushing me to think beyond conventional boundaries. This advice helped me create a unique, eye-catching design that merges aesthetics with functionality."

> **"A breakthrough came when a professor suggested imagining a shoe designed by nature, pushing me to think beyond conventional boundaries."**
>
> — TOLUWALASE ADEDIPE

Adedipe spent five months in the design process as he delved into the natural and industrial worlds. The prototypes incorporate 3D-printed thermoplastic polyurethane, silicone in the sole and warp-knit fabric uppers that Adedipe learned to sew in order to create.

Flyte also garnered an award at the 2024 FIT Sport Design Awards, one of three that Hines students nabbed in that competition.

TOLUWALASE ADEDIPE

AIMING HIGH
Maha Alsagheer collaborated with people who had lower-limb amputations for her award-winning prosthetic foot called Klime, built specifically for rock climbing.

HANDY
Designed by Mary Leath, the Tarsus Chalk Bag has a magnetic lid so rock climbers can chalk their hands more easily.

RECENT INDUSTRIAL DESIGN graduate Maha Alsagheer also won a FIT Sport Design Award, in the sport equipment design / mountaineering, climbing, hiking category, for a prosthetic foot called Klime built specifically for rock climbing. The prototype slots an aluminum "ankle" into a black carbon fiber "foot." The springy blade slides into easily replaceable school-bus yellow silicone rubber soles meant to give the user a natural grip on rocky surfaces.

To make the prosthetic, Alsagheer collaborated with people who had lower-limb amputations. She told the college's Dimension magazine that she hoped to develop the prototype further to make it practical and affordable for anyone who needs one. Winning the design award, she said, "pushes me to keep getting better and making things that improve people's everyday lives."

> **"[Winning the award] pushes me to keep getting better and making things that improve people's everyday lives."**
>
> — MAHA ALSAGHEER

IN THE SAME CATEGORY, Mary Leath, a second-year student, won an award for her Tarsus Chalk Bag, a magnetic-topped bag fashioned to allow rock climbers to chalk their hands without unnecessary futzing.

"I worked with my best friend over several months to develop the Tarsus Chalk Bag," she said in a previous interview. "Through that process, we went through many failures and prototypes to get to the final design, which she still uses today."

Leath made a removable, water-resistant chalk sock out of ski pants and nestled it into a vinyl cup capped with a magnetic lid that easily opens and automatically recloses, a decided improvement over the usual drawstring bags that climbers and boulderers rely on. Around the entire rig she wrapped a zippered nylon fabric shell that fits almost like an apron.

Like a sumptuous easy chair or a pair of lightweight kicks inspired by dragonflies, the bag elevates an ordinary object into a thing of functional elegance.

(LEFT) MAHA ALSAGHEER; (RIGHT) MARY LEATH

Breaking for Gold

*UH alum Jeffrey Louis, aka **B-BOY JEFFRO**, is among the group of athletes who brought the high-impact dance sport of breaking to the Olympics for the first time.*

*By **SAM EIFLING***

YOU MIGHT recognize Jeffrey Louis, who competes in the dance sport of breaking under the name B-boy Jeffro, by his long T-shirt, sweatpants and low-rise sneakers.

Or you might recognize the 2018 University of Houston sports kinesiology grad by his Team USA gear — the red, white and blue Ralph Lauren swag American Olympians rocked in Paris for the 2024 Summer Games.

As breaking made the leap from hip-hop party dance to the Olympic stage, so too has Louis. He has been one of the top B-boys (that is, a male breaking competitor) for years and came up through the youth scene in Houston. He was born and raised in Alief, a half hour west of the UH campus, and has been breaking since he was 12.

When he tells his story, Louis, who is Haitian, credits his hometown's diversity and energy for the distinctive flavor he brings to the floor.

"Coming from Houston, we have a lot of mixed cultures, vibes and communities. It's just a melting pot of flavors and style," he said in a previous interview. "I have a lot of pride to bring Houston to a world stage ... especially with the people I came up with,

BREAKING B-boy Jeffro, né Jeffrey Louis, made it to the quarterfinals in the 2024 Paris Olympics.

LITTLE SHAO / RED BULL CONTENT POOL

like my coach, [UH professor of hip-hop dance] Joel Aguilera."

Louis and other breakers draw from established dance traditions such as bachata and merengue, as well as from gymnastics, martial arts and variations on hip-hop culture that have evolved in different countries around the world. The iconic hip-hop party dance turned global art form has carried an element of competition ever since the early 1970s, when Kool Herc was DJing sets in Bronx apartments.

Breaking — you may (mistakenly) call it "breakdancing" — debuted in Paris as the newest Olympic sport, following the likes of such 2020 additions as skateboarding, sport climbing, surfing and freestyle BMX. The Olympics showcased the sport in 2018 during the Youth Olympic Games in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and its governing body, the World DanceSport Federation, held its first world championships in 2013.

B-boy Jeffro took second place in the Pan American Games in Santiago, Chile, in late 2023 and secured his spot in the Olympic Qualifier Series in Budapest, Hungary, in June. He entered the Olympics as the fifth-ranked B-boy in the world and made it to the quarterfinals in Paris.

Olympic judges evaluated B-boys and B-girls on their creativity, personality, technique, variety, performativity and musicality. If that sounds like a party in a bottle, well, you're not wrong. In competitions, Louis told NBC Olympics, everyone present is part of the event — as surely as if you were at a house party.

"It's the whole hip-hop presence," he said. "The crowd is dancing to the music. You don't even have to be a performer. You could be on the side, just grooving. You're making noise. As dancers, we need to feed off the crowd."

And if you're part of the UH crowd, congrats: We've got another Olympian in our midst. Make some noise.

The Art of Change

Downtown Houston is home to 47 large-scale murals and counting. Here are a few of our favorites.

By ***KATIE STROH***

IN A CITY teeming with artistic expression and creativity, one of the best ways to take in a little culture is to simply walk around. Downtown is now especially bursting with color, thanks in part to the Big Art. Bigger Change. initiative, spearheaded by the nonprofit Street Art for Mankind.

The organization, which aims to harness the power of art to inspire social change, has installed 47 large murals and counting in downtown Houston. Each is inspired by one of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals and by the people and organizations making a difference in Houston.

Started in fall 2022, the series aims to promote community-driven initiatives, beautify the downtown area and make Houston a new street-art destination.

Scan the QR code to browse more images of these and all the Big Art. Bigger Change. murals (and plan your own downtown Houston art walk).

EGIDIO NARVAEZ

Empowered 1

ARTIST:
Adry del Rocio

LOCATION:
Republic Building,
1018 Preston St.

Painted on a wall adjacent to "La Shamana," "Empowered" focuses on advancing women's rights through economic empowerment and highlights the work of Houston's Women's Commission, which aims to advance equality and equity for women in the City of Houston.

La Shamana 2

ARTIST:
Lula Goce

LOCATION:
Republic Building,
1018 Preston St.

"La Shamana" celebrates Houston's status as an innovation hub, particularly in the health care sector. The mural depicts Dr. Maria Elena Bottazzi, one of a pair of scientists who developed the free-patent "World's COVID-19 Vaccine," for which she was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022.

Assiduity 3

ARTIST:
Sam Bates

LOCATION:
Sam Houston Hotel,
1117 Prairie St.

"Assiduity" is dedicated to the essential workers whose critical work kept the country functioning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given that half of Americans in low-wage occupations are essential workers, it is also dedicated to No Poverty, one of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

King of the Road 4

ARTIST:
Case Maclaim

LOCATION:
407 Main St.

"King of the Road," a powerful ode to social equity and breaking boundaries, depicts a Black boy from Houston on his new bike, ready to explore his newfound freedom and the city around him. Notice the Houston hand sign painted just above the front wheel — an Easter egg from the artist, who is famous for his hand-sign murals.

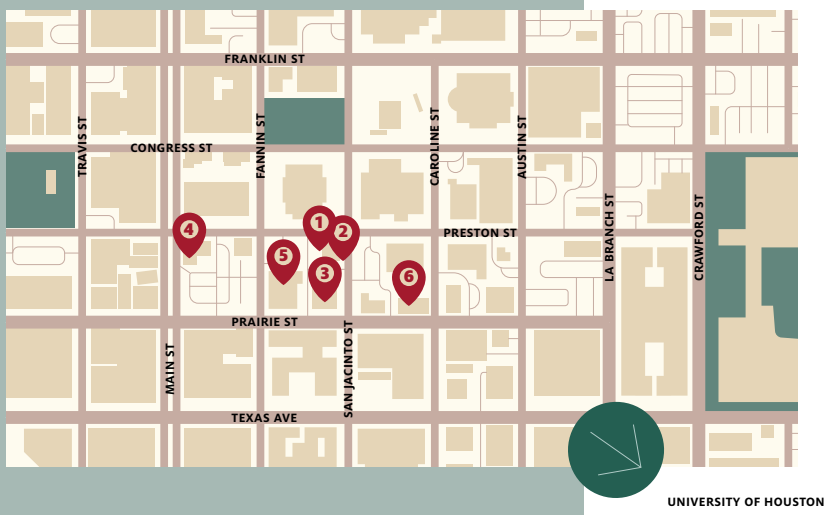
Healthy Aging 5

ARTIST:
Ernest Zacharevic

LOCATION:
411 Fannin St.

Inspired by the goal to promote well-being for all at all ages, "Healthy Aging" depicts community solidarity across generations and recognizes that caring for an aging population requires understanding their value and experience in the community.

EGIDIO NARVAEZ



Digital Citizen 6

ARTIST:
Vinie Graffiti

LOCATION:
1223 Prairie St.

To highlight the importance of safe and violence-free environments for children, "Digital Citizen" raises awareness of cyberbullying and its negative impact on young people. With more children and young people spending time online, cyberbullying is the top concern for their safety when using the internet, according to the UN.

The Mind of Matt Mullenweg

‹The **WordPress** founder reflects on his early days at UH, the teachers who influenced his thinking and the future of the written word online.›

By **SAM EIFLING**

PETER ADAMS FOR THE FACES OF OPEN SOURCE PROJECT

JON BURKE / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

IT WAS MORE THAN 20 years ago now that Matt Mullenweg was a student at the University of Houston, bartering for saxophone lessons. These were the dial-up days, before social media as we now know it, when simply logging on was a chore for most Americans and building websites was still a specialty skill.

Mullenweg had his own website, of course, and would chat with other Houston-area jazz musicians in simple online forums and a community site called Jazz Houston, where he kept track of friends' upcoming gigs. Before Instagram, before text alerts, there was this simple iteration of the internet. The barriers to getting online were higher than they are now, but once you were there, the culture was homespun.

"I was looking for every place I could leverage some of these really talented musicians' time to train me to be a better musician," Mullenweg says. "So I would build websites in exchange for lessons. It's really about using technology to connect people, which is what I think technology does best."

Mullenweg's life has expanded since 2003, when he was a UH undergrad developing WordPress, which has long been among the foundational platforms of the web. He's still the CEO and founder of Automattic, a company valued at $7.5 billion after a 2021 investment round.

WordPress celebrated its 50th release over the summer, a milestone both impressive and, for its regularity, almost quotidian. Like each of the previous releases, this version, Dorsey, is named for a jazz artist.

As far and as fast as he has traveled since he was coding for alto sax lessons, Mullenweg can still trace his trajectory back to those days in Third Ward, where he was studying classic literature, blogging ahead of his time and working to make the advantages he had as a netizen in Houston available to the greatest number of people. Eventually, he left his philosophy and political science studies unfinished and moved to San Francisco to work for the media company CNET.

Yet Mullenweg still reps Houston and UH with passion. The "about" section of his website closes with a shoutout to 18 specific teachers who "had a big impact" on him. The professor Mullenweg recalls as

TRIUMPHANT RETURN
Matt Mullenweg (right) returned to UH this year for the annual Cougar 100 celebration. He spoke with Ernie Manouse, Houston PBS senior producer and host, about the importance of curiosity and what it takes to remain successful in the ever-changing tech industry.

the most influential during his time at UH was the late Ross M. Lence, widely regarded upon his death in 2006 as one of the most dedicated and decorated educators ever to work at the University.

"He was the professor who really was a sort of trigger for me to look deeper or work harder," Mullenweg says. "He introduced me to the classics — Thucydides, Plato — and really sharpened my mind to some of the best thinkers of the previous ages."

Mullenweg's faith in the written word was on display, literally, in those undergraduate days. In a 2003-vintage blog post still living on his website, ma.tt, he posted a photo of his readings at the time. On the shelf are a mix of classic works by Machiavelli, Kierkegaard, Aristophanes, Bonaventure, and, yes, Plato and Thucydides, alongside such modern essentials as the MLA Handbook and William Zinsser.

Also on the shelf: Robert Putnam's "Bowling Alone," a prescient sociology of American solitude. Even as a teenager, it seems, Mullenweg was in conversation with voices from hundreds, even thousands of years ago — while also considering how the written word might close the growing distances between his fellow 21st-century Americans.

Mullenweg encourages everyone to play with the new, early generation of large language model artificial intelligence tools. Shake hands with Claude, open up OpenAI, strike up a chat with ChatGPT — they are "intelligence on tap," he says, and their future is yet to be written. Bad actors will use them for nefarious ends, creating misinformation ahead of elections or designing evermore efficient weaponry. But he has faith that for all the pitfalls new tools bring, people will also figure out

> "The written word is as important as ever. If I had a bet on anything, I would bet on writing. The joke is that the hottest new programming language in San Francisco is English."

effective defenses.

"The written word is as important as ever," Mullenweg says. "If I had a bet on anything, I would bet on writing.

"The joke is that the hottest new programming language in San Francisco is English. With the large language models — which are a mathematical matrix, multiplication, next token, et cetera — basically we're finding intelligence derives from language. … So the command and mastery of that is very, very worthwhile. And now we're teaching it to computers as well."

<Advocating Open Source>

The internet has changed monumentally in the days since he was first building WordPress along with Mike Little, his cofounder, using the blogging platform b2/cafelog as a foundation. But Mullenweg's mission has remained remarkably steady from age 19 until now, at age 40.

He and WordPress have always been pivotal advocates for open-source publishing on the web — that is, creating and maintaining a platform with an underlying code available for anyone to access and modify as they see fit. If you've surfed the web with the Firefox browser or typed on an Android phone, you've used software built on an open-source base.

"Open source is basically this radical philosophy that if you are using software, you should be able to see how it works," Mullenweg says. "You should be able to change it; you should be able to control it, modify it. This is not how most of your proprietary software works, but I believe it's for a free society."

Open source as a concept lies somewhere between a utopian ideal and a shrewd commercial strategy, and its adherents span that spectrum. You want to set up a personal website, for free, in approximately zero time? WordPress is your place. Or maybe you want to build up a site for a brand on the scale of Time, TED, Vogue, Microsoft, PlayStation, Wired or Snoop Dogg? That, also, is something WordPress can handle — and has.

"My life goal was to democratize publishing," Mullenweg says. "Now I've expanded that to democratize publishing commerce and messaging. For publishing, WordPress is about 40% of the way there. We got 40% of the websites on the internet on open source."

Also within Automattic is Mullenweg's effort at replicating that success with commerce: Its product WooCommerce "is like an open-source Shopify." And Beeper, an acquisition made earlier this year, pulls more than a dozen messaging applications into a single node for users to see all their scattered communications at once.

Software should simplify things, he says, not complicate them. If you doubt Mullenweg's commitment to that philosophy, note the now-famous WordPress tagline, "Code is poetry."

"Matt Mullenweg says something about open source that I remind people about to this day, which is that open source takes longer," says Mike Schwartz, CEO of the Austin-based, open-source business software company Gluu and host of the podcast "Open Source Underdogs." "It's easier to just jump out there and build a product. As a commercial company, it's harder to build consensus with a community. But you end up with a better process, a better product."

Treating the internet as a creative, free-wheeling place also means you never know exactly what you're going to wind up with. In 2019, Automattic bought the microblogging platform Tumblr ("one of our greatest competitors back in the day," Mullenweg says) for reportedly less than $3 million, a tiny fraction of the $1.1 billion Yahoo paid for it just six years earlier.

If you haven't been on Tumblr, just picture a youth-driven digital playground that produces most of the best memes you've seen on Instagram and which spares you the blue-check tantrums of X. It's also a place where people can onboard themselves for other Automattic products. This summer the company announced it was going to migrate a truly stunning number of Tumblr pages — half a billion, give or take — to run on WordPress.

That one of the biggest goof-around blog platforms in existence would fit nicely on the infrastructure Mullenweg started in 2003 doesn't strike him as a bit odd. The

REPRESENTING
Mullenweg participated in a 2008 campaign for the University.

thrum of the internet has always required remixes and mashups. He points out that it was a blogging notification device in the design of RSS (really simple syndication) that later became the delivery system for podcast episodes. Every time you get a notification that a new episode has dropped on your favorite pod, you can thank a feature that dates back to the late '90s/early 2000s, when the developer and writer Dave Winer was mostly concerned with distributing his newsletter, DaveNet.

"You build these tools, and what humanity builds on top of them is the exciting part," Mullenweg says. "I'm just making canvases and paintbrushes and colors. The world does all the creative stuff with it. And that's exciting to me."

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‹Stepping Up by Stepping Back›

Automattic has nearly 2,000 employees in more than 90 countries, and as the CEO, Mullenweg spends a great deal of time thinking about how to maintain and grow that workforce. The best and brightest minds in tech have their choice of where to work, he reasons, so culture becomes a deciding factor in attracting talented workers.

In his company culture, he strives to find people who want to build for a long-term future. And one ingredient in that is granting every employee a sabbatical every five years.

Mullenweg points out the concept of a day of rest goes back to the opening pages of the Bible and the Sabbath. After five years of work, an employee is eligible for two to three months of paid time off.

Earlier this year, he finally got around to taking his first sabbatical. It had taken him 18 years, because something always came up. "I was the biggest hypocrite in this," he says. "But it's hard for a CEO to do."

Eventually, he had to admit he was in charge, inspired by tech investor Jerry Colonna, who encourages leaders to ask: How am I complicit in creating the conditions that I say I don't want?

In Mullenweg's case, he had built an organization that required his presence in order to function. So he had to do something about it.

In the winter, he finally stepped away. He traveled to Japan. He played chess. He spent quality time with horses. Threw a banger of a 40th birthday party. Saw the total eclipse from a plane. Rowed a small craft to Alcatraz Island. He took a step back from his job for the first time almost since his undergrad days, surveyed his life and gave himself space to inhabit a world totally different from his own yet fully his.

"Normally, every day, I wake up and my priorities are Automattic priorities," he says. "What does Automattic need? It's like having a child — that's your priority.

"Even mentally removing that and saying, 'All right, this is not my thing.' We're going to mentally say, 'Someone else is responsible. I don't have to worry about it. What do I want to do?'"

That has always been the question at the heart of the internet. What do you want to do? Your answer necessarily builds on what has come before — as surely from your latest decisions as it does from Greek dramatists and Danish existentialist philosophers. Every day is open, yours to modify as you see fit.

Uncovering

Houston History

Professor **ROBERT STEWART** and his team of geophysicists are piecing together a lost chapter of Houston's community history by mapping the subterranean geology of a neglected Fifth Ward cemetery.

By **PETER SIMEK**
Photography by **JON BURKE** / **UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON**

IN THE HEART of Houston's Fifth Ward, an extraordinary effort is underway to restore dignity and honor to a historic, if long-neglected, cemetery. The Evergreen Negro Cemetery, with roots dating back to the 1800s, is home to the remains of enslaved and formerly enslaved people, World War I veterans, buffalo soldiers, and early community pioneers.

Over the decades, however, the cemetery fell into disrepair. Roads were built through its grounds, and the encroachment of urban development led to its decline. Now, community organizations are trying to reestablish the cemetery's importance to Houston history.

The effort required more than some simple cleanup and landscaping. After so many decades of disregard, no one really knew how Evergreen Negro Cemetery was organized, where all the burial sites were located or just how much adjacent development had disrupted the historic grounds.

The project became even more challenging last year when a Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County project discovered that 33 gravesites — which should have been relocated during the expansion of Lockwood Drive in the 1960s — were in the path of the project. In addition to restoring Evergreen, project leaders needed to find space to relocate these remains.

That's when the city and the community turned to Robert Stewart, a professor of geophysics at the University of Houston College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics and an expert in subsurface exploration. After earning a Ph.D. in geophysics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the native Canadian worked in the oil and gas sector for companies such as Chevron and ARCO.

Since 2008, he has taught at UH, refining and perfecting technologies that map subterranean environments. Fifth Ward community members hoped he could use that same technology to identify the burial sites of their forefathers.

The work at Evergreen Negro Cemetery was both more sensitive and more meaningful than any Stewart had conducted looking for natural resource reserves. When the community approached him about creating a subsurface map of the historic burial ground, they were essentially asking the UH professor to piece back together a lost chapter in the story of Fifth Ward.

"We're not just uncovering history," Stewart says. "We're helping people reconnect with their roots."

When the community approached Robert Stewart about creating a subsurface map of the Evergreen Negro Cemetery, they were essentially asking the UH professor to piece back together a lost chapter in the story of Fifth Ward.

"We're not just uncovering history," Stewart says. "We're helping people reconnect with their roots."

Unearthing History With Technology

EVERGREEN NEGRO CEMETERY was founded in the 1880s by Alexander Kelley, a formerly enslaved man who became an entrepreneur and a prominent member of the early Fifth Ward community. The site is believed to be a former cotton plantation, and the burial ground — thought to be the third-oldest African American cemetery in Houston — would become the final resting place of many other notable figures in Fifth Ward history.

In addition to Kelley himself, two of the earliest Black deputies of the Harris County Sheriff's Office are buried at Evergreen, along with many veterans from the Civil War through World War II and enslaved people.

In the 1960s, as Houston was rapidly expanding, the cemetery came under threat. The expansion of Lockwood Drive split the site in two, and the remains of 490 people were moved and reinterred in other cemeteries. As the recent METRO project revealed, that work was perfunctory; not all of Evergreen Negro Cemetery's graves were adequately identified and relocated. There were also many graves that had been lost or left unmarked. By the 1970s, the site fell into severe disrepair, becoming overgrown and largely forgotten by the broader community.

Efforts to restore the cemetery began in earnest in the 1990s. The nonprofit Project RESPECT, alongside local universities and community volunteers, initiated cleanup and restoration activities. These efforts to preserve and honor the historical significance of the cemetery have continued into the 21st century. In 2009, the Texas Historical Commission designated Evergreen Negro Cemetery as a Historic Texas Cemetery, acknowledging its importance and the need for preservation.

The discovery of the unmarked graves in 2023 motivated the community to take

SIMPLE YET SOPHISTICATED
The equipment enables Stewart (wearing the red UH cap) and his team to examine beneath the surface without disturbing the ground, which is essential for preserving the dignity of the burial sites.

restoration efforts even further. In addition to moving the remains, they wanted to erect a memorial designed by Fifth Ward artist Danny Russo, who also constructed a new brick walkway on the site, to commemorate those whose graves were disturbed by the city's construction.

But how could the community be sure that the site of the new memorial wouldn't further disturb lost graves? That's when they turned to Stewart.

At UH, Stewart has worked with technologies such as ground-penetrating radar and magnetometry, which have rapidly advanced our ability to understand and map subterranean environments without disturbing the soil. This technology has been deployed in various contexts worldwide. In countries like Cambodia, GPR and magnetometry have been used to uncover unmarked mass graves. Stewart has even worked with criminal investigations to help locate murder victims or forensic evidence.

"We were in one site and there had been a murder," Stewart recalls. "And the killer was still on the loose, and he was known to be a sharpshooter. The security agencies called us. We had our vests on. They were all armed, and we were in a field with our magnetometers and radar looking for his buried stuff."

Stewart's work locally has been far less dangerous but just as impactful. He has used GPR and magnetometry at several Houston cemeteries to uncover unmarked graves and create more accurate documentation and restoration of burial sites.

The GPR equipment, which resembles a lawn mower, emits radar waves into the ground. They reflect off objects and soil layers to create a subsurface map. Stewart's team carefully guides the GPR equipment across the cemetery, interpreting the signals to identify anomalies that suggest graves or buried artifacts.

The equipment might look simple, but it's incredibly sophisticated. It allows Stewart's researchers to peer beneath the surface without disturbing the ground, which is crucial for respecting the sanctity of the burial sites.

"We're using ground-penetrating radar and magnetometry to locate the graves and artifacts, providing a noninvasive way to uncover the cemetery's secrets," he says.

Stewart points out that Houston's clay-heavy soil presents unique challenges. Clay

SUBSURFACE MAPPING Stewart's team carefully guides the GPR equipment across the cemetery, interpreting the signals to identify anomalies that suggest graves or buried artifacts.

can absorb and scatter radar signals, making it harder to get clear readings. Adjusting search methods and using complementary techniques, such as magnetometry, helps create a fuller picture of the underground.

Magnetometry measures variations in the Earth's magnetic field caused by buried metal objects. This can help locate old grave markers or other metal artifacts. Combined with GPR, these tools can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the cemetery's subsurface.

Working alongside Stewart are UH Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences researcher Chaz Clapsaddle and geophysics doctoral student Presley Greer. Stewart and his team also collaborated with community historians and archaeologists to compare written documentation of the site with geophysical findings to identify areas of interest. They uncovered numerous unmarked graves, revealing the final resting places of individuals who had been forgotten by history.

Reclaimed Roots

ALTHOUGH TECHNOLOGY has enhanced the restoration of Evergreen Negro Cemetery, community involvement has been crucial to the success of this project. Organizations like Project RESPECT and the Shuffield Foundation have rallied support and resources. Former Mayor Sylvester Turner has been a vocal advocate of the project, emphasizing the cemetery's importance to the community's history and a testament to its resilience.

Local groups have organized numerous cleanup events to clear overgrown vegetation and revitalize the cemetery's grounds, making it a place of reflection and reverence once more. Project RESPECT also mobilized residents and forged partnerships with institutions like UH to drive the restoration forward.

The project has also benefited from the expertise of local historians and genealogists. Historical records, old maps and oral histories have helped identify those buried at Evergreen, shedding light on the stories of former slaves, prominent community members, early business owners and educators. They illustrate the contributions and struggles of its residents, deepening our understanding of the broader historical context of Fifth Ward.

Plans are now underway to develop interpretive signage and digital resources to share Evergreen's cultural and historical significance with visitors.

Unearthing these narratives makes the restoration of Evergreen Negro Cemetery more than a preservation project; it is a movement to reclaim and celebrate Black heritage in Houston. For the descendants of those buried at Evergreen, the project has provided a profound sense of connection and closure. For the broader community, it has rekindled pride in their heritage and a commitment to preserving it for future generations.

For Stewart, the cemetery restoration offered a way to leverage decades of research and expertise to contribute to something that runs deeper than the subterranean geology he maps.

"It's an honor to be part of this project," Stewart says. "Every grave we identify, every artifact we uncover, is a step toward restoring dignity to those buried here."

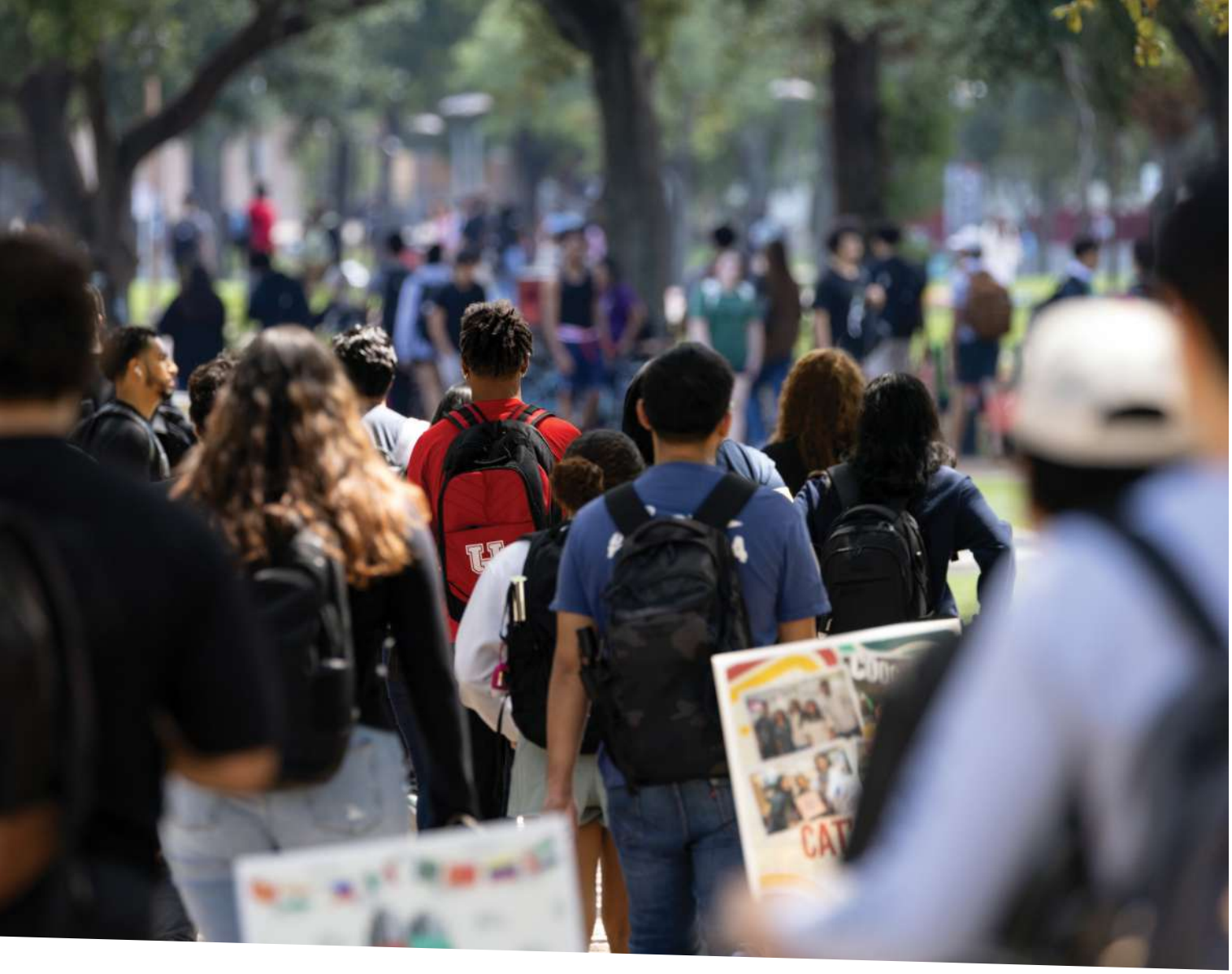
As the role of universities in students' lives expands, UH is addressing the full spectrum of needs, from academics and finances to food insecurity and mental health.

By **SHAWN SHINNEMAN**

SERVING A NEED
Due to increased demand, Cougar Cupboard, the on-campus food pantry, got a sizable upgrade.

JON BURKE / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

Feeding Student Success



JON BURKE / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

IN FEBRUARY 2020, just one month after opening, long lines were forming at the University of Houston's Cougar Cupboard. UH opened the small food pantry to address growing food insecurity in light of research showing just how much that can influence performance in the classroom.

Four years later, Cougar Cupboard is proving to be well worth the investment. The pantry has grown to serve some 8,000 students and distribute 700,000 pounds of food. In April 2024, it moved into a new, larger space in University Lofts to account for the growing demand.

University administrators across the country are becoming increasingly aware of how much food insecurity affects their students and impacts retention rates, and they are doing what they can to address it.

In truth, it's not just the Cupboard where UH is boosting resources. As expectations about the role of universities expand, the school is working to address the full spectrum of students' needs. Students perform best in the classroom when they're able to fully engage — which means any university truly interested in getting the most out of its students must embrace the many outside-the-classroom considerations that enable a focus on studies.

"There's enough research that tells us that if students are in an environment in which they feel supported, they're going to perform better on all levels," says Paul Kittle, vice president for student affairs at UH, who recently joined the University.

UH has invested in programming in health and wellness, mental health, financial health, academic support, and career prep, among other areas. But the approach isn't just about spinning up services. It's about a holistic rethinking of the student experience.

"We've known for a long time that our role was more than just issuing degrees," Kittle says. "When you're working with people, you can't be one-dimensional. Our students and the communities we serve are not one dimension."

A New Approach to Caring for Students

IT USED TO BE that universities were expected mostly to do one thing: educate their students.

WHOLE HEALTH
Students need different things, which requires a breadth of resources and support, as well as a collaborative network that's educated about the students.

> **"We really look at creating the culture from a multifaceted view — mental health, academic needs, personal development, financial, physical movement, career prep. All those elements have to be part of the culture."**
>
> —PAUL KITTLE
> VICE PRESIDENT FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS

But as research connecting student services with outcomes has grown, many colleges are reconsidering their role in a student's life.

"Resources such as academic advising, financial aid services and mental health counseling can mean the difference between stopping out and graduating," the Lumina Foundation noted. Its research collaborator Tyton Partners found that students who know about support services "report higher rates of feeling like they belong at their college or university."

There is no panacea for students' wide-ranging needs. It takes a cohesive plan to keep students healthy and enable their success.

"When we started to have a mental health crisis 10 or 12 years ago, everyone thought we should just hire more counselors," Kittle says. "Well, we couldn't build a counseling center big enough or have enough counselors to out-staff this issue. So we really look at creating the culture from a multifaceted view — whether it's going to be mental health, academic needs, personal development, financial, physical movement or career prep. All those elements have to be part of the culture."

There are the nuts-and-bolts services such as group and individual counseling, physical health and nutrition programming, financial literacy education, tutoring, spiritual and religious resources, and others. But enabling success requires thinking outside the box. It means going upstream to pinpoint and alleviate stressors.

Kittle says UH's Centennial Plaza, in development for the University's centennial celebration in 2027, is a perfect example. It will be an open green space with flowing water, shade, tables and chairs, and room for tossing a Frisbee or hanging out with peers. It's the sort of space for decompression that, Kittle hopes, will lead to an overall happier student body. (Get a sneak peek at the plans for Centennial Plaza on page 12.)

There are smaller efforts too. UH now educates professors on simple things like when papers and projects should be due, for instance. Midnight deadlines beget tired students, and moving them up a few hours to 8 p.m. can make a small, but not insignificant, difference.

Then there are the folks tasked with ensuring young people on campus understand the resources available to them. More than 35% of students who responded to the Tyton-led study said they weren't aware of critical support offered by their respective schools. One way UH addresses that gap is to make sure staff and faculty are up to speed on what the school offers outside the classroom.

The first four to six weeks of the college experience are a good indicator of how a student is adjusting both socially and academically. To get students in touch with resources earlier, residence halls now have a team of five called the Student Success and Wellness Team, which works together with

The Cougar Cupboard's Impact

ALTHOUGH IT'S JUST one part of UH's overall student services offerings, the Cougar Cupboard food pantry has a measurable influence on students' health and well-being.

8,000

Students served

700,000

Pounds of food distributed

90%

Cupboard enrollees who say it has improved their stress levels

1 in 3

College students experiencing food insecurity nationally

UPGRADE
Cougar Cupboard's new space resembles a grocery store to make students feel more comfortable.

JON BURKE / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

Academic Success. The team is equipped with early-intervention strategies.

"We know we can't be predictive, and we certainly don't want to stereotype," Kittle says. "Students are going to need different things. It's about not only having a good menu of resources and support, but also having the network that's educated about them and that works collaboratively."

That holistic approach also has a way of creating equity, helping students from all backgrounds get the support they need.

"I've worked with students from privileged backgrounds who didn't need financial assistance but still required a lot of other support," Kittle says. "And I've worked with students from the lowest income bracket who may have needed support on that side but were well-adjusted socially."

A New Home for Cougar Cupboard

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG for the University to realize that Cougar Cupboard would need more space.

As soon as it opened, lines were already weaving throughout the "little back-of-fice pantry," says Michael Crook, director of the Center for Student Advocacy and Community. Numbers increased steadily over the next several years, with periods of explosive growth. By fall enrollment in 2022, for instance, demand had nearly doubled, with 1,000 student visitors in August compared to 550 visitors during the entire previous spring semester.

The Cupboard had taken on additional space next door, but the need for

The focus on student success appears to be working. The graduation rate for at-risk students — those who've received Pell Grants or are first-time college-goers — is now roughly the same as their peers. UH has had more success than most in closing that performance gap.

something larger was clear. Lines began spilling out of the office and across the lobby of the Campus Recreation and Wellness Center. It was about two years ago that conversations about a move began.

Student housing supported the facility by providing a discount on the larger space. After construction, the Cupboard began moving in last year and officially opened its doors in April 2024.

"It's been a journey," Crook says. "Both the staff who helped create the Cupboard and our students were waiting and patient a long time. And we're so grateful, because the space is amazing."

The experience now feels more like that of a grocery store. "That's really important because of the stigma," Crook says. "We've had students write to us saying that they felt ashamed or emotional or hesitant to use a food pantry for the first time."

Creating Better Student Outcomes

CROOK SAYS accounting for food insecurity on campus is one of the most important things a university can do. When Cougar Cupboard polls its enrollees as they sign up, 38% say they've considered leaving the University due to financial stress. Meanwhile, national studies say about 1 in 3 college students are experiencing food insecurity. "That alone speaks to the relationship between retention and food insecurity," Crook says.

The stress of not knowing where your next meal is coming from can be immense. Crook says some students are making choices between feeding themselves and paying tuition, buying essentials or providing for their households. Meanwhile, there is nothing easy about studying on an empty stomach. Take it all together, and there's a reason that 90% of Cupboard enrollees say the pantry has helped improve their stress levels.

More broadly across campus, the focus on student success appears to be working. The graduation rate for at-risk students — those who've received Pell Grants or are first-time college-goers — is now roughly the same as their peers, UH President Renu Khator wrote last year in her annual State of the University address. UH has had more success than most in closing that performance gap.

And there are additional indicators. UH polls its students on things like their sense of belonging and how safe they feel on campus. Responses, Kittle says, have been trending up.

"Students have to know that we care about them at a level that is more than just a transaction of, 'Pay us and you're getting a degree,'" Kittle says. "It's about creating a holistic culture of caring for our students. We've got enough research that tells us they're going to perform better, they're going to be better prepared when they leave and they're going to impact their communities at a higher level."

Cougar Campus Meet-Cutes

We asked the UH social media community to tell us how they met their special someone on campus. Here are a few of our favorite Cougar couple stories.

"WE MET AT THE Welcome Center on the first day of school in 2012. Now we are married with two little Coogs! 🐾"

— HEATHER DYER ('14)

"WE MET IN sociology in [the] old Agnes Arnold building, and while I was busy flirting and getting a C, she aced it (never lets me live that down). After 14 years and two kids, we still rep the greatest school every Friday!!!"

— MICHAEL AHRENS ('14)

"MET IN ENGINEER-ing math class in SEC 102. Now we have a whole cougar crew. LOL"

— ANSLEY ALEXANDER ('13)

"HE WALKED INTO Law Hall looking for a date. My roommate was 'on the desk.' She called me. I came down, looked at him and went out with him. We were married for 50 years. He's been gone for four years. I miss him."

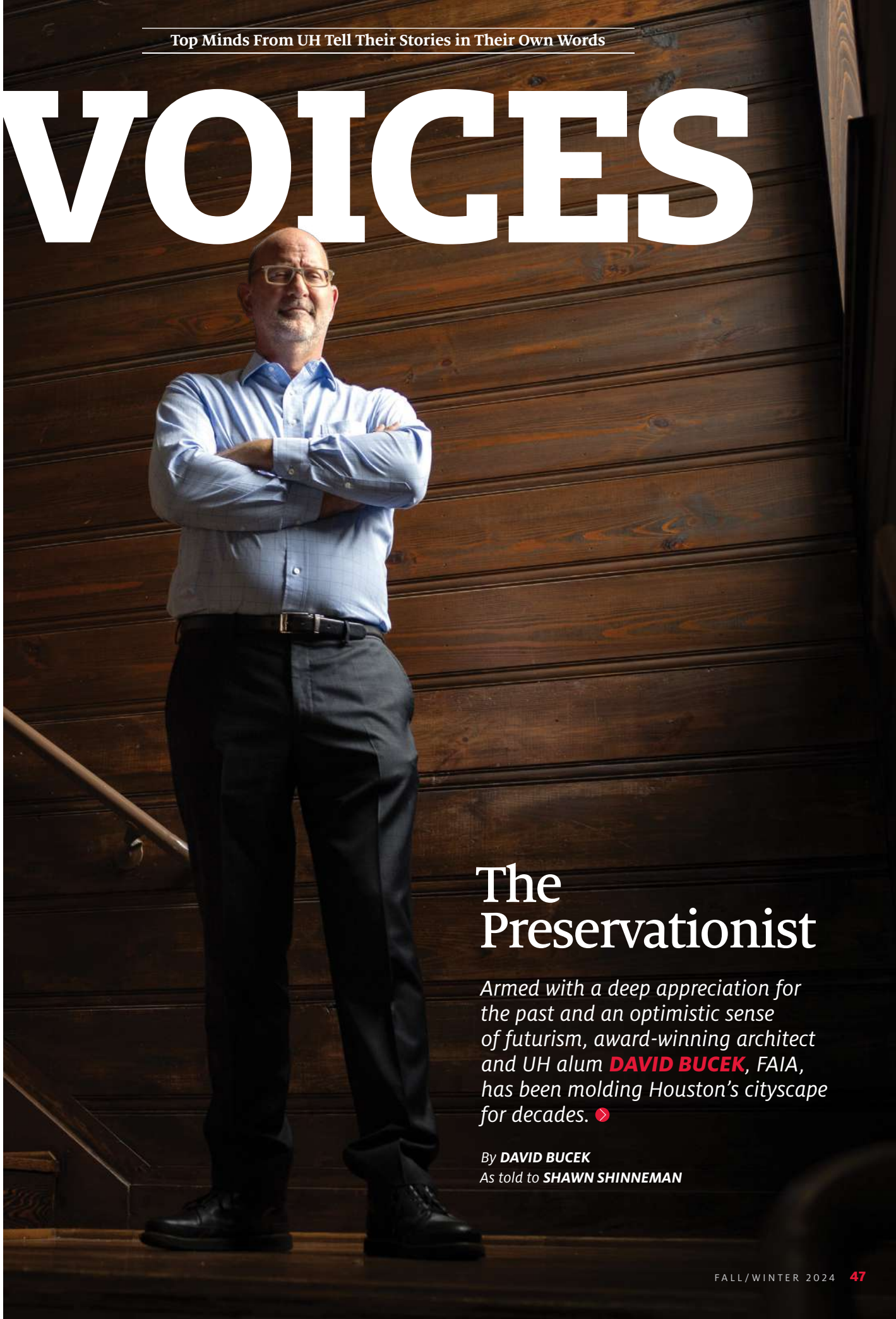
— GLORIA McAVOY BROWN ('69)

"WE MET AT THE honors retreat before school started and both lived in Taub Hall. We got married in the A.D. Bruce Chapel right next to the dorms. ❤️"

— JULIE HINAMAN ('91)

Top Minds From UH Tell Their Stories in Their Own Words

VOICES



JON BURKE / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

The Preservationist

Armed with a deep appreciation for the past and an optimistic sense of futurism, award-winning architect and UH alum ***DAVID BUCEK****, FAIA, has been molding Houston's cityscape for decades.*

By ***DAVID BUCEK***
As told to ***SHAWN SHINNEMAN***

HONORING HOUSTON HISTORY (Clockwise from top left) Bucek worked on the Philip Johnson-designed Menil House, the Apollo Mission Control Center at the Johnson Space Center and the Eldorado Ballroom in Third Ward (where he is pictured on the previous page).

IT WAS MY LOVE for sci-fi that triggered my imagination and passion for reshaping the physical world. The roots were already there — my dad was a contractor, and I'd gravitated toward classes like art history and woodshop in school. Growing up in a rural Texas town watching films like "THX 1138" and "Star Wars," it occurred to me that someone had to design those futures.

Architecture, you could conclude, involves creating tomorrow before it happens. That brought out my creative juices.

My time at the University of Houston was instrumental in my development as an architect. It helped me hone the craft of design. It introduced me to like-minded classmates who taught me as much as the professors — which is no knock on the professors. I still collaborate with many of my peers from UH. And I'll never forget some of the memories, like the time we built a full-scale replica of the Tempietto in Rome, only to have the fire marshal discover it and tear it down. It was, after all, made of plywood and cardboard, sepia paper and hot glue.

At first, I was interested only in shiny things, new things. The domes in the sci-fi "Logan's Run" inspired my master's project at Harvard, a reimagining of the Astrodome. After I graduated, I joined a Houston design firm named William F. Stern & Associates Architects, working under Bill Stern. In 1999, Bill and I formed a partnership, launching Stern and Bucek Architects and bringing aboard Daniel Hall. When Bill passed away suddenly in 2013 from pancreatic cancer, we made a conscious decision to leave the name alone.

We started doing residential renovations before taking on new builds and, finally, working with commercial clients.

> **"I'm drawn to cities and communities that retain elements of their past and find creative ways to add new buildings. … We should be thinking about how our work affects and reinforces the neighborhood, becomes one with the neighborhood."**

The through line of all our work is that we recognize it's ultimately not for us. It's for our clients. We make an effort to check our egos at the door and understand what they're looking for. That means we consider ourselves a custom design shop, and our work tends to look very different from one project to the next. They're unified by our attention to detail, but the outcome is driven by the project rather than a specific look or style.

Over time, I've developed an appreciation for the influence of the past and for the importance of preserving historic structures. That makes it more meaningful that Preservation Houston, a nonprofit dedicated to preserving historic architecture in Houston and Texas, honored me with the 2024 President's Award.

Projects of historic importance have their own sets of demands. It's imperative to begin by researching to understand the project, its purpose, who commissioned and designed it, whether it was successful, and why it's significant. Another consideration — one your average person may not think of — is the passive energy strategies behind some of these buildings.

ELDORADO BALLROOM: JON BURKE / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

MENIL HOUSE AND APOLLO MISSION CONTROL CENTER: HESTER+HARDAWAY

Sometimes the greenest building is the one that already exists, particularly if it was designed before the time of air conditioning and electricity, meaning it needed to be constructed to utilize the sun. Like any project, you want a full understanding before making decisions.

I've been fortunate to work on several historic undertakings in Houston. Among others: the Philip Johnson-designed Menil House; the Apollo Mission Control Center at the Johnson Space Center, a project that honored the 50th anniversary of the moon landing; and, more recently, the Eldorado Ballroom in Third Ward, the music venue where all the top rhythm, jazz and blues artists played during the 20th century. The challenge of the latter was creating a space that was of the neighborhood, which has seen much change in recent years — not all of it beneficial to its residents.

I'm drawn to cities and communities that retain elements of their past and find creative ways to add new buildings. As a cityscape, I find it much more interesting. The design of a structure shouldn't exist in a vacuum. We should be thinking about the context around what we're building. We should be thinking about how our work affects and reinforces the neighborhood, becomes one with the neighborhood.

After all, this approach is what distinguishes one city from the next one down the road. We must prioritize telling stories about who and why our cities evolved the way they did. To stand in front of the important structures that represent achievement is to really appreciate the progress we've made to date and what's to come. It's not about looking back at all; it's about going forward with respect to the environment you inherited.

The Brand Builder

UH brand and licensing leader ***PATRICK MULLIGAN*** *aspires to make the Cougars a household name.*

YOU WALK into a sports apparel store to do some casual perusing. All the usual suspects are there — the Astros, Rockets and Texans. But then, in a section that seems to be growing every time you visit, you see it: the University of Houston Cougars merchandise. We're fighting to make this a common sight.

Over the past five years, as leader of the brand management, licensing and trademarks team at UH, I've been part of a determined effort to build the UH brand. It's not an overnight success story but rather a marathon — and we're beginning to hit our stride. We see UH merchandise cropping up not only in Texas, but also in major markets across the country, such as Los Angeles, Chicago and Washington, D.C.

Our University is one of the city's driving forces. Thanks to licensing, people from far outside of Houston get to be a part of our brand too.

Prior to joining the team at UH, I spent 17 years working at a licensing agency whose main client was Ford Motor Company, navigating international licensing deals that propelled the Ford name into more markets and households. Since joining UH in 2019, I've been tasked with guiding the UH brand to even greater heights.

Branding is all about consistency and persistence, and that's exactly what we're applying to the UH brand. Whether cars or higher education, my favorite thing about branding work has remained the same: Every day is different.

I love to see how people interact with the brand. Its identity has been shaped by the experience people have with it, and that's

*By **PATRICK MULLIGAN** / As told to **TYLER HICKS** / Illustration by **RYAN OLBRYSH***

> **“Building a brand is about more than just putting logos on hats and shirts. It’s about creating a legacy of excellence and innovation people want to be a part of.”**

how merchandising plays a key role. It’s a way to identify as part of the Coog Nation.

In the Texas market, there is intense competition for each spot in every shop. We’re actively fighting for more visibility, battling for space in stores and making sure the UH brand stands out.

And it’s paying off. Lately, the number of people identifying with the Houston Cougars has steadily trended upward, and UH’s merchandise sales have grown each year since the pandemic.

More national brands, such as Peter Millar and Tommy Bahama, are becoming a part of our licensing program. The University is being approached by new companies eager to be a part of this expanding brand. Although I can’t disclose all the details, I can say that upcoming deals will link UH with some household names.

One recent win we’re excited about is our partnership with Travis Scott, along with Fanatics and Lids. This collaboration allows fans to sport UH gear styled in Scott’s Cactus Jack brand. These partnerships are more than just business deals. They’re a way for the UH community to celebrate their pride, and they help build the brand even further.

1,578,826

The number of UH-licensed items sold, 2023–24

Building a brand is about more than just putting logos on hats and shirts. It’s about creating a legacy of excellence and innovation people want to be a part of.

And that leads us to another key piece of this feedback loop: the Cougars who are creating excitement and energy around the UH name. That includes the men’s basketball team, which has become one of the nation’s premier programs and a perennial contender for the Final Four. With their solid defense and scrappy play, the team embodies the tenacity, grit and get-it-done spirit that have come to represent the University.

UH is all about bringing the best and brightest to the same place so we can work together and accomplish something great. It’s a brand of achievement and innovation, and the basketball team is just one of many catalysts.

Our alumni, who are scattered around the world, have made the University synonymous with hard work and success. Everything from prestigious academic research to prize-winning professors helps fortify the UH brand. For instance, Cristina Rivera Garza, director of UH’s creative writing program in Hispanic Studies, recently won a Pulitzer Prize.

Our students are earning more coveted national fellowships than ever before, and UH is ranked among the top 75 public universities by U.S. News & World Report, with efforts underway to move even higher. Every piece of positive news contributes to the positive associations people celebrate.

We are relentlessly pursuing every opportunity, knocking on doors and exploring every avenue to ensure UH merchandise finds its way into more stores. There’s still a long road ahead, but we’re more determined than ever to make UH a name that stands tall across the nation.

JON BURKE / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

The Memoirist

Through writing her Pulitzer Prize-winning memoir, UH professor ***CRISTINA RIVERA GARZA*** *gets justice for her murdered 20-year-old sister — but not in the way she thought.*

By ***CRISTINA RIVERA GARZA***
As told to ***TYLER HICKS***

WITH HONORS
Cristina Rivera Garza, director of UH's creative writing program in Hispanic Studies, recently added a Pulitzer Prize to her list of accomplishments.

JON BURKE / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

Cristina Rivera Garza is the M.D. Anderson Distinguished Professor in Hispanic Studies at the University of Houston and director of the Ph.D. program in creative writing in Spanish, through which aspiring writers hone their craft writing in the language.

They couldn't ask for a better teacher. Rivera Garza's admirable body of work, which includes six novels, three collections of short stories and three nonfiction books, has earned her a MacArthur Fellowship "genius grant" and other prestigious prizes. (For example, she is the only two-time winner of the Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz Prize, awarded for a book written in Spanish by a female author.)

Now, thanks to "Liliana's Invincible Summer," Rivera Garza has added Pulitzer Prize winner to her impressive CV.

The book, published in 2023, is ostensibly a memoir chronicling the author's grief and search for answers, though Rivera Garza says she prefers the term "documentary fiction." It merges Rivera Garza's deft reportage and introspective prose with her late sister's own writings, including journal entries, newspaper stories and a literary journal submission, which bring Liliana to life in her own words.

MY SISTER was 20 years old when she was murdered in her apartment in a Mexico City borough. I spent more than 30 years trying to write about it, and I began writing this book, "Liliana's Invincible Summer: A Sister's Search for Justice," thinking that I would be able to open up her case again.

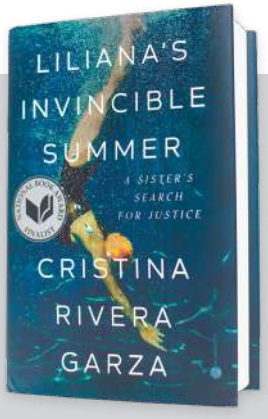
I thought I'd finally get justice.

Time has shown me that it's not going to be the case — at least not in the way I thought.

Creating 'Documentary Fiction'

I'M THE DIRECTOR of UH's creative writing program in Hispanic Studies, where we get these wonderful, gifted students from all over the Spanish-speaking world. In my classes, we discuss issues across genre writing, including the uses of archive materials in fiction and nonfiction writing.

My students have helped me realize that my book is a work of documentary fiction because of the heavy emphasis I place on archival materials, including



MORE THAN A MEMOIR Rivera Garza considers her award-winning book a work of "documentary fiction."

my sister's writings. You could read this book as an archive of sorts, in which I've used heavily the experiences and words of Liliana's friends, family members and her own newspaper clippings.

Once I got to read her letters, I got to see blueprints of all the things that were relevant in her life. I understood that, this time, I was going to be able to go ahead with the project. I understood that I was not writing about my sister but with my sister. I didn't want to be the story either. I wanted her to remain the main character, the main energy of this book.

Liliana was full of dreams — a competitive swimmer who loved movies, motorcycle jackets and the occasional cigarette. Her murder haunted me and our family, partly because we know who did it: her abusive ex-boyfriend, who fled Mexico City before he could be held accountable.

A Different Kind of Justice

I DIDN'T FIND the case files, but through other materials and in my conversations with lawyers and activists of those we've lost to femicide (wherein a woman is murdered simply because she is a woman), I saw there is something called restorative justice.

> **"Being able to articulate Liliana's story and share her truth places her back in our lives as a memory — not just a personal memory but a memory of entire communities."**

Restorative justice is a justice we can all participate in; it's a justice of collective memory and truth. In this case, being able to articulate Liliana's story and share her truth places her back in our lives as a memory — not just a personal memory but a memory of entire communities.

I have to admit that, for many years, the grieving process that my family and I went through was forcibly silent and full of guilt and shame. So being able to write this story in this way was a transformation, because something akin to a small, radical revolution takes place when more than one person decides to miss someone.

The book, I hope, allows readers to get to know Liliana in great detail. And once you do that, my hope is that you, as a reader, will be able to miss her as much as we do — those who were graced by her love.

Maybe you can call it healing.

Because I think a healing process begins when we all collaborate, contribute and participate in the making of these collective histories and collective memories.

I can see a very close connection between what I discussed [in the book] and what I bring into the classroom. I bring in my ideas, the complexity and the challenges that I, myself, am going through, and I share those with the students.

To write a book and discuss those ideas in the safe place that is a classroom has always been very productive for me, and very often, I'm touched by my students' perspectives too.

COURTESY OF CRISTINA RIVERA GARZA

A Cougar for Life

*Megafan **DONALD SCHERER**, aka "The Crazy Cougar," has been cheering on UH from the sidelines (and sometimes on the field itself) for more than 50 years.*

*By **KATIE STROH***

"I'VE BEEN A DIEHARD Coog my whole life," says Donald Scherer, known more commonly in the Cougar fan community as "The Crazy Cougar." In 1968, when he was a teenager, his father took him to his first Cougar football game at the Astrodome, during which UH handily beat the University of Tulsa 100–6.

"You can imagine that made a very large impression on me," Scherer says. The experience influenced him to attend UH after high school, and he received his bachelor's degree from the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture & Design in 1978.

COURTESY OF DONALD SCHERER

THE CRAZY COUGAR
A fixture at UH events for decades, Donald Scherer has been documenting his fandom along the way, including snapshots with the Heisman Trophy (bottom left), Coach Willie Fritz (top right) and his dad at Scherer's 1978 graduation (bottom right).

Since then, Scherer has remained a familiar sight at UH football and basketball games, having held season tickets for 30-plus years and often traveling to away games to show his support alongside a core group of dedicated Cougar fans.

"It's a lot of fun at the away games because we're usually a very small, vocal group in a little pocket of seats," he says. "Especially me — I'm very, very vocal."

So vocal, in fact, that the players have gotten to know Scherer by the volume of his boisterous cheers, chants and shouts of encouragement.

"For 30 years, I had four seats in the first row right behind the Cougar bench at Hofheinz [Pavilion, now the Fertitta Center] — like, 6 feet behind Clyde Drexler, Hakeem Olajuwon, Michael Young," he reminisces fondly about watching the legendary Phi Slama Jama team of 1982–1984. "I got to know those guys a little closer than most fans. … I'd yell at Clyde, 'How'd you miss that dunk?' and he'd give me one of those sheepish grins, like, 'I hear you. I won't do it again.'"

After his children were born, Scherer naturally began bringing them along to games. Two of those kids went on to graduate from UH.

"I've got a picture of Hakeem Olajuwon holding [my son] up above his head at Hofheinz for him to dunk the ball, when he was about 4 years old," he says. "That's one of my most treasured photos."

A faithful Cougar fan to this day, Scherer now loves attending games with his grandchildren, one of whom, he says, attended his first Cougar basketball game at just 5 days old.

30 Years of UH at Sugar Land

The University of Houston at Sugar Land, a UH instructional site in Fort Bend County and home to more than 20 graduate and undergraduate academic programs, turns 30 this year. Let's look back at the site's incredible growth over the past three decades.

1994

The University of Houston-Victoria begins offering for-credit classes in leased facilities in Sugar Land. Although enrollment tops just 200 students, it is apparent the growing area can take advantage of a nearby college campus.

1995

William P. Hobby, former lieutenant governor and UH System chancellor, establishes a teaching center in Sugar Land where students can take classes offered by the four UH System institutions. Classes are held at Clements High School and the Wharton County Junior College Centraplex for Higher Education. Enrollment nears 500 students.

1996–98

Enrollment doubles within a year, thanks to a partnership with Wharton County Junior College and Houston Community College. The Texas Department of Transportation transfers 248 acres of land near the Brazos River to the UH System for the construction of a permanent facility. The UH System Board of Regents approves $11 million for the building, and the City of Sugar Land pledges $3.5 million.

LAYOUT DESIGN BY MARCUS ALLEN

2002

Once called the UH System at Fort Bend, the site officially becomes the UH System at Sugar Land — just in time for the completion of the Albert & Mamie George Building. Nearly 2,000 students are enrolled by this time.

2006–08

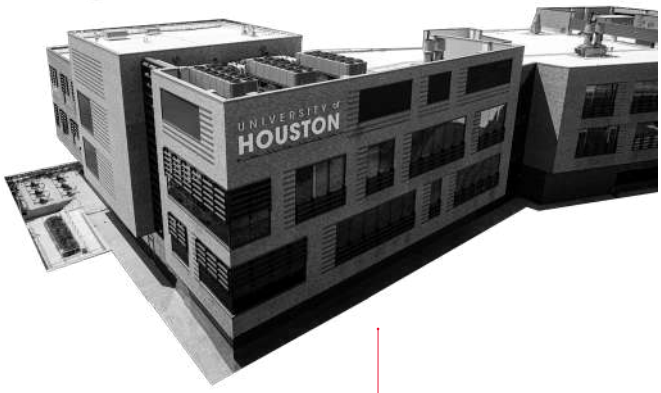
The City of Sugar Land and the UH System at Sugar Land sign a long-term land lease providing $3.5 million to construct Brazos Hall. Later in 2006, the Texas Board of Nurse Examiners approves a Bachelor of Science in nursing to be offered at the UH System at Sugar Land. In 2008, Richard Phillips becomes the first associate vice chancellor of UH System at Sugar Land.

2012–16

The instructional site is officially renamed UH at Sugar Land to reflect its connection to the main campus' faculty, research and programs. Nearly 4,500 students are enrolled by 2012. During the next three years, more programs are added. In 2016, the UH System Board of Regents approves a master plan for UH at Sugar Land, which includes the 150,000-square-foot Sugar Land Academic Building for the technology, business, education and health programs.

2019

The UH College of Technology building, home to new programs and innovative, state-of-the-art laboratory spaces, opens for the fall 2019 semester.



2023

UH at Sugar Land breaks ground on the second Sugar Land Academic Building, which will be home to programs for the Cullen College of Engineering-Technology Division. The grand opening is planned for 2025.

Be the No. 1 Gift Giver

For the Forever Coog in your life, UH has the perfect items for the giving season.

WITH THE HOLIDAYS just around the corner, now's the time to find the right gift for the University of Houston Cougar who likes to dress to impress. From classics such as Nike and Champion to fashion-forward Tommy Bahama, Lululemon and College Concepts, the UH Campus Store is the best place to find the nation's top brands in UH-licensed apparel.

(Clockwise from top): Michael Jordan by Nike UH replica basketball jersey ($120) and Nike UH Cougar shorts ($46); Bella+Canvas Houston Cougars script fleece crew (online only, $48) and College Concepts Houston Cougars script women's pants ($46); Lululemon UH women's oversized full-zip hoodie, everywhere belt bag ($52) and pace rival skirt ($96); Nike UH Cougars men's hoodie ($85) and thermal pants ($76).

Scan the QR code to shop.

Raise a Glass to UH

In Tempore Wine Club supports student scholarships.

THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON has launched the In Tempore Wine Club in collaboration with Fairwinds Estate Winery, bringing UH spirit to Napa Valley's acclaimed Silverado Trail. This exclusive wine collection offers members fine wine while supporting UH student scholarships. Membership perks include two shipments a year, access to rare releases, beautifully branded UH crates and accessories, and free tastings in Napa Valley. Celebrate the spirit of UH with every sip.

Scan the QR code to sign up.

JON BURKE / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

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