UCI MAGAZINE

The American Dream
Legal Landmark

"UCI Law was founded on the aspiration to leave the world better than we found it."
Dean L. Song Richardson tells attendees at a celebration Aug. 20 commemorating the UCI School of Law's 10th anniversary. "We aren't satisfied with the status quo. Instead, we take it upon ourselves to redefine, reimagine and reinvent what a law school can be—and, frankly, what it should be."
### About This Issue:
In this edition of UCI Magazine, we focus on the university’s work in manifesting “The American Dream.” Our cover story, “Advancing the American Dream” (page 14), highlights the efforts that have garnered UCI national attention for its ability to catapult disadvantaged students into the upper middle class, while “The American Dream Personified” (page 21) showcases eight tenacious alumni who are living out their visions while making their own unique contributions to the world. Finally, in “Her Dream? To Call the U.S. Home” (page 44), we tell the story of a UCI law student and “dreamer” Viridiana Chabolla who is one of six plaintiffs in Garcia et al. v. United States of America et al.

### On the Cover:
“The American Dream,” by Sara Tyson
The spring 2018 issue on “The Arts” is simply fantastic. It tells a great set of stories, has compelling visuals and reminds us of how UCI is a world-class institution in so many ways.

Even though I have been at UCI for 33 years, I wasn’t aware of some of the history, how accomplished our graduates are or the quality of the collections we are acquiring!

Viya Govindaraju
Director, UCI Center for Digital Transformation
Taco Bell Chair in Information Technology Management

It is so gratifying to see the arts flourishing at UCI. I am especially proud that my school, through Stephen Tucker, is reaching out to Santa Ana High School music students (“In Perfect Harmony”). What an example he sets for others to emulate.

The university plan circa 1966 was to make the fine arts one of UCI’s academic strengths. In the 70s, Anteaters were already appearing on Broadway. A standing ovation to this issue on “The Arts”! Zot!

Joanne M. Arria ’71
Arroyo Grande

I love receiving my copy of UCI Magazine. As soon as I get it, I have to peruse it. I especially enjoyed the issue on “The Arts.” Imagine my surprise upon seeing the photo on page 6 from the “Costuming the Leading Ladies of Shakespeare” exhibit: That’s me on the far left! I view my days at UCI as among the happiest of my life. Mahalo!

Linda McElroy ’88
Hollywood

Letters to the Editor

What a wonderful acquisition – this recent gift of over 4,000 new works bequeathed to UCI ("State of the Art" and "A California Art Apostle"). Indeed, the depth and breadth of such a collection is absolutely remarkable and will serve as a huge resource not only for the UCI art program and entire school but for California and beyond. It’s yet another addition to UCI’s rock-solid and expanding program.

UCI was an influential part of my cultural and artistic education, and it was a pleasure to read how everything is shaping up and moving forward and to get a glimpse of what’s in store for the future. As an alumnus and a native Angeleno, I am proud to be a part of the UCI tradition.

I will be following closely along with UCI tradition.

Kent Familton ’08
Los Angeles

...and future generations shall have both the opportunity and experience of education to the limits of their capabilities and desires. “

All our hopes depend on the kind of society we can build in the United States,” Johnson said. “That, in turn, rests on our system of education.” In a congratulatory letter, Gov. Edmund G. “Pat” Brown wrote: “In this task rests on our system of education. “In a congratulatory letter, Gov. Edmund G. “Pat” Brown wrote: “In this task

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An Educational Destiny

more than 15,000 people gathered in a sparsely attended field on June 20, 1964, to hear President Lyndon B. Johnson and other dignitaries dedicate the University of California, Irvine. Many drove or walked down the narrow, two-lane dirt road that connected the site with the outside world. The campus would not open for another 15 months, but that didn’t stop imaginations or lessen expectations. “All our hopes depend on the kind of society we can build in the United States,” Johnson said. “That, in turn, rests on our system of education.” In a congratulatory letter, Gov. Edmund G. “Pat” Brown wrote: “In this task of building for the future, I urge all Californians to unite, resolved that all of our children, our grandchildren and future generations shall have both the opportunity and experience of education to the limits of their capabilities and desires.”
Did you know that less than 5.8 percent of the world’s population can solve a Rubik’s Cube?

Now UCI researchers, using two algorithms known as Deep Cube, have taught a computer to solve the puzzle – without human help. The key, they say, is to first present the computer with a completed cube and let it use “autodidactic iteration” to descramble the cube in reverse. Then, with the second algorithm, the trained computer can master the puzzle from any starting point by applying what it has learned. How many total moves does it take? About 30 – with 100 percent success.

“Esports Elation

UCI’s second-seeded esports team is awarded the 2018 League of Legends College Championship trophy on June 10 after defeating fifth-seeded rival Columbia College, 3-0, in Los Angeles. Anteater Jeffrey “Descraton” Du was named tournament MVP. His teammates include Evan “Captain Nuke” Phu, Youngbin Chung, James Lattman and Lyubomir “Bloodwater” Spasov. It was the first national title for UCI’s young esports program, and director Mark Deppe doesn’t think it will be the last: “All of our players are returning next season, so our team is set up to be dominant for the next two years.”

Get Happy

Uplift dance songs by female singers are far more likely to hit the bestseller music charts, according to a new UCI study. “Successful songs behave almost like a different species,” said Chancellor’s Professor Natalia Komarova, a mathematician and evolutionary biologist, who led the work. “They have their own trends and are quantifiably different from average songs.”

Artful Prep

Pietro Maldonado cleans “Untitled (Albuquerque),” by Richard Diebenkorn, using a Chinese hake brush and HEPA vacuum. A team of art restorers and UCI Institute and Museum for California Art staff and curators spent the summer selecting, prepping and installing 50 artworks for “First Glimpse: Introducing the Buck Collection,” which opened Sept. 29 at the Claire Trevor School of the Arts. For more info, visit imca.uci.edu.
Behind the Scenes

While theater-goers may stop to think of actors mastering their lines, many don’t realize all the work that goes into crafting the environment that transforms the performance. It takes weeks, sometimes months, for all the right touches. Here, drama student Chris Pittner, part of the set and props team for the Claire Trevor School of the Arts production of “Mrs. Packard,” carefully removes nails from a wooden crate. Being on the crew fulfills credits toward Drama 101, required by the department of all freshmen and first-year transfer students. “In the end, we help the actors do their thing and let the audience enjoy the ride,” Pittner says. “And I continue to learn how the theater works.”

UCI IMCA

The UCI Institute and Museum for California Art

First Glimpse: Introducing The Buck Collection

September 29, 2018 – January 5, 2019

University of California, Irvine Claire Trevor School of the Arts 712 Arts Plaza, Irvine, CA 92697

Visit imca.uci.edu/firstglimpse to sign up for exhibition updates and special events.

Image: Detail from Oblique of Agawam, by Lee Mullican (1950), oil on canvas, 50 1/2 x 40 inches

The Buck Collection at the UCI Institute and Museum for California Art
Underground Watchman

Hidden deep beneath the Earth’s surface, in a potash mine on the northeast coast of England, lies the Boulby Underground Laboratory. There, an international group of scientists and engineers are in the early stages of building an advanced instrument to detect elusive subatomic particles known as antineutrinos.

UCI physicists, including adjunct professor of physics & astronomy Mark Vagins, are key members of an effort to identify the presence of these antimatter counterparts to neutrinos that nuclear reactors emit in large numbers. The project, called Watchman, aims to create detectors that can spot the clandestine nuclear activities – in possible breach of nonproliferation agreements – of various nations from hundreds of miles away.

Why does the work happen so far underground? “Because neutrinos and antineutrinos carry no electric charge and have much less mass than electrons. They interact very weakly with normal matter and can travel through solid objects without slowing down or stopping,” Vagins says. “Detectors need to be highly sensitive and heavily shielded by the Earth’s crust to limit interference from other forms of radiation. Mines have long been considered the best places for capturing and imaging these ghostly cosmic travelers.”
Michael Dennin serves as dean of UCI’s Division of Undergraduate Education, which promotes programs to enrich students’ academic experience. Off campus, the 51-year-old relishes family trips to Disneyland with his wife, Jennifer, who chairs Mater Dei High School’s religious studies department, and their three daughters. In public, Dennin is sometimes approached by fans of the History network’s “Ancient Aliens,” on which he appears regularly. He delivered “The Physics of Superman” talk. He loved the Christopher Reeve movie as a kid and knew it pretty well. One scene shows Superman flying up from the ground to catch Lois Lane as she falls from a building. You can vaguely estimate how fast they’re both going when he caught her and calculate the force involved when they meet, which is fun because you find out the damage he would do is greater than if she just hit the ground. After the dorm lecture, I kept building on the idea, and it eventually led to a general education course.

Q: Does watching a movie and knowing something couldn’t really happen ruin the experience for you?
No. When I’m watching a movie, the last thing I’m thinking about is whether it’s violating the laws of physics. But it’s fun to go back afterward and say, “OK, which parts could be real and which couldn’t?”

Q: You grew up in a dual-religion home, with a Catholic father and a Jewish mother. Can you discuss the development of your faith and how it meshes with being a scientist?
Catholicism has always felt right for me, but no kid can think his mom is not going to heaven, so I’ve never thought any one religion has a lock on everything. Going to a Jesuit high school, I learned that faith is a journey that includes questioning your beliefs, so my spirituality has continued to evolve. The strong intellectual tradition of the Catholic Church has kept me involved as an adult. For me, any understanding of God and faith needs to be consistent with our understanding of physical reality, and being a physicist has allowed me to directly study the force involved when they meet, which is fun because you find out the damage he would do is greater than if she just hit the ground. After the dorm lecture, I kept building on the idea, and it eventually led to a general education course.

Q: What superpower would you want and why?
That moves around, but I currently lean toward Spiderman’s “spidey sense” to know if there’s danger nearby in the immediate future. I don’t need to see way far into the future, which would be a little scary and raise issues of free will and whether the future can be changed. But a sixth sense for impending danger would be really neat.

Q: Your research focuses on foam and bubbles. What are you hoping to discover?
The basic question is whether foam is a liquid or a solid. If you look only at the molecules, you would conclude that foam is a liquid. But it can also act like a solid. Shaving cream, for example, holds its shape. You can vibrate it. Another interesting case is sand — solid particles that can flow like liquid. What makes something a solid or a liquid? This question has a practical application: How do we get stuff through pipes in industrial processing? Right now, whether a material jams or flows is often based on trial and error. If we had a fundamental understanding of what makes something a solid or a fluid at the macroscopic level, it could improve processing.

Q: What is your role as vice provost for teaching and learning?
I’ve always been interested in pushing the boundaries of teaching, but only when there’s research showing that something really does improve learning. As vice provost, I serve as a bridge between the latest educational research and faculty who want to incorporate it in their teaching but don’t have time to sift through all the studies.

Q: How will the new Anteater Learning Pavilion help students and faculty?
The classrooms are designed for active learning, which relies less on instructor personality in favor of enabling students to interact with each other, their professors and the material in a way that gives them real-time feedback on important aspects of the class. I think it will be transformative for the campus. The next step would be to slowly renovate existing rooms on campus.

“People say you have to be able to say no to things, but it’s just as important to know when to say yes.”

Q: What is your role as vice provost for teaching and learning, a post that encourages professors to experiment with innovative, research-backed instruction techniques. In addition, Dennin serves as dean of UCI’s Division of Undergraduate Education, which promotes programs to enrich students’ academic experience.

Off campus, the 51-year-old relishes family trips to Disneyland with his wife, Jennifer, who chairs Mater Dei High School’s religious studies department, and their three daughters. In public, Dennin is sometimes approached by fans of the History network’s “Ancient Aliens,” on which he appears regularly.

Over the summer, he sat down with UCI Magazine writer Roy Riverburg to discuss everything from his favorite superpower to the science of shaving cream.

Zombies, space aliens and Superman helped put Michael Dennin on the map. For more than a decade, the genial UCI physics & astronomy professor has used pop culture references to teach complex scientific concepts — on television shows, in class, at comic conventions, and in an online “Walking Dead” course that drew 65,000 participants. The lifelong Catholic has also written a book that explores how evolution and the Big Bang theory changed. But a sixth sense for impending danger would be really neat.

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The epiphany came on a battered soccer field outside downtown Los Angeles. Edson Orozco’s father – who had never attended high school and worked a low-skill, graveyard-shift job – was once again unable to attend his son’s game. “He always had to sleep during the day,” Orozco explains. “I told myself I didn’t want to end up like that, rarely seeing my children. So I decided I would become the first person in my family to go to college.”

But the Boyle Heights native had no idea what it took to get there. And his cash-strapped high school offered few resources. “In my neighborhood,” he says, “most people either drop out or maybe go to community college.”

Orozco muddled along until his school was visited by College Track, a nonprofit that guides low-income teens toward four-year universities. College Track pushed Orozco to aim higher, providing SAT prep classes and a tour of UCI, which later offered him a full scholarship.

Today, as a UCI junior majoring in business economics and international studies, Orozco aspires to work on Wall Street and earn enough to pull his parents and younger siblings out of poverty.

He chose a proven launching pad. In recent years, UCI has garnered national attention for its ability to catapult disadvantaged students into the upper middle class. The list of metamorphoses includes the district attorney of Los Angeles County, the owner of Oakland’s NBA champion Golden State Warriors and countless inventors, artists, CEOs and professionals.

What’s the school’s formula? It turns out to be a combination of ingredients, including a dash of geography, an unusual campus ambience and a former teenage magician. But the central element is a collection of trail-blazing support programs.

“When I went to college in the 1970s, nobody reached out to first-generation college students. You either succeeded or didn’t, and the university would be fine either way,” says UCI Chancellor Howard Gillman. “Today we’re trying to be less laissez-faire. If we invite you to come here, let’s make it a partnership. ”

“Historically, many Hispanics felt they would best be served by community colleges and Cal States,” Gillman notes. “To take advantage of that geography, you have to do a lot of groundwork.”

Among other things, Anteater officials have spent decades cultivating relationships with local high schools and community colleges that historically have sent few pupils to major research universities. In 1983, UCI teamed with Cal State Fullerton and Santa Ana College to form the Santa Ana Partnership, which dramatically boosted college readiness and application rates among Santa Ana Unified high school students. The program served as a model for other UC campuses.

“Higher education institutions have an obligation to reach out to overlooked communities and create a pipeline for them to attend,” Gillman says. “Do the math. It adds up.”

The efforts are paying off. Between 2008 and 2016, the percentage of Hispanic undergraduates at UCI doubled, to more than a quarter of the student body. In 2017, the campus became just the second member of the elite Association of American Universities to be labeled a Hispanic-serving institution, meaning that at least 25 percent of its undergraduates identify as Latino and at least half of all students receive financial aid. The designation makes UCI eligible for federal grants designed to aid underrepresented students.

“Historically, many Hispanics felt they would best be served by community colleges and Cal States,” Gillman says. “We’re trying to let them know that our doors are also wide open and they can thrive here.”

Nevertheless, location only gets you so far, Gillman notes. “To take advantage of that geography, you have to do a lot of groundwork.”

Other overlooked groups that UCI is focusing on include military veterans and low-income and first-generation students. Getting them to enroll is one thing. Making sure they graduate is another.

Nationwide, just 49 percent of Pell Grant recipients (who typically hail from low-income families) earn a bachelor’s degree within six years. At UCI, in contrast, the graduation rate is 85 percent. The campus also leads the country’s top schools in Pell enrollment, with 42 percent of undergraduates receiving the aid, according to The New York Times’ College Access Index and UC data. That makes UCI the 13th-best university for veterans, up from 32nd three years ago.

“UCI sets the standard with a professional staff that provides the support necessary for veterans to succeed,” says Adrian Marquez, a former U.S. Marine Corps sergeant majoring in materials science engineering.

One of UCI’s longest-running outreach efforts – the Summer Scholars Transfer Institute, created in 1993 – invites 120 community college students per year to live and study on campus for 10 days, at no cost. The immersion experience aims to give potential transfer students “a sense that they do belong here, that a four-year university is reachable,” says Santana Ruiz, deputy director of UCI’s Center for Educational Partnerships.

Another signature program, the First Generation Faculty Initiative, which debuted in 2011 and quickly spread throughout the UC system, targets the roughly 50 percent of UCI undergrads who are the first in their families to attend college. Refined by a social media campaign, it offers mentorship and encouragement from professors who themselves are first-generation college graduates.

Orozco is active in UCI’s Decade Plus, which pairs first-gen arrivals with older peers and grad students who coach them on juggling finances, managing stress and applying for study abroad programs, among other subjects.

In a similar vein, Irvine was the first UC campus to establish a specialized class to guide underclass freshmen, who are mostly Latino and account for nearly one in five new Anteaters, says Kimberly Ayala, director of UCI’s Undergraduate/Undeclared Advising Program. The course covers such topics as time management, tutoring resources and research opportunities. UCI also has dorms dedicated to first-year students who haven’t chosen a major. There, residents gain access to additional academic support and participate in a group philanthropy project.

Within the university, students have easy access to academic support and other resources. Among other things, UCI pioneered the Summer Scholars Transfer Institute, created in 1993 – invites 120 community college students per year to live and study on campus for 10 days, at no cost. The immersion experience aims to give potential transfer students “a sense that they do belong here, that a four-year university is reachable,” says Santana Ruiz, deputy director of UCI’s Center for Educational Partnerships.

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“Layers of Support

The real-estate credo “location, location, location” has served by community colleges and Cal States,” Gillman notes. “Historically, many Hispanics felt they would best be served by community colleges and Cal States,” Gillman says. “We’re trying to let them know that our doors are also wide open and they can thrive here.”

In line with that philosophy, UCI has set up a multitude of support programs to help various constituencies navigate their way into and through the university.

For instance, UCI offers guaranteed campus housing for former members of the armed services and their families. Other vet-friendly enticements include priority class registration, scholarships for those who have exhausted their Cal Grant benefits, workshops and job conferences. For 2019, U.S. News & World Report ranked UCI the 13th-best university for veterans, up from 32nd three years ago.

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“Not everyone is psychologically prepared at age 18 to know what they need,” Gillman says. “But with a little extra attention, they’re primed to succeed.”

Ayla’s office also assists students who do have majors but fail a prerequisite or find themselves struggling academically. “We suggest backup plans and will even call other departments on a student’s behalf,” she says. For instance, if a pre-med student doesn’t pass organic chemistry, counselors might recommend switching to a related field, such as public health, pharmacology or nursing.

UCI’s skill at “redirecting” unmotivated students is essential to keeping dropout rates low, Chertland says. An additional factor that reduces attrition is UCI’s surprising small-college vibe. Despite an enrollment of nearly 36,000, the university feels more intimate and more unique, partly because UCI is divided into 15 separate schools instead of the five or six found at many other UC campuses, Chertland says. “We’re an odd duck,” he adds, but that makes it easier to deliver more individualized attention.

Why does socioeconomic diversity matter on college campuses? Because without it, the strength of America’s workforce and economy will falter, Gillman says. “Right now, too many of the nation’s elite universities enroll more students from the wealthiest 1 percent of families than from the bottom 60 percent, a situation that widens the gulf between rich and poor and ultimately damages overall prosperity,” he says.

UCI and its sister UC campuses are striving to counteract that trend, creating thousands of modern-day Horatio Alger stories. Across the entire University of California system, a third of low-income students jump from the wealthiest 1 percent of families to the most affluent 20 percent within five years of graduating. UCI has been exceptionally effective in the upward economic mobility department. In August, Money magazine rated the campus No. 3 on its list of the “50 best colleges in the U.S.,” in part because of alumni career success.

Post-grad earnings also figured into Forbes magazine ranking UCI fourth in the nation for delivering “the best bang for the tuition buck,” ahead of Harvard, Stanford and Princeton universities. The April report also placed UCI second in the U.S. at vaulting low-income students up the salary ladder.

And in 2015 and 2017, The New York Times ranked UCI the nation’s No. 1 American dream machine, trailed closely by several other UC campuses, for its commitment to socioeconomic diversity. Gillman says he wouldn’t be upset if a sister school someday overtook UCI. “It’s less important that we stay No. 1 than make the point that alumni career success.

One of the unsung factors driving UCI’s efforts is personal experience. The First Generation Faculty Initiative was born out of associate professor of Chicano/Latino studies Anita Casavantes Bradford’s own feelings of isolation and exhaustion as a first-gen student. She relates how her parents’ work may have to pick up younger siblings from school each day and, therefore, would benefit from the flexibility of more online classes, he says.

“I'm loving the experience,” he says. “Each day, I'm a little bit clouded by obstacles – is now in focus. ‘I’m loving the experience,’ he says. ‘Each day, I'm a little bit closer to my dream.’

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The American Dream Personified

From helping homeless youths to leading California’s community college system, UCI alumni are living out the American dream in myriad ways. Tenacious, intelligent and driven, they have overcome adversity to achieve their visions and make a difference in their communities and in the world. On the following pages, we explore just a small sampling of the fascinating success stories created by UCI graduates.

Jackie Lacey ’79
psychology
District attorney of Los Angeles County
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*Best Doctors Inc. asked more than 50,000 world-renowned medical experts: “If you or a loved one needed a physician in your specialty, to whom would you refer?” Only 5 percent of U.S. doctors earn this distinction.
The most satisfying case so far in Jackie Lacey’s career was prosecuting Milton Walker Jr.’s killers. It was 1999, the UCI alumna was a deputy district attorney for Los Angeles County, and the murder was the first tried as a hate crime in California. “Milton was a homeless, 40-year-old addict, and these skinheads were looking for an African American to kill so they could earn the right to get a lightning bolt tattoo conferred by their gang,” Lacey recalls, sitting behind the desk where she has served since 2012 as the 42nd L.A. district attorney. “I wanted to get justice for Milton. Usually in these cases, family and friends call about progress on the case. Nobody called about Milton.”

She succeeded in winning three guilty verdicts – two for race-based murder and one for race-based involuntary manslaughter.

If not for an “introduction to the study of law” course at UCI, however, Lacey may not have become an attorney. Her journey to campus, her subsequent USC law degree, and her leadership of 1,000 lawyers, 300 investigators and 800 support staff have been fueled by family, faith and hard work.

“My parents came here from the South in the 1950s to escape discrimination,” she says. “They had no opportunity to go to college, but they believed that, for me, education was the path to a good job and an enhanced life. I remember my father accompanied me in touring UCI. A group of students of color – Thomas, Gerald and William Parham – were on the welcoming committee. They had us at hello.” (Thomas Parham would become UCI’s vice chancellor for student affairs.)

Lacey majored in psychology and planned to become a teacher. Then, in her junior year, she heard a law lecture by African American attorney Irma Brown (now a juvenile court judge), and she was hooked.

“I loved how she talked to the class, and I thought if I could get a message across like that, I’d be happy,” Lacey says.

Today, as D.A., her message is the clear pursuit of justice. Under her leadership, prosecutors are educated in the scientific and medical aspects of child abuse, such as shaken baby syndrome, and how to communicate them to judges and juries. An award-winning “Blueprint for Change” report that she initiated spurred the training of law enforcement personnel to de-escalate encounters with mentally ill individuals and divert them from jail.

She also created the Conviction Review Unit to reopen cases under the guidance of experienced detectives and seasoned prosecutors – if warranted. It has revisited 1,300 cases and freed two men from life sentences.

“There was some resistance within the department to this at first,” Lacey says, “but I encourage resistance. It’s my job – and part of my mission – to convince them it’s the right thing to do.”

She has also faced resistance from critics decrying decisions not to prosecute officers involved in shootings. She survived a recall attempt in 2017 after running unopposed for her second term a year earlier.

“I listen and try hard to understand and respect the point of view of groups like Black Lives Matter,” Lacey says, “but I was elected as D.A. to serve the whole community and to follow the law; it’s illegal to decide a case based on anything else. And the law allows police to use deadly force if they believe their lives are in danger.”

That said, she adds: “I deal with 48 different police agencies, and the number of people who die at the hands of police needs to be looked at.”

Lacey – who keeps a plaque on her office bookshelf that reads “Faith makes things possible, not easy” – says she has seen too many times what happens when young adults don’t have the family, faith or educational opportunities she has enjoyed.

“My parents came here from the South in the 1950s to escape discrimination. They had no opportunity to go to college, but they believed that, for me, education was the path to a good job and an enhanced life.”

Jackie Lacey ’79 psychology
District attorney of Los Angeles County
Dr. David Lieu employs a precise and brisk manner of speaking when explaining how he specializes in pathology but subspecializes in cytopathology (forming diagnoses from the study of single cells). Still more specifically, he adds, “I sub-subspecialize in fine-needle aspiration, or FNA, which means I take biopsy samples from patients using a very small needle and ultrasound guidance.”

His Alhambra-based clinic is one of the busiest FNA facilities in the nation, and the bustle suits Lieu. Decades ago, after studying chemistry at UC Berkeley as an undergrad, he worried that science might be “too slow” for him, so he applied to both chemistry and medical grad schools.

“I got accepted to both, but I decided to go to medical school and see how that worked out,” he says, with a laugh. When the UCI School of Medicine accepted Lieu in 1975, he was a mere 19 years old, making him the youngest student ever at the time, and he remains one of its youngest graduates. (He credits his sprint through Berkeley’s chemistry program, in part, to having begun studying college-level textbooks while in junior high.)

Long before then, Lieu’s push to excel had begun as a push just to catch up with his classmates. His parents had immigrated to the U.S. from a farming region in southern China, settling in San Francisco. By the time Lieu was born (followed by three brothers), his father was operating a small grocery store and his mother worked as a hotel maid.

They had little education but instilled a reverence for learning in their children, with one small hitch. “We all spoke only Chinese at home, so when I started kindergarten, I didn’t speak a word of English,” Lieu recalls. “If I did something wrong, I’d get yelled at in a language I didn’t understand.” Even worse, spankings were still administered in schools, he adds, “so I was pretty motivated to learn.”

He says he’ll always be grateful for the chance UCI took on him. He was also taking a bit of a chance on UCI. The medical school had only opened seven years earlier and the entire university was but a decade old—and a fraction of its current size, with fewer than 10,000 students.

“Sometimes it seemed there were more rabbits than people on campus,” Lieu says. “You’d never meet up with anyone unless you were in a club. That’s where I met my wife, Diana.”

She got a degree in biological sciences (leading to a doctorate in pharmacy from USC) in 1979, the same year her husband graduated from med school at 23. He subsequently did his residency in anatomic & clinical pathology at UCI, served a fellowship in cytopathology at UCLA, and earned an MBA at UC Berkeley.

Both the Lieus remain actively engaged with UCI, from hosting dinners for incoming students to funding one of the medical school’s largest scholarship programs, the Lieu Scholars in Medical Leadership Endowment. It supports promising students facing economic and other barriers, such as those Lieu encountered as a first-generation college student.

He recalls, “Being the first member in my family to make it out of high school, college was a mystery to us.” For one thing, Lieu didn’t seek financial aid because his parents feared that administrators would rescind his admission if they saw the family didn’t have much money.

“The university doesn’t do that, but we didn’t know,” he says. “Only after I’d been attending for a while did I think I was safe and finally applied for – and got – a scholarship.”

As he does at campuses around the world these days, Lieu returns periodically to UCI to teach ultrasound-guided fine-needle aspiration. When he’s in front of an audience, Lieu says, he’s especially grateful for the wisdom his UCI teachers shared—and for how they did so.

“One instructor in particular, Dr. Thomas Cesario [who would later become dean of UCI’s School of Medicine], was an excellent speaker who communicated his passion and respect for medical knowledge,” Lieu says. “I was shy and not a good public speaker, and he inspired me to want to become one.”

When he gets high ratings for his teaching now, Lieu says, “the credit goes to my trying to be just like Dr. Cesario.”

As if working, teaching, lecturing, publishing papers and philanthropy weren’t enough, he plans to open a second office this year in Los Alamitos. Lieu could easily retire now but says: “If I work another five or six years, I’m hoping to save enough to endow a chair at Berkeley or Irvine. California’s universities have given so much education and opportunity to people like me that it’s natural to want to give something back.”

“Being the first member in my family to make it out of high school, college was a mystery to us.”

– Jim Washburn

Steve Zylius / UCI

David Lieu, M.D. ’79
Founder, Fine Needle Medical Aspiration Group
To hear Jennifer Friend tell it, the defining move of her career entailed a 65 percent pay cut and a shift from litigating cases for a prestigious law firm to now sometimes cleaning up after potty-training young clients, along with myriad other tasks that might befall the CEO of a fast-growing nonprofit.

“I loved being a trial lawyer, but I’m living my purpose in this job. I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be,” she says. “Where” is Costa Mesa-based Project Hope Alliance, of which Friend says, “Our focus is ending generational homelessness by helping to discover and fill the gaps in children’s social-emotional lives, physical lives – including housing – and, very particularly, education.”

Homelessness and poverty create obstacles to earning a high school diploma, the lack of which makes young adults 346 percent more likely than their peers to become homeless themselves, Friend says. To prevent that from becoming a generational cycle, Project Hope helps with mentoring, online curriculums, transportation, housing and intensive on-campus assistance.

Friend began volunteering with the organization in 2011 after seeing Alexandra Pelosi’s documentary “Homeless: The Motel Kids of Orange County.” In 2013, she quit her law job to become Project Hope’s CEO and has seen the nonprofit grow from serving 65 kids and parents to more than 1,000 today, in 92 K-12 schools.

Friend doesn’t have to imagine what homelessness is like: She and her three brothers spent much of their childhoods with their parents sharing a procession of budget motel rooms, where, she notes, “everything a family does happens in one shared room.” She’d originally lived in a waterfront Newport Beach home, but things changed when she was in sixth grade. Her parents were loving, caring people, Friend says, but her father had tied his fortunes to cellular phones a decade too early, when they came in hulking briefcases. Soon the utilities were shut off, and water was borrowed from a neighbor’s hose. Next came eviction and years in motels and short-lived rentals.

Despite their uprooted childhoods, Friend and her three brothers spent much of their childhoods with their parents sharing a procession of budget motel rooms, where, she notes, “everything a family does happens in one shared room.” She’d originally lived in a waterfront Newport Beach home, but things changed when she was in sixth grade. Her parents were loving, caring people, Friend says, but her father had tied his fortunes to cellular phones a decade too early, when they came in hulking briefcases. Soon the utilities were shut off, and water was borrowed from a neighbor’s hose. Next came eviction and years in motels and short-lived rentals.

Despite their uprooted childhoods, Friend and her siblings became successful adults. Her J.D. (from Whittier Law School) comes in handy in her current job, as does her social ecology education. “The law is very four-corners, while social ecology got me thinking across a broad system perspective,” she says. “That framed the way I think about what I do at Project Hope.”

While earning her UCI degree, Friend also worked 50-hour weeks. “To be candid, my affinity for UCI came after I graduated. I didn’t have time then to have a sense of shared experience,” she says. “Now I see so many students at UCI with stories similar to mine who are taking pride in themselves and learning skills that will make them that much more impactful once they graduate. That makes me ridiculously proud.”

In 2012, Friend turned to the university to actualize an idea she had for an art installation showing what a homeless child’s life can be like: a recreation of a motel room her family had lived in for nine months. She recalls: “I contacted Joseph Lewis [then dean of the Claire Trevor School of the Arts] and said, ‘You don’t know me, but I have this crazy idea. Would you do it?’ And he said yes!”

The resulting “214 Sq. Ft.” has been displayed on campus and at Angel Stadium of Anaheim, the Orange County Great Park and other locales. It’s slated to travel to New York this year to be exhibited at the off-Broadway debut of “Nomad Motel,” a play inspired in part by Friend’s life. When not on tour, “214 Sq. Ft.” can be viewed at Second Harvest Food Bank in Irvine.

Between frequent moves, school and teen jobs, Friend didn’t have much of a childhood. She says she makes up for it now, playing with the two children she has with husband Rob Smith ’98, another UCI social ecology alum. She advises homeless kids that they may also have to defer their childhoods but that if they work hard and graduate, their time will come.

Friend says she’s “humbled beyond measure” by the generosity and kindness people have shown the youths under Project Hope’s wing – from large donations to small personal acts.

“The odds are that your own kids are in class with kids who are homeless,” she says. “One of the most direct things you can do is instill in your kids a sense of empathy for their classmates. “One day growing up, my brothers and I were waiting at the gym for our mother to get off work. We didn’t have any money for snacks, and one friend sensed how hungry we were. I’m 48 now, but I still remember the pudding cups he brought us.”

— Jim Washburn

“The odds are that your own kids are in class with kids who are homeless.”
Joe Lacob '78  biological sciences

Owner & CEO, Golden State Warriors

Joe Lacob earned his way through UCI by selling peanuts at Angels baseball games. Now the Silicon Valley billionaire is at the top of his game in more ways than one. He is majority owner of the Golden State Warriors basketball team, which in June won its third NBA championship in four years — heralding a new hoops dynasty. In addition, Lacob and the Warriors are looking forward to moving into a new $1 billion arena in San Francisco when the 2019-20 season opens.

It’s the fulfillment of a dream: He had wanted to own a team from the time he was 9. But accomplishing that goal required a herculean effort.

“As a kid, I came from extremely modest means,” says Lacob, 62, who attended Anaheim’s Katella High School and then earned a bachelor’s degree at UCI, becoming the first person in his family to graduate from college. “I paid every dime of my education through college — every single dime,” he notes.

A peanut vendor from the ages of 14 through 21, he’s proud of the job he did in the stands. “The ballpark was just a mile from my house, most of the games were at night, and I loved being around sports,” Lacob says. “The commission I made was based on how hard I worked.”

Nonetheless, it’s a long way from peanut sales to courtside owner’s seats. UCI, he says, helped make it happen for him 40 years ago.

“You have to realize it was much different when I was a student there,” Lacob says of the campus. “It was very rural, with cows grazing on the hillsides and only about 8,000 students.” (Current enrollment tops 33,000.) But he enrolled at UCI because he was curious about biological sciences and the school was emerging as a bastion of science instruction.

“I had a great interest in neurosciences and psychobiology, and Jim McGaugh, one of the best-known researchers in the field, was there,” Lacob says, adding that the neurobiologist was among the most influential people in his educational career. Now 86, James L. McGaugh is an award-winning research professor in neurobiology & behavior at UCI’s School of Biological Sciences and an active faculty fellow at the Center for the Neurobiology of Learning & Memory, which he founded in 1983.

“I was one of very few undergraduate research students in my laboratory who co-authored a published research paper. I expected him to flourish — and, of course, he has.”

Lacob remembers UCI fondly. “I was very active,” he says. “I needed 180 [units] to graduate, and I took 250 because I had a thirst for knowledge. Irvine had a great impact on my first career. It gave me the basis to succeed.”

After getting a bachelor’s degree in biological sciences at UCI, he earned an M.P.H. in epidemiology at UCLA and an MBA at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. Lacob credits his epidemiology (biostatistics) degree with providing him a background in statistics that helped drive his passion for sports. But his first field of interest was healthcare.

“During a 25-year career, I worked on about 70 startups, many in healthcare,” Lacob says of his time as a managing partner with the Silicon Valley venture capital firm Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers. “But during my whole life, my overriding dream was to be involved in sports and own a team. How you decide at 9 to do that I don’t know, but I did.”

He’d always been a fan of the Boston Celtics. As a kid, he lived in New Bedford, Massachusetts, 60 miles south of Boston, before his family moved to Garden Grove. When the opportunity arose in 2006, Lacob became a minority owner of the Celtics and earned an NBA championship ring with them. In 2010, he moved on, leading an ownership group to purchase the Warriors with entertainment mogul Peter Guber.

The Warriors’ winning spirit has affected the Bay Area on multiple levels, not the least of which has been the charitable actions undertaken by Lacob. Since its 2012 inception, the Warriors Community Foundation has distributed more than $9.2 million in grants, with a major emphasis on education. Its president is Lacob’s wife, Nicole.

“As the first person in my family to attend college, education has always been a focus in my personal philanthropy,” he says. “Investing in kids who may not realize they can attain the goal of attending college is a vision Nicole and I share.”

Rosemary McClure
Skyler Phamle knows a conversation can transform a life. When she was an overwhelmed first-generation student at a community college, a counselor convinced her not only that she could complete her associate degree there, but that she should then transfer to a major university. Now she wants to do the same for others.

Phamle, 25, graduated summa cum laude from UCI on a bright Friday this past June. The next Monday, she began work at three Santa Ana schools, mentoring low-income fourth- through sixth-graders interested in science and math. As soon as her summer jobs ended, she began her graduate studies at Cal State Long Beach, seeking a master’s degree focused on higher education counseling and student affairs.

It’s all part of an amazing odyssey for Phamle, who both learned English and earned her bachelor’s degree within four years of arriving in the U.S. from Vietnam. She’s driven by her family’s experiences to help those with similar backgrounds.

As children, Phamle and her older brother saw photos of their aunts and uncles tucked in a special corner of their home. But they never heard too much about them.

“Every time my mother would start to talk about it, she would cry,” Phamle remembers.

Pieces of the tragic history slipped out. After Saigon fell in the 1970s, her mom’s older brothers and sisters took turns trying to escape to the U.S. on perilous boat journeys. They were never heard from again, their bodies presumed lost at sea.

When Phamle was 11, a note from France electrified the family. It was from an uncle who had survived. Phamle was sent by her mother to Paris on an exchange program for two weeks and decided she wanted to be a French professor. For seven years, as her parents saved money to bring themselves and their children to the U.S. by airplane, she studied French.

The family settled in Stanton. Phamle’s parents have struggled, currently earning about $2 an hour as “independent contractors” stuffing and addressing direct-mail envelopes. Her father didn’t know how to shop in grocery stores or respond to friendly bank tellers. They’ve stayed in north Orange County fairly near other Vietnamese immigrants. But her mother doesn’t drive.

“My mom uses the metaphor that she became mute and deaf when they came here. She can’t talk to anyone besides the rest of the family,” Phamle says.

She and her brother studied hard at Santa Ana College. But the culture threw her. A professor would joke about a TV show such as “Rugrats,” and everybody would laugh. She had no idea why.

“I understand the words, but I’m thinking, ‘What does that mean?’” Phamle recalls. “To some people it’s very minor, but to me it was a reality check.”

She met for several sessions with a guidance counselor, Jane Mathis, who encouraged the young student, and her confidence grew.

“I had a really tough time at Santa Ana College, but I met this wonderful counselor, and she changed my life,” Phamle says. “So I decided, ‘I don’t think professor is the right profession for me anymore.’”

She transferred to UCI and immersed herself in a new major involving psychology and counseling. Faculty, staff and fellow students helped her win financial aid, provided letters of recommendation, and coached her on submitting applications for graduate studies and employment. She, in turn, took multiple jobs focused on helping others.

At the School of Education, Phamle aided researchers studying low-income digital learning. As a Pathways peer educator, she assisted fellow students with résumés, online professional profiles, fiscal aid workshops and healthcare benefits. For the International Student Excellence Programs, she organized bonding events for mentors and mentees. And she became a one-on-one counselor for Santa Ana College transfer students adjusting to UCI.

“I’ve been through the process, so I know how hard it is to go from a community college to a four-year university, how big things are and how fast the quarter system is,” Phamle says.

She shared tips on good professors and avoiding schedules laden with reading-intensive classes. Most importantly, she listened.

Moving forward, she wants to make sure her parents are comfortable financially and then, someday, start her own counseling resource center for college students from other countries.

Says Phamle: “A lot of my ambitions come from ‘What can I do for you?’”

– Janet Wilson

“I’ve been through the process, so I know how hard it is to go from a community college to a four-year university.”

Skyler Phamle ‘18 psychology & social behavior

Graduate student

Steve Zylius / UCI
Oakley grew up in the Florence-Firestone neighborhood, one of the most diverse two-year college districts in the nation.

But in the company of President Barack Obama and senior officials, Oakley—who was invited along with the superintendent of Long Beach Unified School District and the president of Cal State Long Beach—questioned his importance. He didn’t sleep much on that trip.

“It wasn’t until the second or third time we went back that I started to feel like maybe we do belong and maybe we are making a difference,” he recalls.

Oakley, who earned a bachelor’s degree and an MBA at UCI, is currently the first Latino to lead the largest community college system in the U.S. (California Community Colleges serves 2.1 million students at 114 campuses.) Now 53, he accepted the job as chancellor in 2016, with an eye toward expanding on his lifelong mission to move greater numbers of underrepresented students through postsecondary education.

It was early success in that goal that put Oakley on Obama’s radar. The Long Beach College Promise, which this year celebrates its 10th anniversary, forged an agreement between high school and college administrators for a more organized pipeline from high school to college. The Obama administration “started using this as an example of a community serving a population that some people felt couldn’t succeed in higher education,” Oakley says. “If it could be done in Long Beach, it could be done across the country.”

The White House invitation surprised him at first, but “within my framework of thinking,” he says, “somebody believed in me.”

“I was offered a two-year football scholarship at Pitzer College, in Claremont, after graduating from his Catholic high school. But he declined to enroll because he didn’t understand how he could afford to pay for the entire four years of education. Instead, six months later, at age 18, with an infant daughter, Oakley enlisted in the U.S. Army, where he served for four years.

Once out of the military, he found himself raising his daughter with his partner in a “children-raising-children scenario,” Oakley says. The young family moved in and out of apartments, eventually settling in Irvine.

His job prospects were “going nowhere.”

But Oakley says his Army service taught him that he could accomplish things, and on the advice of military colleagues, he enrolled at Golden West College, in Huntington Beach, before transferring to UCI in 1994.

Oakley considers the campus “a savior” because it was the only UC that approached him as a transfer student.

“Because UCI reached out, making me feel valued and wanted, it made my decision easy,” he says. “That made all the difference in the world.”

The university assisted Oakley in applying Veterans Educational Assistance Program benefits to help pay for college. He also took advantage of a student family housing unit, which he says was “vital” in allowing him to attend school full time while raising a family.

After graduation, Oakley would go on to hold several jobs, including that of vice president of college services at Onward College, and in 2002, he joined the Long Beach Community College District. He became its president in 2007. After nearly a decade in that role, Oakley was unanimously appointed chancellor of California Community Colleges. (He has also served as a University of California regent since 2014.)

Among multiple lofty goals for his tenure, Oakley hopes to reduce racial achievement gaps in community colleges by 40 percent over the next five years and eliminate them completely within 10 years. To get there, he is focused on filling key administrative positions with “people who actually have experience or can directly relate to the experiences of our students,” he notes. Like Oakley, 40 percent of California’s community college students are the first in their families to attend college. His overarching aim is to help young people who grow up as he did—feeling that higher education is out of reach.

“When you know,” Oakley says, “somebody believed in me.”

— Allen Young
In Vy M. Dong’s chemistry lab, everyone is part of the family. “We have undergrads all the way up to postdoctoral fellows, many living far from home,” she says, adding that one student has a 5-year-old daughter in China and several others hail from equally distant places. “They left everything behind to come to UCI. Many are making big sacrifices to pursue their dreams, so I try to make it as much a family as I can.”

Family is important to Dong, 42, a Texas-born Vietnamese American molecular chemistry dynamo whose parents fled to the United States after the fall of Saigon in 1975, eventually settling in Orange County. Multiple generations of relatives still live nearby.

Her parents worked hard—her father as a machinist and her mother as a manicurist—to support their four children. Dong became the first in the family to graduate from college. A merit-based Regents’ Scholarship was “a driving force” in her decision to attend UCI, as it lessened the tuition burden on her parents.

She majored in chemistry, completed an honor’s project with Distinguished Professor Larry Overman—who calls her one of his brightest undergrads ever—and graduated magna cum laude in 1998. (A sister and brother later followed in her footsteps, also receiving UCI degrees.)

Dong moved on to UC Berkeley and the California Institute of Technology, where she earned master’s and doctoral degrees, respectively, before beginning a teaching career at the University of Toronto. After six years in Canada, she returned to the U.S. in 2012 as a full professor at UCI. Her entire team of eight Ph.D. and postdoctoral students, who focus on synthetic organic chemistry, relocated with her.

She is especially appreciative of being able to mentor students at UCI who face income and cultural challenges while seeking an education.

“Teaching is a very fulfilling part of my job,” Dong says, noting that her background makes it easy for her to connect with minority undergrads and serve as a role model.

“I tend to tell lots of stories about setbacks I had as a student,” she says. “I tell them it’s OK to flunk a class and take it again. I’m trying to help my students get to the top—to succeed in getting their dream jobs.”

Her focus on making the classroom a second home for students is evident in activities such as birthday parties, brunches, barbecues and special celebrations. One of those took place this summer when Faben Cruz was surrounded by fellow lab members armed with water guns. He was dripping wet and laughing. So were they. Someone broke out a bottle of champagne and plastic flutes and poured a round. Cruz, a postgrad, was being honored by colleagues because an article he wrote had been accepted by the Journal of the American Chemical Society. It was a last hurrah of sorts for Cruz, who completed his Ph.D. in June and accepted a job at Merck Research Laboratories in San Francisco.

His accomplishment is a point of pride for Dong. “I really hoped that when I came back, I’d be able to help train students for future careers,” she says, noting that those hopes have been realized. “It’s been a great experience.” This year’s crop of grads, which included Cruz, makes her particularly happy. Several have found unanticipated success in their chosen field, publishing in academic journals and being offered excellent long-range career options.

“Two went to top-notch corporate positions; two others are on impressive academic tracks,” Dong says enthusiastically. “I’m so proud of them.”

The year has been a good one for her too. She received a UCI Lauds & Laurels Distinguished Alumni Award in May, recognizing the distinction her professional achievements have brought to the School of Physical Sciences. Personally, Dong’s life has changed immeasurably since her first days on the UCI campus more than two decades ago. She met her future husband, Wilmer Alkhas, when she was a sophomore in Overman’s class. He is now her lab manager, and they have a 2-year-old son, Liam, who contributes to lab’s family ambiance.

Dong and her team specialize in catalysis, or the speeding up of chemical reactions at the molecular level. “My group focuses on new ways of making bonds,” she says, culminating in new pharmaceuticals and biological agents.

“In an academic lab, we have two kinds of products. One is the research, and we really hope to make an impact on society that way,” Dong says. “The other major product is the people we are training, and we hope that they will go on to do even better and greater things than we’ve done.” — Rosemary McClure

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In the dynamic life of Lydia Natoolo – one that has taken her from rural Uganda to UCI, from weathering homelessness to making valedictorian speeches, from dilapidated classrooms to medical school – two things have remained constant: struggle, and a community that makes it all worthwhile.

Natoolo, 37, was born in a village called Lusaze, the youngest of 28 siblings. Her mother and father – a survivor of the Rwandan genocide and an Oxford-educated lawyer, respectively – always encouraged her to pursue education, but their circumstances made it difficult. Like many in their community, the large family – most of whom lived together in the same house – often went without food and didn’t have running water or electricity, but still, Natoolo walked several miles to school every day that she could.

Throughout her childhood, she watched friends, neighbors and siblings fall ill and die of preventable illnesses. When she asked her mother why such tragedies struck, she was told that their village lacked the necessary medical facilities and physicians.

“As a little girl growing up with deficiencies all around me, I imagined myself becoming a doctor one day,” Natoolo says. But she couldn’t easily further her education in her home country, since there were no affordable medical schools available to her there. She would have to go abroad before she could truly make the difference she envisioned.

“About 20 years ago, a mighty door opened ahead of me to come to America, with not a dollar to my name but with a big dream,” Natoolo says. As a teenager, she followed an older sister who had moved to Boston, knowing that a U.S. education would provide her the best chance of fulfilling her medical aspirations. However, her plans were soon derailed.

“I decided to enroll at Northeastern University with no knowledge of how the system worked, especially as an immigrant,” she says. “I found myself dropping out of the university as I was ineligible for financial aid, and even with a job, I couldn’t afford to pay for my own tuition.”

Natoolo then relocated to Los Angeles and – over a decade of homelessness, homelessness and instability – worked and attended a series of community colleges. She later moved to Orange County and graduated from Saddleback College in 2015 as valedictorian, transferring soon after to UCI as a biological sciences major, with a minor in political science.

“I established myself in this great country in which you can achieve the American dream only if you do not let anything or anyone make you give up,” she says. “With many struggles, pain, loss and a lot of failure, I decided to create my own dream – the one I wanted to spend sleepless nights on and wake up to every day.”

Natoolo brought her passions for medicine and community health advocacy to UCI, getting involved in student government and countless global service projects. In her final academic year, she was president of the Associated Students of UCI, an ambassador for the Blum Center for Poverty Alleviation, and the recipient of the UCI Dalai Lama Scholarship, which funded an initiative Natoolo led that taught textile skills to HIV-positive Ugandan mothers.

Throughout her undergraduate years, she also raised more than $20,000 for a U.S.-based nonprofit she founded in 2014. Love a Community brings running water, electricity, food and other supplies to Atutur Hospital in eastern Uganda, which serves over 250,000 people. Her organization has helped dramatically cut the facility’s mortality rate. The nonprofit also launched a farming project to grow crops and raise animals to provide food for the patients and the surrounding area, which could eventually generate revenue for the hospital. This year, she hopes to equip the hospital with solar panels.

Natoolo’s community has stood behind her the whole way. She calls her mother every night before going to bed and relies on family and friends, from Irvine to Africa, to encourage her as she moves forward in her education.

Since graduating from UCI this June, Natoolo has been applying to medical schools in pursuit of her childhood dream: to become a doctor and political advocate who can “change the current medical policies in Africa, making them sustainable and effective.”

“UCI has afforded me an opportunity not only to accomplish my education, but also to serve my family in addition to local and global communities,” she says. “That is what the American dream is all about.”

“I am not at the finish line yet, as I need to finally become Dr. Natoolo,” she adds. But reflecting on her journey so far – and the village of support behind her – she feels well on her way.

- Megan Cole
Foot Fight

UCI midfielder Ivan Canales (No. 10) battles a player from Cal State Bakersfield for control of the ball during the soccer team’s exhibition opener Aug. 16 at Anteater Stadium. Canales scored the first goal, and the Anteaters dominated to win 2-0.
My father grew up on a farm in the “upcountry” area of Maui, on the slopes of the Haleakalā volcano. It was pretty remote. He had to walk miles to catch a school bus. And between farm chores, he had to squeeze in his studies by the light of a lantern. Through sheer drive and determination, he was the first in his family to attend college. It was a hard decision – not just because of the cost, but also because it was at odds with a sense of family obligation to remain on the farm.

At the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, he earned a bachelor’s degree in chemistry and met my mother (the first female in her family to attend college). Life was tough for the newlywed couple. After many life adventures, including a stint in the Army, my parents and sister ended up in Davis, California. There, the family expanded with the births of me and my brother.

My father was drawn to UC Davis by the opportunity to study with professor Daniel C. Aldrich Jr., who convinced him to get a B.S. and an M.S. in soil science. My father eventually became a full professor in water science at UC Davis. Little did my parents know that I would end up being university librarian at the Irvine campus where Aldrich later served as founding chancellor. All I can say is that life is full of coincidences, and I feel a sense of Anteater history every time I step into my Langson Library office, which was once Aldrich’s.

As first-generation college students, my parents highly valued education and passed that along to their children. They encouraged us to be curious and to embrace the concept of lifelong learning.

One of my earliest childhood memories is going to the Davis branch of the Yolo County Library, where my mother was a part-time staff member. She checked in books, answered people’s reference questions, set up displays and interacted with the public in ways that helped make the library a vital community center.

To me, the library was a jungle gym for the mind, a treasure trove of amazing facts and knowledge, a launchpad that let me explore new worlds and ideas.

Surrounded by books, I took it for granted that the sky was the limit in terms of what could be investigated and learned. I could borrow and read as many titles as I liked with my public library card. And it was free! So perhaps it’s not a total surprise that I became a librarian. I’m still surrounded by books – though now with the added benefit of access to thousands of digital publications and databases.

Best of all, I have wonderful library colleagues who are polymaths and philomaths – “Jeopardy!” for them is just a warmup, like practicing scales on a piano – and where there is a strong ethos of sharing information, helping people and working collaboratively.

“Helping people” is a touchstone at the UCI Libraries, which get 1.7 million visits per year. I once heard a faculty member rave about a UCI librarian who had assisted him with some aspect of his research. He had taught at numerous Ivy League universities but never knew the librarian there.

Since then, I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve passed along well-deserved thanks to team members who serve as ambassadors to various parts of the campus, as well as staff who work their magic in providing access to 3.7 million volumes and more than 151,000 journals and who maintain comfortable, technology-enabled learning spaces.

We also offer many resources beyond books and periodicals. For example, we know that not every student has a computer or the latest electronics. So, to help level the playing field, the UCI Libraries have laptops, iPads, cameras and video equipment available to check out for completing class assignments.

Research has shown that students who use the library have higher retention rates and GPAs. Recently, the UCI Libraries team has pushed the envelope further by instituting a “personal librarian” program to connect all freshmen and transfer students to librarians and services who support their success.

The personal touch is everything, and that extends to the new peer reference feature, in which students act as information resource to each other. This supplements the ever-popular 24/7 online reference service that provides access to help anytime, anywhere.

When I became university librarian, my husband and I moved into a house in University Hills. We quickly found out that neighbors refer to it as “the Reines house,” in honor of its original owners, Frederick and Sylvia Reines. Professor Fred Reines (whose papers were donated to the UCI Libraries) won a Nobel Prize in physics for his co-detection of the neutrino with Clyde Cowan. I feel privileged to live there, and I’ve enjoyed learning about the couple – such as Fred’s love of singing and Sylvia’s love of gardening.

My favorite quote from Fred is “Never stop asking ‘Why?’” I think my scientist father would strongly agree, because it goes to the heart of what a university does in encouraging us all to ask questions, explore and discover.

My hope is that the UCI Libraries will continue to be a hub for those in quest of information that will advance their knowledge and a resource that fosters curiosity and critical thinking in current and future generations.

Tanji has been university librarian since 2012.
Signature Moves

Quarterback Jared Goff greets fans after the Los Angeles Rams’ first practice of the season July 26 at UCI’s Crawford Field. This is the third consecutive year the NFL team has held its summer training camp on campus.
Viridiana Chabolla was only a few days into her first year at the UCI School of Law when that helpless feeling she had first experienced as a child welled up once again. Walking to class on the morning of Sept. 5, 2017, she remembers feeling that she needed to fight, not sulk: “I felt that I had to figure out what I could do to make sure people know this is not OK.”

Chabolla, who double-majored in sociology and Chicano studies, graduated from Pomona College in 2013 and was hired as a community organizer for a Los Angeles public interest law firm, focusing on cases involving education inequity. During college, she had volunteered for mentoring programs for Latino students and longed to help other immigrants who hadn’t received the opportunities she had, such as going to college. Working for the law firm illuminated her career path. “It led me to see how the law could impact change,” she says.

When DACA was enacted under President Barack Obama, Chabolla, then a junior at Pomona College, joined the ranks of hundreds of thousands of excited, young dreamers. “It started hitting us that this might be a way for us to work,” she says of DACA. “Just to be able to work was a big deal. But I think I remember being a little bit suspicious too, because I had been let down before.”

Chabolla keeps a Post-it Note on her computer with the reminder “Don’t read the comments.” Media coverage of Garcia et al. v. United States of America et al. generates both encouraging and hateful responses. A reader’s comment on one online story about Chabolla suggested: “Move her on the deportation list.”

So perhaps it’s not surprising that this young woman’s hopes for the future don’t hinge on being a successful lawyer — although she’s excited to become one and vows to pursue advocacy work on behalf of people who are powerless. No, Viridiana Chabolla’s one true dream is to call the United States — the only country she has ever known — home. “Being an immigrant, I never felt that I belonged somewhere for sure,” she says. “Growing up, I knew how easily home could be ripped from me. I think I mostly want stability. I want to be safe. I want my family to be safe. I’m thinking of what I have to do to get that.”
Naahal Iravan-I-Sani ‘90, social ecology

As a 10-year-old immigrant from Tehran, Naahal Iravan-I-Sani struggled to fit in with her Irvine peers. “I was the new kid with a funky accent,” she says. “And being from Iran in the midst of the 1979 hostage crisis didn’t help matters.” Two decades later, as a newly hired prosecutor with the Santa Clara County District Attorney’s Office, she was again perceived as out of place. “Are you the Spanish-speaking interpretor?” a defense lawyer asked one day. “Do you know when the D.A. is going to get her turn?” Iravan-I-Sani replied, “No, I don’t speak Spanish, and I am the D.A.” But these days, there’s no mistaking her role. Wearing a black robe, she now sits on the bench as Santa Clara County’s first Iranian American Superior Court Judge. Iravan-I-Sani, who was appointed last November by Gov. Jerry Brown, has also taught trial advocacy at Stanford University and Santa Clara University.

Victoria Sweet, M.D. ‘77

A medieval nun and a San Francisco almshouse transformed Dr. Victoria Sweet’s view of healthcare and inspired her to write two books: God’s Hotel, which national critics showed with praise, and Slow Medicine, for which she received a Cuggerhen Fellowship. Originally from Los Angeles, Sweet has practiced medicine in rural clinics, as a trek physician in Nepal and for Kaiser Permanente. As her career progressed, her work has been sports-related. She also penned travel articles, magazine profiles and a political column. To encourage other writers, Ardell teaches memoir workshops at the agency’s response to America’s opioid crisis. In her spare time, she enjoys cooking, traveling and competitive gaming.

Kenny Loo ‘07, political science

Jailed and expelled students have been Kenny Loo’s specialty for most of his career, but he recently switched to a wider range of pupils. In July, after serving as principal of two Ventura County schools for troubled youth, through Fifth- through Ninth-graders, he jumped to the Camino Village Unified School District, where he oversees educational programs for all middle school students, as well as staff development. Loo credits his passion for helping kids to a post-UCI summer stint with Teach For America in New York City. After returning to California, he got a teaching credential at Cal State San Bernardino, then moved to Ventura County as a substitute instructor, gradually working his way up to full-time faculty and administrative posts. Fun fact: Loo may set a record for longest time living in college dorms (UCI from 2003 to 2007, CSUSB from 2007 to 2009 and, ever since, California Lutheran University, where his wife is assistant director of residence life and student conduct)

Darren Sapsyharaj ‘10, drama

“Waiting for Godot” turned Darren Sapsyharaj into a chef. Up to that point, he’d been studying sound design at UCI, but a class on the play “made me reconsider everything and think about what I wanted to do in life.” He decided to move to New York City and enroll in culinary school. After four years at McElhinney’s fine dining establishments in the Big Apple, he returned to L.A. and worked at a food manufacturing plant and restaurant chain before opening We Have Noodles, which offers a modern spin on classic Asian dishes. Last fall, Sapsyharaj also appeared on the Food Network’s “Beat Bobby Flay,” show, where he defeated the host in a hot and sour soup cook-off. Although he hopes to launch more noodle outfits, his initial romanticism toward the business has worn off: “I would never suggest opening a restaurant to anyone,” Sapsyharaj says. “It’s rarely fun.”

Paul Nitate ’07, chemistry

Novelist Thomas Wolfe’s adage that you can’t go home again apparently doesn’t apply to Paul Nitate. After graduating from UCI (where he enjoyed making nylon and Silly Putty-like substances in the chemistry lab) and earning a teaching credential at Cal State Dominguez Hills, he returned to his alma mater – Universidad Metropolitana in San Juan, Puerto Rico – where he explored post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, suicide, exposure to violence and related aspects of mental health. This fall, he transfers to the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center & School at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, which trains Green Berets and other personnel. There, Gonzalez plans to research stress, sleep, nutrition and other factors affecting soldier performance. Off-duty, his hobbies include cooking, exercise and D&Ding.

Menglu Yuan, Ph.D. ‘15, pharmacology & toxicology

“This is your brain. This is your brain on e-cigarettes.” If Menglu Yuan ever makes a 1980s-style anti-drug commercial, that could be the tagline, based on her research at UCI into the effects of nicotine on teenage brains. While earning her doctorate, she discovered that e-cigarettes create neurological changes that leave adolescents more susceptible to drug abuse. Yuan, who was born in China and raised in Missouri by a single mom who waitedressed while studying computer programming, traces her interest in drug dependency to Boston University, where she majored in biochemistry & molecular biology as an undergrad. She continues to study addiction as a public health analyst for the Food & Drug Administration’s Center for Drug Evaluation & Research. There, Yuan helps shape the agency’s response to America’s opioid crisis. In her spare time, she enjoys cooking, traveling and competitive gaming.

Oscar I. Gonzalez, Ph.D. ‘11, psychology & social behavior

Natural disasters, combat and the traumatic stress they often induce are among the subjects Oscar I. Gonzalez studies as a research psychologist, scientist and Vietnam veteran at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Maryland. Born in New York and raised in Missouri, he came to UCI after serving as a military medic on the Caribbean island and in Panama, Louisiana and other locales. Once he earned his doctorate, Gonzalez worked as an associate professor at his undergraduate alma mater – Universidad Metropolitana in San Juan, Puerto Rico – where he explored post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, suicide, exposure to violence and related aspects of mental health. This fall, he transfers to the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center & School at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, which trains Green Berets and other personnel. There, Gonzalez plans to research stress, sleep, nutrition and other factors affecting soldier performance. Off-duty, his hobbies include cooking, exercise and D&Ding.

Jean Hastings Ardell ’88, English

Although she gave up on her dream of playing second base for the New York Yankees, Jean Hastings Ardell found other inroads to the male-dominated sport. In 2005, she published Breaking into Baseball, a look at women’s involvement with the pastime – as umpires, sportswriters, front office personnel, fans, players, even groups. In 2013, she co-authored Making My Pitch with Ila Borders, the first female to take the mound for a man’s collegiate baseball team and win a complete game. (Adding to the drama, Borders was a closeted lesbian at a Christian campus.) The book has been optioned for a possible feature film. In addition, Ardell spent 10 years chairing an annual academic baseball research conference, during spring training in Arizona. But not all of her work has been sports-related. She also penned travel articles, magazine profiles and a political column. To encourage other writers, Ardell teaches memoir workshops at the University of California, Irvine Magazine.
Nearly 9,800 Anteaters were awarded degrees this past academic year: 8,616 bachelor’s, 687 master’s, 240 Ph.D.s, 115 J.D.s and 95 M.D.s. For the second year in a row, more than half the bachelor’s degrees were earned by first-generation college students.

Renowned economist Lawrence Benveniste ’72 knows how transformative a UCI education can be. It was here that he discovered his passion for mathematics. Now he and his wife, Marie, are opening doors for others through a planned gift.

To read about the Benvenistes’ gift, visit m.uci.edu/UCILegacy. To learn how you too can make a lasting impact on the people and projects you care about at UCI, please contact Roland Ho at roland.ho@uci.edu or (949) 824-6454.

“Charitable remainder unitrust provides for our family, and then we get the opportunity to impact more lives.” — Marie Benveniste

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CEO, UCI Health System

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In celebration of our 25th Anniversary, the Anaheim Ducks are proud to partner with UCI Health.