

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

# UPSTATE

ALUMNI & FRIENDS MAGAZINE

FALL 2024



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## Message from the Chancellor

The University of South Carolina Upstate is home—home to students from all over the world. And the recent landfall of Hurricane Helene put that home in some peril. The devastation tested us in ways we could not have anticipated. Yet in the face of this adversity, I witnessed something truly remarkable: a community, spanning continents and cultures, coming together with strength, compassion and determination.

Our commitment to being a home for all—no matter where our students, faculty, or staff come from—has never more evident than in the days and weeks following Hurricane Helene. Members of our university from across the globe offered their support in countless ways. Students organized relief efforts, faculty shared their expertise, and staff worked tirelessly to ensure everyone had the resources they needed to recover. It was a testament to the diverse and inclusive family we've built here at USC Upstate.

In this spirit of this global unity, our international outreach has taken on even greater significance. At USC Upstate, we are dedicated to creating a campus that reflects the rich diversity of the world. Our international recruitment efforts continue to grow. We are proud to be a place where students from all corners of the world can come together, learn from one another, and build lifelong connections.

Through partnerships with international universities, innovative exchange programs, and scholarships for students from underrepresented regions, we are broadening our global footprint and offering opportunities for learning and growth to all. These efforts are essential, not only to the academic enrichment of our students, but also to fostering a culture of mutual respect, understanding, and shared humanity.

Even as we continue to expand our global reach, we remain committed to providing a welcoming, supportive environment for all who call USC Upstate home. Despite the physical damage from Hurricane Helene, this campus remains more than just buildings and classrooms. It is a place of belonging—a place where students, faculty, and staff from around the world can feel secure, valued, and empowered to succeed.

I have no doubt the same determination and collective strength that saw us through the storm will propel us forward. Together, we will continue to grow, to welcome new faces, and to foster the sense of community that makes USC Upstate such a special place to live, learn, and work.

Thank you for being a part of our Spartan family. No matter where you come from, you will always have a home here.



Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bennie L. Harris". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Bennie L. Harris, PhD  
Chancellor

## Upstate Magazine

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# Deep Dive

Chancellor Bennie Harris is digging into what makes a good leader on his new podcast, "Below the Line."

In his monthly interviews with top executives, Harris covers industry changes, technology and education through the lens of leadership. The podcast title refers to knowing what's going on beneath the surface of an organization and with its employees, and identifying what's needed to make a project or plan successful.

Harris' guests have included former South Carolina Gov. David Beasley; Tonya Matthews, president and CEO of the International African American Museum in Charleston; Kelli Valade, president and CEO of Denny's; Carol Tomé, CEO of UPS; and Krish Patel '08, entrepreneur and founder of KVP Inc.

The podcast can be found at [uscupstate.edu/below-the-line](http://uscupstate.edu/below-the-line). A modified version of each interview appears in business magazines in Greenville, Charleston and Columbia.

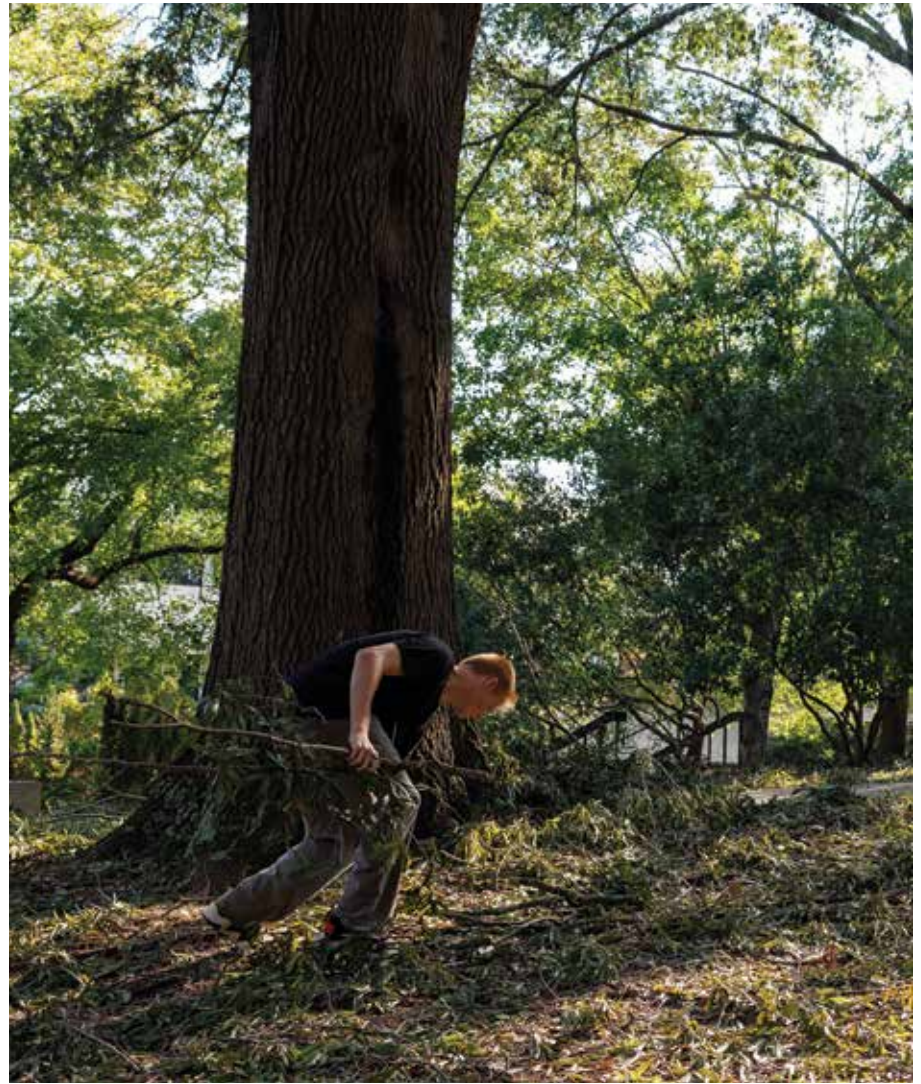


Photo: Charles Carter, a junior from Gadsden, Alabama, pitches in to clean up tree debris on campus left behind by Hurricane Helene.

## Picking Up the Pieces

**O**n Sept. 27, Hurricane Helene tore through the Carolinas, leaving almost the entire Upstate region without power and causing catastrophic damage to homes and businesses. Apart from losing power, the USC Upstate campus mostly was spared major damage. However, fallen trees and debris created hazards on roads and walkways.

The Spartan community quickly came together in Helene's aftermath, even while many were coping with devastating personal losses. Upstate facilities and maintenance crews immediately began clearing tree debris from streets to provide access for emergency vehicles and power trucks. Working without power, housing and food service staff fed and cared for students unable to leave campus. The G. B. Hodge Center became a Spartanburg County medical shelter for residents needing power for their medical devices. Faculty, staff and students also volunteered for relief efforts to feed and deliver supplies to hard-hit western North Carolina.



# Can-Do Spirit

**A**bite from spider gave Peter Parker his special powers. For a group of children with disabilities, all it took was some strokes of Dorrell Howard's pen.

Howard, a USC Upstate freshman, is the illustrator of "The Can-Do Kids," a book by local writer and educator Jennifer Cole about some children whose disabilities are transformed into superpowers. The characters are based on kids Cole has worked with and on her own experiences growing up with ADHD.

Cole selected Howard for the project while he was a senior at Wade Hampton High School and studying at the Fine Arts Center of Greenville. He loved the idea of using his talents to promote inclusion and to celebrate children's differences.

"I want better for not only the next generation, but for people who aren't aware of people with disabilities," Howard says. "I think we oftentimes numb ourselves to things we don't know too much about."

To decide what each child's superpower would be, Howard and Cole

looked at their unique traits or interests. Trevor, for example, uses adaptive equipment to get around, so Howard envisioned him as a kind of Iron Man, with mechanical powers.

One character is especially personal for Howard. Maiyah, who has autism and is nonverbal, is Howard's older sister. Howard says she loves dolls, so he gave her the power to control dolls to assist her during her journeys.

The response to "The Can-Do Kids" has been overwhelmingly positive, Howard says. He has joined Cole to promote the book at Barnes & Noble in Greenville, the Carolinas International Book Fair and the Disability Expo, among other events. Each time, he's met families who are touched by the story.

"I would see adults cry from looking at the illustrations and really feeling emotion about kids with disabilities being presented as superheroes rather than isolated," he says. "It impacted me a lot, plus I get to elevate Maiyah."

A second book is already in the works, dedicated to the memory of Jordan, who used sign language to communicate. Her power is the ability

to transfer her signing skills to hearing children so they can communicate with people with hearing loss.

Howard has tucked hidden references to Jordan's life into the illustrations, including appearances by her grandmother, who was her caretaker. "As an illustrator who never got the opportunity to meet her, I'm almost building a bridge between my life and her and her family's life," he says.

An art education major at Upstate, Howard looks forward to one day inspiring young people to express themselves creatively, just as he was encouraged when he was younger. He was initially forced into art as a way to keep him out of trouble, but his interest grew the more he learned. "I wouldn't have taken it seriously if I didn't have the support I had in my life," he says.

As for what his superpower would be if he could have one? "Telepathy," Howard says. "Helping people who are, say, sad or depressed, because then I can know their mind and what they need and I can provide that."



Photo: Dorrell Howard, second from left, and author Jennifer Cole, left, greet families during a book signing event at Barnes & Noble in Greenville.



Photo Credit: Mills Fitzner Photography

## A Whole New Ballgame

**J**ulian Rip '21, M.S. '23, played baseball most of his life, including on the Netherlands national team. But in his new career with the Atlanta Braves, Rip isn't on the field. Instead, he's helping prospects in the minor leagues perform at the top of their game.

Rip, a strength and conditioning coach for the Braves, oversees 30 to 40 athletes in their High-A team, creating their programming, recovery and training regimens. He travels with the team and gets them warmed up before games, and ensures they follow recovery procedures after.

It's a big responsibility, since these are players the Braves have made an investment in. But Rip enjoys helping people achieve their goals. "I had a guy who started with me who's now a regular in the Major League," he says. "Just to assist him in his process and make his career dream come true, that makes me like the job I do."

Although Rip himself once dreamed of playing professionally in the United States, he found himself at a crossroads after college. He missed the MLB draft cut due to a smaller post-COVID pool, and had just helped his Netherlands team win two European Baseball Championships. His team also finished in the top 10 at the World Baseball Championships. It seemed like a good time to go out on a high

note and focus on a different aspect of the sport.

After graduating from USC Upstate with an interdisciplinary studies degree that focused on exercise science and psychology, Rip went on to get a master's in exercise and sport science. During that time, he worked as a graduate assistant in the Spartans weight room, where he was responsible for most of the athletic teams.

That training and his experiences as an athlete have provided him with unique insights into the players he's assisting.

"When I played, I had really good years and really bad years, where I was the best player or the worst player on the team," he says. "Having gone through that for multiple years allows me to understand what the guys are going through and make the needed adjustments in my programming to get them ready for the game."

Rip notes that since these are professional athletes, they're already competing at a high level. "But if you can help a guy get just one percent better, that could be a career-deciding factor," he says. "So having that conversation with them, and helping them out over the next couple of years and seeing them succeed in their career, that's what makes me go to my job every day."

# Find your next favorite recipe at the Ingles Table!

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```
# Women in Technology
class WomenInTech:
    def __init__(self, name, profession, years_of_experience):
        self.name = name
        self.profession = profession
        self.years_of_experience = years_of_experience

    def show_info(self):
        import random
        import math

class SoapBubble:
    def __init__(self, radius):
        self.radius = radius

    def surface_area(self):
        # Surface area of a sphere = 4 * pi * r^2
        return 4 * math.pi * (self.radius ** 2)

    def repr(self):
        return f"SoapBubble(radius={self.radius:.2f}, surface_area={self.surface_area():.2f})"

class BubbleSimulation:
    def __init__(self, num_bubbles, min_radius, max_radius):
        self.num_bubbles = num_bubbles
        self.min_radius = min_radius
        self.max_radius = max_radius
        self.bubbles = []

    def create_random_bubbles(self):
        for _ in range(self.num_bubbles):
            radius = random.uniform(self.min_radius, self.max_radius)
            bubble = SoapBubble(radius)
            self.bubbles.append(bubble)

    def calculate_total_surface_area(self):
        total_surface_area = sum(bubble.surface_area() for bubble in self.bubbles)
        return total_surface_area

    def print_bubble_details(self):
        for bubble in self.bubbles:
            print(bubble)

def run_simulation(num_bubbles=10, min_radius=0.5, max_radius=5.0):
    print("Generating random soap bubbles and calculating surface areas...")

    # Create simulation instance
    simulation = BubbleSimulation(num_bubbles, min_radius, max_radius)

    # Generate random bubbles
    simulation.create_random_bubbles()

    # Print details of each bubble
    simulation.print_bubble_details()

    # Calculate and print total surface area
    total_surface_area = simulation.calculate_total_surface_area()
    print(f"Total surface area of all bubbles: {total_surface_area:.2f} square units")

if __name__ == "__main__":
    run_simulation()

# Additional Bubble Calculations

def average_bubble_size(bubbles):
    total_radius = sum(bubble.radius for bubble in bubbles)
    return total_radius / len(bubbles) if bubbles else 0

def largest_bubble(bubbles):
    if not bubbles:
        return None
    return max(bubbles, key=lambda bubble: bubble.radius)

def smallest_bubble(bubbles):
    if not bubbles:
        return None
    return min(bubbles, key=lambda bubble: bubble.radius)

def run_extended_simulation(num_bubbles=10, min_radius=0.5, max_radius=5.0):
    print("\nRunning extended simulation...\n")

    # Create simulation instance
    simulation = BubbleSimulation(num_bubbles, min_radius, max_radius)

    # Generate random bubbles
    simulation.create_random_bubbles()

    # Calculate statistics
    avg_size = average_bubble_size(simulation.bubbles)
    largest_bubble(simulation.bubbles)
    smallest_bubble(simulation.bubbles)

    print(f"Average bubble radius: {avg_size:.2f} units")
    print(f"Largest bubble: {largest_bubble}")
    print(f"Smallest bubble: {smallest_bubble}")

if __name__ == "__main__":
    # Run both basic and extended simulations
    run_simulation()
    run_extended_simulation()

# Bubble Statistics Over Multiple Simulations

def run_multiple_simulations(num_simulations=5, num_bubbles=10, min_radius=0.5, max_radius=5.0):
    print("Running multiple simulations...")

    for i in range(num_simulations):
        simulation = BubbleSimulation(num_bubbles, min_radius, max_radius)
        simulation.create_random_bubbles()
        simulation.print_bubble_details()

if __name__ == "__main__":
    # Run multiple simulations
    run_multiple_simulations()

# Generating Bubble Data for Visualization (Optional)

import matplotlib.pyplot as plt

def plot_bubble_surface_areas(bubbles):
    fig = plt.figure(figsize=(10, 6))
    scatter = plt.scatter([bubble.radius for bubble in bubbles], [bubble.surface_area() for bubble in bubbles], color='blue', label='Bubble Surface Areas')
    fig.legend()
    fig.grid(True)
    fig.show()

if __name__ == "__main__":
    # Generate and plot bubble data
    simulation = BubbleSimulation(50, 0.5, 5.0)
    simulation.create_random_bubbles()
    plot_bubble_surface_areas(simulation.bubbles)

# Advanced Feature: Custom Bubble Distribution

def create_bubbles_with_custom_distribution(num_bubbles, distribution_function):
    bubbles = []
    for _ in range(num_bubbles):
        radius = distribution_function()
        bubbles.append(SoapBubble(radius))
    return bubbles

def run_custom_distribution_simulation(num_bubbles=10, distribution_function=random.random):
    print("\nRunning simulation with custom distribution...\n")

    bubbles = create_bubbles_with_custom_distribution(num_bubbles, distribution_function)

    # Calculate total surface area
    total_surface_area = sum(bubble.surface_area() for bubble in bubbles)
    print(f"Total surface area with custom distribution: {total_surface_area:.2f} square units")

if __name__ == "__main__":
    # Run custom distribution simulation
    run_custom_distribution_simulation()

if __name__ == "__main__":
    # Run simulation with custom bubble distribution
    run_simulation_with_custom_distribution()

# Adding More Data Processing (Optional)

def process_bubble_data(bubbles):
    # Example of further processing
    total_radius = sum(bubble.radius for bubble in bubbles)
    total_area = sum(bubble.surface_area() for bubble in bubbles)

    print(f"Total radius: {total_radius:.2f}")
    print(f"Total surface area: {total_area:.2f}")

if __name__ == "__main__":
    # Run and process bubble data
    simulation = BubbleSimulation(20, 0.5, 5.0)
    simulation.create_random_bubbles()
    process_bubble_data(simulation.bubbles)

# Handling Edge Cases

def run_simulation_with_error_handling(num_bubbles, min_radius, max_radius):
    # Error handling for invalid inputs
    if min_radius <= 0 or max_radius <= 0:
        raise ValueError("Radii must be positive")

    simulation = BubbleSimulation(num_bubbles, min_radius, max_radius)
    simulation.create_random_bubbles()
    simulation.print_bubble_details()

if __name__ == "__main__":
    # Run simulation with error handling
    run_simulation_with_error_handling(10, 0.5, 5.0)

class Bubbles:
    def __init__(self, num_bubbles, min_radius, max_radius):
        self.num_bubbles = num_bubbles
        self.min_radius = min_radius
        self.max_radius = max_radius
        self.bubbles = []

    def create_random_bubbles(self):
        for _ in range(self.num_bubbles):
            radius = random.uniform(self.min_radius, self.max_radius)
            bubble = SoapBubble(radius)
            self.bubbles.append(bubble)

    def calculate_total_surface_area(self):
        total_surface_area = sum(bubble.surface_area() for bubble in self.bubbles)
        return total_surface_area

    def print_bubble_details(self):
        for bubble in self.bubbles:
            print(bubble)

def run_simulation(num_bubbles=10, min_radius=0.5, max_radius=5.0):
    print("Generating random soap bubbles and calculating surface areas...\n")

    # Create simulation instance
    simulation = Bubbles(num_bubbles, min_radius, max_radius)
    simulation.create_random_bubbles()
    simulation.print_bubble_details()

    # Calculate total surface area
    total_surface_area = simulation.calculate_total_surface_area()
    print(f"Total surface area: {total_surface_area:.2f} square units")

if __name__ == "__main__":
    # Run simulation
    run_simulation()

# Create simulation instance
simulation = BubbleSimulation(num_bubbles,
```



# CRACK THE CODE

## MORE ALUMS AND STUDENTS ARE DISCOVERING THE OPPORTUNITIES IN HIGH-TECH FIELDS.

By Elizabeth Anderson

**S**andra Fujii '23 was 8 years old when she attempted to build a private server for the online games she liked playing.

She didn't yet have the knowledge to be completely successful at it, but she never lost her fascination with computers. Though her dream was to become an artist, it wasn't difficult to switch to something tech-oriented when she realized the job market wasn't great for art majors.

"I went with computers because that was most of my life growing up," she says.

Fujii, a software engineer at American Credit Acceptance, is one of a growing number of USC Upstate women – graduates and students – who are pursuing careers in tech-related fields. Since 2019, the number of Upstate women graduates in computer information systems has tripled, from 6% to 18% in 2024. Women make up 20% of cybersecurity graduates, a program which only graduated its first students two years ago. Overall, the number of female graduates in tech-related majors has risen from 13% to 21% over the last five years.

While the tech industry remains overwhelmingly male – only 35% of the workforce is female, according to the Women in Tech Network – the numbers have improved from the early 2000s, when women were just 9% of the workforce. New opportunities in cybersecurity and AI are attracting more women to the field.

One of those is Wata Kelleh '21, a cybersecurity analyst at Milliken & Co. Cybersecurity wasn't something she knew much about initially. In middle school, she decided to become an engineer after hearing from a female mechanical engineer on a class field trip to BMW.

But when she got to Greenville Technical College, she started rethinking her goal. Given continued advances in mechanization, Kelleh wasn't sure she could count on having a job in the future. Cybersecurity, which she learned about from a family friend, seemed like a much better bet.

"It's going to be something that's always there," she remembers the friend telling her. "People always need their device to be protected. You should look into that."

Kelleh did, and liked what she discovered. "Cybersecurity plays a role in everything, whether you're doing development, whether you're doing networking," she says. "So I love that I chose a field that plays into everything in IT."

Melissa Davis, director of the USC Upstate Cybersecurity Lab and a cybersecurity instructor, says interest in the program has been growing among women. "I think the first year I might have had two to three females between all my classes," says Davis, who started teaching at Upstate in 2018. "I have definitely in the past couple of years seen an increase in the number of females that are in the classes, and we have been able to place a lot of them in jobs." The same holds true for computer science and computer information systems, she adds.



**Wata Kelleh '21**

CYBERSECURITY ANALYST AT MILLIKEN & CO



**Melissa Davis**

DIRECTOR OF THE USC UPSTATE CYBERSECURITY LAB

### **The pathway to tech**

Some Upstate women choose a tech-related major because it aligns with their interests. Havva Dokmeci, a senior who's double majoring in computer science and cybersecurity, became fascinated with cryptography when she took a summer course after her sophomore year of high school.

"I really developed a love for ciphers and keys and hacking," she says. "I was like, this is pretty cool. It's a whole puzzle."

She also discovered she was good at coding and realized she could use that skill to support others in the future. "It's the Gen Z generation rising, and millennials and people who are older just need a lot more help with technology," Dokmeci says.

Other students, such as senior Christal Cain, had never considered a tech major until starting college. Cain transferred to Upstate her sophomore year, and decided to major in cybersecurity after doing some research. "Basically, cybersecurity was me just stepping out of my comfort zone and trying something I never thought about trying," she says.

Cain admits it was "kind of intimidating" at first to be surrounded by students who had learned to code when they were younger. But she has enjoyed learning how to assess cyber threats and system vulnerabilities and how to keep ahead of ever-evolving attacks.

### **Holding their own**

One issue that students and alums say they haven't encountered frequently is gender bias. While some had classes where they were in the minority, few encountered any problems. "It really doesn't bother me, because we're all in here for the same thing," Cain says.

Fiona Hayes, a senior computer science major, was already used to success in a traditionally male-dominated subject when she got to Upstate. She had excelled in math in high school, and carried that confidence with her as she explored computer science in college. Whenever she compared herself to anyone in high school, she says, it was to the "girls that were smarter than me" rather than any of the boys.

Fujii says her main encounters with sexism have been in the online gaming world, where she has experienced the toxic behavior and misogynistic attacks that female gamers report they are regularly subjected to. She learned at a young age to simply ignore the aggression. "Why do I need to really involve myself in having these feuds, especially when it's not only them that look stupid,

it'll make me look really dumb as well," she says.

Caroline Smith '22, an HR technology analyst at Milliken, remembers a class at Upstate where she was the only woman and was a team leader for a semester-long project. Several of the male students were friends and would joke around with each other, and Smith didn't feel she was being heard.

"So at first, until I felt respected, I was very serious, to the point of no jokes, no funny stuff," she recalls. "I hate that that's what women have to go through to have their ideas accepted and be taken seriously, but that was how I handled it."

Still, she says, it was important for her as a student to "keep being loud, keep being opinionated" and not get discouraged by what anyone might say.

### **Mentors matter**

Joey Fowler, senior IT director of technical services at Denny's, received a version of this advice when she was just starting her career. As an African American woman in IT, Fowler says she was fortunate to have had mentors early on who encouraged her to always speak up for herself. She would remember their words whenever she was being overlooked.

"It's the old cliché, where you say something, and the man sitting beside you says the exact same thing," she says. "And now everybody heard it, but they didn't hear it when you said it."

Sometimes that would cause her to second guess herself and wonder if she could have done something differently. It was helpful then to talk to people who could give her their feedback. When Fowler visits Upstate and other colleges now to talk about her career, she advises students to seek out those individuals with whom they feel safe sharing their thoughts.

"Find those people who are going to be honest, not just the people who are going to tell you what you want to hear," she says.

Mentors are also important for career guidance, she adds. Her earliest mentor was an African American businesswoman she reached out to while still a student at Converse University. Fowler offered to do free database work for her to gain some experience in the field, and the woman agreed. The relationship played a critical role in Fowler's professional development.

"I was able to watch her be unapologetically her and be able to garner respect," Fowler says. "She definitely showed me what was possible, probably without her even really knowing it."

### Leading by example

Having women in leadership roles in the workplace and classroom can often make a difference for those looking to enter the field. Davis, the cybersecurity instructor, got her first job when a woman working for the city of Rock Hill took a chance on her and hired her as a network engineer straight out of college. The two later became good friends while serving as managers of different IT divisions.

Davis notes she never felt intimidated about being a woman in tech, even while she was a student. “I grew up as my daddy’s son he never had,” she says. “I worked on cars, I drove wreckers, I sanded vehicles. So I was put out there to learn that if you need to do it, you can do it.”

Still, she says, it can help female students to have a woman as their teacher, especially one who has experience working in the field.

That was the case for Montyia Cheeseboro ‘22, an application service analyst with Milliken & Co. As a student, she was inspired by Davis. “Her career background is everything,” Cheeseboro says. “She is a woman who was in cybersecurity, doing stuff in IT, and everything that she’s accomplished, I know I can and will too, because she already did it.”

### Space for everyone

Some companies are finding innovative ways to foster an inclusive environment. At Milliken, employees can choose to join any number of affinity groups, such as the women’s alliance, veterans alliance, or “new kids on the block” for new hires. Kelleh, who is a member of the women’s alliance, says the group not only provides professional development opportunities but offers mentorship as well. She currently meets monthly with a woman who works in shareholder services.

“What I really like about that is that you’re exposed to a whole bunch of different people in the organization,” she says. “It’s really nice to just be able to network and meet people who I probably wouldn’t come face to face with or even have a chat with on a daily basis.”

The affinity groups also helped Cheeseboro find connections within a very large company. “It forces you to get out of your comfort zone,” she says. In addition to serving on the steering committees for the women’s alliance and new kids on the block, she enjoys attending events held by Merge, the multicultural group. Now when she walks through different divisions, she’s often greeted by people she’s met at group events.

Denny’s, too, has employee resource groups, including a women’s leadership group open to all female employees. Men in leadership positions have served as sponsors of the group, because it’s important for women to see they have support from men, too, Fowler says. The company also is part of the Women’s Foodservice Forum, and sends women to the conference for networking and development opportunities.

### Choosing the right door

While the South Carolina tech industry may be modest compared with that in states such as California and New York, that also means the sexism that has plagued the industry in those states is less of an issue here. State employers need tech workers, Davis notes, so skills matter more than gender.

“There’s such an increase in the number of jobs for cybersecurity or networking or IT that they have to utilize the people who they have at their disposal who are capable of doing the jobs,” she says.

Kelleh says when she speaks on career panels, she reminds young women they don’t have to pretend to be someone they’re not to work in tech. “Be confident, be yourself,” she says. “It sounds cliché, but don’t try to change yourself to fit into an environment.”

Cheeseboro agrees. Her first impulse when she started her job was to be nice but hang back. Then her parents reminded her that people needed to know who she was and remember her good work. After that, she says, she grew more confident talking about the projects she was working on and asking for feedback.

“You don’t have to change who you are to go in certain doors,” she says. “If you have to do that, then maybe that’s not the door you need to go into.”



**Montyia Cheeseboro ‘22**

APPLICATION SERVICE ANALYST AT MILLIKEN & CO



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# A World Away

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS STEP INTO A NEW LIFE FAR FROM HOME.

**W**hen sophomore Supatta Puttavarat arrived at USC Upstate on a golf scholarship, she felt a little overwhelmed. She felt confident about her game, but less certain about her language skills.

"I was like, oh my God, I don't know anything. What did they say?" she recalls thinking.

Fortunately, she had an immediate support network from her teammates, particularly those who had made the same journey from Thailand a few years earlier. Senior Suwarin Yord-in took Puttavarat under her wing, translating unfamiliar words for her when she got stuck. "Now she's way better," Yord-in says proudly of her friend.

USC Upstate is home to 84 international students, undergraduate and graduate, from 25 different countries. While they represent only 1% of the undergraduate student body, they are 10% of Upstate's student athletes, representing the Spartans in basketball, soccer and golf.

Alex Lorenz, director of global engagement at USC Upstate and associate professor of German, says international students bring valuable new perspectives to the classroom, which enhance American students' learning experience. That in turn builds cross-cultural understanding and prepares students for a global workplace.

"This diversity can bolster research, innovation, and international collaborations, which ultimately benefits the institution's academic standing and global reach," Lorenz says.

Students who come to the United States for college enjoy the new adventure, but it's not always an easy adjustment. Negotiating an unfamiliar language is just one of the challenges. For some, such as graduate student Ravichandra Gochipatala, it's figuring out how to secure a lease and get around town without a car. For those coming from an area of conflict, such as Maria Kirienko, it's learning how to tune out the news from back home in order to stay focused.

Then there are the cultural nuances to decipher. Margrét Edda Bjarnadóttir found these particularly baffling. In Iceland, where she's from, people are much more direct in their speech, she says. But in America, that can be interpreted as rudeness. "A lot of things, like how you communicate, how you act, how you behave, those society rules that are not actually written but you just kind of know them – that was pretty hard at first to navigate," she says.

Yet the rewards that come from experiencing the unfamiliar – personal growth, improvement in a second language, potential job opportunities – continue to give students reason to come to USC Upstate to study. Here are a few of their stories.



Photo: Supatta Puttavarat, right, found support from fellow golf teammates Suwarin Yord-In, center, and Prew Nontarux when she arrived at USC Upstate from Thailand.

## Margrét Edda Bjarnadóttir

**B**jarnadóttir, a senior communications major and a forward/midfielder on the women's soccer team, felt a spark of recognition when she arrived in the Upstate from Iceland. Like her hometown of Reykjavik, Upstate cities are small and surrounded by natural beauty. But other things were unfamiliar to her. When people talked about places in America they wanted to visit, or amusement parks they'd gone to as children, she didn't have comparable experiences to share. "We don't even have an amusement park in Iceland," she says.



Being away from family and friends has been one of the hardest adjustments. One of her favorite activities with her friends back home was going to the swimming center after soccer practice. Iceland has a strong pool culture, she notes, and relaxing in the hot tubs with friends after a dip in the cold tubs is not only good for recovery, but also for unwinding at the end of a day.

After graduation, Bjarnadóttir plans to continue playing soccer, and is considering pursuing a master's in Denmark or Iceland. She has loved studying communications, a subject she discovered at Upstate, and feels it helped her become a better communicator as she adjusted to life in the U.S.

“**Even though Icelanders’ second language is English** – or sometimes Danish, because it's mandatory to learn Danish there for a couple of years – it's still different to speak and actually interact face to face with people, instead of just seeing or hearing interviews or videos or TikToks online.”

“**That was the thing that I was most nervous about** – the weather. Because the humidity here is crazy, and in Iceland we don't really have any humidity at all. We barely have the sun. And because we train when it's the hottest outside, I just pray to God that there are some clouds around. But in Iceland, I'm like, where's the sun, where did it go?”

“**I thought it was really strange and really funny** at the same time when people would ask me questions that I thought were basic, like, 'Oh, do you celebrate Christmas?' I'm like, 'Yeah, that's my favorite holiday.' But then it was my mom who told me, well, they don't know anything about Iceland, and maybe it would be disrespectful if they assumed we celebrate Christmas.”

“**I feel like I've experienced a lot of growth** since I've been here, and that is through my teammates, through my coach, through the people that I've met here. But also connecting with the friends that I still have in Iceland and talking to them about my experiences here, about how certain situations have been, and what I can take from them.”

## Supatta Puttanavarat

**P**uttanavarat, a sophomore communications major, was born in Pattaya, a coastal city in eastern Thailand. It's a popular tourist destination, with lots of beaches and hotels – and golf courses. Puttanavarat is one of the many Thai golfers who have come to the U.S. to play for the Spartans, thanks to a partnership between a placement agency in Thailand and Upstate coach Todd Lawton.

The strong lineup of Thai women on Upstate's team through the years has provided every new arrival with a built-in support network. Puttanavarat leaned on those

teammates when she arrived, especially senior Suvarin Yord-in. Yord-in says Puttanavarat addresses her as sister, since in Thai culture it's important to show respect for those who are older than you. And much like an older sister, Yord-in has encouraged her friend to overcome her shyness about speaking English, and helped her feel comfortable in an unfamiliar place. Among Puttanavarat's new experiences: using a fork to eat, which she learned to do by observing a friend.



### **I love watching soccer and volleyball.**

Before I came here, I didn't watch basketball that much, but when I watched it, I loved it. I learned the rules of softball and baseball last year, I just kept going to watch them play. It's fun."



### **I miss my mom and her food.**

She cooked everything for me. I miss my friends in Thailand. I think here, I know people but we don't talk as much. In Thailand, with my friends, we grew up together and are close. We'd go hang out together, just chilling and talking about what we're doing."



### **In Thailand, college sport is not the big deal.**

You cannot play golf and you cannot go to university at the same time. We study so hard there, we take five or six classes in one day. We focus more on the academic than on the golf side."



### **There's a Thai restaurant here,** where the owner

is Thai. We'll say, can you make a Thai-style fried rice for us, or a Thai curry? And she's like, yeah, sure. Sometimes when we're too tired from practice, we'll go to that restaurant and say hello. And sometimes she'll say, 'I was making this Thai dish, do you want a couple to go home?' We want to pay for it, and she's like, 'It's OK, I just want to give it to you.'"

## Zihe Wang '24

**W**ang is a graduate student in the business analytics program, working on his second degree from USC Upstate. In April, he graduated with a bachelor's in interdisciplinary studies, with a focus on communications and global studies. He came to the United States from China, where he grew up outside the city of Harbin, located near the border of Russia. It's cold half the year, Wang says, so the heat and humidity of South Carolina took some getting used to.

He saw studying in the U.S. as a fun challenge and an opportunity to use English. Wang started his studies at Bob Jones University before transferring to Upstate, but continues to live in Greenville. Up until three years ago, he didn't have a car, which was a challenge. "During COVID time it was super hard, because you can't go anywhere, just stay in the house," he says. Besides now owning a car, Wang also adopted a dog, a labrador mix he named Stewie. He enjoys cooking in his spare time.



### **I feel like nowadays, just a BA is not enough.**

If you want to try to get a better life, you have to work hard. You have to keep going. You have to push yourself, you need to get out of your comfort zone and prepare yourself for your life in the future."



### **We do learn English in China for many years**

in school, but when I actually use it, it's kind of a different deal than just learning it. Another thing is communication with people at first. It's always the hardest thing to ask. I'm more like a quiet person, and if you don't talk to people you cannot prepare or learn how to talk."



### **I like 'Friends' a lot. It's quite popular in China.**

The speed they speak is moderate, not that fast, so it's easy for me to understand. In the beginning, when I was trying to learn how to speak, I watched that show a lot to help me to build my speaking skills or listening skills. That show actually helped me a lot."



### **For college and for the master's degree,**

you have those very long, difficult texts to read and to understand. So that is one of the hardest parts for me. If I do translate those into Chinese, sometimes they don't use exactly the right word in there. Then you need to translate those words and understand what is happening, and then try to understand the article. So that is going to make it very hard as well, because I can't read it fully in English, but I can't fully read the translation."

## Ravichandra Gochipatala

**G**ochipatala always planned to study abroad one day, but wasn't expecting he would do so right out of college. After earning his bachelor's in computer science at Aditya Degree College in Visakhapatnam, India, he was admitted to a master's program in computer applications. But the college was located in the north of India, far from his home, and his father thought he might as well go abroad for graduate school. "I thought maybe I'd come here at 25 or 30," Gochipatala says.

Coming to the U.S. has been a longtime dream of his after following the career of Elon Musk. "I always woke up at midnight to watch his rocket launches," Gochipatala says. He has already begun looking into internship opportunities to gain career experience. His other goal is to learn to drive, so he can get a car and return to doing martial arts or boxing, activities he enjoyed back home.

“

### **I didn't know how to cook when I first came here.**

My mom taught me how to cook rice before I came, so I only knew how to cook rice. She's [now] taught me all the Indian-style curries. When I started cooking, she'd tell me on a video call, first cut the vegetables, and then I'll teach you how to do it. So when I have doubts, I call her.”

“

### **My city is full of beaches, mountains, everything.**

It's an urban city. We have a lot of companies, steel plants, but they're trying to change it into a capital city. A lot of people don't want that, because if it becomes a capital, we get a lot of people, a lot of pollution, and we're going to cut a lot of trees. We don't want to lose the greenery.”

“

### **I've been a lot of times to Charlotte.**

A lot of my Indian friends live there. Mostly, I just stick to my laptop. It's a boring life because I have limited time. My visa is until 2028. I don't want to waste time. I need to improve my skills. If I go there partying and waste money, that's not good.”

“

### **I would say I'm not very emotional.**

I'm not missing my parents, because I talk to my mom every day. Otherwise, she'd keep calling me if I missed one or two days. They're safe in India. I don't have to worry about it. They always told me, just focus on the studies. I was born in a different city called Kandukur, but after my dad got married, he went to Visakhapatnam without telling my mom and me. I was a really, really little kid. He went there to find a job. He worked multiple jobs and finally settled in real estate. He's a real estate agent. So yeah, there were a lot of struggles. He always raises them to show me how hard it is. So that's why I put my emotions aside.”



## Daniel Helterhoff

**H**elterhoff, a business administration major, admits basketball is not the sport that inspires fanaticism among his fellow Germans. That would be soccer, which Helterhoff in fact started off playing when he was 5 years old. “But at some point I was just too tall,” he says. “And then I found the joy of playing basketball, and had to decide between playing soccer and basketball.” He chose basketball, which felt more comfortable physically and which offered him better opportunities. Before coming to the U.S., he spent three years at a boarding school in Germany that had a basketball academy and one year playing for the German U18 National Team.

Helterhoff transferred to USC Upstate this fall, after playing basketball for two years at a Texas university. He had spoken previously with coach Marty Richter, and liked Richter’s commitment to giving back to the community. Changing colleges proved easier than he’d expected. “There’s a lot of nice people here, and they’re all very friendly, so it was easy to integrate into the community.” He also still enjoys playing the occasional game of soccer, and cheering on his home team, 1. FC Köln.

“**Cologne [where I’m from] is a very nice city.**

There’s so many nice people. They’re all very friendly and talkative, and it’s just a nice environment because there’s so much green – flowers and trees and everything. And we have a very famous cathedral, one of the oldest cathedrals in the world.”

“**I always dreamed of playing basketball**

in college and living the college experience. One of my best friends first committed to [Our Lady of the Lake University] and then his parents called my parents and asked them if I would consider going with him as well. And one week later I just committed to the same school as he did. We were there for two years together and it was really nice. Then another friend of mine joined us one year later. So we were a whole group of people that had known each other already for 10 years.”

“**I think one of the biggest adjustments**

for me was my diet. I had to change my diet because at home, I was always used to eating food my mom cooks, or very healthy in general. And then when I came here, I had to consider what I’m eating, because there are so many more fast food places, which I like and I really enjoy. That was another problem. So I had to consider what I’m eating to not gain weight and still be fit.”





## Maria Kirienko

**K**irienko didn't really need another degree when she enrolled at USC Upstate as a marketing major. A native of Siberia, she already had a bachelor's in economics and a master's in finance from St. Petersburg University in Russia. She also had worked as a real estate appraiser in St. Petersburg for almost 10 years. Then Russia invaded Ukraine, and Kirienko, who is half Ukrainian, decided it was time to leave.

Even before war broke out, she had already been thinking of going to the U.S. She felt she had hit the ceiling for wages

in her job, and taking on a manager's role would have meant more work without a comparable increase in pay. While going back to school was not what she had envisioned at this point in her life, she realized it was a way to start a fresh career and also stay in the U.S. She also discovered a passion for graphic design after starting at Upstate. Now a double major, and the social media coordinator for the Johnson College of Business, Kirienko juggles a busy schedule. But she tries to make time for her favorite outdoor activity – hiking – and mushroom hunting.



### **You know when recruiters ask you at an interview**

how you see yourself in five years? I never could answer this question, because I do not know. I just follow the flow. I see what options do I have in the moment. And then I decide what works best for me. That's how I took my first concentration [for my] bachelor's and master's. And when the question popped up again and I needed to decide what major I'm going to do here, I was like, marketing sounds fun. That's how I decide, I just follow my heart."



### **I'm from Siberia, I lived in St. Petersburg.**

It's way cooler during the summer. And I moved [to the U.S.] in the beginning of May, and I stayed in Florida for almost three months. I was melted. I said, no, I'm not gonna stay in Florida, it's too hot. I could not bear this. And I moved here."



### **I'm an immigrant, and getting a degree here is a huge**

life and career elevator. I realized that it will help me a lot to find a job here. I was planning to change the field where I was working and definitely did not plan or want to stay in finance. And I said, OK, I know nothing really about anything else and I do not know how to do any other job. The only way to learn here, to get a network, to build my reputation here, is just to go to college to get connections."



### **[The war in Ukraine] was a huge part of my life,**

the first year of the war. But then you just get tired of this. You understand that your life is going on. You cannot focus on this. You need to build your life. Especially in a new country, you have to work extra hard. You have to go the extra mile all the time until you settle here, and it's a long journey. And I said, OK, I need to change my focus, I cannot focus on it anymore. And I just stopped watching all the news and everything. I said OK, this life, I left it there, I need to look forward. But it was really, really hard."



# Ring Around the Fountain

USC Upstate kicked off a new tradition during Family and Alumni Weekend in October. Juniors, graduating seniors, and alumni who had purchased the official university ring were invited to a ceremony at the Sorenson Fountain in front of the John C. Stockwell Administration Building. There, guests "christened" their rings by dipping them into the fountain, thereby affirming their place in the USC Upstate family. The next ring ceremony will be May 3, 2025. To purchase an official ring and participate, contact [alumni@uscupstate.edu](mailto:alumni@uscupstate.edu) or visit [uscupstate.edu/alumni](http://uscupstate.edu/alumni).







Photo: Tina Herzberg, coordinator of the visual impairment program at USC Upstate

# Raising Awareness

**VISUAL IMPAIRMENT PROGRAM ALUMS MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN EDUCATION AND RESEARCH.**

By Ashley Festa

**M**any people find it difficult to walk a mile in someone else's shoes. Bethany Hastings '18, MAT '22 took a walk in the shoes of a blind person for 24 hours — and learned just how difficult the simple act of walking could be.

During her Orientation and Mobility class's 24-hour simulation of visual impairment, Hastings wore a special blindfold that creates total darkness for the wearer. Then, she went about her daily life, with her husband as a guide.

In addition to the difficulty of completing tasks in her own home, such as cooking and laundry, and the challenges of navigating the outside world — walking in the neighborhood, going grocery shopping — Hastings also experienced the social hardships of being visually impaired.

"There was an instance where someone addressed my husband rather than addressing me," says Hastings, a special education teacher at Cedar Springs Academy, one of the campuses at the South Carolina School for the Deaf and the Blind (SCSDB).

Since 2002, USC Upstate has been preparing graduates such as Hastings for jobs working with people who have low vision or total blindness. Upstate is the only university in South Carolina to offer a graduate degree in visual impairment (VI), and among just a few dozen nationwide.

Professional training is critical to ensuring students with visual impairments get the specialized instruction they need to achieve at the highest level, says Tina Herzberg, coordinator of the visual impairment program and a professor in Upstate's education department.

"That's what I love about what we do," Herzberg says. "We are helping students to be as successful as possible, to reach their fullest potential. That's what we want for every child, right?"

Hastings says through the program, she learned how to prepare her students to be successful both inside and outside the classroom.

"I can do this by teaching them self-advocacy skills, giving them real-life experiences, and teaching them how to use tools that will assist them in completing daily living tasks," she says.

## **AN IN-DEPTH APPROACH**

More than 100 teachers have completed the visual impairment program since it was moved from the University of South Carolina to the Upstate campus in 2002. One of those is Leslie Borton, a 2019 M.Ed. graduate and the lead teacher at the South Carolina School for the Blind. USC Upstate has a close relationship with the Spartanburg-based school, and many alums and students work there.

Borton says the hands-on learning experiences she had while a student helped her understand the different ways people experience and live with vision loss.

"Every time I got to work with a child with visual impairment, that was another piece of what I learned about this population," Borton says.

Students in the VI program learn to read Braille, create tactile graphics, transcribe a child's assignment, interpret eye reports, use assistive devices, and dissect the eyeball of a cow to understand the anatomy of the eye. They also learn to teach their students self-advocacy skills, such as how to explain their eye condition, when to disclose their visual impairment, and how to articulate what they need.

"Our graduates are well trained; when they leave here, they are ready to equip and empower their students for success in school and life," Herzberg says. She notes that the university has a 100% placement rate for graduates of the program.

## **SCHOLARLY INSIGHTS**

The VI program also contributes to the research on educating students with visual impairments. Herzberg was recently honored by the American Foundation for the Blind for her scholarship, and last year she worked with Borton to publish an article that grew out of a project Borton completed as a student.

"Leslie identified a gap in the literature, and I told her, 'You have learned something we don't have documented; if you write a research article about it, you can become part of that literature,'" Herzberg says. "Now teachers can look at what Leslie did to adapt a method of teaching Braille and more easily use it with their students, rather than having to tweak a different method to make it fit their students' needs."

The two are currently collaborating on another project: a systematic literature review of Braille instructional techniques.

### **APPLIED LEARNING**

Herzberg notes that another strength of the program is that working teachers can immediately apply what they're learning to benefit their students. Current USC Upstate student Megan Bryant works full time in Anderson School District 1 teaching students who have both intellectual and physical disabilities, including visual impairment. She particularly enjoyed her assistive technology class at Upstate, which included a fruitful visit to USC's SC Assistive Technology Program in Columbia.

"We got to see the equipment they have to lend out for test trials, and we learned more about what technology would best serve our students," Bryant said. "Learning about all those free resources was great, and my students could try these devices for free. I didn't know those things existed before this class."

Another student, Kate Andrade, teaches special education in Anderson School District 5 and wants to transition to focus on learners who are visually impaired. She says the VI program has helped her work better with some of her current students, many of whom are profoundly disabled. In one of her course projects, Andrade created adaptive puzzles for VI students.

"I love that I get to use the puzzles in my classroom with my students now," she says. "It's really rewarding to see how much more confident I am in working with students with visual impairments."

### **NEW NEEDS TO FILL**

This fall, USC Upstate launched a second VI concentration in orientation and mobility (O&M), a critically needed service area. Specialists in the field help people with visual impairments negotiate indoor and outdoor environments, use public transportation, and get comfortable crossing busy streets.

In South Carolina in particular, where 19% of the population is 65 or older, demand is likely to increase for O&M services among seniors experiencing vision loss.

"We are excited about this new concentration because there is a tremendous need for O&M specialists," Herzberg says. "We want everyone with low vision or blindness to receive the services they need to live independent and successful lives."

At right, Mary Lister works with a visually impaired student at the South Carolina School for the Blind. Top right, Leslie Borton M.Ed. '19 has continued to contribute to research on visual impairment while teaching. Center right, Bethany Hastings '18, MAT '22, teaches at Cedar Springs Academy on the campus of the South Carolina School for the Deaf and the Blind. Bottom right, Borton reviews a math problem with a student.







# No Limitations

Nicole Richardson '04 loves many things and isn't afraid to do them all.



**R**adio and TV show host and producer. Influencer. Oprah Winfrey Network ambassador. Fashion model. Writer. Former special education teacher. Kidney disease survivor.

Nicole Richardson '04 wears her many identities with pride. While her primary role is host, producer and creator of the Nikki Rich Show, which airs on cable TV in the Los Angeles area, she has embraced both the challenges and opportunities that have come her way.

"I'm just an old country girl from Seneca, South Carolina, who has reached so many heights," Richardson says with a laugh.

Online radio provided the foundation for her current career, but Richardson never aspired to work in media. Her first experience with broadcasting was doing announcements for her parents' radio ministry when she was growing up in Seneca. She didn't particularly like waking up early to go on the show with her brother, but the seeds of her future had been planted.

When Richardson graduated from USC Upstate with a degree in criminal justice, her immediate focus was on teaching. She had taken multiple education courses at Upstate, and became a special needs teacher in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system, working with children with autism in grades K through five. She also instructed inmates in state prisons.

During her eight years as a teacher, she earned a master's in business administration through the University of Phoenix. Then layoffs began affecting the district. After losing her job in the third round of cuts, Richardson was determined to become her own boss. "I didn't want anybody to tell me there will no longer be a job," she says.

Richardson decided to try her hand at online radio. She plunged into learning everything she could, researching what platforms to use and acquiring the equipment she'd need. Finally, on April 11, 2011, she was ready to go.

Her first episode of the Nikki Rich Show was her introduction of herself to her audience. She didn't have a particular theme in mind for her show, she says, she just wanted it to have a positive message. To help spread the word, she posted a link on her social media accounts. "I think it was a Wednesday, and I got emails from a publicist and had a celebrity guest by that Friday," Richardson recalls. "It was nerve-racking, but I did amazing."

Richardson entered the world of online radio when audio blog posts, or podcasts, were still relatively new. People weren't entirely sure what to make of the medium, Richardson notes. "They wouldn't take those of us doing strictly online that seriously," she says. "We'd have guests reach out and then say, 'Oh, no, we want to be on real radio.'"

But the skepticism just made Richardson work harder. Like others in the field at the time, "we knew the time would come," she says. "We had the vision."

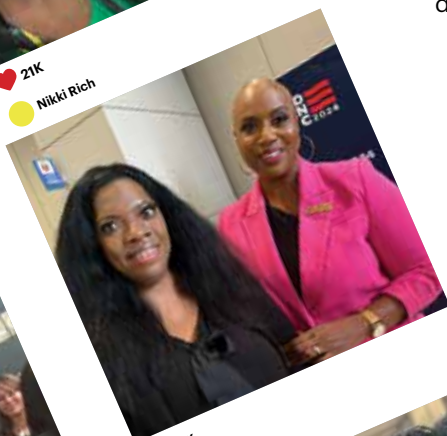
Richardson continued to grow the audience for her two-hour show, producing multiple episodes a week on BlogTalkRadio



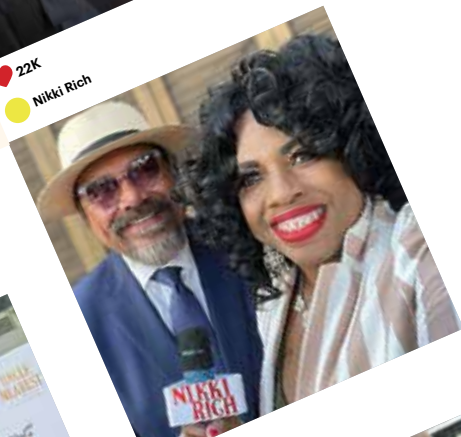
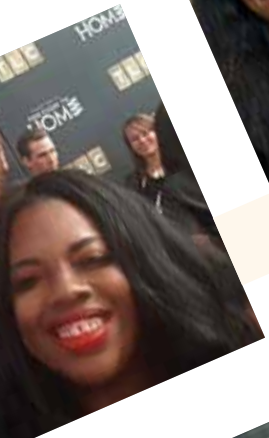
**We knew  
the time would come.  
We had the vision.**



21K  
Nikki Rich



22K  
Nikki Rich



26K  
Nikki Rich





Photo: Richardson interviews Cedric the Entertainer at a red carpet event in Los Angeles.

and promoting them all on her social channels. She also spent six months in New York working on a doctorate in business administration. While she eventually gave up the pursuit to focus full time on her show, the stay proved fruitful for booking noteworthy guests, including broadcaster Barbara Walters.

Richardson also decided it was time to pursue her dream of moving to Los Angeles. The entertainment industry provided no shortage of celebrities for her to interview, as publicists were eager for outlets to promote new movies and streaming shows. But Richardson also mixed in small business owners and local companies to help them build their brands.

"There's hardly any light shining on those hard-working everyday people, and I definitely wanted their voices to be heard," she says. "I wanted to bridge that connection between everyday individuals and the ones who are entertainers."

Since being invited to produce her show for UVerse and Spectrum cable channels in Pasadena, Richardson has been able to focus exclusively on a weekly television program. That doesn't mean she's any less busy, however. She conducts virtual interviews during the week, which she posts to her YouTube channel, and often attends charity events to interview celebrity guests in person. On weekends she tapes the live interviews that will air Monday on cable.

"It seems like a lot, but it's really not," Richardson says.

Even illness hasn't slowed her down. For more than five years she battled kidney disease, undergoing daily dialysis treatments while awaiting a transplant. She also underwent brain surgery in 2021 when the disease caused a blood clot. "Nothing stopped me," she says. "No matter what you go through, you've gotta keep pushing. You gotta keep going."

Richardson's deep faith has also sustained her. "I put God first in everything I do," she says. "Even today, I don't know how it's all working, but he's been guiding." In October, she celebrated the one-year anniversary of her kidney transplant – an event she shared with viewers

in a short reel from her hospital bed right before surgery.

In the many years she's done the show, Richardson can name numerous highlights: interviewing Riley Keough, Elvis Presley's granddaughter, who was promoting her Amazon show "Daisy Jones and the Six"; catching up with rapper Flavor Flav after the Olympics; talking to actor and filmmaker Tyler Perry, an idol of hers. But one of her most treasured moments was becoming an ambassador for the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN).

Winfrey launched the network not long before Richardson started her show, and Richardson was an early fan. She identified with the challenges of building something from scratch, and used her social channels to support Winfrey and live tweet about OWN shows. The network noticed, and selected her as one of its ambassadors, social media influencers who help promote OWN to their audiences.

Not only did Richardson get to interview cast members of OWN shows, but she also got to accompany Winfrey on tours to promote her appearances. "It's amazing to have a relationship with the people who inspire you," she says. "It's beyond words."

Another recent achievement for Richardson was being one of the more than 200 credentialed content creators at the 2024 Democratic National Convention. A strong proponent of voting, Richardson was happy to use her platform to encourage engagement in the political process. As soon as the convention wrapped, she was off to Paris, where she walked the runway for Fashion Week in the Therese Marie Collection.

While she's accomplished so much in building her brand and reach, Richardson isn't interested in sitting back and coasting. "I'm doing what I love, but I want to elevate the show to be on a higher scale," she says. That includes using her platform to raise awareness of organizations like the National Kidney Foundation and groups that assist survivors of domestic violence.

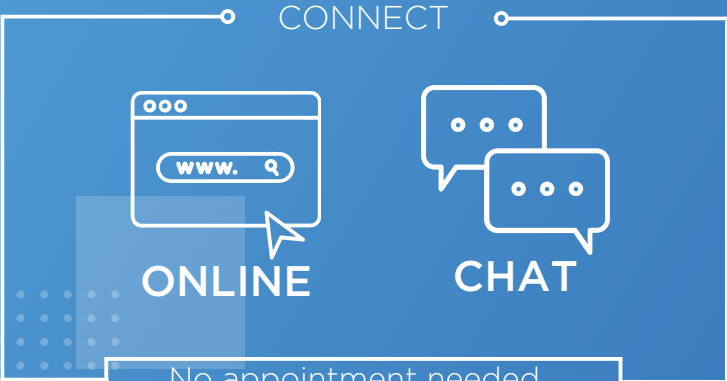
Richardson says there are no limits to what she might do next. "I'm going to do everything I like to do."



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## Faculty Achievements

**Wren Bareiss** (Communication) presented a two-part workshop to medical researchers at Spartanburg Regional Hospital's outpatient center on writing and publishing qualitative research in health care. He was also appointed to three boards: Spartanburg Philharmonic Audience Development, Live Healthy Spartanburg Policy, and Spartanburg Shares.

**John Barnett** (Library) participated in the Harvard University Leadership Institute for Academic Librarians over the summer. He was one of 100 library leaders selected for the competitive program. Barnett also presented the session "On Target? Boosting the Library's Relevance Through the Academic Program Review" at the Southeastern Library Association Summer Conference in Huntsville, Alabama.

**Stephen Bismarck** (Education) presented the paper "Concrete-Representational-Abstract (CRA) Approach in an Algebra I Inclusion Class" at the 15th International Congress of Mathematics Education in Sydney, Australia, in July.

**Brian Brady** (Entrepreneurship) completed the summer course "Negotiation Mastery" at the Harvard Business School. He, **Kim Land** (Marketing) and **Yin-Chi Liao** (Management) also all received the USC Upstate Excellence in Community Engaged Education Award.

**Ryan Crawford '06** (Nursing) co-authored "A National Qualitative Study of Work-Life Balance in

Prelicensure Nursing Faculty" in the journal *Nursing Education Perspectives*. It was recognized as best article among all feature research articles. She was also selected as a BSN Educator Representative for the South Carolina Advisory Committee on Nursing Education (ACONE).

**Shirleatha Dunlap** (Nursing) is the project director for a \$128,503 Nurse Faculty Loan Program award from the Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration. She and

**Jeannie Chapman**, dean of the college of Science and Technology, also secured a \$120,000 grant for expediting high school students' pathway to nursing through dual credit courses in anatomy and physiology.

**Araceli Hernández-Laroche** (Modern Languages) was invited to give the McMahon Keynote Lecture on El Centro & the Importance of Languages at East Carolina University in North Carolina in April. The Coalition of Urban and



### Another Set of Eyes

**Ron Fulbright** (Informatics) has been awarded a patent by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office for his invention "Vehicular Passenger Monitoring System," which could be utilized in an "autonomous date car." A self-driving car equipped with the technology could pick up one or more people at their respective homes, transport them to and from a designated and approved location, such as a movie theater, restaurant, or event venue, and wait for them until the date is over. The car would then drive the couple back home, ensuring they return safely and on time without speeding, going to unapproved places, or engaging in undesired behavior along the way.

Various sensors and cameras in the date car, described in the patent application, monitor the passengers to ensure their safety and well-being while also communicating back to parents, who can virtually chaperone the date via an app on their smartphone. The technology also could be helpful in other situations, such as autonomous transportation of the elderly or disabled to doctor appointments, shopping trips, and visits. Other possible applications include infant-in-distress detection in cases where parents or guardians accidentally leave a child in a car on a hot day.

Metropolitan Universities invited her to speak on a panel with **Maria Francisco Montesó** (Spanish) and three student marketing interns, Danna Lopez, Zaray Lopez, and D'Alexander Zegarra, on "Making Our Work Public" at the virtual Swarthmore College Annual Engaged Scholarship Symposium in April.

**Tina Herzberg** (Visual Impairment) is the recipient of the 2024 Corinne Kirchner Research Award from the American Foundation for the Blind for advancing scholarship in the field of blindness and low vision. She also co-authored the article "Middle and High School Students with Visual Impairments Describe Their Experiences in Learning a New Braille Code for Mathematics and Science" in the May-June issue of the Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness.

**Colby King** (Sociology) co-authored the paper "A Liberal Arts Curriculum that Situates Science While Promoting STEM Graduation" in the journal Science & Education.

**Kim Land** (Marketing) received the Excellence in Teaching and Advising Award from the Johnson College of Business and Economics. She was also recognized for her 20<sup>th</sup> year of service as director of the Upstate Regional Spelling Bee.

**Tracey Miller** (Nursing) became a certified clinical nurse educator after passing the NLN certification exam in July. She also received a \$3,500 Northside Upfit grant for small business owners and Start:ME alumni.

**Lee Neibert** (Theatre) performed in Warehouse Theatre's Upstate Shakespeare Festival production of Henry IV, Parts 1 & 2 in the roles of Worcester and Fang. He was joined by USC Upstate theatre major Robert Penniger in the role of Poins.

**Tammy Pike '05** (History) received the Excellence in Teaching and Advising Award from the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences. She also received the University Excellence in Teaching and Advising Award.

**Laura Rikard** (Theatre) was awarded the Ellen Stewart Award for Scholarship and/or Creative Practice by the Association for Theatre in Higher Education. The award is one of the most prestigious in theater education. Rikard also was an invited guest artist at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., to train up-and-coming professional directors in best practices for developing consent-based rehearsal spaces and for staging intimacy.

**Mary Sarver, Sung-Hun Byun, Courtney McDonald and Tracey Woodard** (Criminal Justice) presented at the American Society of Criminology conference on "The Intersection of Polyvictimization and Health in Intimate Partner Violence: Findings from the NISVS."

**Kimberly Shorter** (Biology) received a \$517,500 NIH R16 grant to investigate a small gene's effects on gene expression

and epigenetics related to cancer and autism. The grant will provide a stipend for Upstate students assisting in the research.

**Nolan Stolz** (Popular Music) will have his forthcoming Route 66 Suite for symphony orchestra included as part of the official Route 66 Centennial Project, upon recommendation of the Route 66 Centennial Commission. Two movements from his Lincoln Highway Suite were performed at the College Music Society Northeast Conference in March. His music-films "The Cuckoo's Song," "Gravitation," and "Standing Waves" screened at film festivals in New York, Las Vegas, Orlando, Missouri, England, India, Indonesia and Serbia.

**Justin Travis '08** (Psychology) chaired a talk on soft skills for data scientists and was a panelist for a talk on buzzwords in consulting at the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology in April.



## More Laurels for Theatre

The theatre program received raves for their production of Katheryn Schultz Miller's "The Trail of Tears" at the Fuse: International Youth Arts Festival in London this summer. The audience gave the show a standing ovation and an encore ovation. The play was directed by associate professor **Laura Rikard**, with design and technical direction by assistant professor **Del Delorm**, and produced by professor **Lee Neibert**. The production received three Kennedy Center American College Theatre Awards: Students Dee Slade and Krischan Taylor received Irene Ryan Acting nominations, and Delorm received a Merit Award for technical direction and design.

**Ginny Webb** (Biology) presented at the national American Society for Microbiology conference in Atlanta, Georgia. Her poster was titled "Identifying the predictors of pediatric vaccine uptake during the COVID-19 pandemic."

**Carolina Webber** (Communication) authored the chapter "A Latina's Performance of Masculinity/Invincibility: Breast Cancer and Everything Else in the Conjunctural Era of Covid 19" in the forthcoming book "Critical Perspectives on the Intersection of Breast Cancer and Academic Identity."

**Griffin Woodworth** (Popular Music) is the author of the forthcoming book "Prince, Musical Genre, and the Construction of Racial Identity."



The **Child Advocacy Studies** program, in collaboration with the Child Protection Training Center, has launched a pilot initiative for professionals working in youth group homes. The program seeks to enhance participants' skills and knowledge to deliver optimal care for children, and focuses on strategies to improve staff retention. It also emphasizes the critical role local agencies and professionals play in the lives of these children.

Retired Chief Justice Donald W. Beatty speaks at a celebration in his honor at the Spartanburg County Courthouse.



## Doing Justice to a Legacy

**A** new center at USC Upstate seeks to give students the resources they need to pursue legal and justice-related careers.

The Chief Justice Donald W. Beatty Center for Justice and Society, officially dedicated on Sept. 19, will offer students experiences and training to prepare them for jobs in law, public policy, government or criminal justice. Beatty, a Spartanburg native, retired in June from the South Carolina Supreme Court after 17 years on the bench, seven of them as chief justice.

"One of the main aims of Upstate is to have students who are career-ready," says Allison Ellis, professor of political science and the center's director. "So this speaks directly to that, because we're providing them with opportunities that will hopefully lead to careers."

Beatty started out in law providing legal services to those who couldn't afford representation. Before his tenure on the state Supreme Court, he also was elected to city and state offices. In that spirit of public service, the center will be a place where students can explore policy and reforms that benefit society, Ellis says.

"People who are interested in broad topics, not just law but also social

justice, victims' advocacy, or domestic violence, often ask: What does that look like, and how can we work to address these challenges?" Ellis says.

"The Center for Justice and Society aims to further this conversation and establish a lasting legacy inspired by Justice Beatty's commitment to justice and equality."

Ellis says in addition to mentoring, the center will offer an LSAT preparation class for those applying to law school. Students also will be able to participate and compete in mock trial, and workshops and seminars during the year will focus on soft skills development. Travel experiences will be offered as well.

Additionally, the center will host speakers from different legal sectors so students can consider what path is best for them.

First-generation students will especially benefit from the center's activities, Ellis says. "Providing students with some of those opportunities hopefully will make it a little easier on them, so they don't have to figure it all out themselves."



## A Way With Words

Kylin Hunter '16 is a true artist — he pours every ounce of heart and soul into his creative pursuits. He is also a man who utilizes his talents to help others in his community realize their full potential.

Hunter graduated from USC Upstate with a B.A. in English and a minor in creative writing. Today, he works as a freelance writer. He does copywriting and editing, builds webpages, and assists with search engine optimization for clients who need help finding the right words. He is also an accomplished creative writer and scriptwriter. His graphic novel, "Carthage," was published in 2022.

A native of Whitmire, South Carolina, Hunter discovered his love for reading and creative writing at an early age. "I grew up very much interacting with nature as a kid, and that actually influenced my creativity," he says. Poetry was his first love, and as a fifth-grader, he won a district award for one of his poems.

USC Upstate was one of the first colleges to reach out to Hunter, and it offered him a scholarship. "I ended up going with Upstate because I liked how engaged they were with me and wanted to make my future bright," he says.

One of the most useful skills Hunter learned at Upstate was networking. As a freelance writer and editor, the ability to network has enabled him to build his career and gain clients. One of the metrics he uses to gauge his success as a freelancer is how much he learns from the writing projects he takes on.

Hunter is always looking for ways to give back. In his scripts, he has written parts for many BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color) characters. Most of his main characters are minorities. Hunter wants young BIPOC people to understand that they can fill leading roles — they don't have to accept the stereotypical parts they're often asked to play.

Hunter hopes his endeavors will be an inspiration to others in his community and beyond. "None of us will be around here forever, but we can make our mark while we're here," he says.

— Josh Lanier (English major)

## Class Notes

**1983**

**Chana Jones Fletcher** is a certified Orton Gillingham tutor.

**1994**

**Lt. Cmdr. David W. York, U.S. Navy (Ret.)** began his career in the Navy as an intelligence officer. He has since retired as an information warfare dominance officer, and now is contracted to the U.S. Department of Energy for three years.

**1996**

**Emily Young Booth** recently semi-retired from her partnership and relocated to Oklahoma. She fondly remembers professors like Dr. Diana Clary and Dr. Meyer Drucker, who were dedicated to sharing their knowledge with their students.

**2002**

**LeAndria Chameka Washington** has a daughter who is a new student this fall at USC Upstate.

**2005**

**Elizabeth Dunbar Walsh** is married to **Westbrook Emmet Walsh '06**, and together they have three children, William, Brooke, and Emily. Elizabeth was a school nurse in Richland County School District 2, but moved back to Columbia over the summer. She has lived in two states since graduating from Upstate and has worked in several different nursing positions.

**2007**

**Ashley Niesha Goodwin** started her own psychotherapy practice and became a licensed clinical social worker in 2023.

**2011**

**Sjerota Annette Pryer** has been a writer for Sheen Magazine, has worked at 107.3 Jamz, and currently serves as senior social media specialist for Synchrony Financial, a position she has held for nine years.

2012



**Ivory Lindsey** owns her own catering business, Soul Sistaz, and recently put her skills to work helping Asheville residents devastated by Hurricane Helene. She made multiple trips to the city to deliver supplies and hot meals, serving up grits, bacon, eggs, biscuits, egg and cheese sandwiches, and goulash on her various visits.

2014

**Nekeisha Johnson Dial** has a daughter who is a student at USC Upstate.

2015

**Angela Rena Jackson** is a teacher.

**Krista Louise McMullen** has moved to Wilmington, North Carolina, and returned to a special education classroom at a Title I school.

2016

**Janeel Green Smith** earned a Doctor of Nursing Practice in June 2024 and was married in July of 2024.

2018

**Samuel Reid Johnson** opened Habit Lounge at Drayton Mills and recently opened a cold plunge and sauna called Flow State.

**Alyssa Stanley Murray** recently got married.

**Anna Elizabeth Pruitt** says support from her USC Upstate professors led her to law school.

2020

**Briana Davina Gaston** has recently been traveling a lot. She is also preparing to start graduate school.

2023

**Marianne Carole Beck** recently got a new job at Spartanburg County School District 6 as a multilingual (ESOL) teacher. She also received her master's in applied learning and instruction with a concentration in TESOL, which helped lead her to where she is today.

**Emilie Upchurch Burt** recently started a new job at USC Upstate as a financial aid specialist and is thrilled to be working for her alma mater.

**Lily J. Mathis** began working as a 911 dispatcher for the Greenville County Sheriff's Office in April and says she loves her job.

**Jessica Lynn Prosser** is currently browsing the job market to start her nursing career, and she recently had her third child in May 2024.

**CJ Robinson** recently got a new job at Westerman Inc. and relocated to Wyoming.

**Susan (Sue) Spence** started a new job in August 2024 as a NBI specialist at Jackson Lewis.

**Paul Austin Thompson** started a new job as a nurse at Spartanburg Regional in January. That same month he also welcomed his second child, a baby girl.

## A Life in Books



Sheryl Mann '12 has always been drawn to literature.

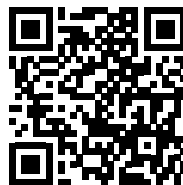
At USC Upstate, Mann earned a B.A. in English and a cognate in philosophy. Her passion for literature and the humanities has been central to her academic career, and it helped her achieve her current position as the branch manager at Cyrill-Westside Library in Spartanburg.

"I've always loved to read, I've always loved to write. I wanted to do something that I found personally fulfilling," Mann says.

She says she loves working as a librarian because she gets to work alongside fellow literature-lovers. But, she adds, being a librarian is more than getting paid to read, and libraries are more than places to store books. They're spaces for people to be social and form community connections – and they're one of the few places people can join for free.

– Autumn Fort '24

Read more of Sheryl and Kylin's stories at [blogs.uscupstate.edu/lc](https://blogs.uscupstate.edu/lc).





## 2024

**Kasey Spencer Chisholm** was married in May 2024 to her spouse, Michael.

**L. Craig Huffstetler III** recently started a new job as the marketing coordinator for Remarketing Solutions International.

**Kiara Ma'Shay Quattlebaum** is attending Converse University to earn a master's in marriage and family therapy.

## In Memorium

Ollie Clark Bramlett '72

Marsha Johnson Ball '74

Deborah Leonard Young '75

Renee S. McSwain '76

Daniel S. Wilson '76

Joel William Elder '77

Joan Puckett Roach '79

Sandra Richey Faulkner '82

Frances Cook Carrouth '83

Freddi Malone Lee '85

Tess Carter Tintle '85

Stephen M. McCormick '87

Nelson Kent Sellars '87

Harnetha Black Dean '88

Beverly Smith Boggs '90

Gregory Joe Palmer '90

Katy S. Stanberry '91

Ruby Corinne Danley '93

William Gilbert Mayer '94

Frankie Eugena Wells '95

David Kyle Fuller '96

Mark Gilbert Godbee '98

Genevieve Paden '02

David Damon Mims '04

Robin Hughes Parsons '04

Jourdan Marie Bryant Dobson '12

Sarah Elizabeth Gambrill '17

Dindy L Wilson '18

Wesley Ryan Edmondson '19

## Retired Faculty/Staff

Nancy Mahlon Bailey

Ina Minsky

Elda R. Rattie

Emmanuel V. Seko

Carolyn Denise Wilson

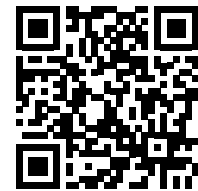


**Tangenicka (Tange) Williams '24** and her daughter, **Chyna D. Williams '24**, were featured on the talk show "Sherri" when they graduated together in the spring with BSN degrees. Read their story at [uscupstate.edu/news](http://uscupstate.edu/news).

## What's New?

Share your news with your fellow alums!

It's easy. Just fill out the form at  
[uscupstate.edu/updatealumni](http://uscupstate.edu/updatealumni)



## Nominations are now open for the 2024 Alumni Awards!

Do you know an outstanding alum who deserves recognition? Help us celebrate them by submitting their name for an Alumni Award! Award categories and the nomination form can be found at

[uscupstate.edu/alumni-awards](http://uscupstate.edu/alumni-awards).

# MARLON SMITH

## Building a Legacy

Marlon Smith, the new director of the Center for Africana & African American Studies, arrived in June eager to strengthen USC Upstate's program. This fall he added two new courses in Africana and African American Studies, and he looks forward to offering a robust array of classes that will appeal to students in diverse academic fields. Smith has also been busy hosting events, on campus and off. Here he shares his early career aspirations and an unusual culinary adventure in Peru.

### Where were you born?

I was born in Fort Worth, Texas.

### What did you dream of being when you were a child?

I dreamed of one day becoming a lawyer.

### Who was your favorite teacher, and why?

My favorite teacher was my 11th grade teacher Ms. Rose. She was the first teacher to ever introduce me to Black writers. "Native Son" by Richard Wright was the book. We are still friends to this day!

### What was your first job?

My first job was working in my grandmother's beauty shop.

### What's a talent you wish you had?

I wish I could draw. I am jealous of people who can create images out of a blank page.

### What book is on your nightstand (or tablet) right now?

The Bible.

### What's your favorite way to unwind?

Eating pizza and watching movies at home

### Do you have any pets?

No.

### What three albums would you want with you on a desert island?

Michael Jackson – Off the Wall  
Lyfe Jennings – Lyfe 268-192  
Marvin Sapp – Diary of a Psalmist

### What's your favorite vacation place?

Brazil.

### What or who inspires you?

People who are committed to serving others.

### Favorite TV or streaming show?

My favorite TV show of all time is "A Different World." It was the show that introduced me to college life.

### What's the craziest thing you've ever done?

Eating fried rat in Peru.

### What five items in your possession have special significance for you?

A photo of me and my stepfather in the hospital before he passed away.  
A picture of my daughter when she was 3 years old. It reminds me that time goes by fast.  
My fraternity membership card. I always knew I was going to pledge Kappa Alpha Psi so I keep my original membership card in my wallet.  
My doctoral degree in Interdisciplinary Studies.  
A grandfather's high school graduation photo. It reminds me how far I have come in my life.

### What's something on your bucket list?

I want to go to Egypt.

### What's your guilty pleasure (could be food, music, TV show, movie, etc.)?

Macadamia nut cookies with milk

### What's your proudest achievement so far?

Being a father and grandfather.

### If you could change something about yourself, what would it be?

I would be taller. I didn't want to get too tall when I was younger because I was a gymnast. Now that life is over, I want the height that I missed out on.

### What's your favorite thing about USC Upstate?

Building out the program for the Center for Africana & African American Studies. I love the ability to build something that can last beyond me that others will have the opportunity to benefit from.

### What's something most people don't know about you?

That I used to want to be a professional singer and artist. I sang in the Texas Boys Choir growing up and with several professional gospel artists when I was younger.

# Q & A



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