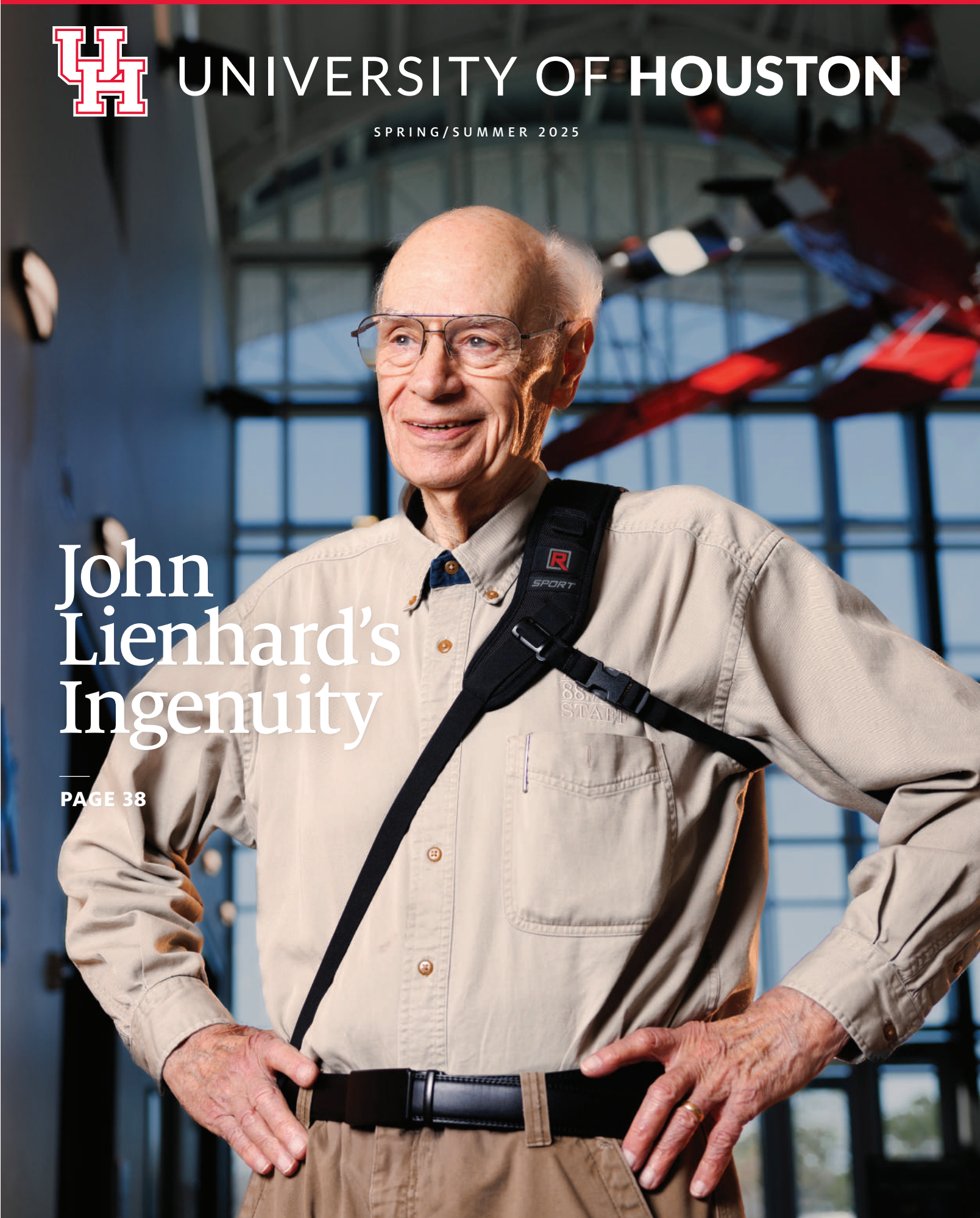
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UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

SPRING/SUMMER 2025

John Lienhard's Ingenuity

PAGE 38



FINAL FOUR FRENZY UH fans showed their Cougar pride at a pep rally on San Antonio's River Walk on April 6, 2025, ahead of the men's basketball championship game against Florida.

JEFF LAUTENBERGER / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Cougars and Friends,



COOG PRIDE
UH President Renu Khator celebrates the Cougars' Final Four victory over Duke on April 5, 2025.

THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON is a great melting pot — a place where different disciplines, ways of thinking, ideas and innovations assimilate into a wonderous, cohesive whole. Merriam-Webster defines a melting pot as a process of blending that often results in invigoration or novelty. That definition holds true at UH, as we saw on the basketball court this season. It's the convergence of a strong defense and offense, relentless preparation, and a die-hard culture that took us to the NCAA national championship game (page 16).

Our University's amalgamation is producing amazing works of art and innovation, groundbreaking careers and discoveries, all wonderfully woven throughout this issue of UH Magazine. In "The Engines of John Lienhard's Ingenuity" (page 38), we learn how the brilliant mind and colorful voice behind one of the nation's longest-running syndicated radio segments broke the mold when he blended his love for storytelling with his passion for engineering. Some may believe that engineers aren't inclined to storytelling and ingenious radio production, but Professor Emeritus Lienhard proves them wrong. He shows the powerful possibilities in pursuing your varied interests.

Likewise, our multidisciplinary Elgin Street Studios (page 24) exposes Master of Fine Arts students to an array of mediums, leading to awe-inspiring student creations. The expansive state-of-the-art facility is artistically designed for collaboration and inspiration, preparing students to be at the forefront of the art industry.

Our digital media students gain the same preparation (page 46), as faculty not only teach them disciplines like graphic design and augmented and virtual reality but also data analysis and project management. Students leave prepared for a resilient career in competitive and ever-evolving industries.

This melding of contrasting disciplines isn't new to Cougars. In his youth, Dr. Bernard Harris (page 28) was drawn to medicine and astronomy and boldly pursued both. He made his start with a biology degree from UH in 1978, then went to medical school, became a NASA flight surgeon and was the first African American to walk in space. His latest accomplishment: inductee into the U.S. Astronaut Hall of Fame.

Yes, you can reach the stars when you dare to color outside the lines. Yet too often we stay within our borders, ignoring that tug to do something new. I encourage you to pursue your passions and explore your full potential.

Like the stories we share, it may lead to wondrous breakthroughs.

Go Coogs!

Renu Khator
President, University of Houston

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UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

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Matched for Impact

With mission in mind, the next generation of UH-trained doctors ***HEADS TO RESIDENCY****.*

ON MARCH 21, 2025 — aka "Match Day" — the second class of the University of Houston's Tilman J. Fertitta Family College of Medicine learned where they would continue their medical training with the excited opening of an envelope. This pivotal event determines where the graduates will spend their residencies, transitioning from medical student to resident physician and shaping the future of their medical careers.

In only its second Match Day, the Fertitta College of Medicine exceeded the national match rate. Reinforcing the college's mission to improve community health, 63% of the class placed in primary care residencies. Two-thirds of the class will stay in Texas, with others heading to top institutions nationwide.

96%

Matched into residency programs, exceeding the national rate

63%

Matched into primary care specialties

8

Matched to residencies in the Texas Medical Center

63%

Staying in Texas

Primary Care Specialty Matches

- Family medicine
- Internal medicine
- Pediatrics
- Obstetrics and gynecology
- Internal medicine-pediatrics

Other Specialty Matches

- Emergency medicine
- Anesthesiology
- Neurosurgery
- Dermatology
- Psychiatry

Where They Matched

- Texas: 15
- Houston: 8
- Pennsylvania: 2
- New York: 1
- New Jersey: 1
- Arkansas: 1
- Louisiana: 1
- Connecticut: 1

"This journey has been a lifelong dream of mine, and today it is a reality."

— NABEEL AHMAD
MATCHED IN PEDIATRIC DERMATOLOGY

"As a former public school teacher, I am ecstatic to match at such a renowned institution as Yale."

— ILIANA SANCHEZ
MATCHED IN EMERGENCY MEDICINE

What Is Match Day?

THE NATIONAL Resident Matching Program, also known as The Match, is a nationwide system that pairs graduating medical students with residency programs based on mutual preference. Established in 1952, it ensures a fair and orderly process for placing future physicians into training positions across the United States.

Nationally Competitive

One future physician matched in a highly selective dermatology specialty.

Fewer than 250 neurosurgery residencies were available nationwide.

Three future physicians placed in anesthesiology, which remained highly competitive in 2025.

CAMPUS BULLETIN



The Quantum Gardener

*UH master physicist and Big 12 Faculty of the Year Award winner **ZHIFENG REN** leverages natural forces for another passion that requires patience and precision: gardening.*

*Story by **DEANNA JANES***
*Photography by **BENJAMIN CORDA** / **UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON***



> **"As a materials physicist, I am trying to make something new that serves and betters society. Often, I don't get what I want, but sometimes I do. And that's satisfactory. Same thing in the garden."**

ZHIFENG REN, the physics professor and world-renowned researcher who holds the University of Houston's Paul C.W. Chu and May P. Chern Endowed Chair in Condensed Matter Physics, just had "the best year ever." Winning a Big 12 Faculty of the Year Award for his innovation will do that. But, for Ren, the recognition is about so much more than his own achievements.

"Over the years, there have been many people who have contributed to my research," says Ren, who is also the director of the Texas Center for Superconductivity. "This really belongs to the whole group."

One of those people is Paul Chu himself, the famed Taiwanese American physicist and UH legend who discovered high-temperature superconductivity. Ren credits Chu as the catalyst for his interest in physics.

"Back in 1986, when I was finishing my master's in material science, I heard that Dr. Chu at the University of Houston had discovered superconductivity at 93 Kelvin," Ren says. "That drove me into physics, because it was just so fascinating."

As fate would have it, Ren met his hero in 2011 at Boston College, where Ren was researching superconductivity, carbon nanotubes and thermoelectric materials. Impressed by the then-student's research, Chu recruited Ren to run the physics department at UH. The 2013 move gave Ren the freedom to expand his work further.

Today, Ren is proudest of his boron arsenide research. "We are extremely excited to see that this material has the best properties of any current semiconductors," he says. "This is the next-generation semiconductor, which has the potential to change the whole world."

Another "project baby" he's excited about is the nickel foam filter designed to catch and kill viruses and pathogens, a discovery that proved effective during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"As a professor, discovery is exciting, but seeing young people become successful is especially rewarding," Ren says, adding that his "best year ever" included witnessing two of his graduate students rise in their fields. "Paving the way for young people to be stars in the future is very satisfying," he says.

To top off his banner year, Ren received UH's prestigious Farfel Award, took home the International Thermoelectric Society's Outstanding Achievement in Thermoelectrics Award and watched his garden grow the biggest melons he's ever seen.

That's right. When Ren isn't breaking ground in the lab, he's doing so in his garden, a 10-acre haven situated in the Houston suburb of Pearland, about half a mile from his home. He retreats to his garden every weekend with his wife, tilling the soil and bunking up in their "weekend house" on the property.

"My parents were both farmers," Ren says. "They had a small patch of land responsible for growing enough food for a six-person family. I learned from them how to farm. My garden, however, is 10 times bigger and just for fun!"

In fact, Ren's garden has become so bountiful, thanks to his supercharged John Deere, he shares the spoils with his whole community. "It's funny, because now, when I go to my land, I see people taking the vegetables from the garden. I don't know them, and they don't know me!"

Always paying it forward, be it with surplus crops or scientific discoveries, Ren notes the parallels between his two passions. "As a materials physicist, I am trying to make something new that serves and betters society. Often, I don't get what I want, but sometimes I do. And that's satisfactory. Same thing in the garden."

Scan the QR code to browse more images of Ren working his idyllic Pearland garden.

COUGAR LORE

The Guarding of the Rings

In this cherished UH tradition, live mascot Shasta VII and his brother Louie partake in each graduating class's commencement celebration.

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







He and his brother Louie watch over the box until that year's ring ceremony, which takes place the next day.



NOTABLE NEWS

The Latest Headlines From Around UH

UH Professors Awarded Presidential Medals

ONCE AGAIN, University of Houston faculty members are being recognized for excellence on a national level. President Joe Biden, prior to the end of his term in office, honored three professors from across the University for their contributions to their fields.

Brown Foundation Professor of Hispanic Studies 1 **Nicolás Kanellos** of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences was honored with a National Humanities Medal during a White House ceremony in October 2024. For more than 40 years, Kanellos has made an indelible impact on Latino culture in the United States through his works of fiction, poetry, biography and history. In addition to his full-time faculty role at UH, Kanellos serves as the director of Arte Público Press and the Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage initiative.

In January 2025, 2 **Allison Master**, assistant professor in the Department of Psychological, Health and Learning Sciences at the College of Education, earned the Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers, the U.S. government's highest honor of its kind. She was one of 400 scientists and engineers honored for their exceptional potential and leadership early in their research careers. She is the first recipient of the award at UH.

Also in January, the Presidential Awards for Excellence in Science, Mathematics and Engineering Mentoring were awarded to a who's who of scholars, scientists, educators and researchers — including 3 **Donna Stokes**, a longtime physics professor in UH's College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics. Since her time as a UH graduate student, Stokes has committed herself to STEM student success, preparing STEM educators in secondary schools and mentoring students and junior faculty. She has also mentored physics and other STEM students in previous roles as physics faculty undergraduate academic adviser and associate dean of undergraduate affairs and student success.

UH Alumnus Receives MacArthur 'Genius Grant'

4 **Poet Jericho Brown**, who earned his Ph.D. in creative writing and literature from UH in 2007, has been widely praised for his work that draws from his own life experiences, exploring themes of family, identity, and the intersection of race and sexuality. He even won a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 2020 for his book "The Tradition."

Now, Brown can also count himself among a select group of MacArthur Fellows. Also known as a "Genius Grant," the MacArthur Fellowship is awarded to individuals who demonstrate exceptional creativity, a promise for important future advances and the potential to create subsequent creative work. Brown, who is currently director of the creative writing program at Emory University, is only the third UH alumnus to win a MacArthur Fellowship.



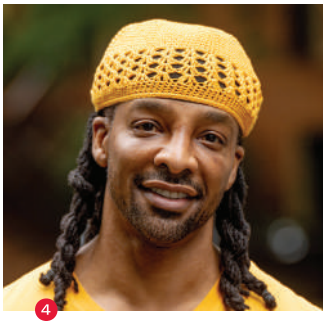
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BROWN COURTESY OF MACARTHUR FOUNDATION



NICK POMES / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

SOCIAL BUZZ

Flipping the Infamous Flop

*UH alumnus **KENNETH COFER III ('24)** teamed up with UH to turn his failed commencement backflip into a social media win.*

*By **KELSEY KOSH***

AS HE SAT waiting to cross the stage and receive his sports administration diploma during December 2024's commencement ceremony at the University of Houston, Kenneth Cofer pondered how he would leave his mark.

"I thought about doing a backflip," he says. He knew he couldn't land the stunt, but he committed to the idea for the laugh and the memorable moment.

"I told myself, 'This is going to hurt a lot,'" he says. "I really wanted to remember UH and all they have done for me."

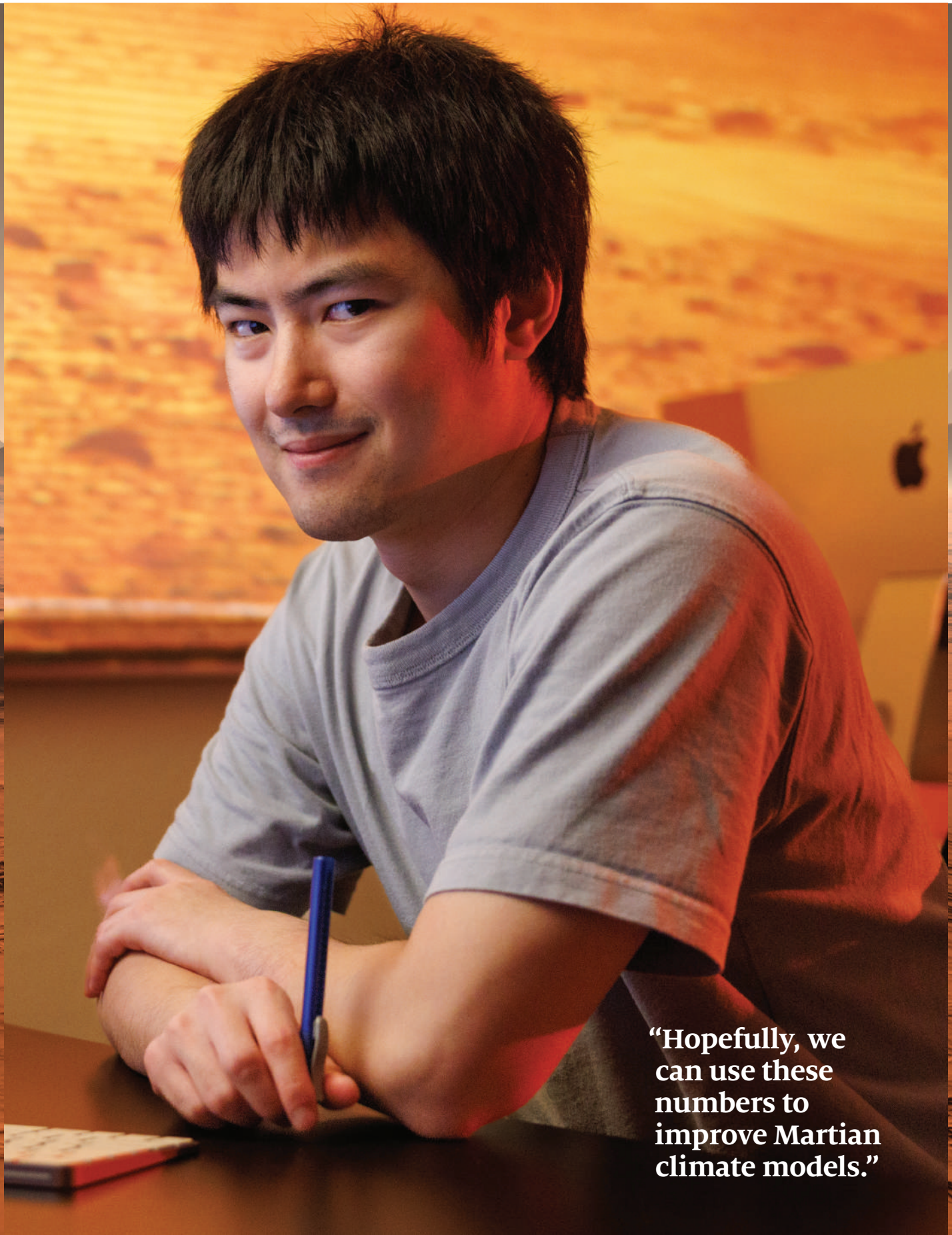
Cofer expected the video of his landing on his neck after he accepted his diploma to go viral only among his family. But when it played on ESPN's SportsCenter and Houston Texans mascot Toro liked it on social media, he knew he had made it big.

About a week later, UH's social media team contacted Cofer to create a video of his notorious failed flip montaged with another "attempt."

His neck couldn't take another failed landing, so he suggested they edit the film to make it appear he was flipping head over heels continuously before landing effortlessly on his feet. "I wanted them to make me flip as fast as possible," he says.

The idea worked: The humorous clip became the University's most-watched video of all time.

Scan the QR code to watch the Facebook video.



"Hopefully, we can use these numbers to improve Martian climate models."

FROM THE LAB

A Martian Mystery Solved

*UH physics graduate student **LARRY GUAN** has broken new ground by generating the first detailed profile of energy flow on Mars.*

*Story by **DEANNA JANES***
*Photography by **JEFF LAUTENBERGER** / **UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON***

WITH BLISTERING conditions and zero protective magnetic field to keep mankind from turning into cosmic ice pops, Mars is no picnic. Still, scientific minds remain focused on unlocking the meteorological secrets of the Red Planet.

One such mind belongs to Larry Guan, the graduate student in the University of Houston's Department of Physics who's just been credited with solving one of those Martian mysteries.

Under the wings of his advisers from the College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics (professors Liming Li of the Department of Physics and Xun Jiang of the Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences) and with the collaboration of several planetary scientists, Guan helmed groundbreaking research, producing the planet's first-ever meridional profile and further laying the foundation for understanding Martian climate.

The study, "Distinct Energy Budgets of Mars and Earth," was published in Earth and space science journal "AGU Advances" and will be featured in AGU's prestigious magazine, Eos. In it, Guan and his team share how they used data collected from the orbital spacecraft Mars Global Surveyor to observe the flow of energy on Mars and, notably, generate Guan's meridional profiles — measures of energy entering or leaving a line of latitude — at seasonal and annual time periods.

"Our research improves upon a concept that was already well-known," Guan says. "Energy budget studies are not new; we're just the first to do it on a more granular time and space scale. Hopefully, we can use these numbers to improve Martian climate models."

Key findings of Guan's research reveal a Martian atmosphere in sharp contrast to Earth's. Where we experience a surplus of energy at the tropics and deficit at the poles, Mars is the opposite — and with global-scale dust storms rocking the planet's energy budget and "massive polar ice caps made of solid carbon dioxide bleeding into the atmosphere," Guan says.

Guan describes his discovery as "standing on the shoulders of giants" and is quick to give credit where it's due. After touting his advisers, Li and Jiang, he endorses the efforts of former UH graduate student Ellen Creecy, who "did a lot of the legwork," and his officemate Xinyue Wang, who was his pinch hitter in academia.

"We were both the designated substitutes for each other's work, in the sense that if I had to cover for her presentation, or if she had to cover for mine, we knew just enough to be able to do so," he says of Wang.

Other study contributors include Anthony Toigo from Johns Hopkins University, Mark Richardson from Aeolis Research, Yeon Joo Lee from the Institute for Basic Science in South Korea and Agustín Sánchez-Lavega from Universidad del País Vasco in Spain.

Germán Martínez from the Lunar and Planetary Institute shouldered the responsibility of ensuring the team's arguments were scientifically sound. "If I ever see him, I'm buying him a drink," Guan says.

The most challenging part of the study, according to Guan, was justifying the novelty of their result.

"It took a lot of consultation with external collaborators — hundreds of quite tedious back-and-forth email exchanges — that ultimately made the paper marketable and got it across the finish line," he says.

With his dissertation in the can and a breakthrough study in the books, you might think this Houston native would be eager to begin unearthing more quandaries deep within our galaxy. But just as the reserve of every ball of gas in the sky inevitably burns out, so too has the star of this study.

After decoding the weather patterns on Mars, the only code Guan is interested in now is Morse, from a cockpit. "I'm taking a year off," he says. "Maybe I'll learn to fly a plane or something."

AROUND THE WORLD

Changing Perspectives

*UH students return to the **DOMINICAN REPUBLIC** for life-altering learnings they can't get in a classroom.*

By **TYLER HICKS**

FOR MORE THAN A DECADE, Jonathan Williamson has seen the many ways students react to studying abroad. Sometimes, during a powerful moment on the trip, they turn to the associate dean in the University of Houston's Honors College and share how the trip has inspired them to change their major. Other times, students return home, reflect on their experience, and continue the work they started abroad by volunteering or taking on new projects on or off campus.

"[Students] see their place in the United States a bit differently," Williamson says. "There isn't a right answer."

The experienced political science professor, who also leads the college's academic programs and faculty affairs, is particularly proud that the study abroad experiences he leads are open to every major. That includes a trip to the Dominican Republic. The first was in 2024, and the next takes place this June. Roughly a dozen students will head to the vibrant, diverse Caribbean country for about 10 days, where they'll partake in a course titled "Political Ecology."

"The Dominican Republic is very interesting," Williamson says. "It has lots of resources, including its amazing people. But it also has lots of challenges."

His course examines the environment and biology of the Las Terrenas community through the lens of politics. Students immerse themselves in the community, walking its coastlines, surveying its springs, and studying its mangroves and coral reefs, all while analyzing how these ecological elements are shaped by political forces on the local, national and global stage.

For Weidy Rodriguez Castro, a hike in Las Terrenas on the 2024 trip provided one of the most poignant moments of the experience.

"I had never done anything like it before and struggled all the way up," Castro says. "However, once I got to the top and saw the view, I understood why people enjoyed hiking so much. It wasn't about the struggle; it was the reward."

Other aspects of the trip were both challenging and rewarding in different ways. Students toured a city dump uphill from one of the local springs, then traced the path of a stream running from the dump into town. They saw how members of the community bathed and washed clothes in the stream, then mapped its contours all the way to a wetland.

This in-depth exploration helps the students pinpoint specific causes of mangrove depletion. Then they work with local organizations on restoration projects.

"These experiences not only taught me the value of small, collective efforts in creating meaningful change but also deepened my understanding of environmental sustainability and community-driven work," says Ranya Khalifa, a biology student who went to the Dominican Republic in 2024. "They reinforced my passion for combining my scientific background with hands-on projects to make a tangible difference in people's lives."

In other words, this political ecology course offers a truly interdisciplinary experience, strengthening students' understanding of climate change and international politics while they undertake a valuable service project. The 2024 class was so impactful for its students that Williamson is returning to the same community for this year's trip — and staying even longer.

"It's one thing to talk about that in a class or read about it in a book," he says. "It's another thing to see mangroves dying, or to see trash lining a stream bank, or to see — and smell — a dump right above what is otherwise a pure and natural spring."

That's an experience that students are unlikely to forget. Some consider new career paths; others take up similar projects once returning home. But everyone returns with even more awareness of our world — and how to improve it.







POLITICAL GROUND
Students in the "Political Ecology" study abroad program get the chance to see how human forces shape ecological environments.

COURTESY OF JONATHAN WILLIAMSON



STUDIES SHOW

Gaming for the Win

*New UH research finds playing **VIDEO GAMES** can advance personal and professional growth.*

*By **MARIA HIEBER***



Melika Shirmohammadi

WHEN YOU THINK OF hobbies that foster the development of professional skills — problem-solving, leadership, collaboration — activities such as scouting or debate team likely come to mind. Well, now you can add playing video games to that list.

Recent research led by Melika Shirmohammadi, assistant professor at the University of Houston Cullen College of Engineering Division of Technology, highlights the link between massively multiplayer online, or MMO, games and enriched skills in the workplace.

The study's findings, published in "Human Resource Development International," suggest that video games such as World of Warcraft, Destiny 2 and Final Fantasy — which require players to coordinate tasks to achieve collective goals and collaborate with a team and problem-solve — help players develop personal and professional skills.

"Online gaming often gets a bad reputation, but our study reveals a different story," Shirmohammadi says. "We found that gaming can actually help people develop valuable workplace skills ... [that] include problem-solving, teamwork, leadership and even self-confidence. Our research shows that gaming, when done in moderation, can be a way for people to grow both personally and professionally."

Many MMO players in the study reported positive mindset shifts, including viewing work as solvable puzzles, and experienced improved patience, self-confidence and self-awareness. The study also traced coaching and development skills — such as evaluating team performance, providing and receiving feedback or encouragement, and player collaboration to persevere in reaching a shared goal — to gaming.

"Our study extends the understanding of nonwork-to-work enrichment to the MMO gaming context and reveals how a hobby, as an understudied subdomain of life, could benefit work," Shirmohammadi says.

SHIRMOHAMMADI: JEFF LAUTENBERGER / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON; GAMING: JON BURKE / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

DEEP DIVE

A Health Care Powerhouse

*Counting the ways **HEALTH CARE EDUCATION** at UH impacts patient care in Houston, the state and the nation.*

WHEN IT COMES TO excellence in health care education, the University of Houston is a standout. A full 15 of 16 colleges offer health-related programs, underscoring UH's deep health care roots and promising future.

Trained under a collaborative, integrated approach, students are equipped to work in teams across disciplines to tackle complex, multifaceted health problems that affect patients of all backgrounds and life circumstances.

Let's dive into the impact UH's health care programs are making in Houston, across Texas and nationwide.

81

Unique degree programs in health-related fields

1 in 4

UH students enrolled in a health-related degree program

85%

UH grads in health-related fields work in Texas

3x

Nursing school enrollment growth in the past five years

1st

New medical school in Houston in 50 years

180

Clinical partnerships

HOMES CLINIC
In one of many clinical partnerships, UH students work with Healthcare for the Homeless–Houston to serve the city's unhoused population.





JEFF LAUTENBERGER / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

SNAPSHOT

Snow Daze

Cougars came out to play on campus after ***A RARE HOUSTON SNOWFALL.***



WHEN HOUSTON EXPERIENCED up to 6 magical inches of fluffy snowfall on Jan. 21, 2025, the University of Houston campus temporarily transformed into a winter wonderland.

Cougars made the most of their two unexpected days of canceled classes by building snowmen all over campus (including on statue Shasta's head), sledding, scaring up snowball fights and, of course, taking snowy selfies galore.


NCAA
2025
DIVISION I
MARCH MADNESS
MIDWEST REGIONAL CHAMPION
NCAA
CHAMPIONSHIPS
FINAL FOUR

Culture of Champions

UH's relentless road to the ***MEN'S BASKETBALL NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP.***

Story by ***SHAWN LINDSEY***
Photography by ***JEFF LAUTENBERGER*** / ***UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON***



ROBERT GODDIN / IMAGN PHOTO

SWEET VICTORY Men's basketball coach Kelvin Sampson led the Coogs to the Final Four with his signature blend of toughness, tenacity and unwaveringly high standards.

THIS WASN'T THE ENDING the University of Houston had written in its collective dreams — not with a ball dropped in the final seconds, the confetti falling for someone else. But being a national finalist is a season worth remembering with a team worth celebrating. It ended in heartbreak, sure, but it was built on heart from the very beginning.

Houston's march to the national championship game in San Antonio on April 7 was something rare: a stretch of basketball where toughness, togetherness and belief overcame just about everything else.

The Cougars knocked off Purdue in the Sweet 16 on a last-second drive by point guard Milos Uzan. Then they gutted out a 64-63 win over Duke in the Final Four that will live in University of Houston lore: a game decided by defense, nerves and two clutch free throws from J'Wan Roberts.

That set the stage for a national championship clash with Florida: a back-and-forth war dictated by Houston's defense, until momentum shifted. The Cougars led in the second half, but the Gators clawed back, possession by possession. In the final seconds, the Cougars were unable to get off a potential game-winner. That moment might echo in the minds of Cougar fans for years, but it doesn't define this team.

What defines them is what came next: teammates rushing to junior guard



COOGS' HOUSE
Fans clad in Cougar red filled the team's hotel lobby to show players support on their way to the championship game.

Emanuel Sharp, lifting him up, refusing to let the weight of that play fall on his shoulders alone. "We know how special Emanuel is," Roberts said after the loss. "I'm going to defend his name if anyone tries to make it worse than what it is."

Houston finished the season 35-5. Undefeated on the road. Zero losses by double-digit points. A team that showed up every night, punched harder than anyone else and nearly pulled off a dream ending.

Houston may not have won the last game of the season. But it won everything else that matters.

And Cougar Nation showed up with heart. Tens of thousands of fans made the trip to San Antonio, transforming the city into a vibrant sea of red. Houston fans surrounded the team hotel, filling the lobby and streets with cheers, signs and shared hope. "Whose house? Coogs' house!" chants rang out over the River Walk — a declaration of pride from those who followed this team every step of the way. This wasn't just a game. It was a moment of celebration for how far the program had come.

BUILDING THE CULTURE

Nearly nine months before that final game, before fans filled arenas and cameras tracked every possession, the Cougars were grinding in the shadows. In the predawn darkness of a humid June morning last summer, the basketball team gathered on the campus baseball field. The clock read 6:30 a.m., but for Kelvin Sampson's team, it was already game time for creating a championship season.

Those punishing summer workouts — 100-yard sprints under the relentless Texas sun — weren't just about physical conditioning. They were laying the kind of foundation necessary to make it through to March and into April.

Sampson doesn't just preach toughness. He builds it — through repetition, through routine and through unshakeable standards.

"This is very much a player-led team. They're responsible for our success, and as a coach, that's the way I prefer it," Sampson says. "I think the reason why we have been so good over the years is we've developed a great culture that our seniors adopt and make sure that our young kids and new kids buy into."

The team leans on one another because it must. "We go through a lot of hard things together — the conditioning is not easy, all the stuff we do, nothing is easy — so we have to lean on each other to get through it," says L.J. Cryer, Houston's graduate guard and leading scorer. "I feel like that's where the camaraderie comes from."

In Sampson's program, punctuality isn't optional, and accountability isn't a buzzword.

"I know how hard our kids work," Sampson says. "We start in June. That's part of our culture. You be on time, and you're held accountable for everything you do."

THIS IS HOUSTON

This culture didn't materialize overnight. When Sampson took the reins in 2014, he inherited a program adrift — waning fan interest, outdated facilities and years of irrelevance.

"I was so grateful he accepted the job,



BROTHERHOOD
"We go through a lot of hard things together … so we have to lean on each other to get through it," says lead scorer L.J. Cryer.

because we really didn't have anything to offer to him," says UH President Renu Khator. "I wouldn't even say we were on the first floor; we were in the basement [of college basketball]. We had to really get out of there to get on the launchpad, but dreams have power."

Sampson wasn't looking for flash. He was chasing belief. "Coaches can win games," he told Khator during his interview. "But the administration wins championships."

"What that meant was that he would be a fantastic coach, but if he doesn't have the tools, it's not possible to bring magic back here," Khator says.

Determined to resurrect Cougar basketball, he went to work — not just with his team, but with the campus. In 2014, armed with a bullhorn and his trademark relentlessness, he walked alongside players around campus, personally inviting students to games.

"Our first [game] is tomorrow night," he announced, fist-bumping students and igniting a spark that would eventually engulf the campus in basketball fervor.

Now? The facilities are among the best in the nation, and the games are sold out. The Fertitta Center, which opened in 2018, is a wall of noise. The student section doesn't just show up; it takes over. Houston has become one of the loudest, most hostile arenas in college basketball.

"This is Houston, and a lot of things are possible here," Khator says.

RELENTLESS PREPARATION AND DEFENSIVE TENACITY

Sampson's system is built on preparation and defense. Core principles are drilled and drilled again until they become second nature, ensuring that come game time, the Cougars are a defensive juggernaut.

"That's what we do. We're a great defensive team, and that's how we like to set the



DEFENSIVE MEASURES
Forward JoJo Tugler reaches for the ball during UH's Final Four matchup against Duke.

Houston may not have won the last game of the season. But it won everything else that matters.





SHOWING OUT
Cougar loyalists rallied to support their team both inside and outside the Alamodome.





tone of the game: on the defensive end," Sharp says.

But Houston's path to San Antonio wasn't all defense. The Cougars were also one of the best three-point shooting teams in the country. When opponents pressured them, Houston didn't blink.

"Be fearless," Sampson told his team during a late-game timeout out against Tennessee in the Elite Eight. "Don't be afraid to take a big shot — and don't be afraid to miss it either. What's the worst that can happen? You miss it."

During the 2025 NCAA Tournament, Houston's defense held opponents to an average of 58.7 points per game. The Elite Eight against Tennessee? Just 50 points allowed in a 69-50 throttling that sent UH back to the Final Four for the seventh time in school history. They then held a Duke team that averaged 83 points per game during the season to 67 points in the Final Four showdown.

SEAMLESS INTEGRATION AND PLAYER DEVELOPMENT

There's no plug and play in Houston's system. It takes a certain type of player to make the leap. It takes buy-in. Milos Uzan knew that. The Oklahoma transfer had the impossible task of following All-American Jamal Shead, and he never flinched. The team's inclusive culture eased this transition.

"This is tough coaching right here," Uzan says. "I've never really had a coach like Coach Sampson, honestly — somebody who's going to always push you to be your best — and that's exactly why I came here."

Cryer saw it from day one. "When you're able to come in and be yourself, that brings out the best in you," he says. "We're not out here putting pressure on [Uzan] to live up to Jamal's expectations. We want him to go out there and be the best Milos he can be."

This emphasis on individual growth

‘Run It Back’

The UH team that said no to the portal and **YES TO A BROTHERHOOD**.

IN AN AGE WHERE LOYALTY in college basketball is treated like a relic, the University of Houston Men’s Basketball team decided to do something radical following the 2023–2024 season. They came back.

It started quietly last March, in the echo of a Sweet 16 loss to Duke. With multiple players recognized as draft prospects, or the promise of an NIL deal or a starting position on another team, the headlines said the Cougars were done. The team said: not yet.

J’Wan Roberts (pictured) made the first move. “Job’s not finished. Let’s run it back,” he posted on Instagram. Then L.J. Cryer. Then Emanuel Sharp. One by one, the roster stacked back up. Ja’Vier Francis, JoJo Tugler, Ramon Walker Jr., Terrance Arceneaux and Mylik Wilson. Everyone but All-American point guard Jamal Shead.

A “Run It Back” campaign was born — not as a slogan, but as a mission.

“If you’ve got a program that’s sustainable over an eight-year period like we’ve been, it starts with the character of your players and the kind of kids you want,” says Cougars head coach Kelvin Sampson. Nearly a year later, the Coogs proved they were not only the most loyal team in America but worthy of national title contention.

“I feel like when you come across a bunch of people [who are] genuine and love you for you, I feel like you want to keep those guys close to you as much as you can,” Roberts says.

In a sport overtaken by the transfer portal and NIL bidding wars, Sampson built something different. Something lasting. Only three players from his top rotation have transferred out in 11 seasons. The team that beat Tennessee? Four starters returned from last year. The only additions? Milos Uzan, a savvy pickup from Oklahoma.

“We’re kind of a homegrown program. We bring kids in as freshmen. We don’t really live in the portal. This year, we only took one portal kid, and that was Milos [Uzan]. Everybody else returned,” Sampson says. “Year before that we took two … L.J. [Cryer] and Damian [Dunn]. We’ve always believed in recruiting high school kids and developing them, and that’s how we’ve had a great culture. It’s been a secret sauce of ours.”

After the 2024 season, players had no shortage of options: Chase the money or promises laid before them, or double down and come back.

“I could have been in the G League or doing something else, but it made more sense coming back to college,” Cryer says. “At the end of the day, I’m all about winning. I felt like we had unfinished business, and I felt like with the group we have right now, we could do something special.”

They stayed for love — for the game, for their coaches and program, and for each other.

“This team, it’s a brotherhood here. I love lacing up next to E and L every day,” says Uzan, referring to teammates Sharp and Cryer.

“Family, that’s No. 1. I call all these guys my brothers. If I could be here for another three years, I would,” Roberts said after his final game wearing a Houston uniform. “I wouldn’t trade this for anything else in the world.”

For Sampson, this wasn’t just a team; it was one of his all-time favorites. A group that let him coach them hard, held each other accountable and carried the weight of the season together. They weren’t the most heralded roster he’s ever had, but they might’ve been the most connected.

“I don’t want to coach a team that doesn’t cry,” Sampson said after the loss to Florida. “That means I’m recruiting the wrong dudes.”

They cried together in that locker room — freshmen, seniors, everyone in between — because they gave everything. And because they loved each other enough to hurt like that.





VALUABLE PLAYERS Emanuel Sharp (above) shows off his elite shooting skills against Duke. Milos Uzan greets a crowd of fans.

within the team framework is a testament to the program's developmental focus. Players aren't just molded into specific roles; they're nurtured to become the best versions of themselves, contributing uniquely to the team's success.

"We went through some struggles this season, and a lot of people doubted us," Sharp says. "We went back into the gym, cracked down on the things we need to do better … and we fixed them."

"We don't have to be mentioned in the greats or this and that," Roberts says. "We'll take the underdog spot, and we'll just do what we do."

POWERHOUSE PROGRAM

Kelvin Sampson doesn't just win games. He builds programs. And he's built a monster in Houston. A team that defends, that rarely turns it over, that out-prepares and out-toughs almost everyone. From a punchline to a powerhouse: back-to-back Big 12 titles, two Final Fours in five years and the program's first national championship game appearance in 41 years.

One thing is clear: This Houston team didn't just reach college basketball's pinnacle. They built the blueprint for how to stay there. This national finalist will have two returning starters and one of the nation's top recruiting classes next season — all the ingredients in place to run it back in 2026.

After all, this is Houston, and a lot of things are possible here.

Scan the QR code to browse more images from Houston's historic basketball season.



An Artistic Retreat

*An inside look at UH's **ELGIN STREET STUDIOS**, a purpose-built artistic haven where MFA and sculpture students are taking their work to new heights.*

*Story by **DEANNA JANES***
*Photography by **JOSEPH BUI** / **UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON***

SOME OF THE WORLD'S greatest artistic masterpieces were born out of cramped spaces. Look to Vincent van Gogh's "Starry Night," famously painted behind a barred window at a French asylum, for proof.

But doesn't creative genius deserve the space it needs to take flight?

Elgin Street Studios, home of the Master of Fine Arts and sculpture programs at the University of Houston's Kathrine G. McGovern College of the Arts, is gifting students with just that. In keeping with the University's commitment to providing students with the gold standard in education, Elgin is a state-of-the-art facility designed to inspire creativity and innovation and cultivate future generations of artists to steward Houston's robust art scene.

"If you have a leading arts institution like we do, and if you provide the kind of excellence in pedagogy and faculty we do, you should have a facility that matches," says Beth Merfish, associate professor of art history and the director of the School of Art at UH. "Elgin matches the rigor of the program and the stature of the faculty."

Opened in summer 2020 and located on the northeast corner of Houston's Arts District, at 43,000 square feet, Elgin is the first purpose-built building on the UH campus and also features a parking garage, administrative offices and retail space. More than just a place to create, Elgin Street Studios itself is a work of art. Every inch of the expansive, dual-floor structure is



ART HOUSE
MFA and sculpture students like Maddie Casagranda (left) and Sajeela Siddiq (right) have access to a range of traditional and modern technologies and equipment at Elgin Street Studios.





IDEA WORKSHOP
In the sculpture wing, student artists have access to a fully equipped metal shop, as well as sculpture gardens and a commercial-grade woodshop.



dedicated to teaching and creating art.

With sky-high ceilings and walls of windows, natural light floods the facilities and creates an expansive environment for working and learning. Students enjoy their own spacious studios or graphic design areas for the duration of their MFA tenures, and exhibition galleries offer space for critiques.

"Facilities and materials should not be barriers to creativity, so our facility offers students every opportunity to pursue their creative path," Merfish says.

MFA candidate Maddie Casagranda says she's been "very fortunate" to spend the last three years at Elgin Street Studios. "As my practice has become more interdisciplinary, I've been able to take advantage of the physical space, resources and support around me. I'm grateful for the space and time this program has given me."

Elgin is filled with a range of traditional and modern technology and equipment. In the sculpture wing, there's a fully equipped metal shop, sculpture gardens and an impressive commercial-grade woodshop.

"Francis Giampietro, who runs that space, would say that you could chop down a tree in your yard, bring it into the woodshop and mill it into anything you want," Merfish says.

Giampietro, who earned his MFA from UH in 2012, now leads the popular wood and metal fabrication class, where students learn to create with oxygen/acetylene torches. "We went to great lengths to acquire and maintain a wide variety of equipment to meet the needs of a diverse group of artists and makers," he says.

> **"Art thrives in a diverse and changing environment, so it's really exciting to see all these students interact with one another."**
>
> **— BETH MERFISH**
> DIRECTOR, SCHOOL OF ART

As designers dreamed up custom facilities for each program discipline — from photography and graphic design to digital media and painting — they kept safety and accessibility top of mind. This is evident in the fully ADA-compliant supply room and the spray booth equipped with a vacuum system that enables safe aerosol use.

One of Merfish's favorite building features is the donated library, for which Giampietro custom-built the shelving. Commissioned by the estate of Dana Padgett, a former UH faculty member, the shelving unit now harbors her book collection. Giampietro, who studied under Padgett, says she and her books played a major role in his thesis.

"It was a profound experience to build shelves to house her personal books," he says, adding that a meeting with Padgett's husband led to his choice of technique. "He told me they did a lot of edge-banding of plywood at their home. I was able to use this method in the construction of the shelves. I enlisted the help of several students, turning the project into a carpentry workshop for them."

Maximizing impact is a common theme within Elgin's walls. Though the space offers artists privacy behind closed doors, Elgin also fosters community with shared spaces that "almost feel like a college dorm," Merfish says.

Even the building's construction encourages collaboration; students can interact easily with classmates in other areas, so they are "literally talking through the building," Merfish says.

"Art thrives in a diverse and changing environment, so it's really exciting to see all these students interact with one another. And because Elgin was built for exactly this purpose, they are free to create in exactly the ways they want to. And we can see that in the variety of work they make."

That range was on display March 22–April 20 during the 47th annual MFA Thesis Exhibition, which takes place every spring. If you missed this year's, you can still get your creative juices flowing during First Friday Studio Sessions, which invite curators, gallerists and professionals to tour the building and interact with the students during the fall and spring semesters.

"We're providing students with so much opportunity, experience and institutional knowledge that they leave us ready to be particularly impactful in the art world and beyond," Merfish says. "When they do that, they elevate the stature of the city of Houston."

As Houston's art scene continues to hum and emerging UH artists leave their marks, history will look back on Elgin Street Studios and see it as not just a vessel for creators, but an active participant in the magic we call art.

Scan the QR code to see more images of Elgin Street Studios.



"The University of Houston was my first and only choice. I like to describe it as my launching pad."

Houston, We Have a Star

***DR. BERNARD HARRIS**, UH alum and inductee into the U.S. Astronaut Hall of Fame, journeyed from Houston to the stars and back — changing lives along the way.*

By ***DEANNA JANES***

DEFYING GRAVITY
Being the first African American to walk in space is just one of Dr. Harris' many accomplishments.

DR. BERNARD HARRIS is a man of firsts. He was the first African American to walk in space and the first physician to conduct a telehealth conference from space. He was aboard the first Russian-American joint shuttle mission flown by the first female pilot, Eileen Collins. It's an impressive resume, and if you ask Harris, he credits his No. 1: the University of Houston.

Harris was born in Temple, Texas, and raised in Houston. He was a temporary resident of the Navajo Nation — where, under those expansive skies, his dreams of becoming an astronaut began — and returned to Texas to complete high school in San Antonio. But he always thought of Houston as "home." So when it came time for higher education, there was only one option.

"The University of Houston was my first and only choice," he says. "I like to describe it as my launching pad."

As a kid, Harris was drawn to the sciences, particularly medicine and astronomy. So he did both. After earning his bachelor's degree in biology from UH in 1978, he went to medical school, then completed training at the Mayo Clinic and a fellowship at NASA's Ames Research Center, researching bone loss as it occurs in space. Shortly after, he joined NASA's Johnson Space Center as a flight surgeon.

In 1990, Harris' dream of becoming an astronaut was realized. Chosen for the astronaut training program, he earned his space boots a year later. Two years after that, he was space bound. Over the course of Harris' cosmo-career, he flew two missions — one on Space Shuttle Columbia and one on Space Shuttle Discovery. It was on that second trip he enjoyed a five-hour spacewalk.

During his time at NASA, Harris researched musculoskeletal physiology and developed medical devices to extend an astronaut's stay in space. Many of the innovations from his research and experiments are still in use on NASA spacecraft today.

Since retiring from NASA, Harris has turned his attention to fostering education and philanthropy, using his astronomical platform to engage with his community. In addition to running The Harris Foundation, an organization that serves disadvantaged youth, and an investment firm dedicated to telehealth, he launched the first Bernard Harris Science Camp at UH.

A residential program that teaches middle schoolers about STEM, the camp has expanded to more than 50 college campuses across the nation. "These kids are high performers, some that don't realize how high-performing they are, and we are able to bring them into these college campuses all over the country and make a real difference in their lives," Harris says.

These days, Harris stays on solid ground, but his achievements remain stellar. He's a 2025 inductee into the U.S. Astronaut Hall of Fame, and he's currently enjoying the release of his second book, "Embracing Infinite Possibilities," designed to help others reach their potential.

Although we're positive the tome will result in many firsts for those who read it, we can't help but wonder what Harris' next first will be.

NASA

Community Roots Run Deep

*UH's recent **TREE PLANTING EFFORT** reflects a deeper commitment to Houston's Third Ward.*

*Story by **DEANNA JANES***
*Photography by **JEFF LAUTENBERGER** / **UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON***

OVERCAST and comfortable, that day in early February was perfect for rolling up sleeves and making magic with mulch. The site: the Columbia Tap Trail. The goal: to plant more than 500 trees that will eventually offer pedestrians, cyclists and residents of Third Ward a beautiful, verdant canopy.

The urban greening project is one part of turning the historic, four-mile trail into a linear park that runs through the neighborhood. Efforts for the park's creation are being spearheaded by Friends of Columbia Tap in collaboration with the University of Houston's Third Ward Initiative, led by Vice President of Neighborhood and Strategic Initiatives Elwyn Lee.

"The trail really connects the community to downtown and also to the medical center area," Lee says. "And the park, along with the sites along the trail where we planted the trees, will provide another outdoor venue where people can exercise, get together and get to know each other."

He adds that preserving the cultural significance of the area and reclaiming its purpose cannot be lost. More than a respite designed to do what parks do — provide relief from Texas heat, improve air quality, harbor local wildlife — this park and the act of putting new roots into its ground represent something much loftier: a reclamation.

Once the site of oppression, the trail was part of a 50-mile rail line built by enslaved Black men who were forced to transport sugar and cotton from Brazoria County plantations to Houston's port. According to Lee, they contributed to the largest cotton import/export line in the country. Historical markers will be installed to inform and educate people about the history of the trail to memorialize this legacy.

In his role, Lee collaborates with community organizations to make improvements to Third Ward and helps students advance in their academic pursuits and enhance their cultural IQ.

"They learn how to interact with people who may not look like them, whether it be age, other characteristics or economic status," Lee says. "It gives them an opportunity, while working together on the project, to develop some cultural competence."

The tree planting project was the perfect fit for doing just that. Working in tandem with FOCT and several local organizations, including Rotary, Fit Houston, ToolBank and Houston Wilderness, Lee recruited dozens of UH students and faculty members. In the end, more than 200 volunteers showed out to plant three varieties of native trees.

"Community engagement is a win-win," Lee says of the project. "It benefits the community and volunteers as well. It's a mutually beneficial activity, particularly when you approach the engagement with the appropriate respect for the culture and the history."

Transforming the trail is just one way Lee and his department are empowering Third Ward. In addition to projects that benefit the community's health, like tree planting, their broader work taps into education, economic empowerment and cultural heritage.

One of the department's most successful programs, Stimulating Urban Renewal Through Entrepreneurship, or SURE, educates UH students about starting a business while also giving under-resourced Third Ward entrepreneurs the opportunity to grow their existing businesses.

Another is keeping the iconic rivalry between Third Ward's Jack Yates High School and Fifth Ward's Phillis Wheatley High School alive, Lee says. A newly installed historical marker in TDECU Stadium tells the story.

"It was like the Rose Bowl," Lee says. "There were parades and floats, and 20,000 to 30,000 people would come to the game."

And he would know. He grew up in Third Ward, attending Blackshear Elementary and Yates before graduating from Yale and going on to Yale Law School. "I have a love affair with Third Ward," he says. "It's a great place to live."

It should take about 30 years before the trees Lee and team planted reach their full potential, shading the streets of Houston and providing a picture-perfect backdrop for Third Ward. But ripples of the project's impact are already spreading.

Events like the Third Ward on Tap Fest are sprouting up all over the park, with people doing exactly what Lee hoped they would do: get together, get to know each other and uplift this vibrant historic community.

STEWARDING GROWTH
UH's Elwyn Lee collaborates with community organizations to make improvements to Third Ward and helps students advance in their academic pursuits and enhance their cultural IQ.



Houston Hits the Spot



With recent wins in the first-ever Texas Michelin Guide, the Bayou City reaffirmed its place among the nation's **TOP FOOD DESTINATIONS**. And UH is here for it.

By **NICK RALLO**
Photography by **JEFF LAUTENBERGER AND BENJAMIN CORDA** / **UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON**



“One thing this city is great at is showing how new Americans can incorporate cuisines from the place they came from with what has been locally popular and make it into something new and exciting — and, in many cases, better.”

— TODD ROMERO
ASSOCIATE DEAN, UH COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES AND CODIRECTOR OF THE GULF COAST FOOD PROJECT

AWARD-WINNING
Todd Romero digs into a taco at Cochinita & Co., a James Beard semifinalist and Houston Chronicle Top 100 Restaurant.



OFFICIAL FOODIE
Romero, who helped with the Houston Chronicle's Top 100 Restaurants in 2024, can often be found scouting the city for exciting new flavors.



THIRSTY FOR KNOWLEDGE
Assistant Professor Kyle Hight's expertise in restaurant operations and entrepreneurship are a boon to students who aspire to open their own bars or eateries.

HOUSTON'S FOOD SCENE IS not full of hidden gems. The diamonds are out of the rough — visible on the surface, bright and shining, and easy to find.

The city's restaurants show up on lists of the nation's best culinary experiences and regularly receive accolades from food authorities like the James Beard Foundation. In November 2024, Houston's status as a destination food city was reaffirmed with the release of Michelin's first-ever Texas guide, in which six area restaurants received a star and more than a dozen more a Bib Gourmand designation for good food at fair prices.

Of course, this came as no surprise to residents, who've been enjoying Houston's rich culture — and the food that comes along with it — for decades.

Regional cuisines from around the world collide and evolve in Houston — the fourth most populous city and one of the most diverse large metropolitan areas in the United States. Authenticity is relative, and tradition is a tool. New American meets Korean. Burnt ends hang with bún bò Huế. "Fusion" fails to adequately describe dazzling dishes such as grilled rib-eye with sticky rice.

As Todd Romero tells it, Houston diners meet restaurants where they live. Romero, associate dean of undergraduate affairs at the University of Houston's College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, is a food historian and codirector of UH's Gulf Coast Food Project, a prestigious food institute dedicated to community outreach, innovative teaching and cutting-edge research on the region's unique food culture.

He's also working on a book on the history of the Creole and Cajun foodways of Southeast Texas. "The culture here is really deep and rich," he says. "There's just always something that's going to surprise you."

Romero — who says he's more of a gas-station-taco guy than a tasting-menu one — has always been interested in food. As a grad student at Boston College, where he studied colonial and Native American history, his roommates wouldn't be surprised to find him over the stove, blistering red and green chiles sent from home in New Mexico.

Once he finally moved to Houston, he wasn't prepared for what he found.

"I was blown away by the incredible diversity of restaurants," Romero says. "Everything is just so fun here."

Romero loves to explore his adopted hometown; he helped comb the city for the Houston Chronicle's Top 100 Restaurants list in 2024. For example, the first time he visited Jūn, a James Beard semifinalist in Houston's Heights neighborhood, the meal lit him up.

"I left it so excited," Romero says. "I thought to myself, 'This place is just unrelenting on your palate.' It gives you no breaks — but I like that."

How about brisket bathed in curry? At Jūn, a slab of Texas' most famous barbecued thing is brined and braised for hours, nestled into an amber-bright peanut sauce and zapped with Szechuan peppercorns. This is how restaurateurs connect with diners. Jūn's brisket is one of many fingerprint dishes: an imprint of Texas time and place whirled around by the hands and memory of someone from someplace else.

Put another way: No one on earth is eating better — or like you — when you're elbows deep in a meal at a Houston gem like Jūn.

"One thing this city is great at," Romero says, "is showing how new Americans can incorporate cuisines









GREAT SHAKES
Hight recently conducted an in-class mixology competition in his beverage management class. The winner's cocktail is being served in Eric's restaurant and lounge at the UH Hilton.

from the place they came from with what has been locally popular and make it into something new and exciting — and, in many cases, better."

KYLE HIGHT LEFT HOUSTON in the early 2000s, at a time when old-money steakhouses led the talking points about the best food in the city. He joined the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, where he learned to cook and, more importantly, how to survive in an industry that runs on razor-thin margins.

He returned to Houston in August 2024, joining UH as an assistant professor at the Conrad N. Hilton College of Global Hospitality Leadership, to teach the up-and-coming generation, aka "The Bear" generation, what he knows. He was shocked when he came back — by the vibrancy, the sky-big and concert-loud flavors, the stories told through meals. The merging of so many varied cultures, from Jamaican to West African to Thai, also staggered him.

But it's a hard business. A quick count at the end of 2024 put the number of Houston restaurants at nearly 28,000, and restaurateurs face unrelenting challenges: rising prices, third-party apps fighting for a piece of the pie, logistical issues. Then there are the post-pandemic realities, including different dining habits and preferences and dramatic rent increases. A shortage of qualified staff at all restaurant levels, including cooks and chefs, is a persistent problem. And the closing of the Art Institute of Houston's culinary school in 2023 dealt another staggering blow to the regional restaurant industry.

Hight pours this knowledge into his classroom. He revamps the curriculum frequently to impart the most current, and applicable, real-world wisdom to the incoming generation.

"In talking to the students, I'm telling them what keeps the CEOs up at night," he says. "We tell students that many people get into the restaurant industry who, honestly, have no business getting into the industry. You can tell who hasn't attended school, let alone a hospitality program, and who's never put together a business plan."

With all the cards on the table, Hight conveys hope.

"I'm very happy to say that the interest in opening restaurants, opening bars, opening everything from fine dining down to a neighborhood spot, is as high as I've ever seen. Houston is in good hands with the up-and-coming wave of restaurateurs."

To train his students, he sends them to Texas Wine Country to learn what our state keeps in its treasure chest. He sends them to the Culinary Institute of America to take a crash course on cooking and running a real restaurant. In the classroom, where he puts on events such as a recent mixology competition, Hight's approach is hands on.

He predicts smaller, more intimate settings in Houston's dining future. He believes that massive, Cheesecake Factory-level restaurants will fade, and there will be more spaces where diners can really connect with the food and the city. He emphasizes smaller footprints and sharply focused menus — and maybe a pop-up restaurant for the big ideas.

Romero shares the same hope for the future. As a Houston diner who revels in a good food adventure, the vibrancy of the city means a lot.

"On one hand, food is intensely local, and on the other hand, reflective of the chef's personal story," Romero says. He is continually shocked by the affordability yet high quality of the city's food, as well as the imaginative yet intrinsic ways in which Houston's chefs and restaurateurs meld national and international flavors and cooking styles.

You'll probably find Romero at the small-but-dazzling bistro Nancy's Hustle, which earned a Bib Gourmand in the Texas Michelin Guide. "I think that's the sweet spot for me in Houston — restaurants that are New American but broadly defined and redefined."

Another Bib Gourmand awardee, in the Houston suburb of Spring, is Belly of the Beast. For his menu, first-generation American chef Thomas Bille frequently digs into his Mexican roots to devise dishes such as barbecue unagi or birria tacos with Texas-born and -bred waygu or grilled redfish with cilantro corn.

"It's an interesting restaurant that reflects someone who says, 'I love cooking and the food that I grew up with at a high level, but that's not the only thing I'm going to do,'" Romero says. "I find that really refreshing."

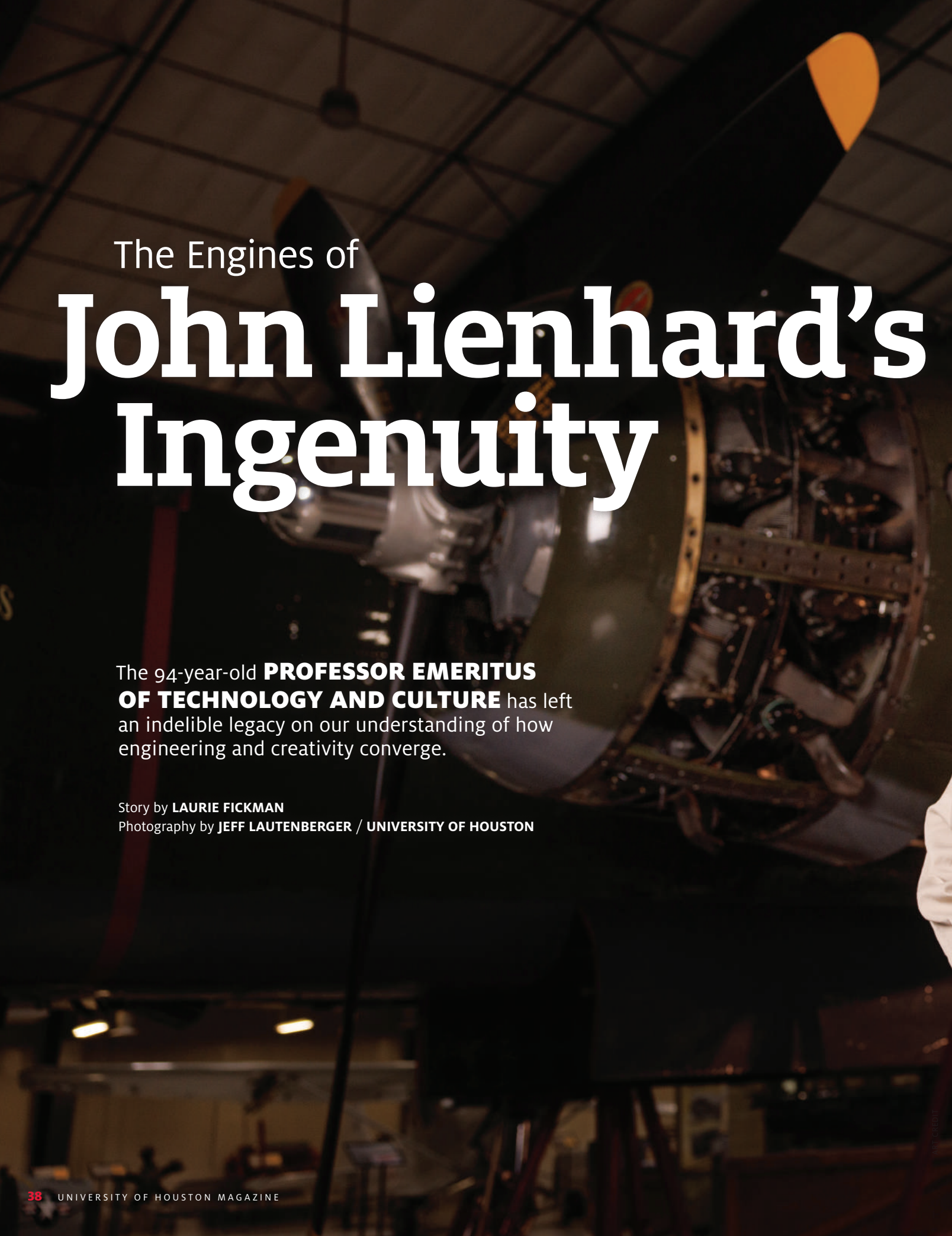
That's a common story in Houston. Chefs and restaurateurs nod to Texas traditions, acknowledging the joy they elicit, while bringing something personal to their dining experiences. The food isn't overwrought or pretentious or star-seeking. It nourishes, adapting to its people and the place.

"When I worked in restaurants in grad school in Boston, people would talk about fusion food … and it was always a little bit contrived. It didn't really resonate with me," Romero says. "What I see here is food that's very organic, and of the place, and probably not food you would get in another city."

He also shares this advice with diners: Stretch yourself if you're not a fan of adventurous food. Make your palate as capacious as possible, and you will be rewarded.

"If you have ever worked in a restaurant, you know that chefs are exquisite thieves and borrowers. Food, like everything in our culture, like music, is on the move."

> **"I'm very happy to say that the interest in opening restaurants, opening bars, opening everything from fine dining down to a neighborhood spot, is as high as I've ever seen. Houston is in good hands with the up-and-coming wave of restaurateurs."**
>
> **— KYLE HIGHT**
> ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, CONRAD N. HILTON COLLEGE OF GLOBAL HOSPITALITY LEADERSHIP



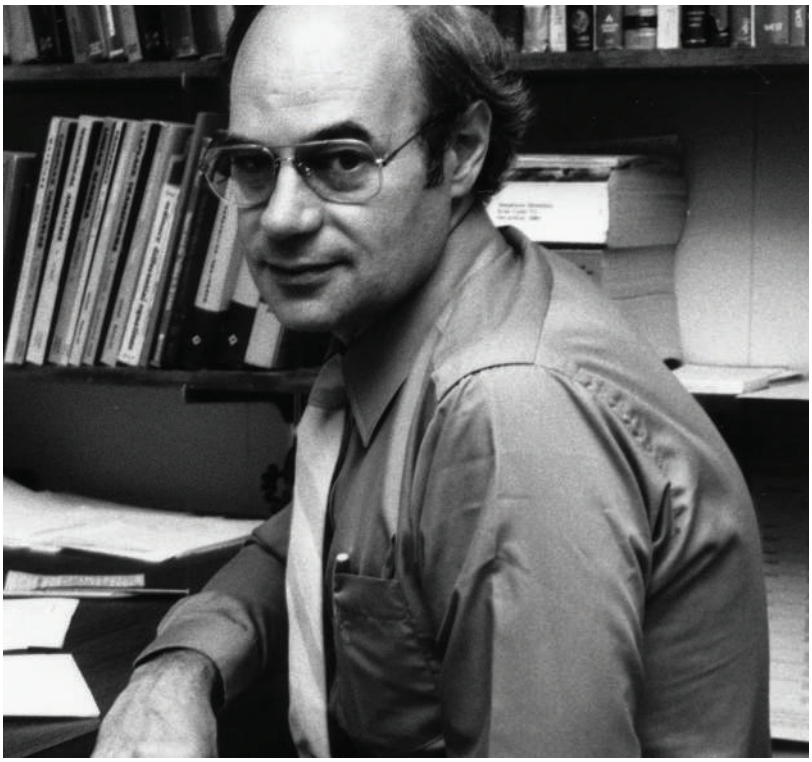
The Engines of John Lienhard's Ingenuity

The 94-year-old **PROFESSOR EMERITUS OF TECHNOLOGY AND CULTURE** has left an indelible legacy on our understanding of how engineering and creativity converge.

Story by **LAURIE FICKMAN**
Photography by **JEFF LAUTENBERGER** / **UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON**



MASTERMIND
Lienhard is not only a world-renowned professor emeritus of mechanical engineering but also the mind behind one of the most inspiring and enduring public radio programs in Houston history.



ONE AFTERNOON in 1987, John Lienhard, already a renowned professor of mechanical engineering, sat in the office of Roger Eichhorn, then-dean of the University of Houston's Cullen College of Engineering, pondering a question: How can we promote the college?

"What people really want to do is listen to a story," replied Lienhard, now 94 and professor emeritus of technology and culture.

"So, I cooked up 'Engines of Our Ingenuity' and wrote two episodes the next day," he now recalls.

Easy as that. He just "cooked up" one of the longest-running, nationally syndicated four-minute radio segments in history, now in its 37th year on KUHF-FM. With almost 3,500 episodes in its library, "The Engines of Our Ingenuity" airs seven days a week in Houston and is heard on National Public Radio member stations across the country.

Its storytelling format has made the show particularly effective at conveying the human side of innovation, highlighting the creativity, struggles and triumphs behind technological advancements.

The segments all begin with the same alluring introduction: "The University of Houston presents this series about the machines that make our civilization run and the people whose ingenuity created them."

Episode topics range from cable cars to Civil War submarines, from the connection between Romantic poets and Victorian science to the invention of the barcode and even the simple paper bag.

In episode 2171, Lienhard begins: "The paper bag is a remarkable contrivance. It serves us constantly and inconspicuously. It folds flat yet opens into a structure that can stand open upon the table while we eat our sandwiches from it and chat with friends."

The piece continues as Lienhard unravels the engineering marvels of creating "the lovely, delicate, ever-present, brown paper sack" and tells the story of Margaret Knight, born in 1838, who invented the first bag-making machine, now in the Smithsonian Institution.

"The magic sauce for his broadcasts is that John has the heart of an artist," says Paul Pendergraft, a longtime producer of "Engines" and himself a broadcaster for more than three decades. "He comes to science with the full knowledge that art and music and all that it entails can be in perfect parallel with science and engineering. It is uniquely smart."

DEMYSTIFYING SCIENCE

The program's enduring success comes from its simplicity and elegant ability to turn science, engineering and so many other forms of human creativity into stories of drama and intrigue, according to NPR. That perfect blend makes engineering accessible and engaging, sparking curiosity about human ingenuity.

One such curious listener in the early days of the program was a kindred spirit: Richard Armstrong, at the time a lecturer at the College of William and Mary in Virginia.

"My first thought was, 'Who gives a radio show to an engineer?' And I'd never even heard of the University of Houston at the time or been to Texas," says Armstrong, now an associate professor of classical studies at UH.

"Then I listened to his episodes over the space of a few months and was very impressed by the range of it, including his interest in unsung women scientists and engineers," Armstrong says. "I really came to like the show and even to think that Houston must be very different from what I imagined."

Was it coincidence, then, that Armstrong eventually landed in Houston?

The mystical power of "Engines" might have played a role. Armstrong has now written and produced 46 episodes of the program. "I find it an amazing corrective to our usual academic way of writing, and I still marvel at John's ability to talk about substantive, complex ideas in so short a format."

Ushering the program into a future that will not always include Lienhard, Armstrong continues to read and edit scripts sent by other contributors, but Lienhard's legacy is never far from his thoughts. "He set a high standard for both quality and quantity of production, and it's a part of Houston's pioneering broadcast history worth celebrating," Armstrong says.

And celebrated it has been. For his work on "Engines," Lienhard received the 1989 ASME Ralph Coates Medal for contributions to the public understanding of technology.



SUPERIOR STORYTELLING
For more than 35 years, Lienhard has used "Engines" to shine a light on the human, creative side of technological innovation.

> "The magic sauce for his broadcasts is that John has the heart of an artist. He comes to science with the full knowledge that art and music ... can be in perfect parallel with science and engineering."
>
> — **PAUL PENDERGRAFT**
> PRODUCER, "ENGINES OF OUR INGENUITY"



John Lienhard's Essential 'Engines' Episodes

Looking for an entry point into the show's extensive back episodes? Tune in to one of the host's **HANDPICKED FAVORITES**.

EVEN AT 94 YEARS OLD, John Lienhard's sharp and curious mind remains focused on the future. So it's no surprise that he balked at picking his top five episodes. He's known to say his favorite episode is the one he hasn't written yet.

It's a Herculean task whittling down 3,000-plus episodes that cover everything from the existential to the most practical of inventions. Here are a few more recent episodes Lienhard recommends to new "Engines" listeners, plus a bonus episode from the vault.

EPISODE NO. 3223: "READING AND LISTENING" Discover the magic of Lienhard doing what he does best through the power of the written and spoken word. He explores the difference between reading and listening, the surprising science behind word absorption, and how simplicity — not complexity — is key to effective communication.

EPISODE NO. 3143: "HIDDEN REALITY" Lienhard grapples with the idea of reality and whether there are realities we can never know because, as physicists argue, "these realities don't really exist until we cause them to be by observing them."

EPISODE NO. 3135: "FUJITA IN BROOKINGS" Hear the story of Japanese naval flight officer Nobuo Fujita, who dropped bombs over Brookings, Oregon, during World War II, and his reckoning with that small community many years later.

EPISODE NO. 3259: "A TREASON TO YIELD" What happens when imagination meets hard truth? Lienhard tells the story of a hopeful inventor in early America whose bold desalination idea ran aground. It's a reflection on failure, persistence and why yielding to reason too soon can feel like a betrayal of the inventive spirit.

EPISODE NO. 1861: "MUSIC FOR A WHILE" This special hour-long orchestrated piece, aired in 2023, sings the praises of music's role in our lives, examining how it can bring a sense of calm to our fast-paced world and offer deeper insights into our experiences.

VAULT TRACK — EPISODE 1: "OLIVER EVANS" The first "Engines" episode, which aired on Jan. 4, 1988, started with bang, exploring the connection between guns and steam engines and how American steam-engine builder Oliver Evans used that knowledge to forever change modern industry. This topic has so captivated Lienhard, he's returned to it twice more over the course of the show.

Scan the QR code to find these and every other episode of "Engines of Our Ingenuity."



ACT OF SERVICE
"There's not one single thing that is more appropriate for [public radio's] core mission of public education than 'Engines of Our Ingenuity,'" says producer Paul Pendergraft.

He also received the 1991 Portrait Division Award from the American Women in Radio and Television and the 1998 American Society of Mechanical Engineers Engineer-Historian Award. He was also named one of the five finalists from among 1,300 entrants in the 1993 New York Festival International Radio Competition.

Lienhard has written upward of 2,500 radio scripts for the series, each one more intriguing than the next, telling the story of engineering and creativity and how they form our culture. Every audio and transcript — plus lots of supporting documentation and data — lives at the UH Library Special Collections.

As for the program's radio future, Pendergraft reflects on its long-standing success, reinforcing public radio's role as an essential platform for lifelong learning.

"There's not one single thing that is more appropriate for its core mission of public education than 'Engines of Our Ingenuity.' It is a four-minute godsend to the core mission of public broadcasting," Pendergraft says.

GENTLEMEN, START YOUR ENGINES

Rarely does anyone reach the pinnacle of both engineering and storytelling, but Lienhard has stood at the very top for decades. Both his undeniable engineering brilliance and his storytelling talent were shaped and refined from an early age.

"I got into engineering because I was seriously dyslexic," Lienhard says, recalling his early days in Minnesota when his parents would read to him, opening up a new world for the child.

"It was good stuff. They were reading Dickens and Melville and Chesterton," Lienhard says. "I was raised with the maxims of writing ringing in my ears. I could barely read and write, but I could make pictures in my mind. So that was the way I managed to learn anything I learned — it was sight and sound."

Through the hours he spent listening to his parents read, he became a symphony of ancestral talents, an amalgam of the Lienhards who came before him. His mother, a singer in early radio, and his father, a newspaper reporter and photographer (once a science editor), revealed their talents to him, and he lapped them up. As the years laid out in front of him, Lienhard would travel through the arts, with stints as both a singer and stage actor.

But he could not know that listening to his parents' storytelling would lead him to become a world-class engineer or one of the nation's great radio writers and storytellers.

A LIENHARD HIGHLIGHT REEL

Though his radio success might seem to eclipse other of Lienhard's accomplishments, it most assuredly does not.

In 1964, he was the first to use thermodynamics, the study of heat and energy, to predict how much rainwater flows out of a watershed and into rivers and streams. He soon realized that similar mathematical and physical models could describe how things like money, jobs and resources move through society.

"We developed that whole thing a lot further and predicted things like wage distribution," Lienhard says. "We showed that with all of the standard distributions, you can actually form physical models behind them."

This work has been called groundbreaking because it showed that the same mathematical principles that govern nature could help explain economic and social inequalities, helping shape modern methods for predicting income gaps, poverty trends and resource distribution.

In 1981, he quite literally wrote the



PRODUCTION PARTNERS Richard Armstrong, associate professor of classical studies in the Honors College at UH, is a longtime Lienhard collaborator, having written and produced more than 46 "Engines" episodes.

book on heat transfer, "The Heat Transfer Textbook," in which he discusses managing heat in power plants, where engineers must efficiently transfer heat away from engines or turbines to prevent overheating and improve energy efficiency. Though in true Lienhard everyman style, he also explains all the thermal action behind a glass of iced tea.

Since its initial publication, it has been used in engineering courses worldwide and is currently in its sixth edition, solidifying its place — and his — in scholastic history.

As points of family pride, Lienhard's son John, an MIT professor of engineering, made contributions to all editions, signing on as coauthor to manage the first free typeset version, the third edition. His son Andrew, a software developer, composed the music in the background of every episode of "Engines of Our Ingenuity," communicating his thoughts lyrically. And his loving wife of 65 years, Carol, who died in 2024, "critically read almost every episode with a fine ear for what will work and what will not."



LIFELONG LEARNER
In addition to his innumerable other accomplishments and skills, Lienhard has been an avid amateur photographer since childhood.

DEVELOPING A LOVE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

In his early days, Lienhard had to find creative ways to learn. "Everything I did had to be a visual workaround. I didn't do decently in any K–12 course until my senior year in high school," he says. "Then I took drafting and was hypnotized by it — finished all three years of the course in one. That led me into engineering, which was, for me, always a visual sport."

A visual sport not unlike photography — another Lienhard talent that should come as no surprise. He has been tinkering with cameras since elementary school, when he attempted making pinhole cameras following a diagram published in 1925.

It was a natural fit for someone who painted pictures in his mind as his parents read to him years earlier.

Nowadays, you can find Lienhard's photography online, where you'll get a peek inside what revs Lienhard's own engine: sports, travel, nature, music and UH football.

THE IMPACT OF 'ENGINES'

As the show's popularity grew, Lienhard understood the importance of his audience.

"He knew there were going to be scientists and astronauts and heart surgeons and real academics hearing every word he said, so not only did he have to be interesting but he also had to be dead solid right," Pendergraft says.

He was so right that one astronaut, Dr. Michael Barratt, was inspired to partner with Lienhard and write 20 episodes — one while on board a space shuttle.

Barratt's episode, No. 2693, begins, "Greetings from the flight deck of the Space Shuttle Discovery, where today we celebrate our ships." Barratt ends the episode with the same awe-inspiring feelings provoked by Lienhard's prose: "So here's to our ships, and to the men and women who build them, from those of us with the tremendous good fortune to sail and fly them."

Barratt is one of 50 guest hosts that have filled Lienhard's slot as writer and narrator, marking a change and new identity for the program. The evolving landscape brings the show into a new era full of possibilities, perhaps like the one Lienhard chronicles in episode 1557: the story of his Swiss great-grandfather, Heinrich Lienhard, who immigrated to the United States on the eve of American industrialization.

That segment begins with, "Today, we watch a new world being formed."

Indeed, this great-grandson now witnesses the emergence of yet another new world, reflecting on the program's enduring legacy. Modest to a fault, he says, "The program is going into better hands than mine."

But then again, change is nothing new to Lienhard. In his book "Inventing Modern: Growing Up With X-Rays, Skyscrapers and Tailfins," he acknowledges: "Change, even rapid and radical change, is oddly invisible; it really does come to us on little cat feet."

One thing that won't change is the way he and his guest contributors sign off on the program, just after they say their name. His tagline — much like the professor himself — is low-key and brilliant: "I'm John Lienhard at the University of Houston, where we're interested in the way inventive minds work."

Mostly his.

A Whole New (Virtual) World



By teaching problem-solving and strategic thinking as well as hard skills, the **DIGITAL MEDIA PROGRAM** at UH prepares students for an ever-evolving technological future.

Story by **SHAWN SHINNEMAN**
Photography by **JEFF LAUTENBERGER** / **UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON**



DIGITAL MEDIA MAVENS Tony Liao, associate professor of digital media and director of the CougAR Lab, helps Abion Stevens, the program's student council president, adjust a VR headset.

ART CREDIT



WHEN IT COMES to innovation, the digital media landscape advances in dog years. The core competencies students learned even a decade ago — say, website design or video editing — now only scratch the surface of what they may be asked to do upon graduation.

Today, students in the digital media program at the University of Houston's Cullen College of Engineering Technology Division are ushering in a new era: creating immersive reality experiences, analyzing user behavior and exploring how artificial intelligence can shape human relationships. With coursework geared to the evolving industry and a variety of hands-on research and experimentation at places like the CougAR Lab, UH students are at the forefront of redefining what it means to work in media.

The digital media program produces not only technical proficiency but also strategic thinking and problem-solving — skills that remain in demand regardless of the evolving tech landscape or the content distribution medium of the day.

"It's a growing field that has to evolve constantly," says Tony Liao, associate professor of digital media at UH. "We prepare our students within digital media to be strategists who can learn and pick up a lot of new media platforms and technologies. That's our overarching vision, because if you teach somebody one software or platform, it could be gone in five years."

A MAJOR MEDIA MILESTONE

Liao's interest in digital media started, of all places, at "The Oprah Winfrey Show."

He was a middle schooler in an Ohio community that had just suffered a tragedy. A girl getting off a school bus had gotten her coat string caught in the bus door. The driver didn't notice, drove off and dragged the girl to her death.

In the face of the incident, Liao and a few of his fellow eighth graders created a plan to replace the door linings with bristles, allowing strings, straps and other small items to easily pass through the gap in the door, reducing the chance of a student getting caught. The team received a $25,000 grant from the National Science Foundation and a trip to Chicago to see Oprah.

In Liao's recollection, coverage of young people at that time (not long after the school shooting at Columbine High School) was not particularly flattering. Oprah was interested in spotlighting some positive efforts among youth.

"I'm 15, and I'm speaking to probably the largest audience I will ever speak to in my life," Liao recalls. Backstage, a producer bluntly told the students to "be inspiring,"

The CougAR Lab approaches immersive technologies from a social science lens. The lab aims to better understand how people are using these technologies, how they impact people's perceptions of place, and how discussion around AR and VR may shape further development.



because they were about to be broadcast to 150 countries in 27 languages.

"I was like, 'Oh my God, this is a lot of pressure.'"

The experience stuck with Liao, who decided around that time to pursue a career in media. He went to the University of Southern California for his bachelor's degree, then got a master's and a doctorate in communication from Cornell University, where he studied the impact that iPhones were having on society's relationship to space and place. He taught at Temple University in Philadelphia and the University of Cincinnati before reaching UH in 2021.

"I had that seminal moment of experiencing big, mass media," he says. "Later on, I decided I wanted to study the delivery mechanisms, the phones and now the emerging visual side of media. I got really fascinated."

WHERE TECHNOLOGY MEETS SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

By its nature, digital media is always evolving, and our individual relationships change with it in the process. That has become a key area of Liao's studies: aiming to understand how new technologies change how human beings interact, live and establish relationships.

Humans generally form associations in three buckets: personal relationships *(I know this person)*, stranger relationships *(I don't know this person)*, and parasocial relationships *(I may recognize this person or know their name, but I don't really know them)*.

Liao's team found that something as seemingly innocuous as the app Foursquare, where people "checked in" at various physical locations, could reveal new truths about the arrangement of society in the iPhone age. People were now getting parasocial relationships in the digital world. They may never know the people they see at their daily Starbucks, but they're checking a social box by interacting with them digitally.

"That was an interesting thing, that technology could sort of off-load some of

our social needs and interactions through this phone," Liao says.

Of course, in 2025, studying the societal impact of the iPhone is no longer considered novel. Over time, Liao has begun to center his attention on emerging technologies that remain ripe for deeper examination: virtual and augmented reality.

THE ONGOING EVOLUTION OF IMMERSIVE REALITY

Five years ago, when Liao was discussing his new role at UH, he had a request. He wanted to create his own AR/VR lab. A decade prior, doing so would've cost a fortune. But the level of computing, sensors and scanning had risen in capacity and plummeted in cost.

"It was like, 'Hey, we're at this point where it's not millions of dollars anymore,'" he says. "'It's doable, the technology is getting good enough.'"

By 2022, the CougAR Lab was born, approaching immersive technologies from a social science lens. The lab aims to better understand how people are using these technologies, how they impact people's perceptions of place, and how discussion around AR and VR may shape further development.

Already, Liao and his students have done some important and interesting work. One example: The lab has been working with a surgeon who operates on spinal cords. After you receive a spinal cord implant, part of the recovery involves standing atop a board, moving left or right on command. It's a tedious experience. But Liao's research assistants have been designing custom VR games that sync up with the floorboard movements to gamify the rehab.

Another: Working with the College of Education, the lab is designing software that helps teachers more seamlessly lay out their classrooms, which is a core competency for elementary school teachers in the program. Classrooms are traditionally drawn out on a piece of paper, but the lab's VR technology allows teachers to check their work by stepping into the classroom virtually to better understand if the layout works — if tables are appropriately spaced and angles to monitors are conducive to learning.

One more: The lab's VR pet study is exploring how humans wearing VR headsets interact with virtual canine or feline companions. Researchers at UH and beyond continue to try to better understand the effect that a 360-degree, spatial experience may have on the emotional, the physical and the attitudinal.

Even when our objective brains know what we're seeing isn't real, visual cues are powerful, and immersive reality experiences appear to have the capacity to create a stronger emotional response than something in 2D. Human beings in a VR environment in which they could conceivably walk off the top of a virtual building experience fear, for instance. And an experience with a pet or another virtual human may produce empathy or connection, even when the other "living thing" is actually AI.

"We're at this point now where we're like, 'OK, VR has an effect,'" Liao says. "It has a greater effect, in some ways, than [traditional] media because of these unique possibilities. Some of that is interactivity. Some of it is embodiment. Some of it just being able to see new and weird things you couldn't otherwise. Some of it is presence — the more immersed you are in it, the more real it feels."

PREPPING STUDENTS FOR AN EVOLVING INDUSTRY

Of course, AR and VR are two of several exciting technologies that students are exploring inside the digital media program.

Abion Stevens, the program's student council president, has given a variety of these technologies a portion of her studies. She started out at UH wanting to explore a career as a software engineer, but she soon decided she preferred something more creative, and she liked the idea of using technology to that end. She also has a wide range of interests that include modern languages and education, and she's interested in merging these areas with her digital media background.

"A digital media student is not necessarily a specialist, but they can do more than a specialist can ever accomplish," Stevens says. "Our leg up is that we can do graphic design as well as manage your project. Let's say I'm applying to do some app development. I can be your user experience

Is This Real Life?

Truly immersive VR experiences can induce stronger emotional responses than traditional 2D media (even when we know what we're seeing is virtual) through the use of concepts such as interactivity, embodiment, novelty and presence.





THE LONG VIEW
The digital media program at UH prepares students like Joshua Ovalle for an evolving technological landscape with future-proof skills such as adaptability, problem-solving and strategic thinking.



Technology continues to disrupt how things get done, how people learn and interact, how messages are delivered. But students trained to be problem-solvers and strategists can adapt to the tech of the day.

researcher to tell you what works and what doesn't work, or I can do some form of data analytics and collect data. … We can bring more to a job or organization than just the specific skill they might have been searching for."

That's of particular use, considering the fast pace of change across these kinds of jobs. Technology continues to disrupt how things get done, how people learn and interact, how messages are delivered. But students trained to be problem-solvers and strategists can adapt to the tech of the day.

Liao prioritizes that kind of high-level thinking as the program's coordinator, a role he took on last year. Students learn how to do graphics, explore user experience, design websites and apps. They may take courses on social media, digital marketing and content creation. There's a new esports lab that has quickly become popular.

But the training doesn't just focus on the capabilities. "You actually have to understand the back-end psychology," Liao says. "UX is actually one of our biggest growing fields, because so many people are now asking for digital media students to have technical expertise and some design aesthetic expertise. It takes both."

WHERE DIGITAL MEDIA GOES FROM HERE

No one can predict the future, but if the last decade is any indication, more and more students are going to enter digital media. The program had around 300 students 10 years ago, Liao says, and today boasts more than 500.

What they'll be learning three, five or 10 years from now is anyone's guess. Liao sees AR and VR becoming a larger part of our daily lives going forward, as evidenced by the hefty investments from some of the largest tech companies in the world. Those companies are trying to find the right middle ground, Liao says, between functionality and fashion.

But disruption is just about the only constant in digital media, and some of the innovations of the next decade may still be sitting outside the public view. Liao and other professors in UH's digital media program are trying to ensure their graduates will be well-equipped to react when those innovations appear.

For Stevens' part, she's considering going to graduate school. She's been working an internship with Baylor College of Medicine's Center for Teaching and eLearning that merges her interests in technology, education and design.

Her exact career path is still coming into focus, but that's as much a function of her wide-ranging ambitions as anything. Her experience in digital media has taught her that there are many ways to approach a given project — and, for that matter, a given career.

"It's kind of like you have a lot of candy in front of you, and someone tells you to choose one, but all of them are your favorites," she says. "It's going to take you a while to decide what you actually want."

VOICES



The Librarian

***CHRISTINA GOLA**, interim dean of libraries, is "reimagining" the role of libraries on the UH campus and beyond because they are more important than ever.*

*Story by **CHRISTINA GOLA***
*As told to **STACI PARKS***
*Photography by **JOSEPH BUI** / **UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON***



As the interim dean of the University of Houston Libraries, Christina Gola oversees about 125 employees, approximately 35% of whom are professional librarians. A respected leader and mentor, the third-generation librarian is a past Texas Library Association president.

Previously, Gola served as the associate dean for Organizational Development, Learning & Talent, where she built an understanding of her staff's areas of expertise and needs, and how practices and policies can be adjusted to increase success aligned with the University's mission.

Since stepping into the interim dean role in February 2024, Gola has used her professional and institutional knowledge to spearhead crucial library initiatives that revamp how UH students, staff and faculty interact with the University's libraries.

GROWING UP, I didn't always aspire to be a librarian. But I always wanted to be part of a community committed to building a greater society. Higher education allows you to do just that.

Librarians and libraries are a vital part of my family's lineage, starting with my grandfather, an academic librarian who served as a dean at Saint Louis University. Then, my mother, who retired as director of the MD Anderson Cancer Center Research Medical Library.

As a native Houstonian, this city and the University hold a special place in my heart. UH was in my orbit as a student at St. Agnes Academy, whether it was using the library for research papers, attending sports camps or participating in Model United Nations conferences.

I wanted to explore different places and make a name for myself outside of Houston. As an undergraduate at Texas A&M University, I studied political science, intentions set on law school and a career in government policy and constitutional law.

But, through my studies, I realized that research endeavors interested me more than anything else. I decided to pursue a graduate degree in library and information science at the University of North Texas and never looked back.

In 2009, beloved former dean of

FAMILY PHOTOS: COURTESY OF CHRISTINA GOLA

> **People love the public good the libraries provide. But we have to help our friends understand the libraries' current challenges and our role in society."**

LITERARY LINEAGE

Gola's grandfather, James V. Jones, and mother, Kathryn J. Hoffman, at an American Library Association Conference in 1973 (inset left). An infant Gola joins her mother in the library (below).

libraries Dana Rooks, whom I met through the Texas Library Association, recruited me back to Houston. Renu Khator had just stepped into her role as president of the University, and UH was on its way to becoming a Tier One public research institution. I wanted to be part of that trajectory.

Leading Into a New Era

As interim dean, my focus has been positioning UH Libraries to advance University goals and values through identifying and building partnerships across campus that keep us on track, ensuring we're providing material that meets faculty research priorities and student needs.

Another focus area has been strategically leveraging and managing the library budget and resources. UH Libraries do a lot of fundraising and "friend"-raising. People love the public good that libraries provide. But we have to help our friends understand the libraries' current challenges and our role in society. We do more than just provide collections of information.

Every day, librarians are fighting for access to information on international, national and local levels. Of course, there are trade-offs of the commodification of information: Faculty publish in journals that profit from their information, yet promotion and tenure processes are wrapped up in publication. While there are some really good components, there's also reduced access to information. Libraries are tasked with creating infrastructures and influencing policies that make information available to the public good.

A 'Reimagined' Library System

Libraries must evolve with the world. Research and the direction it's going is interdisciplinary, and libraries are the interdisciplinary connectors, as they aren't beholden to a single discipline. This one of the factors that inspired our "Reimagined Libraries" vision.

We're looking at how we can inspire and enable students and faculty from across disciplines to engage together, including transforming and modernizing our spaces and services across all of our libraries. Recently, we hit an important milestone in completing a feasibility study of the MD Anderson Library building, which is more than 400,000 square feet. This huge endeavor took more than a year and a half to complete, but it's given us a master plan for how to reimagine these spaces and the length of time it may take.

We're also conducting an assessment of how our print materials are being used and how they can be reshelved to help with access and collaboration. These "reimagined" spaces and services would create that nexus of intellectual engagement we want to build.



We're already doing this with the Digital Humanities Core facility, as defined by the Division of Research. It's a partnership between the libraries and the Hewlett Packard Enterprise Data Science Institute that's meant to encourage student and faculty researchers to engage in cross-disciplinary collaboration. It is a core facility that exists without a physical space. We want to build a space so it has a physical footprint, raising awareness about how others can engage in this work. Imagine if this space was located next to where graduate students study; that kind of visibility would attract students and faculty who don't come into the library currently.

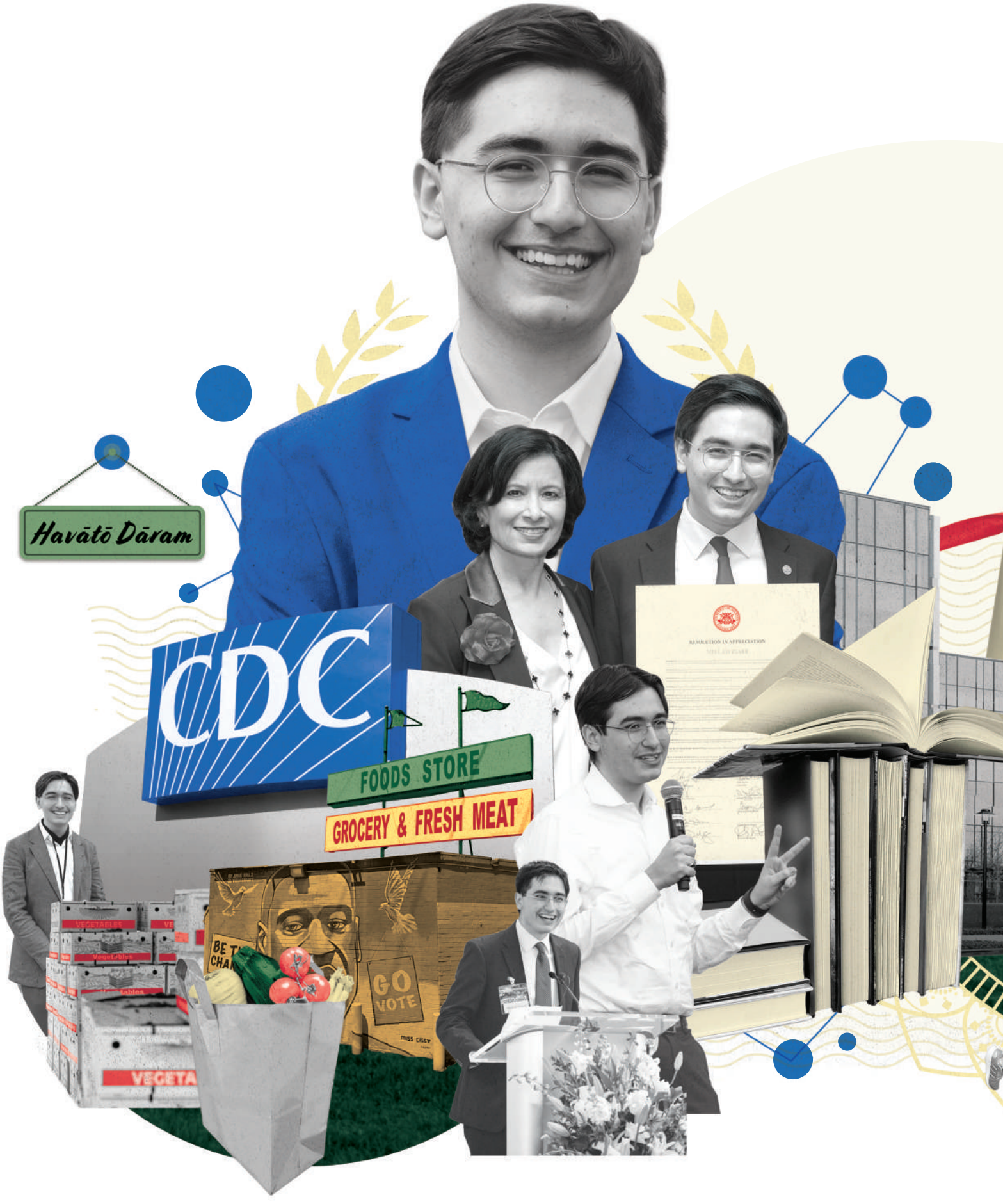
Information Literacy Delivered Peer to Peer

There are activities happening on campus all the time — during the day, after regular work hours and on the weekends — long beyond our librarians' reach. Our new peer mentor program, still in its pilot year, is one way we're able to expand that reach.

A teaching and learning librarian works with student mentors on strategies to help their peers with topics such as finding information, deciphering source accuracy and trustworthiness, and understanding when to use library resources versus other sources.

All of these skills are so critical today when we have such an onslaught of information.

As UH Libraries move forward, our staff is listening to our students and faculty, engaging in national conversations about higher education trends, and forging partnerships with other universities as well as here on campus. This work ensures that our programs and services align with the University's goals, while positioning us as an interdisciplinary connector on campus — the bridge across all of those trends and needs of different disciplines.


Havātō Dāram
CDC
FOODS STORE
GROCERY & FRESH MEAT
GO VOTE
RESOLUTION IN APPRECIATION

The Public Health Whiz

Story by ***MIELAD ZIAEE***
As told to ***SHAWN SHINNEMAN***
Illustration by ***HEATHER COBB*** */*
UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

Psychology major ***MIELAD ZIAEE****, one of UH's most promising young scholars, aspires to eliminate health disparities though evidence-based social policy.*



Psychology senior Mielad Ziaee is one of the most impressive and promising young scholars in University of Houston history, having already presented his work at institutions such as Harvard University, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, and the Kennedy Krieger Institute. Ziaee, the son of Iranian immigrants and a first-generation college student, focuses his research efforts on food insecurity issues and erasing health disparities in UH's neighboring Third Ward.

In addition to the Harry S. Truman Scholarship, the Phi Beta Kappa Key Into Public Service award and a variety of other notable honors, Ziaee recently earned the prestigious Marshall Scholarship — and he's only the third UH student in history to do so. Presented to just a handful of recipients, the scholarship provides students in the United States opportunities to study at noted institutions of higher learning across the United Kingdom.

I'VE COME TO REALIZE that health care is much more than a doctor's visit, much more than treating physical symptoms. It's

not just biological; it's social. I attribute that perspective in part to my experience as the child of immigrants.

Growing up, I saw the challenges my parents faced navigating the American health care system. They struggled to decide when it was worth it to see a doctor, considering the distances they often had to travel to find an in-network doctor who was also equipped to handle the language barrier.

Somewhere along the way, it dawned on me that their experiences were not uncommon. I started asking why, saying yes to a range of academic opportunities to find answers, and eventually landed at a core belief: Health care is much more than physical or even mental well-being. It's a combination of financial factors, economic factors and access.

So, although I'm a premed student set to graduate this year, I have my career sights set on making an impact at a community level.

My research on Houston's Third Ward explored and expanded that interest. I started with two simple questions: What does the community need, and how can I best make an impact? Food insecurity is a significant challenge for residents in this area, and at first, I thought a data-based approach could help predict areas of food insecurity.

When we engaged in the work and talked with community leaders, it became clear that there was a gap in much of the literature and research around food insecurity. The problem in Third Ward was not a lack of food. It was that food resources weren't being fully utilized.

Our conclusion — which we were lucky enough to present to the American Public Health Association conference, the largest public health conference in the United States — was that efforts to reduce food insecurity could only succeed alongside cultural and educational work.

The public health nerd inside me was thrilled to present these findings in Atlanta, home of the Centers for Disease Control, alongside so many (mostly older) peers. But it was also important to me that we developed policy recommendations to that end, aimed at supporting nutrition and health at the community level, as so many of these very smart research projects don't result in real change.

All in all, that research is a big reason why I've become so interested in leadership and community-based efforts. Academic work and social change, it turns out, are one and the same.

I'm thrilled that I'll get to continue exploring these overlapping arenas next year as a Marshall Scholar, a program funded by the British government that places a handful of U.S. students at British institutions. I'll pursue a Master of Public Health at the University of Edinburgh before heading to the London School of Economics for studies in the areas of health and international development.

Of course, I intend for med school to be in my future as well. I'd like to help bring innovative new policies to American health care that are backed by data science. How can we better identify at-risk populations? How can we better serve those populations? How can we track our interventions and ensure they're creating real impact?

> **"I hope my story inspires other young people to pursue ambitious goals, to go to med school, to explore leadership roles — regardless of their background. We can't understand the needs of people if we don't interact with them, so meaningful representation is essential."**

Answering these questions requires firsthand experience with patients — that's fundamental — but also creativity and a willingness to rethink some established ways of operating. As one example I took from my genomics work as a National Institutes of Health All of Us Research Scholars Program scholar, the genetic databases driving research and development in the U.S. are not necessarily representative of the diversity within the American population. That must change, but the solution is multifaceted. It involves outreach. It involves policy. It involves community education.

And then there are the questions we'll have to solve around AI in health care. It can and should be a powerful tool, but realizing its potential will require a few gaps to be bridged, a few leaders who can not only understand the technology side, not only understand how tech can better serve patient needs, but also grasp and help shape effective policy.

As I build my career, I hope my story inspires other young people to pursue ambitious goals, to go to med school, to explore leadership roles — regardless of their background. We can't understand the needs of people if we don't interact with them, so meaningful representation is essential. I take my background as an Iranian, Muslim and Texan with me into every new endeavor.

There's a Farsi phrase I hold dear: havātō dāram. It reminds me who I'm speaking for and to and puts me in a mindset to serve. The literal translation is perhaps especially meaningful to someone pursuing work as a physician: "I have your air."



The Crusader

***DOUGLAS THORNTON**, director of UH's PREMIER Center, breaks down treatment barriers to help the city of Houston battle the opioid epidemic.*

*Story by **DOUGLAS THORNTON***
*As told to **KELSEY KOSH***
*Photography by **JOSEPH BUI** / **UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON***



Reducing Risk

Part of the PREMIER Center's work focuses on distributing one-time use safe disposal kits that deactivate unused and unwanted prescriptions, reducing the risk of misuse. Americans fill hundreds of millions of controlled substance prescriptions every year, so risk mitigation is a critical priority in tackling the opioid epidemic.

As a clinical pharmacist in the University of Houston College of Pharmacy, Associate Professor Douglas Thornton focuses his work on treating opioid use disorder though the effective use of medications and related health care services. As the director of the Prescription Drug Misuse Education and Research (PREMIER) Center, he and his team work to reverse the devastating effects of controlled substance prescription misuse on families, communities and the health care system. It is the first center at UH dedicated to prescription drug misuse research and education.

I GREW UP IN SOUTHERN WEST VIRGINIA during the peak of the prescription side of the opioid crisis. You don't realize what's happening when you are growing up in it. West Virginia was targeted by the pharmaceutical manufacturers, because much of the population works in manual labor, so pharmaceutical companies knew many people in the Appalachian region would be able and willing to take medications to deal with their pain.

I went to pharmacy school at West Virginia University. Both my parents went to pharmacy school; my mom was a pharmacist, and my dad became a physician after he graduated from pharmacy school and medical school.

I did my residency at St. Mary's Medical Center in Huntington, West Virginia. My work wasn't focused on the opioid crisis at the time, but the area was one of the key cities being struck by the heroin side of the opioid epidemic.

I thought I wanted to work in emergency care, so I went to a high-need hospital in the area. One of the things I found was that there were many clinical scenarios in which we knew what to do, but patients weren't doing it, weren't being offered it or weren't accessing it.

When I pointed this out, I was encouraged to pursue a Ph.D. in health services and outcome research. So, I attended a doctorate program through the University of West Virginia at a hospital in Morgantown, West Virginia.

Writing My Own Future

I still didn't want to work in opioids per se. I was more focused on the bigger picture of creating guidelines and recommendations. I told my mentors from pharmacy school, "I don't want to be reading guidelines; I want to be writing guidelines."

> **"The PREMIER Center has made a name for itself locally and nationally. There are comparable centers doing this kind of work in big cities like Los Angeles, Boston and Chicago, but nowhere in the South."**

I applied for, and was accepted into, a National Institutes of Health predoctoral training program. They worked with us as doctoral students to figure out what we were passionate about and what we could speak to. While doing some self-reflecting during my third year, I realized there were a lot of people who were talking about the opioid crisis who had no idea what the problems within it actually are.

I grew up around it; I was trained as a professional working around it. Then I practiced at the front lines of it. It clicked that I should be doing something more. I got to work with several campus and state organizations and realized working in the opioid crisis was my calling.

When I first began my time in academia at the University of Houston, I knew no one, so I started going to community meetings. It was about meeting people where they were and figuring out what the needs of this community really are, because who was I to come in and say that I knew what Houston, or Harris County, or Texas needs? I needed to go hear that firsthand and meet people.

Meeting with some of those organizations, treatment facilities, researchers and clinicians motivated me to think, "OK, I can really build something here."

Another faculty member, Marc Fleming, and I worked on a proposal for the Prescription Drug Misuse Education and Research (PREMIER) Center, which was approved in December 2018. The idea was that instead of us going out and trying to meet other researchers, clinicians and health facilities, we wanted to provide a resource to be leveraged and with which others could collaborate.

Meeting a Need

Fleming took another job in 2019, but the PREMIER Center and I have since gone on to work directly with the City of Houston, Harris County, multiple state agencies and multiple national agencies. The PREMIER Center has really grown and made a name for itself locally and nationally. We now have multiple faculty members in the center doing work for both pain and substance-use disorders, which is our mission statement.

We have been funded through different government agencies to do projects ranging from building interventions for physicians and pharmacists to conducting opioid prevention activities for 800 organizations across Texas. There are comparable centers doing this kind of work in big cities like Los Angeles, Boston and Chicago, but nowhere in the South.

We've done work that has been cited in multiple guidelines. Last year, we received funding from a national foundation to work with several national organizations to write our own guidelines for pharmacists about treating substance-use disorders through pharmacy.

It felt like a good, closing-the-circle moment. I thought back on why I went to grad school: My team and I are writing the guidelines I wanted to write.

Treatment for people with substance-use disorders has become one of the few bipartisan issues that people can get behind in the modern political climate, probably because it has gotten so bad that almost everyone knows someone who has been affected.

The low-hanging fruit right now is removing the financial barriers around access to treatment — things like prior authorizations, copays, and other real and perceived financial risks to patients. As a society, we also spend so much time getting people into treatment, but we aren't maintaining them in treatment.

My hope is that we will find a way. We are a resilient people and a resilient state.

HEALTH HUB
From optometry and nursing to social work, primary care and more, UH students are developing practical and innovative health care skills.

UH's Health Care History

*For nearly a century, the University of Houston has been a leader in **EDUCATING TOMORROW'S HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS**. Here's how UH health programs have evolved over the decades.*

1946

The College of Pharmacy is established on Oct. 16, with an inaugural class of 144 students. The college has since become one of the premier pharmacy programs in Texas.

1952

The College of Optometry — the only public optometry training program in Texas — opens. Today, it is one of only 23 optometry schools in the United States.

1967

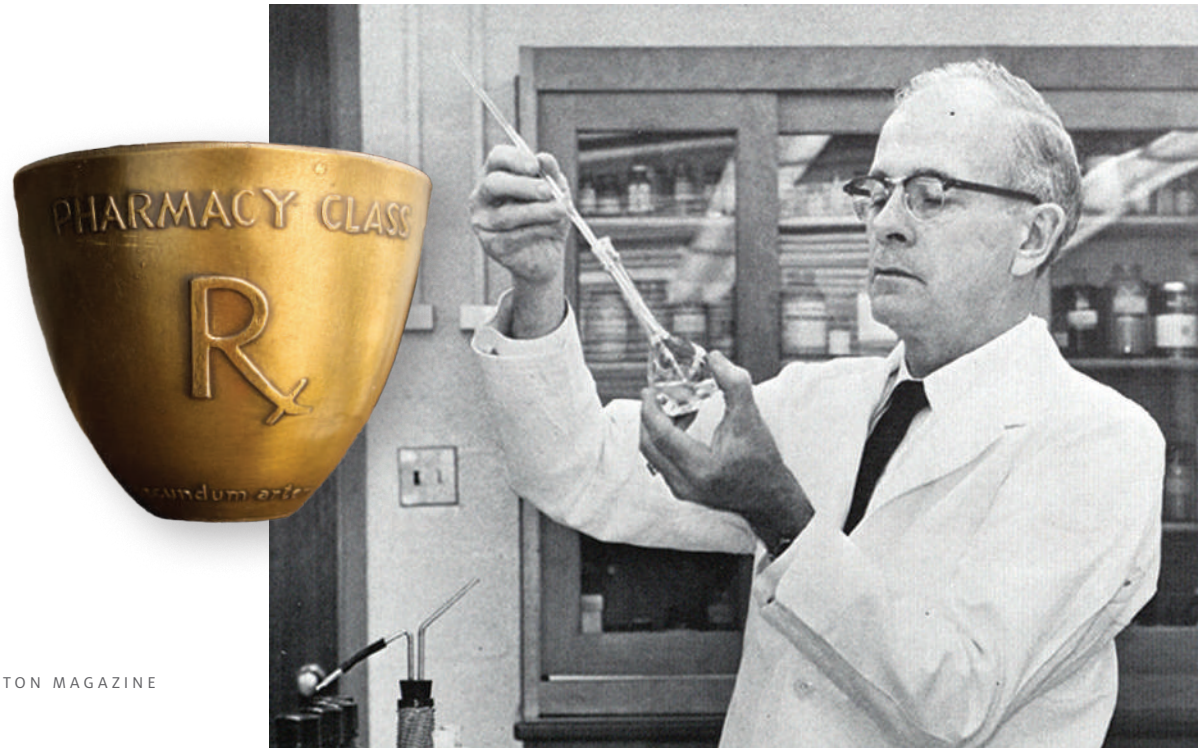
The Graduate College of Social Work is established by the Texas State Legislature with initial funding of $150,000, a founding faculty of seven and an inaugural class of 26.

1980

The College of Pharmacy is named a Texas Medical Center member institution and opens its TMC campus building.

2009

The University of Houston is named a Texas Medical Center member institution.



DECADES IN THE MAKING
Now one of the premier programs in Texas, the UH College of Pharmacy dates back to 1946.





2015

Previously part of the University of Houston-Victoria, the School of Nursing officially becomes a program of the University of Houston.

2017

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board reclassifies the School of Nursing as the College of Nursing, providing opportunities for endowed scholarships, professorships and chairs.

2019

The College of Medicine is founded, enrolling its first class of 30 students the following year.

2022

The College of Medicine is renamed the Tilman J. Fertitta Family College of Medicine. UH launches its Population Health initiative, a first-of-its-kind program to advance health equity in Houston, the state of Texas and beyond through a holistic approach to health and well-being.

2023

The College of Nursing is renamed the Andy & Barbara Gessner College of Nursing in recognition of a $20 million gift to help the college address the nation's nursing shortage.

2024

UH confers its first medical degrees to the inaugural class of medical school graduates.



CUTTING-EDGE CARE Medical students work around an anatomy table in the Tilman J. Fertitta Family College of Medicine.

Drawn to Victory

How one Cougar fan turned devotion into digital poetry.

EVERY GAME. Every win. Every heartbreak. This season, University of Houston alumnus Cory Rodriguez ('18) transformed Cougar basketball into art, one illustration at a time. Armed with nothing but an iPad and a love for his team, Rodriguez captured the season's soul: the grit of game-day battles, the thrill of buzzer-beating wins and the quiet power of a hug between head coach Kelvin Sampson and J'Wan Roberts on Senior Night.

What began as a personal challenge bloomed into digital poetry. Each piece tells a story, a visual chronicle of Houston's historic season, with every detail personal and meaningful.

In one piece, Baylor transfer L.J. Cryer is seen chasing a bear up a tree — a clever nod to his former team, layered with rivalry and redemption. In the illustration capturing UH's emotional victory over Duke, Rodriguez included a powerful tribute to former Cougar standout Reggie Chaney, who passed away in 2023. Hovering just behind Roberts, who is shown blocking a shot by Duke phenom Cooper Flagg, is a haloed Chaney — immortalized as an angel, still backing up his teammates.

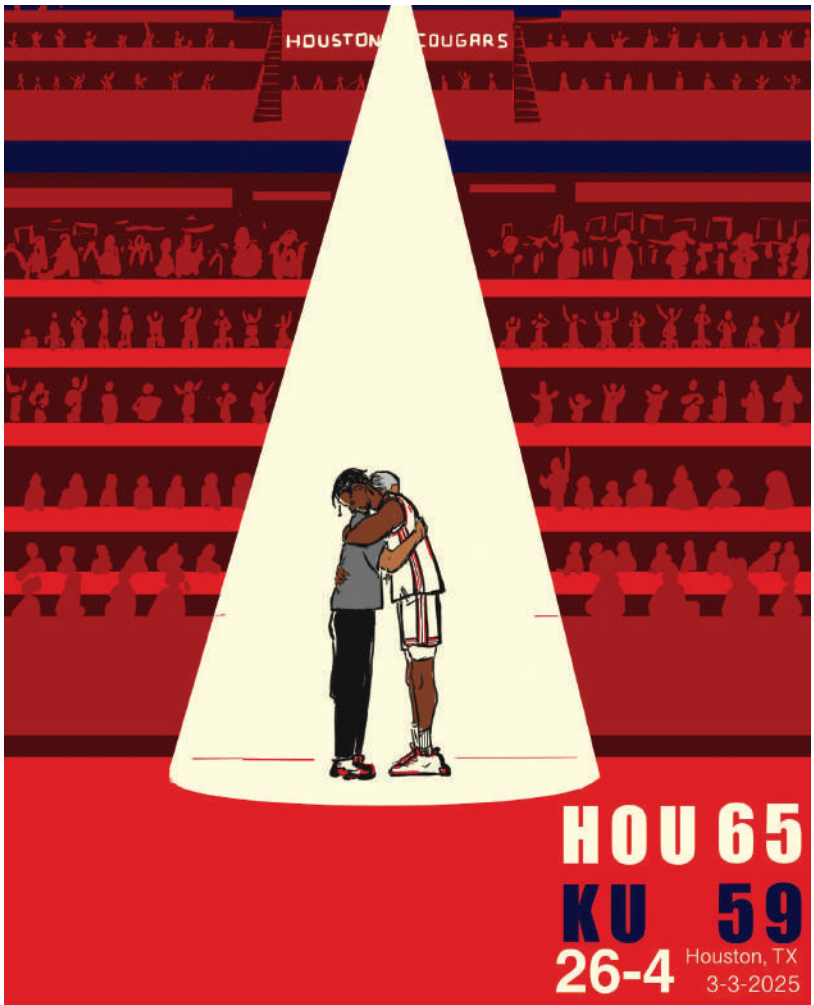
Cougar fans took notice. Rodriguez's artwork has gone viral on social media (he is @leftcory on X), embraced by the UH faithful and shared by players past and present.

"I can't love this enough!!!!!" Chaney's mother, Mikki, commented on Rodriguez's post. "Thank you for continuing to honor my son's memory … I looooove this!"

In their likes, shares and heartfelt replies, Coog Nation has embraced Rodriguez's work, recognizing him not just as a fan, but as a true artist of the game.

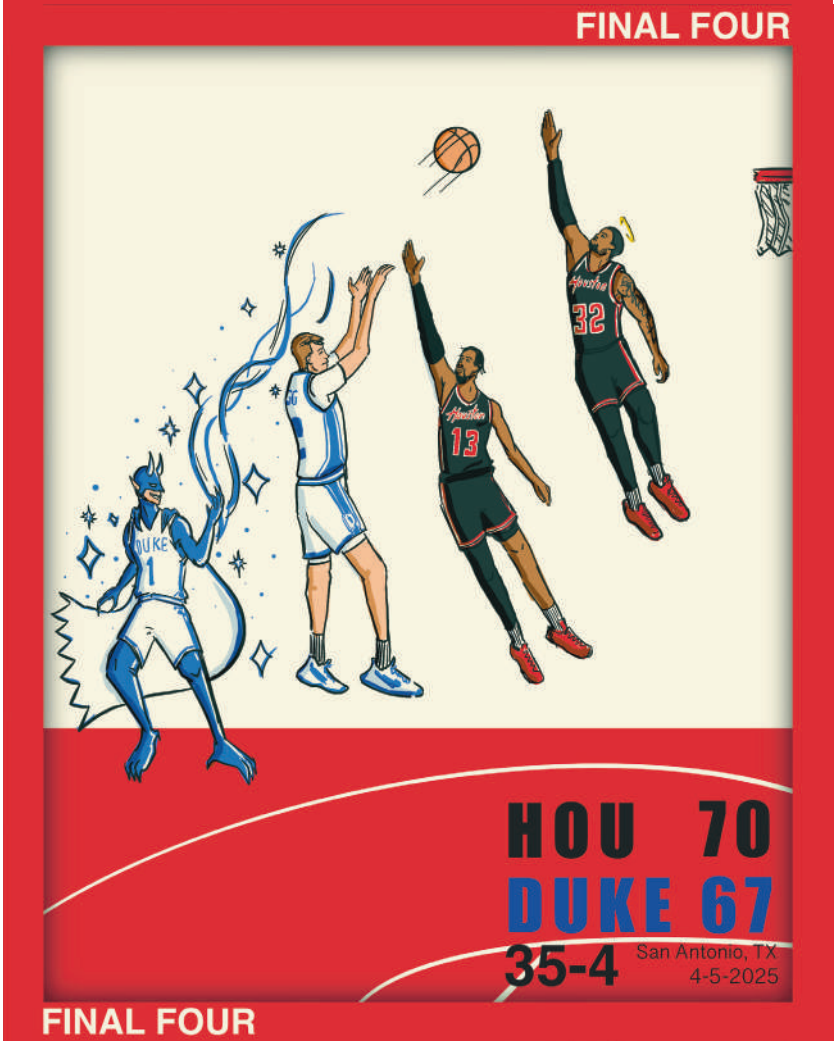






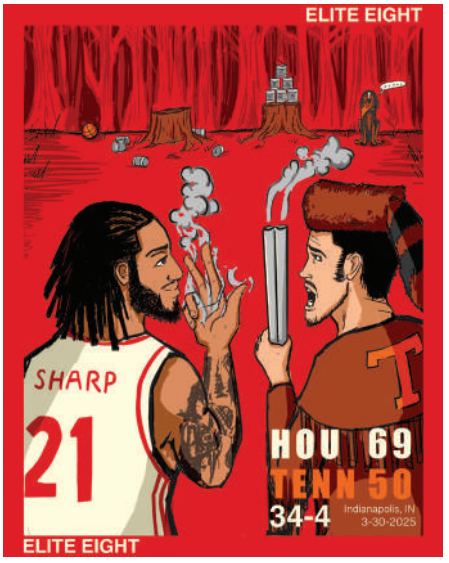
CORY RODRIGUEZ











Scan the QR code to learn more about the stories behind the artwork.

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