UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

FALL/WINTER 2025



# Maya History, Rewritten

Through their life's work, UH archaeologists **DIANE AND ARLEN CHASE** have fundamentally changed the world's understanding of the Maya culture.

**PAGE 26**

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

FALL/WINTER 2025



**RAD SUSTAINABILITY**
Built with over a million pounds of mass timber that stores 650+ metric tons of $CO_2$, the RAD Center is the first of its kind on campus. Every detail reflects UH's commitment to environmental stewardship and student-centered design.

JOSEPH BUI / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

# Dear Cougars and Friends,




ANTHONY GOLLAB / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

**AS WE STAND ON THE THRESHOLD** of our centennial, I am reminded that one of the University of Houston's greatest strengths is our spirit of exploration. From the heart of our campus to the farthest reaches of Texas — and even to the ancient ruins of Caracol in the jungles of Belize — our community is driven by its relentless curiosity and bold pursuit of discovery.

This magazine captures that spirit beautifully. Whether you are reading about the transformation of our residential campus, the adventures of our alumni across the Lone Star State, the groundbreaking research of our faculty or the award-winning innovations of our students, you will find a common thread: the courage to seek, to question and to grow.

Melody Yunzi Li, an associate professor who lives in Cougar Village I with her husband and new baby, is helping students find their "home away from home." In "Family in Residence" (page 5), Li shares the everyday interactions and personal mentorship that are nurturing growth, resilience and community among first-year students. In our feature on "The Residential Advantage" (page 34), you'll meet UH senior Grace Rodriguez, whose choice to explore opportunities and engage deeply with campus life is leading to lifelong friendships and success — and that's exactly the "why" behind UH's quest to expand to 10,000 beds on campus.

Our alumni, like Shane McAuliffe, remind us that the world is full of stories waiting to be discovered. In "Taking the Scenic Route" (page 40), the host of "The Texas Bucket List" shares how his journeys across Texas have revealed the richness of our state's people, places and traditions — and how his time at UH prepared him to tell those stories.

And in one of our most remarkable stories, UH professors and archaeologists Diane and Arlen Chase have uncovered the tomb of the first ruler of Caracol, rewriting Maya history and demonstrating the power of perseverance and teamwork in scientific exploration (page 26). In this issue, you'll also read about UH Energy's study abroad program (page 14) and fascinating new technologies developed by our faculty and students, further proof that our University's influence reaches far beyond campus.

As we look ahead to our next hundred years, let us continue to embrace the unknown and celebrate the explorers among us — those who ask new questions, build new communities and chart new paths.

Thank you for being part of this remarkable journey. The best is yet to come.

With Cougar pride,

**Renu Khator**
*President, University of Houston*

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ANTHONY GOLLAB / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON



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A model created by UH engineer Maksud Rahman, who's exploring ways to make inherently brittle materials foldable; Houston Cougars midfielder Casey Maddox (inset) is among the many UH athletes seizing the moment for women's sports.




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UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

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# Big Numbers, Bold Moves

***INTEREST*** *in and* ***ENROLLMENT*** *at the University of Houston are booming.*

**THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON** is rapidly emerging as a first-choice university for incoming college freshmen across the country. Along with unprecedented interest, UH has seen a surge in visibility, engagement and enrollment metrics that points to its growing reputation, thanks to its nationally recognized programs, world-class research and court-dominating basketball team.

## Visibility & Digital Engagement

**No. 1**

UH's ranking for social media engagement among all Texas universities (public and private) according to Rival IQ

**No. 22**

UH's national ranking for social media engagement among 668 Division I & II colleges and universities

**1,800%**

Increase in Google searches for "UH Cougars" during the 2025 NCAA Final Four

## Application & Enrollment Growth

**48,000+**

Freshmen applications — a historic high and 12% growth vs. fall 2024

**19.3%**

Growth in early applications for fall 2026

**75,000+**

Total applications (undergraduate and graduate)

**6,700+**

Freshman enrollment for fall 2025. 500 new freshman seats were added.

**4,500+**

Transfer students enroll annually

**49,000**

Record-breaking fall 2025 enrollment

**1,000**

Number of UH students taking classes at the campus in Katy, a 73% increase, fueled by expanded course offerings

## Housing & Student Experience

**8,397**

Number of beds, making UH No. 4 in Texas

**976**

Number of beds at Centennial Hall, the new residence hall opening in fall 2027. The extra beds will put UH at No. 2 in Texas.

**97%**

Housing at capacity for fall 2025

**4.8%**

Increase in first-time students living on campus

ANTHONY GOLLAB / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

# CAMPUS BULLETIN



OFFICE HOURS

## Family in Residence

*Chinese studies professor **MELODY YUNZI LI** blends culture, care and community as a Faculty-in-Residence at the University of Houston.*

*Story by **STACI PARKS***
*Photography by **ANTHONY GOLLAB** / **UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON***

**BABY MAKES THREE**
Li lives in the residence hall with her husband, Luis, and newborn daughter, Amelia.



A CACOPHONY OF SOUNDS swirls inside the University of Houston's Cougar Village I, a freshman residence hall tucked away on the campus' south end. On any given night, you may hear lively conversations, mariachi music, the coordinated shuffle of dance rehearsals — and the occasional infant's coo.

You're not hearing things. That delicate cry comes from Amelia, the newborn daughter of Associate Professor of Chinese Studies Melody Yunzi Li.

Li, along with her husband and daughter, is one of the faculty members living among the students on campus as part of UH's Faculty-in-Residence Program. A collaboration between the divisions of academic affairs and student affairs, the program aims to strengthen the connection between students' academic and residential experiences. (To learn more about how UH is enhancing the residential experience, turn to page 34.)

It's working. Research shows that interactions with faculty outside the classroom can positively impact a student's college experience, from GPA to degree completion.

**'HOME AWAY FROM HOME.'** Li has lived on campus since 2021, though she expressed interest in the program shortly after joining the University in 2018. For her, this role is personal.

Originally from Guangzhou, China, she completed her undergraduate and master's degrees in China before earning her doctorate at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri — half a world away from home.

"The dorm experience is very crucial to a student's development," Li says. "I believe these extracurricular or cultural experiences can really change someone's life, so I want to provide this home away from home."

> **"That's my favorite thing: to form a family outside [of] our family home with the students."**
>
> **— MELODY YUNZI LI**
> ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF CHINESE STUDIES AND FACULTY-IN-RESIDENCE

**BUILDING COMMUNITY.** Although Li teaches Chinese culture and literature, she strives to connect with as many students as possible from differing backgrounds. She hosts a variety of student-focused events for the residence hall, ranging from casual weekly coffee hours and study groups to cultural events celebrating various holidays. Every event is a touchpoint for Li to spark and nurture a relationship.

"There's limited space and time within the classroom," Li says, noting that students open up when they like and trust you. Living among students creates opportunities for organic, authentic connections, whether it's through sharing meals or even the elevator.

"My original purpose is to foster a sense of belonging," Li says. "I think that's my favorite thing: to form a family outside [of] our family home with the students."

Li shares her personal passions — like dance and mariachi music — with her students through selected programming. It's also a way to model work-life balance while encouraging cultural immersion.

Li has brought her love of dance to campus through her Chinese dance team, Moonlit Petals. The group performs at residence hall events as well as campus festivals such as International Education Week. Dance in all forms is one of Li's first loves. She met her husband, Luis, at a Latin dance event.

Li discovered her love of mariachi music through Luis, who's Mexican. She was so taken with the genre that, after seeing UH's Mariachi Pumas perform, she begged director Jose Longoria to play at her 2022 wedding. (He caved, performing with his internationally recognized group, Mariachi Imperial de America.)

Li's efforts at connection have paid off, with several students acknowledging her as critical to their success. Luey Flores, who worked in Li's residence hall for two years, credits Li with encouraging him to continue his educational journey through a master's program.

"It was the best decision I could have made for myself," Flores says. "Being involved with [Li's events] taught me time management, organization, people skills, logistics, community outreach and, of course, culture. I grew up a lot because of her guidance."

**RAISING THE NEXT GENERATION.** Li acknowledges the difficulty of balancing work with life. "They say having tenure and a baby at the same time [is] the best time," Li says, laughing.

As she adjusts to motherhood on campus, she knows that her role might shift a bit, but her goal of immersive education remains the same.

"I feel like it would be fun for [Amelia] to grow up in a college environment [around] all these diverse voices," she says. "Just talking about the student body and how many languages they speak, these diverse voices would help her language and culture immersion."

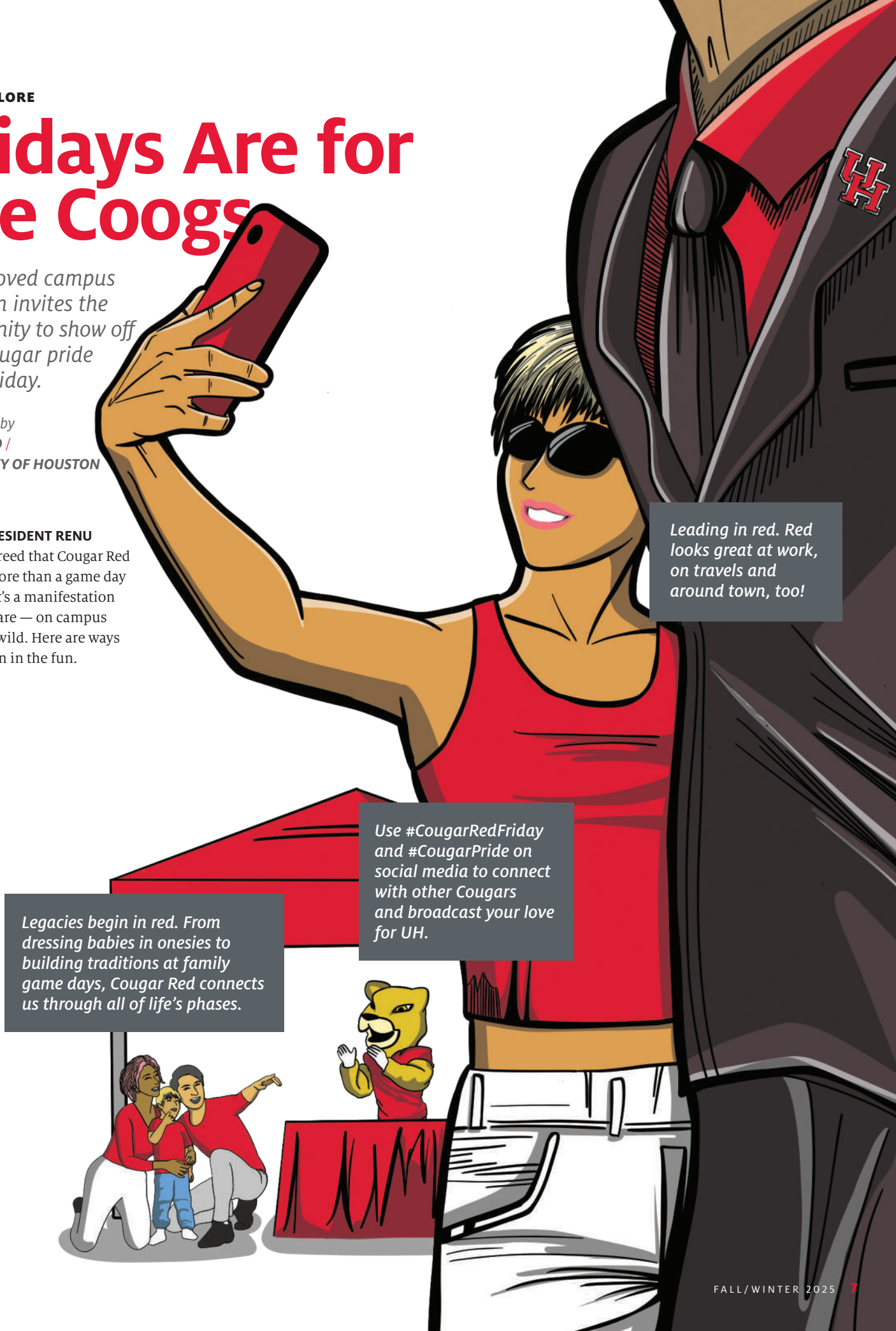
Li sees the potential for further mentorship too — as a scholar, professor, wife and new mother navigating life changes. "I think it helps them to balance the pressure of multitasking between different roles."

# Fridays Are for the Coogs

*This beloved campus tradition invites the community to show off their Cougar pride every Friday.*

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

**IN 2011, PRESIDENT RENU** Khator decreed that Cougar Red Friday is more than a game day tradition. It's a manifestation of who we are — on campus and in the wild. Here are ways you can join in the fun.



NOTABLE NEWS

# The Latest Headlines From Around UH



Gregory B. Dudley



Yarneccia D. Dyson



Xianjun Geng



Christina H. Gola

# New Leaders at UH

*The University welcomed **FIVE DISTINGUISHED AND ACCOMPLISHED** administrators: four college deans and a vice president.*

Veteran academic leader and chemist **Gregory B. Dudley** joined the College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics on Aug. 1 as professor and dean. He was previously the Eberly Family Distinguished Professor at West Virginia University's Eugene Bennett Department of Chemistry and also led the department as chair. His work — reflected in more than 100 publications, 200 presentations and multiple patents — has advanced the frontiers of organic synthesis. Dudley says student success will be his first priority as dean: "I want every student in NSM to feel seen, supported, challenged and inspired. We have profound impacts on the lives of our students; we must ensure that those impacts are positive, lasting and empowering."

On June 1, award-winning scholar, teacher and academic leader **Yarneccia D. Dyson** stepped into the role of dean of the Graduate College of Social Work, where she will also hold the Maconda Brown O'Connor Endowed Dean's Chair. Dyson comes to UH from North Carolina State University, where she served as executive director and head of the School of Social Work. Dyson describes herself as an adaptable leader who embraces three distinct leadership styles: transformational leadership, collaborative leadership and servant leadership. "I believe in co-creating change with faculty, staff, students and community partners, centering transparency, mutual respect, psychological safety and accountability," she says.

**Xianjun Geng**, a renowned scholar whose research focuses on pricing, supply chain management, business analytics, information security and behavioral economics, officially became dean and Hugh Roy and Lillie Cranz Cullen Distinguished University Chair of the C. T. Bauer College of Business on May 1. Geng comes to UH from Tulane University's A. B. Freeman School of Business, and he has served extensively in leadership roles in the academic community. Geng says the decision to join UH and Bauer College came down to "impact, people, culture and fit. The University of Houston and Bauer College are on a remarkable rise. The synergy between the University and the city is the envy of many other universities."

On Sept. 1, **Christina H. Gola** became dean of the University of Houston Libraries and the Elizabeth D. Rockwell Chair. Having served as interim dean since March 2024 and devoted a total of 16 years to UH Libraries, Gola is well-positioned to continue to advance and strengthen UH Libraries as she steps into a permanent leadership position.

Among Gola's priorities as dean is continuing the Reimagined Library initiative, designed to evolve the University's library landscape to meet the needs of a new generation of Cougars.

"I'm honored and excited to lead UH Libraries into its next chapter," Gola says. "This is a transformative moment for our University, and I'm proud

GENG: NOAH DAWLEARN / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON



Russell T. Dunlavy

to contribute to its ambitious goals."

A member of the UH community since 2008, **Russell T. Dunlavy** assumed the role of vice chancellor/vice president for Advancement and Alumni on July 16. Previously, he served as the senior associate vice president and successfully led development efforts across the UH's 16 academic colleges, two university units and centralized advancement teams, including Gift and Estate Planning, Corporate Relations, and Foundation Relations.

Dunlavy is also leading major gifts for UH's Centennial Campaign, helping to shape the future of the university he's called home for years. Reflecting on his longstanding connection to UH, he says, "From the moment I walked onto campus as a freshman and moved into Moody Towers, to now having the opportunity to help lead the efforts that connect our Cougar family, the University of Houston has been a part of my journey every step of the way."

# Rankings on the Rise

*UH climbs six spots to become* ***NO. 68 AMONG PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES****, according to U.S. News & World Report.*

**THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON** continues to boost its position in the national rankings, underscoring its growing reputation for student success and as a leading public research institution.

Marking a significant step toward its long-term vision of becoming a Top 50 public university, UH has improved six spots in U.S. News & World Report's "Best Colleges" rankings for 2026, published Sept. 23. The University also climbed 12 spots to reach No. 132 among universities overall.

"Our incredible rise in the rankings is a testament to our unwavering commitment to student success and institutional excellence," says UH President Renu Khator. "I thank our faculty, staff, students and supporters whose drive empowered us to crack the top 70 for the first time."

**COUGAR LOVE**
A student gives the temporarily relocated statue of Shasta an affectionate pat on the head during the first week of classes of the fall 2025 semester.

**No. 68**

Among public universities

**No. 132**

Among all universities

**No. 40**

In "Top Performers on Social Mobility"

**No. 48**

In "Most Innovative Schools"

**6**

Number of spots UH rose in national ranking of top public universities



COUGAR: JEFF LAUTENBERGER / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON




**LEADING LADY**
Houston Cougars guard Kierra Merchant handles the ball during the team's Feb. 8, 2025 matchup against West Virginia.




UH ATHLETICS

**BLEACHERS**

# She's Got Game

*With **WOMEN'S SPORTS ON THE RISE** nationally, UH is championing excellence on campus with a vision of investment, growth and visibility.*

*By **DEANNA JANES***

**WOULD YOU LOOK AT THAT?** The undercard just became the main event.

From the 2025 Women's College World Series drawing a record-breaking 2.7 million viewers and the U.S. Women's National Team setting a single-game attendance record to basketball icons Caitlin Clark and Angel Reese experiencing meteoric rises on the national stage, the surge of women's sports shows no signs of slowing.

Eddie Nuñez, University of Houston's vice president of intercollegiate athletics, is taking note. But more than just embracing the momentum, Nuñez is pouncing on it — Cougar style.

An athletic director who saw success at the University of New Mexico, Vanderbilt and Louisiana State University prior to joining UH, Nuñez envisions a women's athletics program steeped in inspiration, growth and excellence. He's also a girl dad of two and has always been an advocate for women's sports.

"I understand the impact of what a great women's program can do to help not just elevate the department, but sustain excellence across the board," Nuñez says. "And 99% of women athletes do great academically and in the community; they're great ambassadors. Why not invest in them?"

Investment, he says, starts with stellar coaching. With a focus on softball, basketball and soccer, Nuñez embarked on a nationwide search for leaders of the highest character and integrity — but also those who can bring the hype.

"We needed individuals who could add energy to lift this program and, at the



**OUT OF THE PARK** Outfielder Amanda Carden at bat during the Houston Cougars' winning series opener against the University of South Florida on May 5, 2023.

> **"99% of women athletes do great academically and in the community; they're great ambassadors. Why not invest in them?"**
>
> **— EDDIE NUÑEZ**
> VICE PRESIDENT OF INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS

end of the day, have that fire in their gut," Nuñez says.

He found exactly that in Chrissy Schoonmaker, the 2022 Atlantic 10 Coach of the Year and former UH softball assistant coach; Ben Williams, soccer's reigning Southland Conference Champion and 2024 Southland Conference Coach of the Year; and Matthew Mitchell, the winningest coach for women's basketball at the University of Kentucky.

"All three have had success," Nuñez says, "and they all understand the expectations here that yesterday is not where we're going to be tomorrow."

At UH, "tomorrow" means a future of opportunity and visibility. Investing in women's sports, Nuñez says, doesn't just elevate a school's athletic program. It builds a stronger community and paves the way to sustained excellence.

"If I can look back and say that we laid the foundation to sustained excellence [in women's sports at UH]," he says, "that will be something I can hang my hat on." UH

MADDOX SISTERS: JEFF LAUTENBERGER / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON; SOFTBALL: JONATHAN BURKE / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON




# Sister Synergy

Soccer stars **CASEY AND CAMERYN MADDOX** are teaming up in the way only siblings can.

**BEFORE THE HOUSTON COOGS** even take the field, they have an instinctual edge over their opponent: the Maddox sisters.

Casey and Cameryn Maddox, soccer stars from Snellville, Georgia, grew up playing and training together, but the two split up when Casey enrolled at UH and Cameryn the University of San Diego.

This year, however, the two are back together, reunited at UH and challenging every other Big 12 team with their sibling solidarity on the pitch.

"Having someone who has good chemistry with you automatically gives you an advantage," Cameryn says, adding that Casey is both her biggest fan and fiercest opponent. "We'll go really hard in practice against each other."

Casey says having her sister back on her team is a game-changer: "She knows my game."

It's that trust, motivation and bond that will fuel team camaraderie and connection this season — and, hopefully, give their new coach, Ben Williams, a nonstop highlight reel.



**CAMPUS LIFE**

# A Gateway to the Next Century

*The ongoing reimagining of* ***UNIVERSITY DRIVE*** *will bring a new level of walkability and beauty to the UH campus' main thoroughfare.*

*By* ***SHAWN LINDSEY***

**STANDING** at the entrance of University Drive today, you will undoubtedly hear the buzz of construction. What's being built here is more than pavement and pathways; it's a future. As the University of Houston approaches its 100th anniversary, its campus core is transforming in bold, beautiful ways, and nowhere are these changes more symbolic than along University Drive.

Closed to vehicles, University Drive is undergoing a once-in-a-generation reimagining. The temporary inconvenience is a small price for a transformation that promises lasting impact. By late 2026, this thoroughfare — historically the central artery of campus — will be reborn as a pedestrian-first promenade from Martin Luther King Boulevard, past the Conrad N. Hilton College of Global Hospitality Leadership and Student Center South to Cullen Performance Hall.

Picture shade trees, art-lined walkways, inviting gathering spaces and a striking campus gateway monument at Spur 5. More than just a beautification project, these campus upgrades send a clear message about the future of the University.

"For years, the academic and reputational profile of UH has been on a steep upward trajectory," says UH architect Jim Taylor. "Now the physical heart of campus is rising to meet that same standard."

The project, led by award-winning landscape architecture firm OJB, is part of a $43 million Centennial Construction initiative focused on community, connection and sustainability. It's designed to reflect what UH has become — a nationally competitive, Tier One public research university — and where it's headed in its second century.

The new corridor is designed to slow the pace, encouraging passersby to pause, connect and reflect. Public art, outdoor "rooms" and informal dining nooks will invite students and visitors alike to linger, creating moments of inspiration and memory in a space once known primarily for its traffic.

The University Drive overhaul is just

OJB



**CAMPUS REIMAGINED**
University Drive is getting a pedestrian-first makeover just in time for UH's centennial in 2027.







one piece of a broader vision to elevate the campus experience in time for UH's 2027 centennial celebration. For those who have watched the University grow over the decades, this physical transformation feels not just appropriate, but essential.

It's a visible reminder that UH is striding forward into the next 100 years with intention and pride.



# Other Spaces on the Rise

**WILHELMINA'S GROVE:** This cherished green space is being reimagined as a serene retreat in the heart of campus. Enhancements include shaded walkways, a calming water feature and a small amphitheater nestled among the trees — perfect for outdoor performances or quiet study between classes.

**CENTENNIAL PLAZA:** The beloved Cullen Family Plaza and iconic fountains will return in a newly designed plaza that serves as a signature public space. Featuring flexible seating, outdoor "rooms," public art and water features, the revitalized plaza will continue to anchor the University's civic and social life.

AROUND THE WORLD

# Energy Abroad

*UH students embark on first-ever learning abroad trip dedicated to* ***ENERGY INNOVATION****.*

*By* ***JONATHAN ADAMS***





**ENERGIZED**
Virginia Snodgrass Rangel (right), a UH associate professor, organized the energy-focused trip to Argentina, where she lived for two years.

**WHEN VIRGINIA SNODGRASS RANGEL** moved to Argentina in 2023, she didn't just fall in love with the country's colorful streets, its endearing people and their rich culinary traditions. She discovered a new way to see energy.

While living in Buenos Aires for two years with her husband, who works for an international energy company, the associate professor at University of Houston's College of Education immersed herself in a South American country where oil and gas and innovative renewable solutions coexist in unexpected ways.

An idea began to take shape: What if UH students could see this for themselves? It was an opportunity to learn about the country's energy production and sustainability technologies, along with policies, while also experiencing everything she had come to love.

## THE JOURNEY AHEAD

After months of planning, coordinating with deans and faculty across campus, and forging connections with Argentinian businesses and universities, Snodgrass Rangel's vision became a reality. On May 24, a pioneering group of 10 students and three faculty members landed in Argentina for UH Energy's first-ever learning abroad program focused on energy policy and innovation.

Titled "Sustainability in Policy," the program offered a rare, on-the-ground look at one of the world's most complex energy landscapes.

"It's always useful to learn about something from someone else's perspective," Snodgrass Rangel says. "A lot of our students were really hoping to learn about renewables, which is only part of the story in Argentina. It's also one of the world's biggest oil and gas producers."

## POWER PLAYERS

Across 10 packed days, the students and faculty visited nine businesses and three universities across two cities, Buenos Aires and Neuquén. One of the top priorities for the trip was to ensure students were exposed to new experiences, such as visiting oil and gas production sites.

"They got hands-on learning to see what's happening," says Mim Rahimi, professor at the Cullen College of Engineering, who served as the faculty lead on the trip. "We took them to a site in Neuquén, and the students were so excited. It was priceless."

Chemical engineering major Vittoria Palomba says the trip transformed her perspective on engineering's real-world, global impact.

"It helped me connect classroom learning to broader global systems and made me think more critically about the role engineers play in shaping sustainable solutions," Palomba says.

The title and topic for next year's trip are still being finalized, but they're already looking for the next cadre of ambitious UH Energy students to make the expedition.

"Everything is global now, but energy really is global," Snodgrass Rangel says. "I think the more the University can do to build those international connections [the more they] will prepare students for what they're going to find."

GROUP: COURTESY OF DEIDRA P. PERNELL



**MORE THAN MOVEMENT**
"What makes the Myostep project so compelling is it's not just about the technology. It's about restoring confidence, function and hope," says Jose Luis Contreras-Vidal (inset), director of the UH BRAIN Center.

CONTRERAS-VIDAL: JEFF LAUTENBERGER / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON; EXOSKELETON: JOSEPH BUI / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

**STUDIES SHOW**

# A Step Forward

*A team from the UH BRAIN Center and TIRR Memorial Hermann have created the first* ***WEARABLE SOFT EXOSKELETON*** *for children with cerebral palsy.*

*By* ***KATIE STROH***

**FOR CHILDREN** with cerebral palsy and other motor impairments, simple physical activities like standing, walking and jumping aren't always so simple. Cerebral palsy is a common neurological disorder in children that affects motor skills, including the ability to walk, and occurs in 1 to 4 out of every 1,000 births worldwide.



The Myostep soft exoskeleton, developed by a team from the National Science Foundation-funded University of Houston Building Reliable Advances and Innovation in Neurotechnology (BRAIN) Center and TIRR Memorial Hermann, represents a significant technological leap for wearable mobility aids for people with cerebral palsy, particularly children. Recently debuted in Electronic Devices Magazine, the discreet, lightweight Myostep system makes use of cutting-edge technologies such as artificial muscles, smart fabrics and a comprehensive sensor network, which work together to promote healthy musculoskeletal development and can be adjusted as children grow.

Myostep's creators say the device addresses motor impairments that can severely restrict children's participation in physical activities, self-care and academic pursuits, all of which may lead to developmental delays, social isolation and reduced self-esteem.

"What makes the Mystep project so compelling is it's not just about the technology. It's about restoring confidence, function and hope," says Jose Luis Contreras-Vidal, director of the UH BRAIN Center and Hugh Roy and Lillie Cranz Cullen Distinguished Professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering. "This kind of innovation has the potential to dramatically improve quality of life, helping children move through the world with greater ease and dignity."

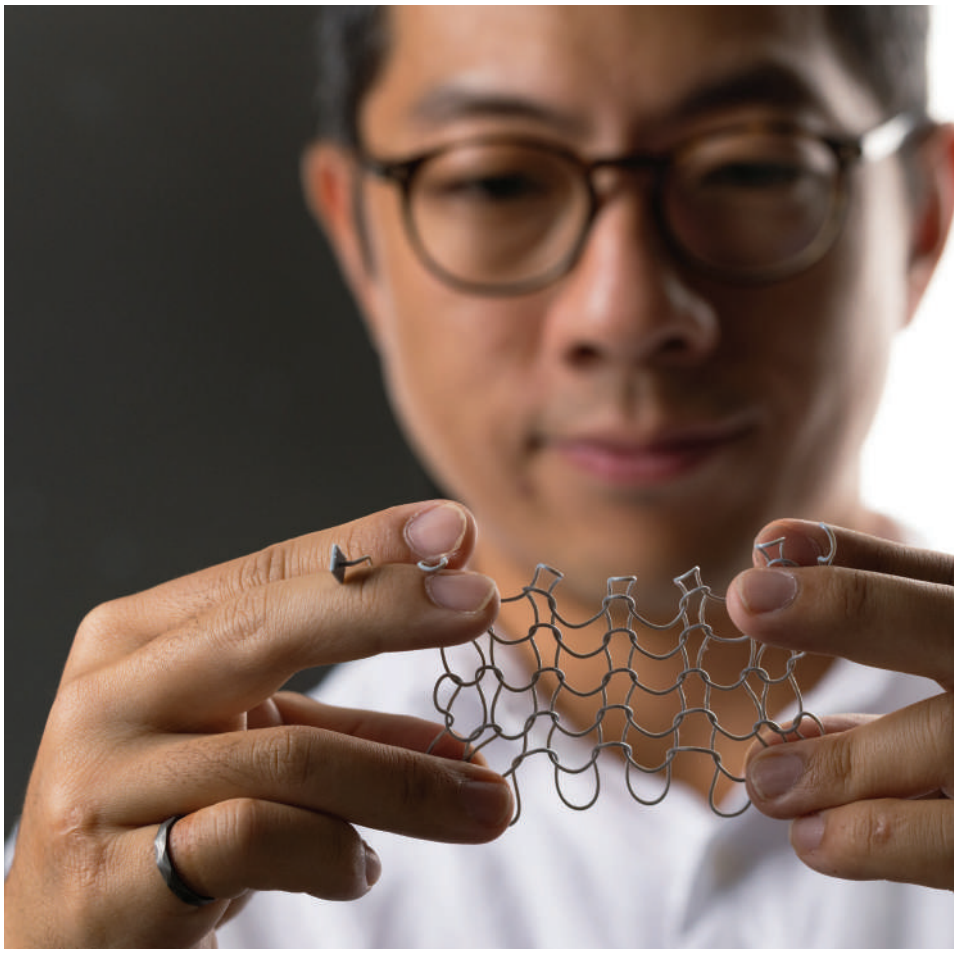




# A More Flexible Future

*UH engineers are stretching the way we shape and arrange materials.* ***THE IMPLICATIONS ARE MASSIVE.***

*Story by* ***TYLER HICKS***
*Photography by* ***ANTHONY GOLLAB*** / ***UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON***



**ONE DAY,** not long ago, Maksud Rahman found himself unable to get an image out of his head: his son folding a sheet of paper this way and that, practicing the ancient art form of origami.

Rahman is an assistant professor of mechanical and aerospace engineering at the University of Houston, so he's something of a materials expert. He spends a lot of time thinking about how to make materials like ceramics more "damage-tolerant," so when he thought about his son's origami hobby, he got an idea.

"Can we make origami using ceramic?" he wondered.

If he succeeded in making inherently brittle ceramic materials lighter and foldable, such materials could be used for medical prosthetics and new components in the aerospace industry.

"I always tell my students, 'It's called research because you'll search again and again,'" he says. You may fall short of your goal, but that just means you're getting closer.

Around the same time, Tian "Tim" Chen, a professor of mechanical and aerospace engineering at UH, was also working with a soft material: fabric. With a lab that uses both industrial knitting machines and 3D printing to explore material behavior, Chen is exploring new applications in the worlds of tech and robotics.

"Problems we haven't traditionally thought of as mechanical are becoming mechanical," Chen says.

Both Chen and Rahman are stretching materials science in new directions — and delivering major innovations in the process.

## 'Zero to One'

There are two main ways to do research, Rahman explains. One way is to build upon work someone else has begun. The other way is to develop something new, something no one else has tried before. This is called "zero to one" research — and it's what Rahman was doing with his origami-centric approach to ceramics.

But he was undaunted. This is the kind of work he relishes, especially because he was working alongside a talented postdoc student.

"I always see my role as a guide," Rahman says of his approach to researching alongside students. "I provide them technical support, critical feedback and help them with each step, but I never provide the answers."

In this case, they had a solid foundation. Rahman and his postdoc, Shajedul Hoque Thakur, found inspiration in seashells, which bear a striking structural resemblance to ceramics and polymer.

This natural architecture gives seashells both strength and toughness — a rare combination in engineered materials.

Rahman and Thakur replicated that strength-through-structure approach using 3D printers to create origami-inspired designs. And just as seashells gain toughness from their microstructure, the team focused on architectural design to improve flexibility in otherwise-brittle ceramics.

"If you have foldable ceramic origami one day, you'll see that you can transport it easily from one-dimensional to two-dimensional and three-dimensional," Rahman says. "You can take it from one place to another place — a big structure — because you can fold it easily."

Of course, since this is research — searching and searching again, as Rahman puts it — he encountered several challenges. There were printer failures, polymer burnout and uneven polymer coating, all of which prevented him from creating the strong but flexible structure he sought.





**FORWARD THINKERS**
UH professors Tim Chen (left) and Maksud Rahman are broadening the scope of their field — mechanical and aerospace engineering — to tackle challenges they "didn't know about" before now.

His solution was to develop a vacuum-assisted polymer coating method to re-create the benefits of the soft protein layers found in seashells. This coating added a flexible, damage-tolerant layer, showing Rahman that "interdisciplinary research can lead to surprising breakthroughs."

"We combined concepts from origami, from material science and from manufacturing, and we ended up with a very nice discovery using this ceramic," he says. "This can reshape how we approach challenges in different scientific applications like biomedical or engineering fields."

"This folding pattern," he adds, "can unlock some new functionalities in most fragile materials."

## Unique Approaches to New Challenges

Chen's work may use softer materials, but, like Rahman, Chen is broadening the scope of mechanical engineering.

"In the past, mechanical engineers worked on very fundamental and practical problems," Chen says. Now, leaders like him tackle challenges we "didn't know about" before, such as biomechanics and robotics.

Chen's research fits into this new frontier by focusing on materials that are "much, much softer than what we traditionally use," he says. "So instead of working with steel or concrete or ceramics, we try to understand the behavior of things that are inherently soft."

His foray into fabric began when a running shoe company asked if it was possible to 3D print woven materials with varying stiffness: supportive in some parts, flexible in others. This work activated Chen's long-term interest in exploring how knitted fabrics behave mechanically.

For his most recent project, he worked alongside collaborators at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Stanford who have extensive experience in industrial knitting. "What we found is that the behavior of knits is largely dependent on topology — how the yarn threads through itself," Chen says.

They used 3D printing knit patterns that mimic traditional knitting machines, and the mechanical properties matched closely, even when materials changed from cotton to synthetic polymers. This means the structure — not the material itself — controls mechanical properties such as stretch and support.

By designing a pattern, engineers can create fabrics with tailored behaviors like elasticity and reinforcement. Chen's insight has major implications for wearable technology, soft robotics and adaptive materials that require precise mechanical control.

In quintessential UH fashion, these two professors have taken unorthodox inspiration and pioneered new pathways in mechanical engineering. Their work will unlock new possibilities far beyond their field — and it all began with a little curiosity.

> **"I always tell my students, 'It's called research because you'll search again and again.'"**
>
> **— MAKSUD RAHMAN**
> ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF MECHANICAL AND AEROSPACE ENGINEERING

# A Winning Wayfinder

*With the debut of **AN AWARD-WINNING, AI-ENHANCED HIKING TECHNOLOGY**, a UH design grad is blazing a trail that redefines how we connect with nature — and each other.*

By **DEANNA JANES**




COURTESY VARSHINI CHOUTHRI

**PICTURE THIS:** You're lost in the woods, unsure how a harmless hike went from fun times to frantic mess. Do you break your vow to become one with nature and consult the GPS in your pocket? *Reluctantly, you pull out your phone.*

Now imagine the same scenario, only this time you're equipped with an AI-enhanced, screen-free hiking companion programmed with seamless navigation and real-time guidance. It's not sci-fi; it's NOMAD, a trailblazing innovation that rethinks how we de-screen in the great outdoors — and keep it that way.

Developed by recent industrial design graduate Varshini Chouthri in the University of Houston Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture and Design's Product Experience Design Lab, NOMAD allows hikers to immerse themselves in nature while maintaining an awareness of their surroundings. By using adaptive artificial intelligence and contextual sensing for hands-free navigation and smart wayfinding, NOMAD seamlessly blends in with the environment rather than interrupting it.

## Where Nature Meets Tech

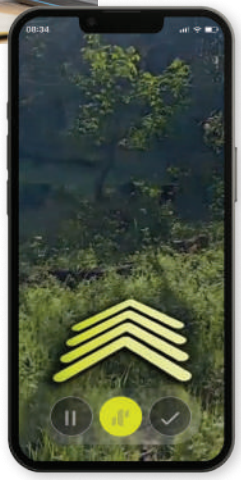
Chouthri says there are a couple ways to use NOMAD: via 1 the mobile app or 2 a modern-design interface pin, which magnetically attaches to your gear, allowing for a phone- and screen-free journey. Just how disconnected a hiker prefers to be is entirely up to them.

Meaningfully and intuitively incorporating AI into such a low-tech activity didn't come without its challenges. "It took so much practice, research, a lot of iterations, and the expertise of STEM pros and user feedback," she says.





**NATURE FIRST**
Varshini Chouthri (above) designed NOMAD as an app or magnetic pin to ensure a screen-free yet safe journey for hikers.



1

In addition to crowdsourcing thoughts from other hikers about how NOMAD could most benefit them, she pulled inspiration from her own childhood. Having grown up hiking the mountains of California, Chouthri says her family's passion for exploring Mother Nature was key to NOMAD's creation.

Perhaps even more influential, she says, was her hiking community. "There's a really big community aspect in hiking," she says. "When one person goes on a hike, they share scenic or hazard points they saw and alert fellow hikers."

> **"My favorite part of building NOMAD was getting to talk to people and seeing people's faces when I would show them the finished product."**
>
> **— VARSHINI CHOUTHRI (B.S. '25)**

NOMAD's continuously evolving knowledge base — a pivotal design feature — is designed to empower both individual users and the broader hiking community. Information such as trail hazards, a hikers' insight reel and post-hike reflections are updated often, while pre-mapped drone data, AI-powered preparation and dynamic route awareness ensure confident exploration.

At the project's outset, Chouthri intended to create a hiking companion that would simply get people excited about lacing up their boots and hitting the trails. However, throughout the process — and nearly 20 iterations of the app and interface pin combined — her purpose evolved.

"Through the [PDX Lab] program, I realized I am a very empathy-driven designer," she says. "I like designing based upon people's experiences, and I like really working with them. My favorite part of building NOMAD was getting to talk to people and seeing people's faces when I would show them the finished product."

## Award-Winning Design

If only she could have seen the faces of the judges behind Red Dot's Best of the Best Award 2025 when they voted on their winner. The international design competition awarded Chouthri's NOMAD the prestigious top prize, placing it among the top design innovations across the globe. Chouthri says she's still in shock: "I can't believe it's real."

For now, NOMAD remains a successful school project and award magnet; it also earned recognition from the FIT Sport Design Awards and IDEA Awards. While Chouthri is currently turning her focus to other projects, she says she fully intends to return to NOMAD and get it on the market.

"When people finally see NOMAD, I want them to say, 'I want to go on a hike now,'" she says. "We're so glued to our screens all the time, we completely forget about how cool nature is."

CHOUTHRI: ANTHONY GOLLAB / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON



*Nearly 40 years after her sudden death, UH volleyball legend* ***FLO HYMAN*** *has been inducted into the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Hall of Fame.*

# Cementing a Legacy

*By* ***STACI PARKS***

**UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON** volleyball legend Flora "Flo" Hyman was inducted posthumously into the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Hall of Fame in July as part of the class of 2025.

Hyman, who's often credited with the rise of women's volleyball in the United States, was the first female scholarship athlete in University of Houston Athletics history. She led the Cougars to two top 5 finishes in the 1970s while winning the 1976 Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women National Player of the Year title and the 1977 Broderick Award.

Hyman also guided the United States to its first Olympic volleyball medal in 1984. Although Hyman was part of the 1980 Olympic team, a U.S. boycott of the Moscow games kept her from competing. Outside of the Olympics, Hyman helped U.S. teams win a silver medal at the 1983 Pan American Games in Caracas, Venuzuela, and a bronze medal at the 1982 World Championships in Peru.

The honor came nearly 40 years after Hyman's shocking, unexpected death. On Jan. 24, 1986, 31-year-old Hyman collapsed and later died after subbing out of a match in Matsue, Japan. Initially, her cause of death was thought to be a heart attack, but an autopsy later determined it was a ruptured aorta due to Marfan syndrome, a genetic connective tissue disorder. Hyman's sudden death brought much-needed awareness to the rare disorder — and saved her brother Michael's life.

Ruth Nelson, Hyman's teammate, coach and friend, gave an acceptance speech on her behalf at the Team USA Hall of Fame ceremony in Colorado Springs, Colorado, sharing stories of the determined, charismatic athlete.

"Flo was more than a teammate; she was

UH ATHLETICS



**LEADING LEGACY**
The first female scholarship athlete in UH Athletics history, Hyman is often credited with the rise of women's volleyball in the United States.

> **"She was a force of nature, a leader who stood for justice, a teammate who believed in unity and someone who made everyone feel like they belonged."**
>
> **— RUTH NELSON**
> FLO HYMAN'S FORMER TEAMMATE AND FRIEND IN THE ACCEPTANCE SPEECH SHE GAVE ON HYMAN'S BEHALF

a force of nature, a leader who stood for justice, a teammate who believed in unity and someone who made everyone feel like they belonged," Nelson said. "Her Olympic teammates often said, 'Flo didn't just play for us; she played for everybody.'"

Nelson described the 6-foot-5 Hyman as an "athlete, advocate, icon and friend" who "cared deeply and lived passionately."

Hyman decided to pursue a professional volleyball career in Japan after the 1984 Olympics. While abroad, she noticed that other countries gave women's sports more notoriety and respect. Never one to back down, Hyman often returned home to advocate for increased opportunities for female athletes. She also joined forces with civil rights leader Coretta Scott King and astronaut Sally Ride to lobby for the Civil Rights Restoration Act and strengthen Title IX legislation.

Hyman was one of 12 inductees in a class that included powerhouse athletes such as fellow Olympians Gabby Douglas, Allyson Felix and Serena Williams.

Each year, the University recognizes Hyman's legacy through the Flo Hyman Collegiate Cup.




**CELEBRATION CENTRAL**
FIFA Fan Festival Houston, to be held outside Shell Energy Stadium for 34 of the tournament's 39 days, will form the main hub for World Cup activities in Houston.

# Houston Scores Big

*As the city preps for the **2026 FIFA WORLD CUP**, a UH economist and soccer coach weigh in on the event's potential economic and cultural impacts.*

*By **STACI PARKS***




**FUN FACT:** *A UH alumna designed the Houston World Cup poster. Read all about artist Stephanie Leal ('21), who grew up playing soccer.*

**NEXT SUMMER,** Houston's NRG Stadium will host seven 2026 FIFA World Cup games over the span of three weeks — a feat the city has been preparing for since it was announced in 2022.

An event of this magnitude has plenty of positive implications, including helping Houston position itself as a "world-class city." We spoke to Steven Craig, University of Houston economics professor, and Ben Williams, Houston Soccer head coach, for their insights on how the World Cup could impact the Bayou City for years to come.

"Houston, clearly, is a major league city," Craig says. "It's done a good job of marketing itself."

While the buzz around global attention is warranted, the actual economic impact is more nuanced. Houston is "not naturally a tourist destination," Craig says, citing sweltering summers, an absence of scenic vistas and a lack of distinct cultural identity found in neighboring cities like San Antonio.

In the case of the World Cup, that's a good thing, according to Craig. Every tourist is "an addition" in Houston because they aren't "crowding out" other competing tourists. "The short-term impact on Houston is bigger than it would be most other places," he says.


Steven Craig



Ben Williams

Houston is rife with great, varied entertainment options, which will inevitably lead to an economic spike in the city's hospitality and entertainment industries. "A lot of the concentrated financial activity that you see at that time is just a substitute for much more dispersed entertainment around the city, both geographically and in time," Craig says. "So the net economic impact is really from the visitors."

But Craig notes that this is "periodic business," and it's "not the same thing as building a new industry."

The World Cup can be part of a broader strategy to position Houston as an attractive, dynamic city that's capable of hosting major international events — potentially placing it in the spotlight for future business deals, including corporate relocations.

When cities get extra traffic and attention from events like the Olympics or World Cup, there tends to be a slight increase in business relocations over the following five years. "Hosting part of the World Cup might put [Houston] on that list when it wouldn't otherwise," Craig says.

Williams, in his inaugural season as Houston Soccer head coach, echoes Craig's optimism. "[The World Cup] just gets more eyeballs seeing Houston as a soccer city," he says.

Williams is no stranger to the game and its global impact. He grew up in "soccer-crazy" Liverpool, England, and played four seasons with the Oklahoma Wesleyan Eagles before embarking on a successful coaching career, which has included leading Stephen F. Austin's Ladyjacks to the largest single-season turnaround in Division I in 2024.

"A big thing about soccer is how it brings multiple cultures together to watch one game," Williams says. "A big part of it translates to the city we're in, which is a very multicultural, diverse city. I think that replicates, on a very small scale, what the World Cup is about."

Williams hopes to coordinate "kickabouts," or informal soccer games, at the stadium and fan zones with UH soccer players to build on the World Cup's excitement and interest.

Watching the World Cup on a global stage "changes everything," creating an opportunity for it to spark interest in the sport from both prospective fans and players. "It's going to be people from every country here, seeing their country play soccer," Williams says. "You might inspire another future kid who isn't involved in the sport right now."

COURTESY FIFA WORLD CUP 26 HOUSTON HOST CITY COMMITTEE; CRAIG AND WILLIAMS: ANTHONY GOLLAB / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON; POSTER COURTESY OF FIFA

UH archaeologists **DIANE AND ARLEN CHASE** have spent the last 40 years excavating in Caracol, Belize — fundamentally shifting our understanding of the Maya with every decade.

# Maya H



JAMENPERCY/ISTOCK



# History, Rewritten

By **LAURIE FICKMAN**




**IN 1937, WOODCUTTER ROSA MAI,** likely with a machete in hand, slashed his way through the thick jungle forest that covered the Vaca Plateau in Caracol, Belize. He was cutting vegetation and underbrush in search of mahogany and tree sap, known as chicle, that was used to make chewing gum.

Although history makes no note of Mai's success in the tree and gum business on the northeastern coast of Central America, it does record —with great importance — how he found carved stones and enormous mounds, cloaked in thick vegetation and years of overgrowth, that he suspected were hiding archaeological secrets.

It would take about 50 more years for young archaeologists Diane and Arlen Chase — both now faculty at the University of Houston — to begin major excavation at the site, using hand tools to carefully clear layer after layer of soil and debris.

Finally, the structures beneath the mounds began to spill their secrets. One revealed itself to be the most impressive structure at Caracol: a royal palace, ceremonial center and seat of power originally built between 600–700 AD, in the Late Classic period of the Maya civilization. Its scale and massive size — soaring 141 feet in the sky — prompted the Chases to name the structure Caana, which means "Sky Place" in the Maya language.

After dating relics and reading hieroglyphs in the palaces and temples located throughout the site, the Chases proved Caracol was a major political hub in Maya history, dominating the southern part of the Yucatán Peninsula from 560 through 680 AD before its abandonment by 900 AD. That was news to other researchers who had dismissed Caracol as a peaceful backwater town.

As remarkable as Caana's revelation was — and the subsequent rewriting of Maya history — this was only the beginning for the Chases in Caracol.

The story of these married archaeologists could fill several books. It is a story of chemistry — theirs — and science, which would lead them to become the world's leading experts on Caracol and the Maya civilization.

### FIRST, THE CHEMISTRY

In 1971, Arlen Chase had been on campus at the University of Pennsylvania for one full day as a freshman when he saw Diane Zaino driving up to campus with her parents. To be sure, he saw her coming, but he could not foresee or imagine what they both had coming together for the next 50-plus years.

They would both obtain doctorates in anthropology with specialties in archaeology, marry in 1975 and have three successful children, one of whom, Adrian, now works as an archaeologist alongside them. They would prosper as professors of archaeology, and Diane would eventually become senior vice president for academic affairs and provost at the University of Houston.

Through it all, they have never missed an excavation season in Caracol since 1985, when they obtained their permit to carry out archaeology there from the Belize Institute of Archaeology, an organization





**THE COUPLE WHO DIGS TOGETHER**
The Chases have not missed an excavation season in Caracol since 1985, when they first obtained their permit from the Belize Institute of Archaeology.

COURTESY OF ARLEN AND DIANE CHASE



**ANCIENT HISTORY EXPOSED**
Diane Chase carefully uncovers vessels and skeletal remains in front of the south wall niche of the tomb of Te K'ab Chaak.

COURTESY OF CARACOL ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT

with which they collaborate frequently. Besides digging in the ground, they first explored the area on foot with machetes, then with tools such as transits and tape measures, while walking and mapping by hand, side by side, before introducing modern LiDAR (light detection and ranging) technology to the Maya region to reveal 3D maps of surfaces.

Though they have been asked many times about the practicality of working and living together, Diane always has the same answer.

"He's my best friend as well as my husband," she says. "He's my co-principal investigator; he's all of those things. We're just a really good team." In archaeological parlance, they still dig each other.

## NEXT, THE SCIENCE

In 2025, the Chases and their archaeological team would find one of the most spectacular things they had ever encountered: the 1,700-year-old burial tomb of Te K'ab Chaak, the first ruler of Caracol and the founder of its royal dynasty.

The discovery is the first identifiable ruler's tomb found in more than four decades of work in Caracol, the largest Maya archaeological site in Belize and in the Maya lowlands.

Te K'ab Chaak, who acceded to the throne in 331 AD, was interred at the base of a royal family shrine along with 11 pottery vessels, carved bone tubes, jadeite jewelry, a mosaic jadeite mask, Pacific spondylus shells and other perishable materials.

"It is one of our most important finds," Diane says. "We found the first person in the dynasty, so that, in terms of the history of Caracol, is huge, and it's incredible that we could identify him as a ruler. We've found numerous tombs with really impressive artifacts inside that were clearly [those of] members of the royal family, but this is the first one that matches with hieroglyphic records to be a ruler, and beyond that, the first dynastic ruler."

"I was just amazed when I saw it," says Arlen, who is a professor of anthropology and chair of Comparative Culture Studies at UH. It was Arlen who first peered into the tomb and saw the red cinnabar on the walls, the large cross-shape niche carved into the

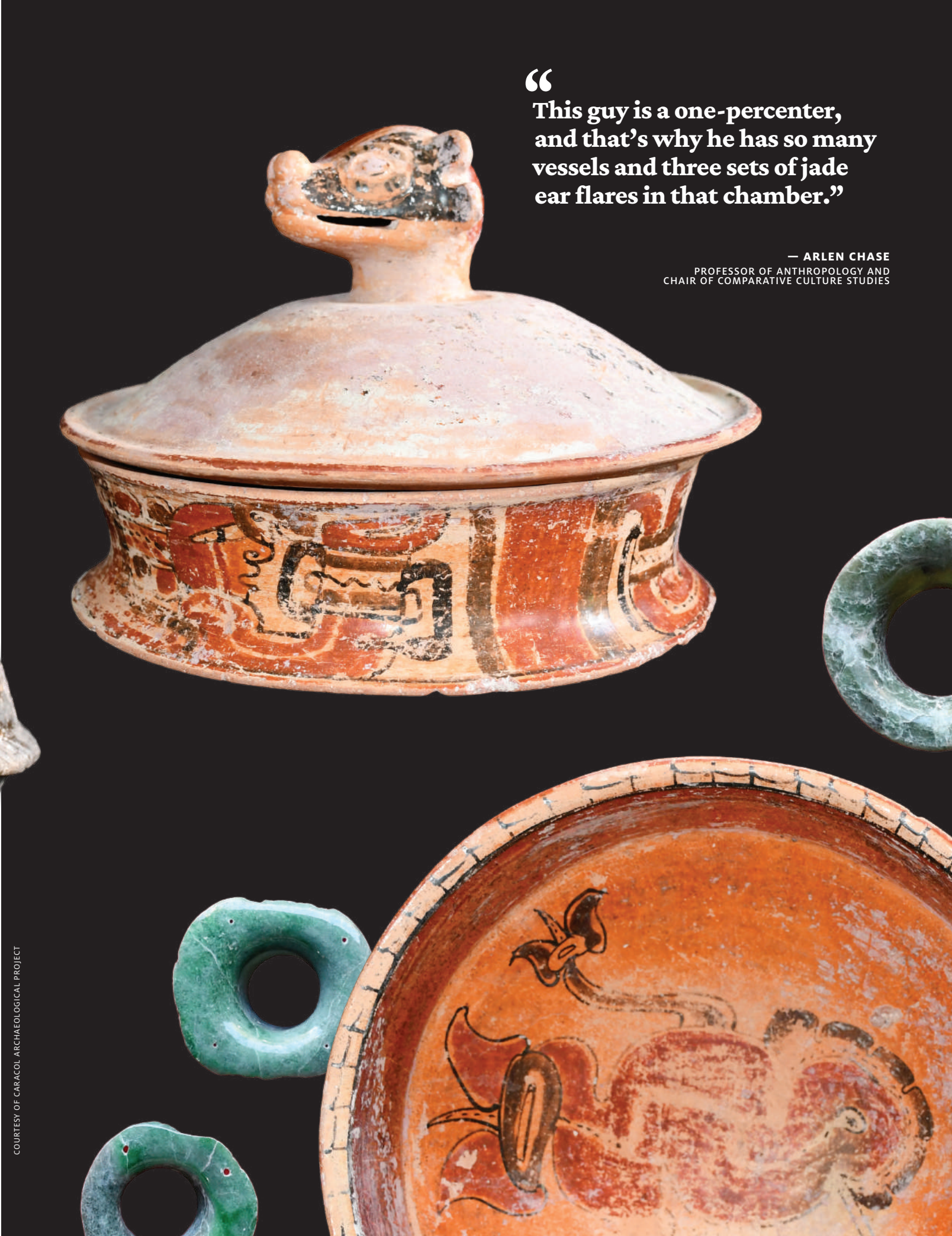


**DIGGING UP CLUES**
Arlen Chase, a leading expert in contextual pottery analysis, during the early days of his archaeology career.





COURTESY OF ARLEN AND DIANE CHASE



“This guy is a one-percenter, and that’s why he has so many vessels and three sets of jade ear flares in that chamber.”

— ARLEN CHASE
PROFESSOR OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND CHAIR OF COMPARATIVE CULTURE STUDIES

COURTESY OF CARACOL ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT



**DECADES OF DEDICATION**
Diane and Arlen Chase have devoted most of their adult lives to meticulously excavating, identifying and cataloguing artifacts from Caracol.

back wall, and the elaborate vessels and jewelry that were buried with the ruler.

Those vessels tell a story about Te K'ab Chaak that does not paint the rosiest picture of his leadership.

"This guy is a one-percenter, and that's why he has so many vessels and three sets of jade ear flares in that chamber," Arlen says. "The Early Classic period is the time when the rulers assert the fact that they oversee everything, completely distant from the rest of the population. That changes at the end of the Early Classic period, especially in Caracol, when they start to share the wealth with the general population. But not this person."

The tomb also gives the Chases evidence of how to rewrite the relationship between Caracol and its Central American neighbor Teotihuacán, a city previously thought to have dominated the Maya region beginning in 378 AD.

But this tomb is dated to 350 AD, 28 years before that development.

"Everyone thought Teotihuacán was so important because there was nothing else like it at that time in Mesoamerica, so the assumption had been that Teotihuacán dominated everything, including the Maya," Arlen says. "This discovery says they didn't dominate everything. They were simply another political player of that time."

In fact, it was the Maya at Caracol who defeated the powerful city of Tikal, located in what is now Guatemala, in warfare in 562 AD — events recorded on a Caracol carved stone altar found by the Chases in 1986. This event points to Caracol's importance in the Late Classic period, debunking the prevailing myth of Tikal's invincibility and dominance.

The Chases' archaeological finds indicate that the ancient Maya were travelers who were interconnected with other parts of Mesoamerica. People moved back and forth between Caracol and Teotihuacán.



ANTHONY GOLLAB / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON



**FACING THE PAST**
The mask of Maya ruler Te K'ab Chaak — the reconstruction of which is still in progress — is a crucial part of a trove of artifacts that reveal new knowledge about an ancient civilization.

> **"One of the reasons we're able to make as many contributions as we have is that we stayed put at one site for a long period of time, and we just kept asking questions."**
>
> **— DIANE CHASE**
> ARCHAEOLOGIST AND UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON PROVOST

Today a trip by car between these two sites would take more than 23 hours. The one-way walking time is approximately 153 days, yet plenty of evidence exists linking the two locations.

### IT TAKES TIME TO UNCOVER TIME

For more than 40 years, the Chases have been the lead scientific researchers at the Caracol site, but they note that they could not have made these discoveries without extensive support from a variety of sources.

The Belize Institute of Archaeology provides site permits and collaborates on the long-term research focus. The Government of Belize has secured funds to consolidate the ancient structures and, most recently, to construct a paved road to the site to allow tourists and local Belizean visitors greater access. The various institutions at which the Chases have worked, such as UH, have been understanding about their need to work remotely from the jungle. Numerous institutions and individuals have provided financial support for the investigations, among them the Alphawood Foundation of Chicago. Their children tolerated annual treks to the jungle, and project members, staff, and students from the United States and Belize make the day-to-day discoveries possible.

As the Chases often note, there is no "I" in archaeology. It takes a team, time and patience.

"One of the reasons we're able to make as many contributions as we have is that we stayed put at one site for a long period of time, and we just kept asking questions," Diane says. "We asked, can we see the impact of warfare? So we developed an archaeological research design to see the archaeological impact of successful warfare. We asked, were there different diets among people at the site? There were. We just continued to ask new research questions over all of those years. The results help build the picture."

"If we'd worked at Caracol for five or 10 years, we would have had part of the story and only part. If we'd stopped at 20, it still would have only been part. I think the point is that there are many more years of exploration and many more years of discovery," she says.

Unlike the ruler whose tomb they uncovered, long may they reign.

# The Residential Advantage

As UH approaches its centennial, a **BOLD HOUSING STRATEGY** aims to create not just more space, but more connection, transforming student life inside and outside the classroom.

By **TYLER HICKS**



PAGE STANTEC



**LIVING LARGE**
Centennial Hall, slated to open in 2027, will be a 1,000-bed first-year residence hall that will help redefine the on-campus living experience at the University.



**PARADIGM SHIFT**
Vice President for Student Affairs Paul Kittle (left) is spearheading the University's ambitious initiative to encourage more students like Grace Rodriguez (right) to live on campus, which can enhance the college experience and lead to better academic outcomes.

**GRACE RODRIGUEZ** has rules. Homework: never in the bedroom. Coffee: always at Cougar Grounds. And birthdays? Those are for joyful, late-night, living-room gatherings with friends.

Rodriguez has celebrated four of those birthdays on the University of Houston campus, where she has lived since her freshman year. She could have commuted from Channelview, but she wanted something more.

"I wanted the real college experience," she says. "I would've missed out."

Now a senior set to graduate in May, Rodriguez can still pick out faces from her first year in Cougar Village I. Neighbors became study partners, roommates became lifelong friends and campus became home.

That decision opened doors: a communications internship with Cougar Athletics, a student worker position in UH Marketing and Communications, and a coveted internship at Memorial Hermann Health System, where she hopes to land a job after graduation.

If UH's campus is a city, Rodriguez has learned how to thrive in it. And this is exactly the story UH wants thousands more students to tell.

Paul Kittle, vice president for student affairs, sees the same pattern in the data. "We're in this amazing city; people drive in and out every day," he says. "Students who live here enjoy it. We see it in the data. We feel it on the sidewalk. They build community."

As UH nears its 100th birthday, housing is central to the University's strategy for student success. The bold target: 10,000 on-campus beds — a benchmark that would earn UH the Carnegie Foundation's "primarily residential" designation, shared by 20% of the top 50 public universities. The strategy is simple: Students who live on campus take more credits, earn higher GPAs and graduate faster.

When it opens in 2027, Centennial Hall will be the modern centerpiece of this vision — designed as a launch pad for the first-year students and a gateway for building a stronger campus community.

"When it's all done, it's going to look incredible," Kittle says.

Holly Alexander, executive director for residential life, says what matters most to UH is how students feel inside the building: safe, supported and part of something larger.

"It's Maslow's hierarchy," she says. "If students aren't fed, housed and healthy, they can't focus on learning. Once those needs are met, we can build community, belonging and purpose."

**"People always said living on campus would change your life, and I didn't believe it. Now I know they were right. I can't imagine my college experience any other way."**

**— GRACE RODRIGUEZ**
CLASS OF 2026

ANTHONY GOLLAB / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON



## Neighborhoods Within a Building

Alexander imagines "neighborhoods within a building" — clusters of communal kitchens, social lounges and study space designed for what she calls "intentional collision."

"If people don't know you and you don't feel like you have a connection, you don't feel like you belong," Alexander says. "You have to feel valued in the community you're in."

As Kittle puts it, "It's like renovating your house." There's ample thought behind every decision and how it will shape the lives of the people living there.

As UH's academic profile has risen and its enrollment has grown, the University's identity has shifted to that of a residential campus. For instance, UH already ranks among the top 5 Texas institutions for total bed count. And while the 10,000-bed goal is an ambitious milestone, Kittle stresses it's about much more than numbers.

"It's an internal paradigm shift in how we as an institution think of ourselves and serve students," he says.

That mindset shift means everything from evening and weekend programming to increased dining hours and reimagined student spaces. Alexander sees this as a necessary and natural evolution, particularly given how today's students engage differently than previous generations.

This neighborhood-driven vision is an extension of what students currently enjoy on campus. It's part of a master housing strategy nearly seven years in the making led by Assistant Vice President Don Yackley and developed in collaboration with residential life executive staff, including Associate Director Keeyana Talley.

"If you walk in our residence halls, you see people gathering around pool tables and the soft-sided furniture that we have there," Alexander says. "We've been really intentional about two aspects of the plan: How do we drive interaction, and how do we have intentional spaces for people to gather, whether those are small, intimate spaces that can be used for study or spontaneous gathering spaces?"



**SERVING STUDENTS**
Executive Director for Residential Life Holly Alexander (left) says she envisions UH's residential spaces, such as the under-construction Centennial Hall, as "neighborhoods within a building" with communal kitchens, lounges and study rooms.

## More Belonging, Greater Well-being

The goal, Alexander says, is to make residential living something even more students and families are excited about. Welcome programming is more robust and purposeful. For example, during this past fall's opening festivities, families had the option to write a letter to their student that will be delivered later this semester.

"It's an intentional choice for us to do something that also incorporates the family, because I think that's who our students are," she says.

Rodriguez says she's also seen this philosophy carried forward by resident advisers and staff. "You can tell how much thought goes into making new residents feel included," she says. "Students don't have to guess where to go or who to ask."

The vision is to connect housing, academics and cocurricular life into one ecosystem that emphasizes overall well-being. One of the most distinctive parts of UH's housing evolution is the creation of the Student Success and Wellness Team: a group of professionals embedded directly in the residence halls and headed up by Assistant Director Kelsey Reynolds, who is trained as a social worker.

**As UH nears its 100th birthday, housing is central to the University's strategy for student success.**

ANTHONY GOLLAB / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON




**SUPPORT ON SITE**
Thanks to the Faculty-in Residence and Student Success and Wellness programs, students living on campus can lean on a team of professionals embedded directly within their residence halls.

Designed in response to post-pandemic challenges around mental health and academics, the team connects students with academic, emotional and wellness support exactly where they live. In its first year, Student Success and Wellness managed around 150 student cases. This past year, that number surged to more than 960.

Kittle points out that this initiative puts UH at the forefront of higher ed's future: "This is where higher ed is going," he says.

Many of the team's members come from social work or counseling backgrounds. And the biggest perk might be accessibility: Students don't have to find a building across campus or make an appointment. A trained, experienced professional is right there in their hall, ready to help.

Faculty are in the neighborhood, too. UH's Faculty-in-Residence live among students, turning the mysterious office-hours door into a friendly wave in the elevator or an impromptu idea session in the lobby. It's the campus version of sitting at the kitchen table with a mentor. When a professor like Jerrod Henderson or Tiffany Davis hosts a floor conversation, it blurs the line between "learning" and "living" in exactly the right way. (Learn more about the program and one of its standout members, Melody Yunzi Li, on page 5.)



**COMMON SPACES**
Residential programming now aims to create more connection outside the classroom, from anime clubs to group fitness classes.

Building a residential campus also means rethinking how students spend their evenings and weekends. Programming now aims to match the rhythms of real life, when students are out of class and looking for connection. From anime clubs to group fitness sessions, UH has embraced the idea that any interest — big or small — can be a doorway to community. In other words, even as the campus grows, the UH experience is becoming more personable than ever before.

"I've always sort of lived this life with the philosophy that my home is my sanctuary," Alexander says. "So I ask myself, 'Can our halls provide that for the people living here?'"

And while both she and Kittle spend a lot of time thinking about current and future students, they're also thinking about what those people will think and feel as alumni years from now, long after the scaffolding is down, the Centennial building is up and this project has given way to ambitious new initiatives.

"We appreciate what we've accomplished, and we keep looking forward," Kittle says.

Both want alumni to look back years from now and recall a residence life experience filled with warmth and connection.

"The community's there if you choose it," Rodriguez says. "But you still have to work for it."

For her, that choice has shaped everything — friendships, internships, even her future career. She's quick to admit it hasn't always been easy, but the rewards have been life-changing.

"People always said living on campus would change your life, and I didn't believe it," she says with a laugh. "Now I know they were right. I can't imagine my college experience any other way."

It's exactly the kind of transformation UH leaders hope thousands more students will claim in the years ahead — proof that residential life isn't just where you live, but where you grow, belong and launch what comes next.

# Taking the




PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICAH JUFFEE

# Scenic Route



**TRAVERSING TEXAS**
McAuliffe has crisscrossed the state from El Capitan in the Guadalupe Mountains (pictured) to the furthest reaches of the Gulf Coast in pursuit of Texas' brightest hidden gems.




"The Texas Bucket List" creator and UH alum **SHANE McAULIFFE** has become an ambassador of the Lone Star lifestyle — with a knack for finding the folks who make our state great.

By **DEANNA JANES**






JEFF LAUTENBERGER / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

**TEXAS SUN ABLAZIN'.** Swamp critters alive and chitterin'. Mouthwatering aroma of golden-fried seafood risin'. This is the scene at Bluebird Fish Camp, a family-owned gastropub perched on the edge of the Sabine River in Orange, Texas. It's also the site where an episode of "The Texas Bucket List," a weekly, nationally syndicated TV program hosted by Texas native Shane McAuliffe ('03), took an unexpected turn back in 2021.

What started out as an inspiring episode about the LeBlanc family's humble fish camp unfolded into something far more meaningful. While talking history about the restaurant's history with the owner's daughter, Ashley Steiner, McAuliffe glimpsed a man with a tracheostomy and asked about his story.

That man was Bluebird's owner himself, Oscar LeBlanc Sr., who had survived six gunshots during a robbery, beating the odds and living to tell McAuliffe his tale. (Sadly, LeBlanc died in June 2022 at the age of 66.)

"He told me he'd prayed about us coming to see him," McAuliffe says. "And I'm sitting here going, 'This guy almost died and he's praying for me?' That was a really emotional moment."

It's this unpredictability that makes "The Texas Bucket List" a must-watch ode to the wonderful corners of the Lone Star State. In each episode, McAuliffe goes in expecting a routine story but leaves having met remarkable and resilient Texans, capturing their stories in authentic ways.



## THE ROAD TO TEXAS STARDOM

Storytelling has always been McAuliffe's passion. Since he was a kid in Round Rock, manning the map for his dad on family excursions and listening to his pops tell him about all the hidden stories living in plain sight, he knew discovery and narration were for him.

In high school, he and his family moved from Round Rock to Houston. "I always used to tell people, 'I lived half my life in a small town and half getting refined in Houston,'" he jokes. Years later, he attended the University of Houston, chasing a degree in broadcast journalism.

For a while, McAuliffe worked as a tour guide at Space Center Houston, which he says got him comfortable presenting in front of crowds and learning the art of conversation.

His first gig out of college was covering sports for a local network in Abilene where he says he went from "making $16 an hour doing computer work to making six bucks an hour at a TV station."

Abilene is also where McAuliffe met his future wife, Meredith. Fate took her to College Station and McAuliffe to Austin, but the sting of dating long-distance couldn't keep them apart. In 2008,





**PEOPLE PERSON**
McAuliffe says it's the people who make his favorite pit stops so special, from the staff at Houston's famous Cream Burger (left) to Oscar LeBlanc Sr., late owner of Bluebird Fish Camp in Orange, Texas.

> **"We just try to tell genuine stories about folks who are doing what they can to be successful here in the Lone Star State."**

McAuliffe put down roots in Aggieland, where he still lives with Meredith and their three children.

### BUILDING 'THE TEXAS BUCKET LIST'

It's here where the story of the "The Texas Bucket List" begins. McAuliffe says he was approached by a local TV news producer, who was clamoring for a human-interest summer series brimming with fun features highlighting the area's lifestyle. The resulting "Brazos Valley Bucket List" was a hit.

"People were coming up to me and saying things like, 'This is like "Texas Country Reporter" but better,'" McAuliffe says. "I'm like, 'Really? Bob Phillips? He's a legend.'"

After a couple of years winning over audiences and solidifying himself a purveyor of Texas taste, McAuliffe was given carte blanche to follow his own vision for the show. He says the moment he got the call from the program director informing him the show would be airing on not one, but three, stations was like "divine intervention."

"I was like, 'Here we go!'" he says.

### WHIPPING UP HIS SECRET SAUCE

In the entertainment business, it's gung-ho new season one second and soul-crushing cancellation the next. Knowing this, McAuliffe injected a bit of magic into his show to keep his producers singing.

"It's really hard to tell a good story — and to tell one that takes some time," he says. "Everything today is consumed in 30 or 60 seconds. You have to work hard to grab people's attention, tell a good story and not make it about yourself. We just try to tell genuine stories about folks who are doing what they can to be successful here in the Lone Star State."

If the show doesn't air in your area, you can find "The Texas Bucket List" videos online at thetexasbucketlist.com. About a

COURTESY OF SHANE MCAULIFFE




**HOUSTON PROUD**
A UH grad, McAuliffe says Houston is still one of his favorite cities in Texas to grab a bite and meet new people: "We could do an entire season on H-Town alone."

JEFF LAUTENBERGER / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

**ADVENTURE AWAITS**
Hosting "The Texas Bucket List" has taken McAuliffe from driving a real tank at Uvalde's Ox Ranch to sailing aboard the tall ship *Elissa* (below left) and sampling tikka masala chicken-fried steak at Cowboys & Indians (below right).







minute into any cut, you'll see that although the show is a guide to the state's most memorable sights and bites, it's really about the people.

"We sneakily make the show about these people who are behind the experiences and how they got where they are and how they got to do what they're doing," McAuliffe says.

**STORIES FROM THE ROAD**

Traveling the roads of Texas, exploring each of its nooks and crannies for long stretches, takes heart and grit. McAuliffe says it's the people who keep him going, adding that the best stories come from word of mouth and the ultimate local tipoff: "You gotta meet this guy!"

It's giveaways like this that led McAuliffe to Ox Ranch in Uvalde, where he got behind the wheel of a real tank and took it for a spin before filming his segment. A forever stargazer, McAuliffe name-drops the McDonald Observatory in Fort Davis as another standout pit stop, adding that "The stars are absolutely amazing; you feel so small and it's just beautiful."

But it was his chance encounter with LeBlanc that takes top honors. In fact, the Bluebird Fish Camp episode won McAuliffe and his crew a Gold Telly Award in the category of General: Biography.

Life on the road has its fair share of twists, turns and touchpoints — some that even make McAuliffe chuckle in hindsight. One such time, he shares, was when he and his team visited a family-run fusion joint nestled in the heart of H-Town; its name, Cowboys & Indians, is often mistaken for being culturally insensitive.

"What's funny is the restaurant's run by Indian guys — actual guys from India!" McAuliffe says. "So it is literally cowboys and Indians. And their tikka masala chicken-fried steak is pretty darn good."

**'ONLY-IN-TEXAS' MOMENTS**

And then there are the double-take moments, those only-in-Texas happenings. One of them happened when he was shooting a birding center on the southern border.

"Here we are, just looking at birds, and all of a sudden the road between Texas and Mexico turns into a dust storm with a truck barreling toward us," McAuliffe says. "I'm thinking they're either after someone or we're in trouble."

Both were wrong, actually. The rocket on wheels was carrying fans.

"The guys get out of the truck and they're like, 'Hey! It's Shane from "The Texas Bucket List!" Look at that!'" McAuliffe laughs. "That was crazy."

Another amusing moment unfolded while McAuliffe and his team were trying to capture the mysterious and unexplained ghost lights that occasionally paint the night skies of Marfa.

"These lights just refuse to show up for me," he says.

The crew had tried to film the phenomenon on more than one occasion with no luck, until the last night they were there. Waiting for dark, cameras set to record, anticipation building, they waited for the elusive lights to show themselves. But as the sky finally came alive, mystery gave way to a cosmic joke.

"The lights were just the train of Starlink satellites," McAuliffe says, laughing. "Still, I was like, 'Yes! Something's finally happening in Marfa!'"

**DRIVING TOWARD COMMON GROUND**

Whether those moments on the road made him laugh or made him pause, McAuliffe says he's learned the very same lesson from each encounter: "All of us relate to each other, no matter how different we are."

From El Paso to the Panhandle, the Brazos Valley to East Texas, we all have Texas pride in common, McAuliffe says, adding that he loves to see "Texas flags everywhere. When you say you're Texan, everyone here relates to that."

Texas pride runs deep; it's what gets

COURTESY OF SHANE MCAULIFFE



**HIGHLY DECORATED**
"The Texas Bucket List" has racked up four Lone Star Emmy Awards since its premiere in fall 2013. Here McAuliffe celebrates the show's 2019 wins with producer Donnie Laffoday.

communities through the good times and the bad — including the tragic floods that struck Central Texas this past July. In the spirit of giving back to the communities that make "The Texas Bucket List" so special, McAuliffe's team partnered with Prosperity Bank to raise more than $70,000 for the Kerr County Flood Relief Fund.

"Shared experiences definitely define our lives and generations," he says.

**McAuliffe says it's the people who keep him going, adding that the best stories come from word of mouth and the ultimate local tipoff: "You gotta meet this guy!"**

### SAVORING THE PIT STOPS

Texas isn't without its hardships. But just as fiercely as we come together to rebuild, the people of Texas make the most of life and remember to savor every morsel along the way. For this reason, McAuliffe details his own must-visit places around the state. And his list is impressive.

From Tejas in Tomball for chocolate and barbecue to the Topwater Grill in San Leon for shore-side hospitality, this champion of Texas culture really knows how to cover his bases. Topping his entire list is the 1877 tall ship *Elissa*, parked at the Galveston Historic Seaport.

"Sailing on the *Elissa* is another one of those awesome things we've done on the show," he says. "Getting to sail on one of the oldest sailing ships in the country was just amazing."

Even though McAuliffe has been around the Lone Star State and back, he still ranks Houston as one of the best cities around. Taking us on a mini jaunt of hidden H-Town gems, he stops at Antonini's Subs & Steaks in Webster, an unassuming shop tucked away in a shopping center off Highway 3, for "the best Italian subs" he's ever had.

We then head to Buffalo Bayou Park, where the city's cistern — once a drinking water reservoir — has been transformed into an 87,500-square-foot public space that hosts tours, performances and art installations. Then it's off to the San Jacinto memorial, a museum of quintessential Texas history in Houston's backyard. We finish at Cream Burger, just steps from the UH campus.

(Explore more of McAuliffe's favorite Texas pit stops on page 60.)

"There are so many amazing places in Houston that we could do an entire season on H-Town alone," McAuliffe says. "It's such a great town, so full of diversity."

Showing his Cougar pride, McAuliffe says Houston is the reason he's able to tell the stories that make him whole. Studying broadcast journalism at UH prepared him for the road, giving him the building blocks and opportunity to be successful. He also credits his professors for teaching him what not to do.

"I was not the best student, and my grades reflected that, but there was a professor, Beth Olson, who recognized something in me," McAuliffe says. "She was a fantastic teacher. I didn't know what I had, but she could tell that I had something."

Another influence he mentions is William Hawes, the same communications professor who taught many broadcast greats, including NFL sportscaster Jim Nantz, over the years. Perhaps someday, Shane McAuliffe will be the name on UH grads' lips.

### THE FUTURE OF 'THE TEXAS BUCKET LIST'

For now, McAuliffe is looking forward to his 13th year producing the show, and his 25th season launching later this fall. He also plans to turn the studio into its own mini-adventure.

"People are always asking for tours, so we want to expand the studio to make it a little more of an experience," he says.

As for a "The Texas Bucket List" podcast, book or spin-off, there's no word yet. But McAuliffe does have a takeaway he hopes resonates with his viewers.

"Things are not as bad as you might think they are," he says. "The world is a great place. Go out there and experience as many experiences as possible. Because you only get one ride, and you might as well see it all before you kick the bucket."

COURTESY OF SHANE MCAULIFFE

The Top Minds at UH Tell Their Stories in Their Own Words

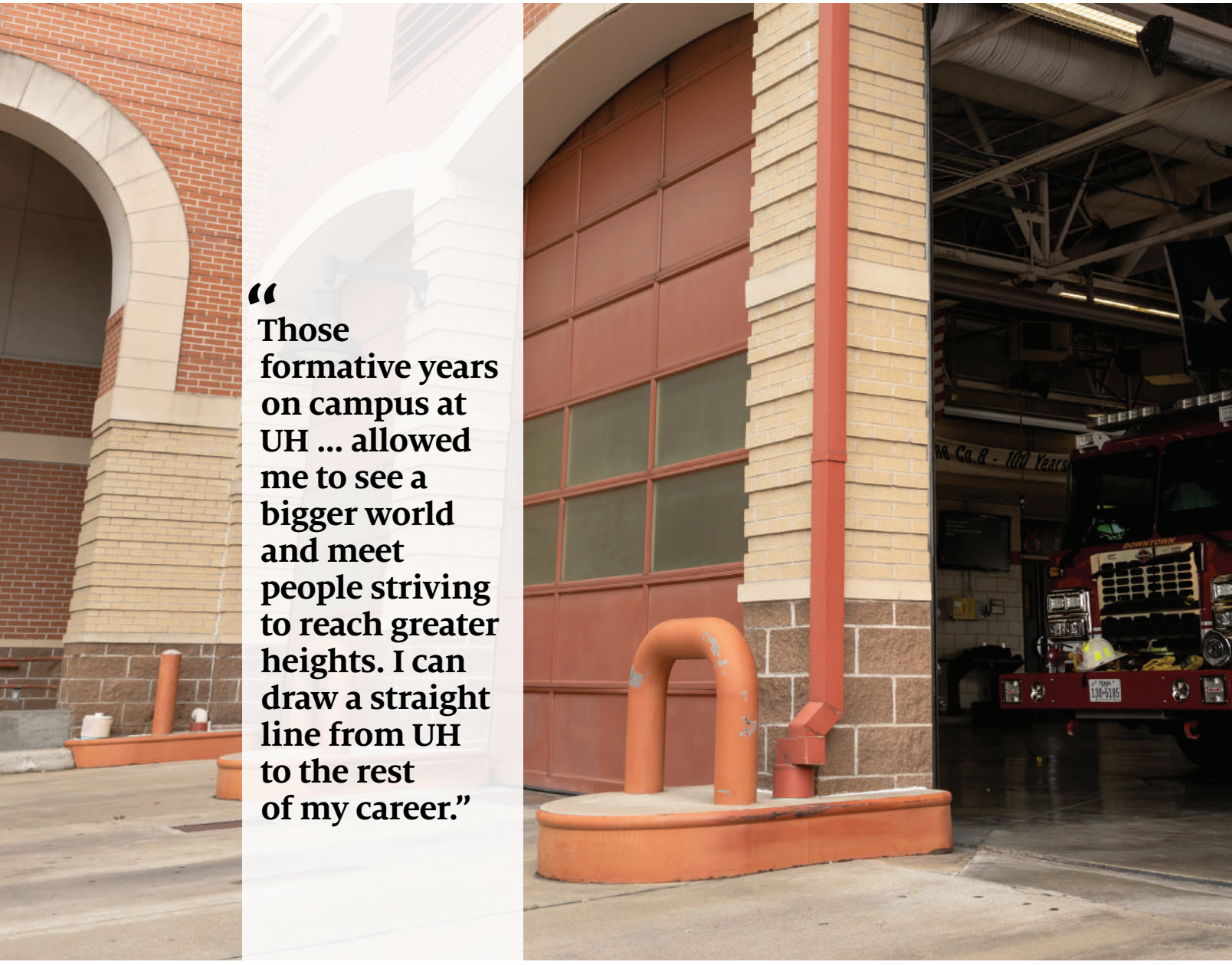
# VOICES




## The Fire Chief

***THOMAS MUÑOZ**, 37th chief of Houston's fire department, says his time at the University of Houston helped him realize his true potential.*

*Story by **THOMAS MUÑOZ***
*As told to **SHAWN SHINNEMAN***
*Photography by **ANTHONY GOLLAB** / **UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON***



> “Those formative years on campus at UH … allowed me to see a bigger world and meet people striving to reach greater heights. I can draw a straight line from UH to the rest of my career.”

**LONG BEFORE I FOUND THIS CAREER** in the public sphere, I was just a kid at the University of Houston trying to figure out what would come next.

I’d grown up in government housing in the Rio Grande Valley, so coming to college served as a shock. Very early, I had to learn to be resourceful. When my student loan filing got lost — back then, it was all documented on paper, so that could happen — I ended up trading work as a handyman for a place to stay while an emergency loan came through. What a way to start.

With housing situated, I dove into political science with a minor in psychology and gratefully found some mentors to guide my studies. Professors like Tatcho Mindiola and Lorenzo Cano were critical to my development and offered a first look at Hispanics serving in academia. Dr. Mindiola would show us around the city and ask, “Why not you?”

All I knew was poverty, but I started asking: “Why not me?” Soon, that led to more questions: What did this person or that person do to reach their level of success? How do I get there? The answer I settled on: great education and a lot of hard work to separate yourself from the pack.

## Making Houston Home

My intentions had been to go back home after college, but I fell in love with the big city. I’d been working at the district attorney’s office when, on a whim, I decided to sign up to be a firefighter. When I got accepted into the Houston Fire Department, I found a real sense of family, something that had been missing as a kid. Suddenly, I had somewhere I could spend Christmases, Thanksgivings, birthdays.

My education set me apart, so I continued to invest in it. I joined the U.S. Coast Guard and took night classes to earn a master’s degree in crisis, emergency and



**OVERCOMING OBSTACLES**
Having grown up poor in a small Rio Grande Valley town, Muñoz says attending UH opened his eyes to his future potential.

disaster management — and, later, in homeland security. I would serve 21 years in the Coast Guard, working during major events like hurricanes Katrina and Maria, before retiring as a commander.

Meanwhile, at the Houston Fire Department, over my 24 years of service, I climbed to the rank of assistant chief of homeland security and planning. I helped coordinate events like the NCAA finals, presidential visits and marathons.

I retired from the department but not from working life. I've been Houston's emergency management coordinator and acting director for Mayor John Whitmire's ('75, J.D. '80) Office of Public Safety and Homeland Security.

Then, just last year, I was honored to step into a new role, appointed by the mayor to be chief of the Houston Fire Department. It's an unbelievable honor to be the 37th chief of the department since 1895, when it became non-volunteer.

I came in prepared because of everything that had come before. My days as a young firefighter learning my way. My time in New Orleans and Puerto Rico, working through devastation; it's still a little hard to wrap my head around. My long days working for the City of Houston to ensure the safety and success of a wide range of events. My education.

## Compassionate Leadership

Today, I count my experience growing up poor in the Rio Grande as a major blessing, too. Without those challenges, I'd have never found the empathy required to understand what people go through in their most challenging times. It created in me a passion for taking care of people from all walks of life, and for communicating with them effectively.

I'm grateful to have the support of Mayor Whitmire, a guy who understands the compassion inherent in great leadership, particularly during trying times.

I'm incredibly grateful for those formative years on campus at UH, which ended up serving as the foundation for my career. They allowed me to see a bigger world and meet people striving to reach greater heights. I can draw a straight line from UH to the rest of my career.

Without an education from UH, I don't think I'd have been noticed among the 5,000 candidates at the Coast Guard's Officer Candidate School. Without the Coast Guard, I'd have never gotten the chance to earn my master's. That education led to the leadership roles I've been able to step into later in my career.

It brings me pride to say I'm an alumnus of a school that has only gotten better and more distinguished since I attended. People don't always recognize the opportunities that a big school presents for people from humble, small-town beginnings. I'm forever grateful. Go Coogs.



# The Storyteller

*A judge and UH adjunct law professor by day,* ***CHRISTINE WEEMS*** *moonlights as a theater director, merging her worlds with presence and persuasion.*

*Story by* ***CHRISTINE WEEMS***
*As told to* ***DEANNA JANES***
*Illustrations by* ***HEATHER COBB*** / ***UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON***



**I NEVER WANTED** to be a judge. I always wanted to try cases. But presiding over the bench became my purpose.

My decision to run for judge came when I learned how few judges have experience trying cases. Because of that, achieving the robe became a matter of principle. How could I be the kind of person who complains about the fact that we don't have qualified judges if I'm not willing to do something about it? So I threw my hat in the ring on the Democratic ticket to run the 281st Civil District Court, and I won.

Originally, I wanted to be a district attorney, fighting for rights and locking up criminals. But that changed when I was in college. As a freshman at the University of Texas, I got super into mock trial tournaments — not out of ambition, really, but rather for the social life. I didn't play sports growing up, so mock trials were the closest thing to a team sport I'd ever done. The practices, the camaraderie, the adrenaline rush — I was hooked.

As a bonus, the trials reinforced self-assurance. I found my voice and my presence in the courtroom. And once I learned that confidence is just losing the fear of looking stupid, I was free of the stage fright. That's a goody I teach my students in the University of Houston Law Center's mock trial program, of which I'm the director.

In the weeks following graduation from South Texas College of Law Houston, I began to miss the performative nature



of trying cases. Fortunately, I lived in Houston, which has the fourth-largest theater scene in the nation and offered me another creative outlet: acting.

In the summer of 2005, I got accepted to the American Academy of Dramatic Arts' theater camp in New York. It was just a three-week course, but it led me to take a three-month hiatus from law. I packed up, headed north, and immersed myself in vocal projections and stage movements. Little did I know my temporary jaunt would turn into a yearslong odyssey through the arts.

Acting and, later, directing theater filled the mock-trial-size hole in my heart. I was studying the craft while acting in short plays and films. I even helped found a theater company, Phare Play Productions, with a friend. In four and a half years, we produced some 50 shows in NYC.

After meeting my playwright husband (a good, old-fashioned showmance), we had kids and moved back to Houston to raise them. I continued directing and producing plays and cofounded another theater company, Cone Man Running Productions, producing original works and reworked classics, like all-female Shakespeare plays. But I never let go of law.

The more my two professions intersected, the more I clocked their similarities. Law and theater — it's all just persuasion, human connection, storytelling. Juries are people, and people want to be entertained; you just have to get them invested. Theater is the same thing. I do find, however, that theater has more in common with being a lawyer than a judge.

As a judge, I'm a thoughtful listener, a deciding force. As a director and lawyer, I'm commanding the courtroom, adjusting my emotion, telling my client's story the way I want to deliver it. It's what I love about working with my mock trial students. Coaching them keeps my legal mind sharp, which is great. But even better is watching my students find their own voices in the courtroom.

> **"The more my two professions intersected, the more I clocked their similarities. Law and theater — it's all just persuasion, human connection, storytelling."**

A few years ago, I merged law and theater like I'd never done before: I began directing lawyer plays. Exactly what they sound like, the shows are about law and cast real-life lawyers in the roles. From "12 Angry Jurors" and "Witness for the Prosecution" to "Office Hours" and "To Kill a Mockingbird," which killed for three weeks in front of sold-out crowds, I watched my lawyer friends, law students and colleagues — some of whom had never acted before — light up the stage. It was amazing.

Now, I know; it's a lot. Theater director. Civil judge. Married mother of three. Lifetime member of the Girl Scouts. But I always tell people: If there's something you want to try, try it. If you love it, you'll find time to keep doing it. Balance is not a myth. It's more achievable than you think; you just have to ask for help and give it when you can.

Throughout my career, my two worlds have consistently collided, becoming chapters of the very same story. I didn't intend to become a judge or direct a theater company, but now that I do, I use those platforms to make the world a better place. At the end of the day, whether through law or theater, I just want to help people find joy, learn something new about themselves and inspire their own stories.



# The Poet

*UH English professor **KEVIN PRUFER** is bringing poetry — his own and others' — to the people in his role as Texas State Poet Laureate.*

*Story by **KEVIN PRUFER***
*As told to **KELSEY KOSH***
*Photography by **JOSEPH BUI** / **UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON***



**PURE POETRY**
Prufer, photographed here in a Roy G. Cullen building classroom, says he remains fascinated by what poetry can convey about the human mind and the passage of time.

**“The poet laureate’s job is to bring poetry to as many people as possible. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that my whole life has been bringing poetry to people.”**

*An English professor and leader of the creative writing program at the University of Houston's College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, Kevin Prufer has written nine collections of poems and edited numerous poetry volumes. His work has received several of the genre's highest distinctions, including a long-list finalist designation for the Pulitzer Prize in 2019, the 2024 Rilke Prize and a New York Times selection for Best Poetry Books of the Year in 2014.*

*In June, the Texas State Legislature appointed Prufer as the Texas State Poet Laureate for 2026 — one of the state's highest honors for excellence in the arts.*

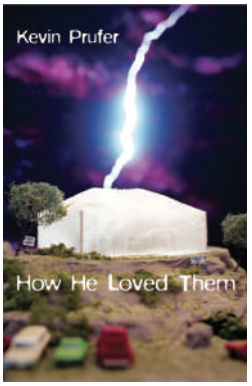
**MY FIRST JOB** outside of university was in the news. I worked for "News Hour" on PBS in the foreign affairs department and for Washington Monthly, a political opinion magazine out of Washington, D.C. I didn't like writing the news. Within 24 hours, everything you wrote is obsolete and no one wants to read it anymore. So I called up a writer named Annie Dillard, and she helped me get a fellowship at Hollins College in Virginia to write something more permanent.

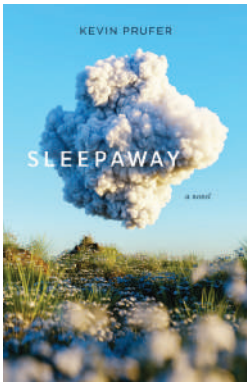
I went there to write a novel, and I fell in love with poetry while living in the Blue Ridge Mountains. I'd never taken classes in poetry or American and English literature, so it was all new to me. While I was there, I decided that poetry was what I wanted to do. I got a professorship at the University of Central Missouri and stayed for 15 years. Then, the University of Houston called and offered me a job. I accepted.

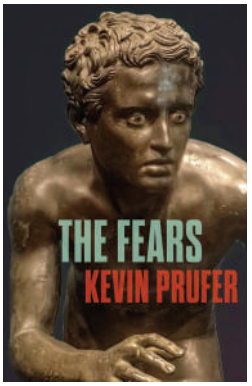
## The Power of Poetry

I had to learn over many, many years what I liked about poetry. Initially, I was attracted to its succinctness and its interest in not necessarily making a point or constructing an argument. It was a kind of writing where one could just think about things and be ambiguous. That grew into an attraction to poetry partly as a way of expressing how thoughts work using art and words.

There are a number of tools available to poets that aren't available to other types of writers — the line, a caesura to create rhythm, meter, stanza breaks. Poets can use these scalpel-like tools to create the feeling in a reader of what another person's mind feels like — how that mind is working, where that mind is resting in silence, where the mind is finding words, losing words, or where the words come together perfectly in a rhyme. I'd invent these characters and their minds and be very interested in how their minds performed for readers.




**HIGH PRAISE**
Among other distinctions, Prufer's work has been longlisted for the Pulitzer Prize and selected as one of the Best Poetry Books of the Year in 2014 by The New York Times.

The other thing that interested me was how a poem can manipulate the passage of time. That's something that a journalist or fiction writer can also do, but I think poets can be more interesting with how time passes. Time can shift over a stanza break; it can go back 20 years, five minutes, or jump 20 minutes into the future.

I got very interested in how when you tell a story through poetry, like God, you're manipulating the passage of time, and the reader is just along for the ride.

Where those two things come together — how a mind works and how time passes — seemed like an interesting connecting point. Time exists in the mind, so these two things come together at a really interesting place, and that's what is exciting for me and what I can't have in other kinds of writing.

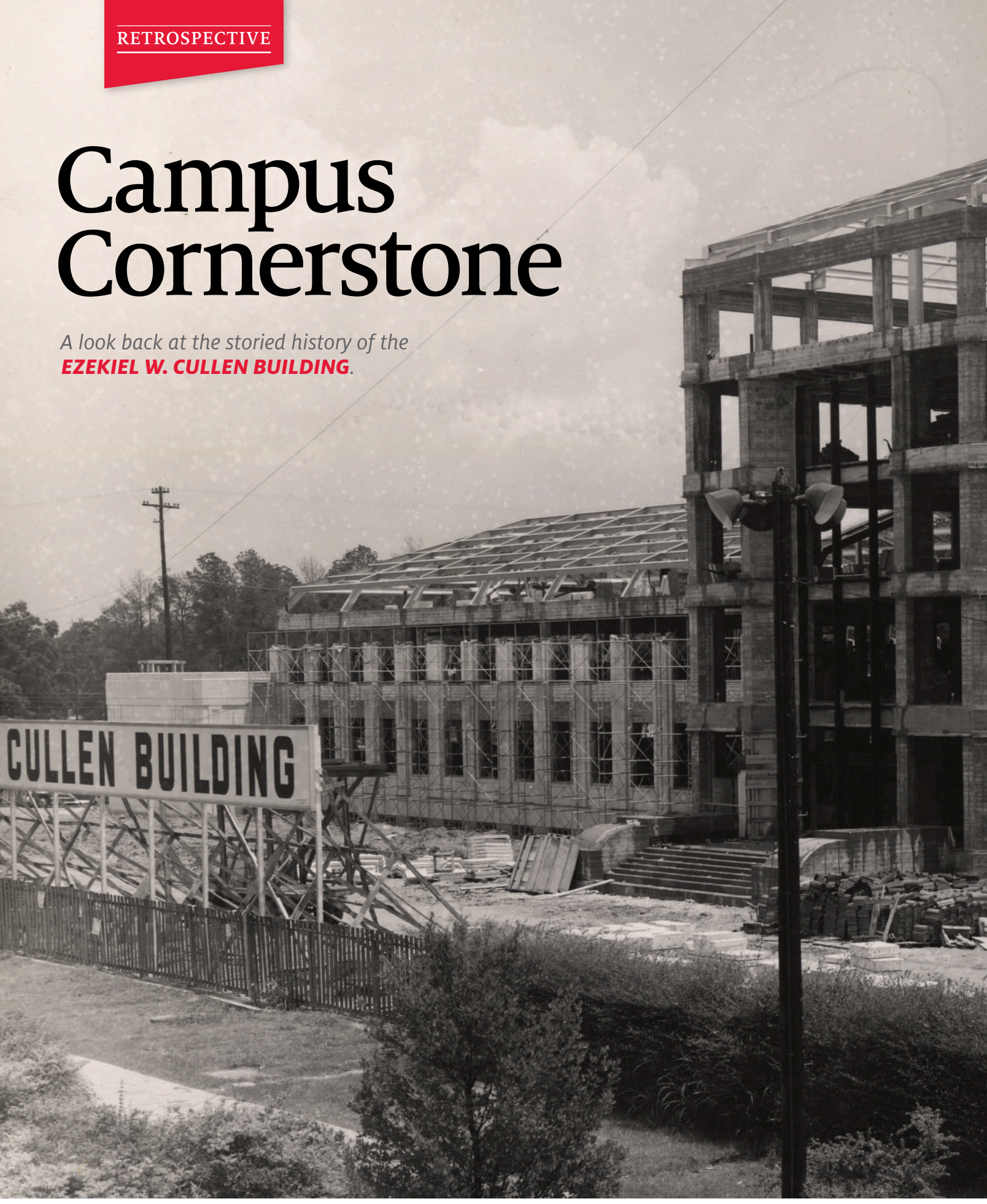
The poet laureate's job is to bring poetry to as many people as possible. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that my whole life has been bringing poetry to people. Whether in a classroom or at readings, I've spent a lifetime writing poetry and trying to bring it to people in all kinds of ways — not just with my own work but with poetry by others. That's mostly what I do in my professional life. I say, "Here's a poem. Let's talk about it."

I want to keep on writing. I just finished a novel, and I'm finishing a new book of poems; I want to keep on working on those. I also have a book coming out called "Other Legacies," which I wrote with UH alumni Martin Rock (Ph.D. '18) and Adrienne Perry (Ph.D. '18). It's an alternate history of American poetry that tackles the question: If all the great poets we grew up hearing were out of the conversation, who would we be talking about?

COURTESY OF KEVIN PRUFER

# Campus Cornerstone

*A look back at the storied history of the* ***EZEKIEL W. CULLEN BUILDING****.*







**IF YOU'VE STEPPED FOOT** on the University of Houston campus recently, you may have noticed it's undergoing some pretty big changes. That got us thinking about another major period of campus construction: 1949, when the Ezekiel W. Cullen building was still being erected.

The E. Cullen building, as it's casually known, was designed in an elegant art deco style by Houston native Alfred C. Finn. Ezekiel W. Cullen, for whom the building is named, is considered the father of Texas public education due to his introduction of the "Cullen Act" in 1839, which set aside government lands to establish public schools and higher education institutions. Cullen's grandson, Hugh Roy Cullen, agreed to head the University's first fundraising drive and was the project's major donor.

Though today it serves as administrative space for the University's president, provost and many vice presidents, E. Cullen originally housed 46 classrooms, the drama and music programs, a 1,680-seat auditorium, and the nation's first public TV station.

The building didn't officially open until Halloween 1950, but on March 16, 1949, UH held a special cornerstone-laying ceremony and filled a copper time capsule with relics such as a copy of Ezekiel Cullen's last photo, the biography of President Oberholtzer and a copy of the bill establishing land grants for public education.





**HOLIDAY WISHES**
Behind the scenes of the 2024 UH holiday card, which featured a Coogs-themed light show by H-Town Frankie and a performance.

# Bright Lights and Beats

***H-TOWN FRANKIE**'s Cougar pride shines brighter than his incandescent synchronized holiday light shows.*

By ***DEANNA JANES***

MASCOTS: JONATHAN BURKE / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON; TO-ONG: ANTHONY GOLLAB / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON



**LIGHTING UP THE WEB**
A proud UH alum, To-ong designs hip-hop infused holiday light shows that rack up tens of millions of views online.

**MEET FRANKIE TO-ONG,** aka H-Town Frankie. A light show creator and proud University of Houston alum, he turns his home into a glow-show sing-along every holiday season, syncing bright lights with festive tunes and iconic tracks from hip-hop megawatt stars like Biggie, Tupac and Jay-Z — his "secret sauce," he says.

Originally a way to make his young daughters light up, Frankie's shows, which began in 2014, have gone from humble holiday tradition to must-see main event. He says he pulls inspiration from his days deejaying in the Commons and leading the Filipino Students Association's Spirit Dance team to competition wins.

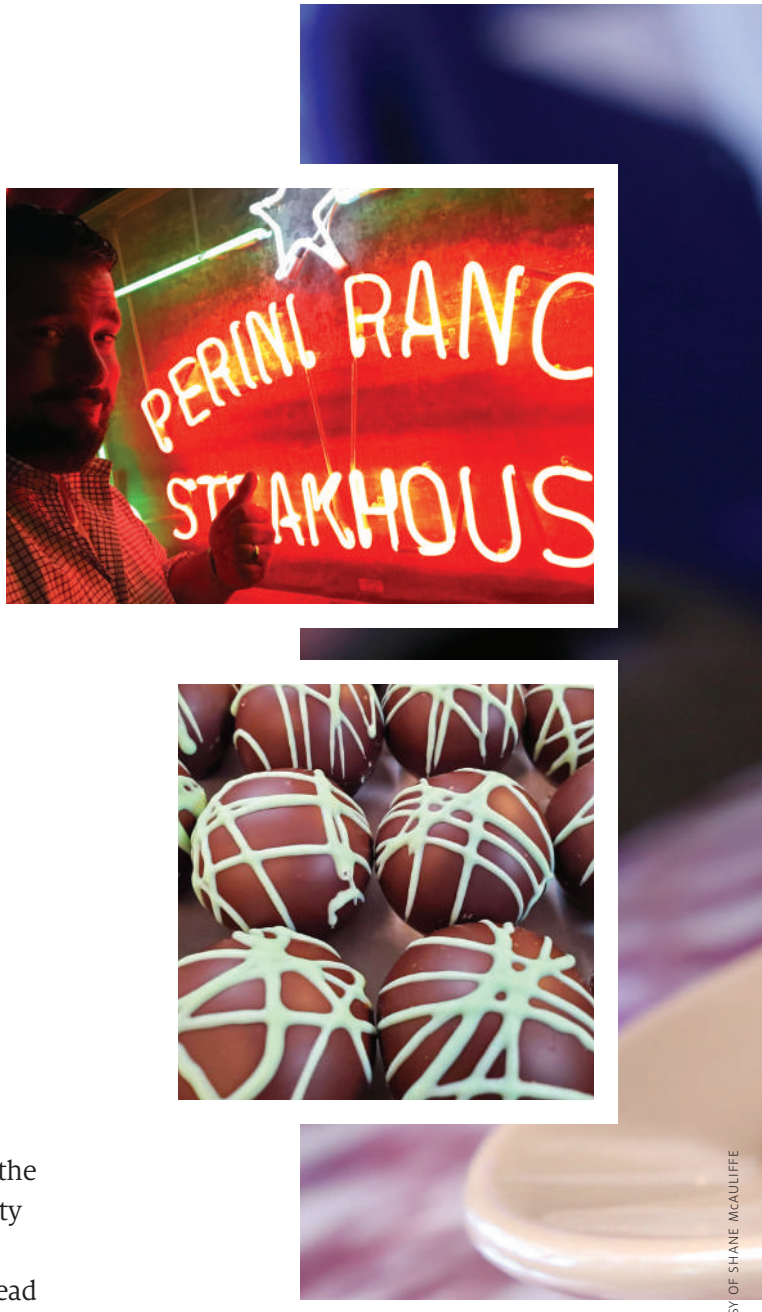
Little did he know his annual displays would soon go viral.

Frankie posted "the video that changed everything" in 2017. An homage to the Houston Astros' World Series win, it landed on the feed of H-Town rapper Paul Wall, whose reshare helped rack up the streams. Since then, unofficial mayor Bun B, news networks and even daytime talk shows have reached out.

Today, Frankie's leveled-up productions use pixel lights for better synching, a garage matrix for throwing lyrics and oversized snowflakes for matching drum beats. He says it takes months to program a single show, but for 50 million views a year, the effort seems worth it.

Of all the fandom, though, he says there's one admirer who takes the tinsel.

"When UH reached out asking me to choreograph something for the 2024 holiday card, I dropped everything I was doing," he says. "That was a proud moment. That made me feel really special."








# Shane McAuliffe's Favorite Pit Stops

*These **RESTAURANTS STOOD OUT** to the "Texas Bucket List" creator and host.*

*By DeAnna Janes*

**ALTHOUGH HIS SHOW IS OSTENSIBLY** a guide to Texas' most memorable sights and bites, McAuliffe admits it's really about the people who make our state great. That said, he's had some pretty out-of-sight eats in the process of meeting those folks. Here are a few of his favorite spots around the Lone Star State (and read more about his adventures on page 40).

### Perini Ranch
**BUFFALO GAP, TX**

This James Beard Award-winning steakhouse has been serving "cowboy cooking" specialties like fried quail legs, Cajun catfish and mesquite-grilled steaks in a converted barn 17 miles outside of Abilene for more than 40 years.

### Burnt Bean Company
**SEGUIN, TX**

Open since 2021, this gem of a spot was recently named the No. 1 barbecue restaurant in Texas by Texas Monthly. While people naturally flock to Burnt Bean for its legendary smoked meats, McAuliffe says it's the sides — brisket cowboy beans, Hot Cheeto mac and cheese, bacon ranch potatoes, jalapeño street corn pudding — that really sing.

### Tejas Chocolate + Barbecue
**TOMBALL, TX**

Like something sweet with your 'cue? Make a day trip out to Tomball, where Tejas turns out handcrafted chocolates alongside premium smoked meats. Drop in on Thursdays for the house-smoked pastrami Reuben and beef rib specials. Just get there early and expect a line.

CHOCOLATE COURTESY OF TEJAS CHOCOLATE + BARBECUE; OTHERS COURTESY OF SHANE MCAULIFFE



**GOOD EATS**
(Clockwise from top left) McAuliffe is a fan of Perini Ranch steakhouse, the Superman burger at Top of the Hill and handmade chocolates at Tejas Chocolate + Barbecue.

### 1775 Texas Pit BBQ
**COLLEGE STATION, TX**

This veteran-owned, family-run spot located in a trailer on the Brazos River is famous for its perfectly seasoned brisket, tender turkey and old-fashioned corn casserole.

### Top of the Hill
**BRYAN, TX**

Craving burgers over barbecue? You can't go wrong with Top of the Hill's "old fashion greasy burgers." McAuliffe recommends the Superman: two seasoned third-pound patties with lettuce, tomato, American cheese, bacon and jalapeños on a griddle-toasted bun.

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