

the Islander



ISLANDERS TO THE RESCUE

A CRITICAL MOMENT
FOR CRITICAL CARE

OPERATION
CORAL RESCUE

YOUR ISLAND
ADVENTURE AWAITS

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The Islander is published biannually by the Texas A&M-Corpus Christi Division of Institutional Advancement.

DEAR ISLANDERS,



Above: Dr. Kelly M. Miller, TAMU-CC President and CEO, seen here with Island University students. Miller has served as university president since 2017.

At Texas A&M-Corpus Christi, opportunity isn't confined to the classroom — it's in the lab, on the water, and out on the playing field. Equally important are the opportunities in our community, where Islanders are answering the call as they help tackle the Coastal Bend's most complex challenges. In this issue of the Islander, I'm excited to share stories of Islanders who have stepped up to serve — whether it's rescuing fragile ocean ecosystems, advancing health care, or lending a hand to those who need it most.

In these pages, you'll also meet alumni whose paths have led them to become true trailblazers. This includes Valerie Perez '14, whose leadership on the softball field has transformed into courageous service as a firefighter and manager for the Savannah Bananas, and Elena Flores '03, '07, the

innovative spirit behind Corpus Christi's Sew Bonita. You'll also hear from a trio of Islander alumni who have dedicated their lives to teaching and offer invaluable advice to those following in their footsteps.

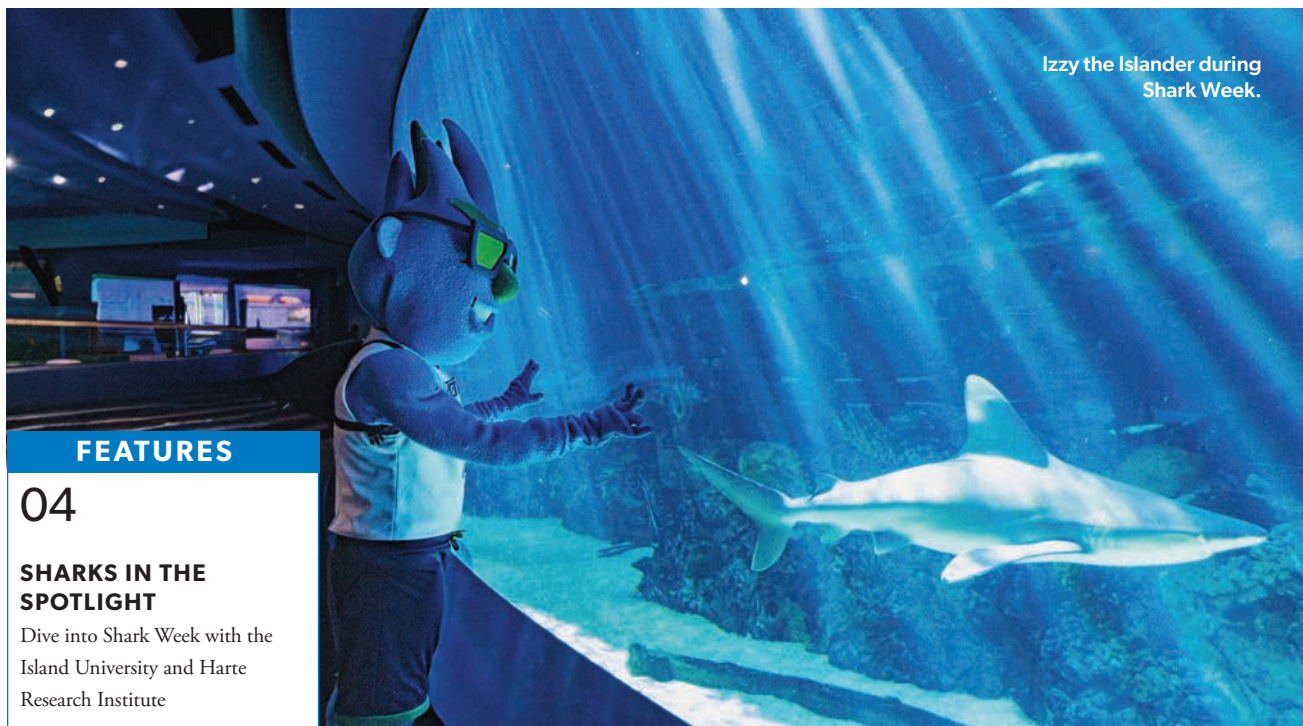
From the moment students first step onto our Island, they embark on a journey rich with discovery, innovation, and community impact. As they graduate, they join a network of alumni whose successes showcase the powerful legacy of the Islander experience.

Thank you for being part of our Islander family as we uplift, support, and champion the unique paths that make our university — and our region — truly exceptional.

Sincerely,

Kelly M. Miller, Ph.D.
President and CEO
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi

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Izzy the Islander during Shark Week.

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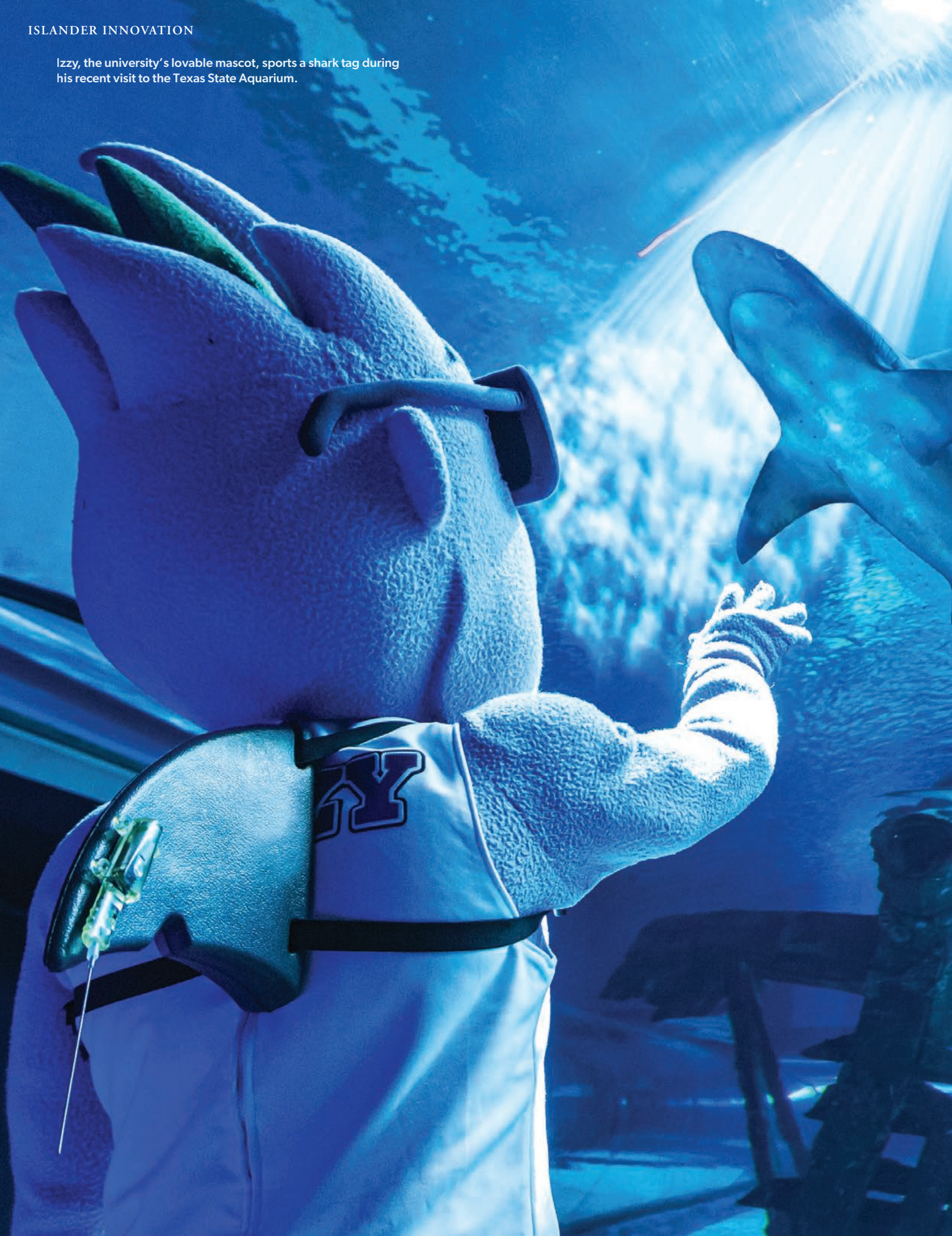
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Izzy, the university's lovable mascot, sports a shark tag during his recent visit to the Texas State Aquarium.



SHARKS

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

DIVE INTO SHARK WEEK AS THE ISLAND UNIVERSITY AND HARTE RESEARCH INSTITUTE STUDY, SHOWCASE, AND SAFEGUARD OCEAN PREDATORS

Each summer, as the Discovery Channel spotlights sharks during its Shark Week documentary series, the Island University renews its commitment to protecting and understanding sharks in the Gulf of Mexico. With eight features in Discovery's primetime lineup in recent years, this summer's university-hosted Shark Week celebration brought excitement to the Coastal Bend through signature events at La Palmera Mall, the Texas State Aquarium, and a free community watch party at Brewster Street Icehouse. These events underscored the university's dedication to studying, showcasing, and safeguarding these charismatic, yet often misunderstood ocean apex predators.

Continued on the next page.

Clockwise: The Island University and Harte Research Institute hosted a community watch party at Brewster Street Icehouse for the premiere of Discovery's Shark Week episode featuring Dr. Kesley Banks '19.



Far left: Visitors to La Palmera Mall were treated to a shark-and-Islander-themed display during Shark Week.

Left: The Texas State Aquarium's "Let's Talk Sharks!" show attracted a large and enthusiastic crowd eager to learn about sharks.

Dr. Kesley Banks '19, Associate Research Scientist with the Center for Sportfish Science and Conservation (Sportfish Center) at the Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies (HRI), spent multiple weeks leading up to Shark Week talking about her shark-related research with various local, regional, and national media outlets. This year, she celebrated her fifth appearance in a Shark Week episode, featured on "Caught! When Sharks

Attack," an episode that explored shark behavior and the science behind shark-human interactions.

"Shark Week is a great avenue to get research out of the lab and into people's day-to-day conversations," Banks said. "It gives people a chance to dig deeper in shark science and seek answers to the questions they have — not only about sharks, but about having a healthy ocean in general, from which we all benefit."

Banks' work is part of the broader, interdisciplinary research occurring year-round at HRI to advance the long-term sustainable use and conservation of the Gulf of Mexico, including sportfish, water quality, coastlines, oysters, and other Gulf ecosystems.

During the last five years, HRI's research portfolio has reached \$160 million for its nine programmatic areas, each led by endowed chairs. A portion of



Above: TAMU-CC's "Break in the Day" offered faculty and staff a chance to mix, mingle, and get into the spirit of Shark Week by dressing up in shark-themed clothing and accessories.

this research is supported by the Sportfish Center, which generated \$17.3 million in grant revenue over the last five years, including \$2.3 million in 2023-2024 alone.

"Beyond our extraordinary research, the Sportfish Center provides the Texas A&M University System and our Island University with exceptional recognition and visibility through Shark Week programming, related events, and social media promotions," said Dr. Greg Stunz, HRI Senior Executive Director. "Our research literally reaches millions of individuals each summer."

More than 1,000 people attended this summer's Shark Week LIVE! community event in downtown Corpus Christi,

"Shark Week is a great avenue to get research out of the lab and into people's day-to-day conversations."

DR. KESLEY BANKS '19
HRI Associate Research Scientist

including Caleb Garner and his mother, Megan, who traveled from Liberty Hill, just northwest of Austin. Eleven-year-old Caleb developed a fascination with sharks after encountering a tiger shark on a charter boat four years ago. The event featured a meet and greet with marine researchers, a group viewing of the latest Shark Week episode, and a variety of family-friendly activities supported by several HRI programs.

"It's a super great experience meeting Dr. Banks," Caleb said. "She has a great personality and her love for sharks is super amazing. I think she's making a good impact on the ocean." •



Join President's Circle Today!

President's Circle is a membership group for alumni and community members to get involved and support the mission and vision of our Island University and President Kelly M. Miller.

MEMBER BENEFITS

Members receive an inside look into the current happenings on campus, with exclusive event programming and correspondence from President Miller.

presidentscircle.tamucc.edu



JOIN TODAY!

MEMBER LEVELS: Bronze Circle: \$1,000 | Silver Circle: \$2,500 | Gold Circle: \$5,000

Valerie Perez '14 is an Islander alumna, full-time firefighter, member of the USA Women's National Baseball team, and team manager for the Savannah Bananas expansion team known as the Firefighters.



ISLANDER ALUMNA VALERIE PEREZ '14 BREAKS BARRIERS IN THE WORLD OF BASEBALL

Feeling the heat is nothing new for Valerie Perez '14. Whether it's swinging for the fences as a softball player on the scorching hot diamonds of South Texas or fighting flames as a Corpus Christi firefighter, when the heat is on, Perez appears to perform at her best. Now her two passions have come together in a new role — baseball manager.

In October 2023, the Savannah Bananas, an exhibition team which can best be described as the Harlem Globetrotters of baseball, announced a

third team to their Banana Ball World Tour. They were given the moniker "The Firefighters," and they named Perez their first manager.

Banana Ball is known for its unique rules, choreographed dancing, and showmanship. Along with record-breaking attendance numbers, the team has over 15 million followers on their various social media platforms.

The team toured May through July 2024, including stops in Nashville, Las Vegas, and at Nationals Park in

Washington, D.C., their first trip inside a Major League Baseball stadium. Perez used vacation time and the help of her fellow firefighters to turn her baseball dream into a reality.

"Being selected as the manager has been an incredible honor in so many ways," Perez said. "While the walk-ups and celebrations are planned, the action on the field is the real deal. We create special moments with fans any opportunity we can get."

“I believe being in high-pressure situations as an athlete translates very well to the fire service.”

VALERIE PEREZ '14

For Perez, this new role was years in the making. It all began at the age of three when the Calallen native was introduced to baseball by her brothers. She played in the Oil Belt Little League for many years, and once in high school, she played softball for the Calallen Wildcats. There, she was a four-year letterwinner, a first-team All-State shortstop, and was named First Team All-District her sophomore, junior, and senior years. From there, it was a short trip to the Island University where she had to earn her way onto the field.

“I initially had a scholarship to play for TAMU-CC. Then I broke my tibia the last game of my senior year in high school,” Perez recounted. “I took a year off to recover, and when I came back, I had to walk on for a new coach. It was a humbling experience, but I found a way to prove I belonged there.”

Belong she did. She was named captain of the team her last two seasons at the Island University, and the softball team renamed their defensive player of the year award to “The Valerie Perez Award.” She also earned her scholarship back. When she wasn't excelling on the softball diamond, she was busy excelling in the classroom. She majored in health sciences with the goal of eventually becoming a firefighter for her community.

“I have always had a calling to help people, it was just a matter of how,” Perez said. “I believe being in high-pressure situations as an athlete translates very well to the fire service. I welcome the intense pressure and take honor in the fact that I, along with my crew, are the ones that arrive on the scene to serve, rescue, and protect our community.”

Managing a baseball team, a firefighting career, and a personal life can be overwhelming, to say the least. But like her work out on the field or in the firehouse, it takes a good team. Perez credits her wife with allowing her to pursue her dreams.

“My wife has been an absolute rock star. She has taken on all the responsibility of raising three kids, managing our household, and she has her own career,” Perez marveled. “Each decision I have made has been 100% made with

consideration and protection of my family. My children have also accompanied me to different training sessions. The support from my family and friends has been incredible. I couldn't do any of this without them.”

Perez's most recent opportunity in the world of baseball had her facing off against some of the world's best. She was selected to the USA Women's Baseball team that competed in the IX World Cup in August 2024. As one of five rookies on the team, and the only player from Texas, she helped the national team take home the silver medal. It was the team's first World Cup medal since 2014.

“Having the opportunity to put on the USA jersey and represent our country was one of the biggest honors of my life,” Perez said. “Playing baseball at this level is a big accomplishment, but to do it while representing our country is something I have dreamed of since I was a little girl.”

It's been quite the journey for that little girl that first picked up a bat just so she could play with her brothers. What started as just a game has turned into a lifetime of opportunities for Perez.

“Baseball and softball have brought incredible opportunities to me and my family,” Perez said. “I will forever be indebted to the game.” •



Left: In 2013, during her junior year, Perez started as shortstop in 44 games, led the team with 107 assists, and earned the Islanders Outstanding Leadership award. Above: In 2024, Perez was named Team USA's everyday shortstop and collected a four-game hit streak while batting .286 with six RBIs.

Put a Ring on it

THE OFFICIAL ISLANDER RING SYMBOLIZES ACHIEVEMENT, UNITY, AND UNIVERSITY SPIRIT

There's a story behind every Islander's ring ceremony. They are as varied as the students themselves, but one thing that unites them all is the pride of receiving this symbol of the culmination of their time at the Island University.

The Fall 2019 Islander Ring Ceremony was an unforgettable day for Leanne Mulholland '08, '11. Her daughter, Elizabeth Valentine '19, a senior accounting major, was among the students receiving their coveted Islander Rings. Mulholland, however, was more than just a proud parent — she was also in line to receive a ring herself.

Eight years after earning her Master of Business Administration from the Island University, Mulholland was finally able to purchase her Official Islander Ring. As a single mother, finances were often tight during her undergraduate and graduate years. However, by 2019, Mulholland's hard work had paid off, and she had become the Chief Operating Officer for

Coastal Community and Teachers Credit Union.

Mulholland remembers the ring ceremony with vivid clarity.

"We were in different places in the ring line due to our different last names, but event organizers graciously allowed us to walk out together," Mulholland said. "To experience this event with your child is an emotional thing, there are no words for it. I was so proud of her, and I was excited for myself. I'm proof that it's never too late to take part in this Islander tradition."

The Spring 2024 Islander Ring Ceremony was an especially touching moment for Matthew Sanchez '24, who graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Health Care Administration. Sanchez had full intention of buying a ring when he learned that he would be receiving the SEAS Legacy Ring based on his time as a student worker in the Dean of Students office. The Legacy Ring comes at no cost to the students who receive it.



Above: Matthew Sanchez '24 celebrates the honor of receiving the SEAS Legacy Ring.

Sanchez was thrilled to share the news with his mother, which had come to him in the form of a congratulations letter.

“I read it out loud and she started crying,” Sanchez said. “And whenever you’re with someone you care a lot about and they start crying, it’s hard to not cry yourself.”

Three-time alumna Dr. Margaret “Peggy” Lara ’98, ’01, ’12 said she is looking forward to experiencing the joy of receiving her Islander Ring at an upcoming ceremony. Lara has been a member of the Board of Directors of the

Islander Alumni Association since 2019 and was Board President from 2020 to 2022. Her role has meant that she’s helped give out hundreds of Islander Rings to deserving students but still doesn’t have one of her own.

“I kept telling myself that I was going to get one — I even went so far as to fill out the paperwork when I was about to get my master’s degree,” said Lara, who currently serves as an Instructional Teacher Advisor with Gloria Hicks Elementary School in Corpus Christi ISD.

As the first in her family to earn a

doctorate, Lara said it would be especially meaningful to own an Islander Ring.

“The Islander Ring is a symbol of so many things,” Lara said. “It’s a symbol of time, sacrifice, challenges, memories, achievements, goals, and the journey. For me, that’s what having a ring will represent.”

After each Islander receives their ring, they are invited to participate in the Ring Wish tradition, where each ring recipient tosses a sand dollar into Woo Sung Lee Plaza Fountain and makes a wish. •



Left and above: The Ring Wish Ceremony is an Islander tradition that involves students tossing a sand dollar into the fountain in Woo Sung Lee Plaza.

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE TO
ORDER YOUR *New* ISLANDER RING!



TRADITIONAL STYLES ALSO AVAILABLE

SCAN FOR MORE INFO



TAMU.CC/ISLANDER-RING

More than 3,200 youth participated in various Island University summer camps in 2024.



FROM

CAMP TO CAMPUS

SUMMER CAMPS SPARK CURIOSITY AND DESIRE TO RETURN AS ISLANDERS

Texas A&M-Corpus Christi remains a bustling hub of creativity, teamwork, and discovery each summer as young students from across the region flock to its diverse offerings of summer camps. These summer camps offer K-12 school children a unique opportunity to explore their passions, develop new skills, connect with mentors, and envision themselves as future Islander students.

Beau Laviolette '28 as Bobby Strong in the Theatre Camp production of *Urinetown*, directed by Alison Frost.



THEATRE CAMP

Camp on the Coast, which invites theatrically inclined high school students from all over Texas and beyond for a highly intensive and creative theatre experience, celebrated its 20th anniversary this summer. Since its inception, the camp has been led by Professor Kelly Russell, while Professor Alison Frost has served as show director for the last decade.

“Our first camp saw 60 campers; this year, we had 117 students,” Russell said. “We are dedicated to giving students a place to do what they love and giving them access to members of the industry who can help them develop into the performers they want to become.”

During the two-week camp, students also live, eat, and sleep on campus. For Beau Laviolette '28, a repeat participant of Camp on the Coast, this final summer as a camper solidified his choice to attend TAMU-CC for his undergraduate degree.

“There is something magical about being in such a welcoming environment; to have so many people who are passionate about the theatre in the same place,” Laviolette said. “As soon as I arrived, I felt like I belonged on the Island, and I made an easy decision to enroll as a student.”

Each year, Camp on the Coast invites a diverse roster of guest artists, including seasoned actors, directors, playwrights, and designers — often an Island University alumnus — to share their expertise and

mentor the next generation of theatre professionals.

Jeremiah Clapp '13, who now lives and works in New York as a professional actor, delivered this summer's masterclass. Once a camper himself, Clapp credits his time at Camp on the Coast with helping to refine his passion for theatre and find a group of like-minded friends — fellow Islanders who, like him, have gone on to thrive in the theatre industry.

“The camaraderie, expert insights, and instruction campers receive at Camp on the Coast, all while having the space to play, makes it really something special,” Clapp said.

The high employability rate of the TAMU-CC theatre graduates means students aren't just having fun and making friends, they are learning skills that will translate into future careers.

“It's so rewarding to see students graduate who just a few years earlier were campers,” Frost said. “And now they are ready to take on the world stage — literally! Our alumni are performing on Broadway or are touring in other productions; they are theatre teachers, or are working backstage, or dancing. The potential for campers here is limitless, and this is where our future Islanders find their families.”

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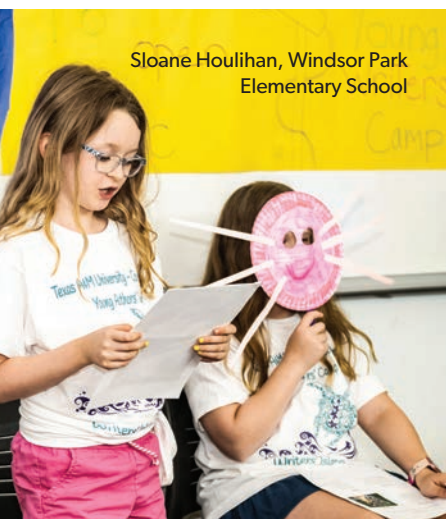




Jose Garza, Gregory-Portland Middle School



From left: Marcus Aguirre, Los Fresnos High School, and Sophia Hernandez, Gregory-Portland High School



Sloane Houlihan, Windsor Park Elementary School



BAND CAMP

In the university's Center for the Arts, it is impossible to ignore clamor of musical strains floating from the rehearsal spaces. Responsible for the flutter of sounds are middle school, junior high, and high school campers enrolled in the university's Band Camp.

"The first day of camp is always chaos with students arriving — perhaps feeling nervous or insecure about living on campus during camp — but by Friday, everyone is flourishing," said Dr. Brian Shelton, Director of Bands and Camp Coordinator.

Jose Garza, a first-time camper and trumpet player, saw Band Camp as a way to learn about different music styles.

"I really want to be in a mariachi band, and I think Mariachi de la Isla is really cool," said Garza, a seventh grader at Gregory-Portland Middle School. "But I think it's also important to work with a variety of styles. While I've been at camp, I've learned a lot about jazz trumpet, which has been a good experience."

For Islander music major Natalia Canelo '26, head camp counselor and French horn player, Band Camp is not only a place to hone her performance skills, but also a worthwhile opportunity to mentor future Islanders.

"I think it's really valuable to explain to some of the older campers how scholarships for music degree programs at TAMU-CC work," she said. "There are so many options here, and we can help campers explore what they might be interested in — whether it's double majoring, teaching music, or studying music industry classes."



YOUNG AUTHORS' CAMP

At Young Authors' Camp, budding writers from elementary to high school are encouraged to unleash their creativity and develop their craft.

"We carefully plan every detail to create fun, welcoming spaces for campers," said Jennifer Monreal '13, an English teacher with Corpus Christi ISD and Camp Director. "Each grade level has a theme, and the camp wraps up with an open mic where campers share their stories. Many students return year after year — one camper has been with us since third grade and is now looking forward to our high school camps."

During summer camp, young athletes learn baseball fundamentals from their favorite Islanders Baseball players.



ISLANDERS ATHLETICS CAMPS

Islanders Athletics camps add another exciting dimension to the university's offerings. With programs in baseball, basketball, soccer, softball, and volleyball, these camps enhance skills, promote teamwork, and foster a love of sports for children of various age groups and skill levels.

"Our athletic camps are not just about improving game techniques, they also build character and create lasting memories," said Adrian Rodriguez, Vice President of Student Engagement and Success & Intercollegiate Athletics. "Many campers return year after year, transitioning from campers to high school players, and some even go on to compete as collegiate student-athletes."



GRAPHIC DESIGN CAMP

Dallas high school senior, Cairo Clay, took a leap of faith when he signed up for the TAMU-CC graphic design camp — Camp Design, Preparation & Inspiration (DPI). This camp, sponsored by the Frazier Family Foundation, aims to help newcomers to graphic design gain exposure and experience in visual communication.

“Going to this camp was a bit of a spontaneous decision,” Clay said. “My friends were planning a fishing trip on the day I was due to finish camp, so I thought, if I don’t like it, I’ll just go home early. But the moment I pulled up at the beach near campus, I knew I’d made the right choice. We spent two weeks learning about graphic design, marketing, and networking, and on Friday, we took a trip to the Art Walk downtown, where we saw the final product of the things we learned during the camp, and it was amazing.”



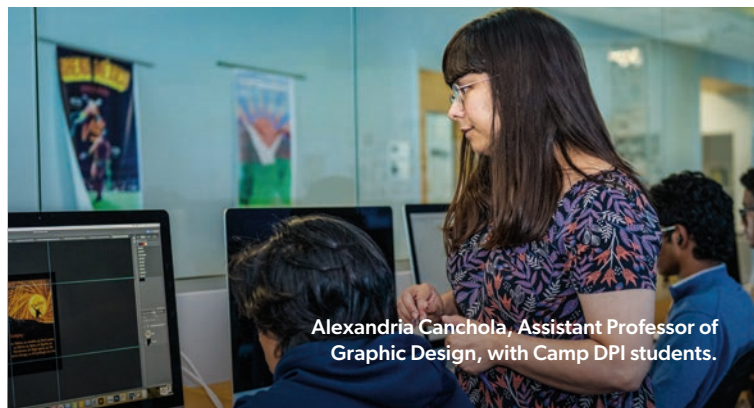
GEOSPATIAL ENGINEERING AND LAND SURVEYING CAMP

At the inaugural Geospatial Engineering and Land Surveying (GELS) Camp, led by the Conrad Blucher Institute for Surveying and Science, 30 young campers spent a week learning how to use surveying equipment, including drones and GPS, while also hearing from industry experts about careers in the field. Campers attended GELS Camp at no charge, thanks to a gift from the Port of Corpus Christi.

It’s easy to see how the impact of these summer camps extends well beyond summer. As campers return year after year, broaden their skills, and deepen their connection to the university, they pave their way to becoming the next generation of Islanders. •



Soleil Garcia '24, Camp DPI mentor and graphic design major, with graphic design campers.



Alexandria Canchola, Assistant Professor of Graphic Design, with Camp DPI students.



Benjamin Buttler, Flour Bluff Intermediate School

Registration for
SUMMER CAMPS
 Opens March 2025

Available for K-12 | For more information, visit tamucc.edu/camps

OPERATION CORAL RESCUE

HARTE RESEARCH INSTITUTE PARTNERS IN JOINT RESCUE
MISSION TO PROTECT NEARLY 300 CORALS

In the shimmering waters of the Gulf of Mexico, beneath the surface where the sunlight dapples the seafloor, lies one of the ocean's most vital ecosystems: coral reefs. These underwater cities, built over thousands of years by tiny coral polyps, are more than beautiful landscapes — they are lifelines for the ocean and humanity.

The Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies (HRI) at Texas A&M-Corpus Christi is broadening its coral research efforts with the addition of a Coral Reef and Ocean Health Lab. At the helm of that lab is Dr. Keisha Bahr, who has dedicated her career to understanding these fragile ecosystems. In June, she was appointed HRI Chair for Coral Reef and Ocean Health. In that role, Bahr will work closely with other HRI researchers focused on ocean acidification, oyster reef ecology, socioeconomics, resiliency, and water quality to better understand and mitigate the effects of environmental change on corals and coral reefs.



Above: Dr. Keisha Bahr stands by a tank at the Texas State Aquarium's Center for Wildlife Rescue, where endangered corals now occupy space usually reserved for rehabilitating sea turtles.

“Coral reefs provide essential services that support vibrant marine communities and benefit us on land,” Bahr said. “These massive three-dimensional structures offer food and shelter for marine life, act as the rainforests of the sea, and provide natural coastal protection for our shorelines. We also rely on coral reefs for medicinal resources, sources of protein, and tourism, and they hold immense cultural value, but we are losing coral reefs at an alarming rate. It is estimated that we have lost half of our coral reefs over the last three decades.”

Bahr, an Ohio native, developed an interest in marine biology during high school, leading her to the University of South Florida and later to the University of Hawai'i, where she earned a Ph.D. in zoology as the first in her family to attend college. She spent nearly a decade in Hawaii studying coral reefs, collaborating with local communities and agencies such as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to understand and monitor changes occurring on Pacific reefs.

In 2019, Bahr joined TAMU-CC as an Assistant Professor of Marine Biology

and discovered the vibrant coral gardens within the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary. This unique coral ecosystem, located approximately 100 miles off the coast of Galveston, is among the healthiest in the greater Caribbean and Gulf region. Bahr collaborates with the sanctuary to support monitoring efforts and address scientific needs. In 2022, Bahr was appointed as an HRI Fellow, where she works with Dr. Mark Besonen, HRI Director of International Programs, and International Chairs Dr. Nuno Simões (Mexico) and Dr. Patricia González Díaz (Cuba) to co-develop and promote standardized coral reef monitoring methods across the Gulf of Mexico.

“We specifically focus on providing tools and solutions, whether scientific advances or resource management strategies, to support local managers and communities in their coral conservation efforts,” Bahr said.

In September, Bahr joined researchers at Nova Southeastern University on a project dubbed “Operation Coral Rescue,” a crucial conservation mission that transported more than 300 corals from Florida to their temporary new home at



From left: TSA Operations Maintenance Coordinator Gilbert Mendoza, TSA Chief Operating Officer Justin Sefcik, and TSA President and CEO Jesse Gilbert '07, '14, '22 help offload boxes of corals from the aquarium's Wildlife Response Vehicle.

the Texas State Aquarium's Center for Wildlife Rescue in Corpus Christi. Thanks to their new Texas home, these corals, including more than 100 genotypes of critically endangered Staghorn coral and colonies of endangered mountainous star coral, will help preserve genetic diversity and support experiments on dredging effects.

The corals will also have an educational component, as these corals of opportunity — those removed from artificial structures, such as tires, or broken from their substrate or foundation — will be used to develop a coral health color card for Caribbean corals, supporting coral monitoring efforts in the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean.

Ultimately, these corals will permanently transfer to Bahr's newly remodeled state-of-the-art lab at HRI, which should be complete in early 2025.

“Through our research, we are committing to ensuring that these corals not only survive, but thrive,” Bahr said. •

LIFE at Island U



ANCHOR CAMP!

Each fall semester, the Islander community welcomes new and returning students to campus during Waves of Welcome, better known as WOW. During WOW, students learn Islander traditions, make friends and connections, explore campus and community resources, and show their Islander Spirit.



WELCOME WEEK WENT OFF!



TAMU-CC



e

Islanders Beach Bash helps students start the year off with a bang! The party includes music, games, food, and giveaways. Fireworks are sponsored by the Islander Alumni Association.



Islander Family Weekend welcomes the whole Islander family — from parents to siblings to extended family and chosen family — to visit campus and see TAMU-CC through the eyes of their student.

#ISLANDERFOREVER

TIME WITH THE FAM!

Entrepreneur Elena Flores '03, '07 is the proud owner of Sew Bonita, which sells a bit of everything, including Mexican imports, accessories, beauty products, and eclectic merchandise with local flair.



A photograph of Elena Flores, owner of Sew Bonita, standing in her colorful store. She is wearing a black dress with floral embroidery and has vibrant pink hair. The store is filled with Mexican-themed merchandise, including colorful plates, bowls, and decorative items. A large circular sign in the background reads "ISLANDERS MEAN BUSINESS".

Sew Bonita®

FROM STITCH TO STOREFRONT

ISLANDER ALUMNA ELENA FLORES '03, '07 TAKES NON-TRADITIONAL PATH TO SUCCESSFUL BRICK-AND-MORTAR

In a colorful Corpus Christi storefront filled with souvenirs, novelty items, and home goods bearing distinctly Spanglish phrases and Tex-Mex slang, Sew Bonita owner Elena Flores '03, '07 works diligently to prepare for the morning rush just before the store's first hour of operation. It's the middle of summer, and Flores and her husband, Gerald, attend to every detail to ensure no sales opportunity is missed.

Flores, a proud Island University double alumna with a Bachelor of Science in Health Science and a Master of Science in Community Counseling, initially

pursued a career in case management for adults with special needs. Despite the satisfaction her work provided, she always felt something was missing. From a young age, she had envisioned herself as a store owner.

"I've always been in love with Tex-Mex culture — the color, the food, the smells, everything," said Flores, a native of Eagle Pass, Texas. "I've always felt like this was something that I want to do, but I put it on the back burner."

In 2014, Flores' husband gifted her a sewing machine, a gesture that would become a turning point in her life.

"My mother, Esperanza Ruiz, passed away in 2008 right after my time in grad school," Flores said. "She always wanted to teach me how to sew, but I was a rebellious teenager, so I never learned. When Gerald gifted me the machine, I signed up for some sewing workshops and I finally learned how to sew."

Flores works closely with her husband, a graphic designer by trade, to realize her design ideas. As she honed her skills, Flores began creating T-shirt designs that featured references to Latino culture as well as prideful souvenir items bearing fresh takes on the city's name and familiar

places. Before long, those designs could be found on coffee mugs, stickers, keychains, and magnets.

“At first, it was just for fun, making things and then learning from the mistakes,” Flores said. “And then, it just took off. Starting in 2021, we did pop-up markets and I hosted quarterly markets called ‘Loca for Local,’ which is a phrase I have since trademarked. So, here I was working full-time in social services, and I also had a thriving side hustle.”

Given their growing customer base, the couple decided to launch a brick-and-mortar retail space where buyers could easily browse and buy items from the store’s eclectic line of products. The couple opened Sew Bonita in a 500-square-foot

storefront in Hamlin Shopping Center in late 2021.

“I signed a one-year lease because we just didn’t know; I was still working full time during the week and opening the shop on weekends. I worked seven days a week for a whole year just to test the waters,” Flores said.

Demand for the store’s products, which includes popular items from Mexico, proved so strong it prompted the search for a larger retail space. The couple moved the store to its current location in Meadowbrook Shopping Center on Alameda Street near Airline Road in October 2022.

Sew Bonita’s strong social media presence has attracted customers from as

far away as Detroit, New York, Norway, and even Japan. The store was featured on the ABC show “Good Morning America” and was profiled by Texas Monthly.

“Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would be in a printed magazine that my dad subscribes to,” she said.

Flores said she encourages entrepreneurial-minded Islanders to listen to their heart but remember to plan accordingly.

“I know the fear of leaving the safety of constant income, health insurance, and retirement,” Flores said. “Jumping out of that world and into self-employment is scary, but with proper planning, it’s entirely possible and totally worth it.” •



Elena Flores '03, '07 turned her sewing hobby into a profitable storefront.




CONSEJOS DE ELENA
+ ELENA'S TIPS +

BEST ADVICE FOR TAMU-CC STUDENTS

Make friends, join organizations, and get involved. The people you bond with will be lifelong friends!


BEST REASON FOR ALUMNI TO STAY CONNECTED TO TAMU-CC

To see the magic and the growth that happens at our school that allowed us to become the professionals we are today.



A CRITICAL MOMENT FOR CRITICAL CARE

TACKLING THE NURSING SHORTAGE,
ONE GRADUATE AT A TIME



In the College of Nursing and Health Sciences Simulation and Clinical Learning Center, Emma Gibbs '22 strengthens her nursing skills, ensuring that she is practice ready upon graduation.

Deep within the jungles of Costa Rica, concealed by trees that have been rooted there for generations, you'll find a group of people with little access to health care. It's also where Rita Castillo '24, a recent graduate of the College of Nursing and Health Sciences (CONHS), found a new appreciation for her field of study.

"It's very beautiful, but different there," Castillo said. "I feel like I have more empathy now following this experience. I'll bring that back to a hospital setting when I'm dealing with families who are going through stressful situations."

Castillo was part of an annual 10-day trip for nursing students, where they offered medical check-ups to indigenous families in Costa Rica. It's a trip that not only gives nursing students practical experience but also imparts lessons to last a lifetime.

"Their eyes are open, for sure," said Leigh Shaver, Assistant Clinical Professor. "The educational benefit is immeasurable anytime you can take a student out of the classroom and place them in a real-world setting."

Now more than ever, educating the nurses of tomorrow is vital. The nursing profession is experiencing an unprecedented shortage that shows no signs of abating. This lack of nurses will not only impact the quality of patient care but will also have far-reaching effects

From left: Leigh Shaver, nursing faculty, and Rita Castillo '24, recent nursing graduate, interact with a young patient in Costa Rica.



throughout the entire health care system. According to Nurse.org, Texas is ranked as one of the states with the highest shortage of nurses, with a projected deficit of over 34,000 nurses by 2030.

"Due to an aging patient population, along with population growth of the Corpus Christi community, there is a need for more nurses," said Gloria Madera, Public Relations Manager for CHRISTUS Health. "It is so important to have partners like Texas A&M-Corpus Christi in our community to help meet that need and train our community's future nurses." *Continued on the next page.*

Islander nursing students and faculty learn about the biodiversity of the Costa Rican environment on a waterfall hike at the Texas A&M Soltis Center for Research and Education.



From left: Delfino Salinas III '25 and Assistant Clinical Professor Amiee Griffis reinforce clinical skills using "Hal," an artificial intelligence-powered patient simulator.



Another main driver of nurse insufficiency is the lack of qualified faculty available to educate nursing students. To address this challenge, Texas A&M-Corpus Christi is requesting funding during the 88th Texas State Legislature to educate more nurse leaders through its Doctor of Nursing Practice program, who can then, in turn, educate the next generation of nurses.

Proper training is crucial for those in the business of critical care, and Islander faculty take pride in delivering that expertise. Each year, more than 200 Islander nurses graduate — a number that continues to grow, along with the advanced tools used to prepare these future lifesavers.

"The college has a state-of-the-art Simulation and Clinical Learning Center that allows our faculty to simulate scenarios that our students will face in the real world," said Dr. Hassan Aziz, CONHS Dean. "This allows them to strengthen their skills in a safe

"With the shortage the industry is currently experiencing, the opportunities for our nursing students are boundless."

DR. ELIZABETH LOIKA, Associate Clinical Professor

environment and prepares highly skilled nurses to join the workforce."

The college's 12,000-square-foot "sim lab" can be found on the second floor of Island Hall on the main campus of the Island University. Walking through the center's doors immediately transports one from an academic environment into what

feels like a real critical care facility. The typical elements of an emergency room are present: a hospital bed, monitors for tracking vitals, a crash cart, and other lifesaving instruments. However, these are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the available teaching tools.

"We recently purchased an artificial-intelligence-powered mannequin named Hal that allows students to diagnose and care for a simulated patient," Aziz said. "Hal can carry on a conversation and even says things like 'My stomach hurts.' He can respond to questions, describe his health situation, shake hands, and show emotion. Hal is as close to real life as it gets."

Hal can also exhibit stroke symptoms, such as facial drooping and slurred speech, as well as coughing or even a simulated heart attack. Beyond working with Hal, students can also use virtual reality goggles to participate in various procedures, including delivering a baby.

"From neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) nurses to emergency room

*“My family is here
and so is my dream
job. This is where I
accomplished my goals,
and I am here to stay.”*

RITA CASTILLO '24

nurses and beyond, the need for highly skilled nurses is well documented,” Aziz said. “And, providing our students with modern resources as well as a committed faculty helps to ensure that they are ready to provide high-quality health care to the communities they serve.”

The hope is that most of these future nurses will stay and work in Coastal Bend, near their alma mater. These are nurses who are well-prepared, with a 90.05% pass rate on the National Council Licensure Exam. These are nurses who are also well-

supported. Since 2016, thanks to a Health Resources and Services Administration grant, the college has awarded more than \$5.2 million in scholarship funds to 441 disadvantaged students, an average of \$9,000 per student at 60 students per year.

“With the shortage the industry is currently experiencing, the opportunities for our nursing students are boundless,” said Dr. Elizabeth Loika, Associate Clinical Professor, Family Nurse Practitioner, Pediatric Nurse Practitioner, and TAMU-CC FNP Program Coordinator. “They can be clinical nurses, hospital nurses, even a military nurse. Islander nursing graduates are eager to embrace diverse nursing experiences.”

Loika knows all too well how dire the nursing shortage is. That’s because she is also a nurse practitioner at Amistad Community Health Center, a nonprofit health facility in Corpus Christi aimed at helping the less fortunate. It’s a place where Loika’s students complete essential clinical hours required for graduation, but more importantly, where they can see

firsthand how the skills they’ve learned can positively impact others.

“The life lessons are endless for the students,” Loika said. “Whether they are helping young pregnant women, the elderly, or victims of crime, the students learn how to aid our underserved, vulnerable populations. This experience instills in them a renewed commitment to serving the community after graduation.”

The lesson Castillo took from the jungles of Costa Rica — being of service to others — is the same commitment she continues to uphold right here in Corpus Christi. In October, she began a residency program at Driscoll Children’s Hospital with the goal of becoming a NICU nurse. It’s yet another success story for the College of Nursing and Health Sciences, as an Islander alumna plants roots in the community where her health care journey began.

“My family is here and so is my dream job,” Castillo said. “This is where I accomplished my goals, and I am here to stay.” •



BUILD YOUR LEGACY WHILE CHANGING STUDENTS' LIVES

Many supporters like you—who care about keeping your Island University a top research institution while benefiting the Coastal Bend—may be interested in tax-smart ways to help ensure a strong future for our students and our community. You can create an impact by making a gift from your will, your retirement accounts, or your life insurance policy.

Giving to **Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi** provides support for scholarships, scholarly activity, research, and more. To learn more about making a planned gift, visit plannedgiving.tamucc.edu or contact the Office of Development at **361.825.2639**.

ASK AN

ISLANDER

AN INTERVIEW SERIES

We're excited to launch our new "Ask an Islander" series in this edition of Islander Magazine, where we shine a spotlight on university alumni making waves across various industries, bringing together individuals from different stages in their careers to share their unique journeys and motivations. This inaugural edition focuses on the educational sector and the incredible alumni inspiring generations to come.



Meet Melissa Guerra '16, a dedicated pre-K teacher known for her exceptional connection with students and families at Sam Houston Elementary School in the Corpus Christi ISD; Chris "Coach" Steinbruck '02, '07, the Flour Bluff ISD Superintendent of Schools, whose career spans from coaching to educational leadership; and Dr. Rebecca Palacios '76, a retired Corpus Christi ISD bilingual educator, teacher advocate, and author whose extensive experience and commitment to bilingualism continue to influence the field. Together, their stories provide a rich tapestry of insights into the evolving landscape of education.



MELISSA GUERRA '16

Pre-K Teacher at Sam Houston Elementary School
Bachelor of Science in Interdisciplinary Studies
(EC-6 with an emphasis in Bilingual Education)



CHRIS STEINBRUCK '02, '07

Superintendent of Schools for Flour Bluff ISD
Bachelor of Science in Kinesiology
Master of Science in Secondary Education



DR. REBECCA PALACIOS '76

Retired Educator, Educational Advocate, Author
Master of Science in Curriculum and Instruction
(Emphasis in Early Childhood Education)

ON STARTING OUT

MELISSA GUERRA: Teaching for me was always a true calling from God. I can remember thinking that my kindergarten and first-grade teachers were perfect in my eyes; I watched everything they did and aspired to be like them. Not only were they amazing educators, but the way they built a relationship with my family was heartwarming. Now I strive to be that inspiring teacher to my students. Teaching requires a genuine passion to help others learn and grow. It embodies a spirit of servitude in that it encompasses serving and prioritizing the needs of others and embracing this servitude means understanding the depth of commitment required in this profession.

CHRIS STEINBRUCK: My inspiration to pursue education was deeply rooted in the influence of the educators around me. My mother, a third-grade teacher, exemplified the profound impact a teacher can have on a child's life. My father, who coached Little League, taught me the importance of knowing and caring for the people you work with and how relationship-building and integrity can positively influence others. Now, as superintendent, I am driven not just by a desire to educate, but by the opportunity to shape the overall educational environment. I want to ensure that students are embraced as part of a community and value the same principles of integrity, hard work, and academic excellence that were instilled into me.

DR. REBECCA PALACIOS: I can remember being inspired by my teachers from an early age, particularly noticing their teaching and learning styles, and strategies to bring out the best in their students. Now, I believe that career teachers should consist of our best and brightest graduates, although there is a current lack of teachers in our nation's classrooms. Now as an educational consultant, my 34 years of experience in the classroom have provided me with the knowledge and skills to advocate for public education, particularly in terms of funding and ensuring teachers are paid a meaningful salary.
Continued on the next page.



ON BEING A LIFE-LONG LEARNER

GUERRA

Each year, I see more and more students with greater needs to fulfill, and teachers must adapt to properly address and support these needs. I am continually learning to support my students to the best of my ability — and I often find that teachers learn best from those in the trenches alongside them. Moreover, watching the sheer resilience and determination of my students to learn and succeed, seeing their potential and growth in the face of obstacles, drives me not only to become a better educator but a better person; my students teach me every day.

STEINBRUCK

Patience is a quality that is often overlooked — not only by students, but by teachers themselves. Teaching is a long and often challenging journey, but each experience contributes to your growth as an educator and leader. It is crucial to be patient with your own progress, to savor the moments that matter, and to keep learning and adapting along the way. I often think of teaching as a calling rather than simply a profession, and it is what you experience on this journey that truly fosters the impact you have on others.

PALACIOS

I feel that, aside from taking inspiration from my students, one of the reasons I had such a long classroom career was because of the support that I had from my administrators and colleagues. We were all united by our goal of providing holistic care and advocacy for the child. A strong workplace support system is imperative for alleviating feelings of burnout and that is why, even though I have since retired from teaching, I remain an educator to empower teachers and enact change for public schools.

ON BEING INSPIRED

GUERRA

My career so far has seen me work with children from very difficult circumstances, including those with mental illness, abuse victims, and children in foster care, which has required me to think outside the box to build relationships that foster trust and set students up for success. My most rewarding experience in teaching has been working with a student who was blind. Her disability meant that I needed to teach in a different way to enable her to grasp concepts; this meant developing more tactile approaches to teaching and changing my voice and intonation to encourage her engagement.

STEINBRUCK

A pivotal moment in my career occurred during my time as athletic director and head football coach at Flour Bluff High School when our team advanced to the state semi-finals in 2021. This achievement was not just a victory on the field — it was a powerful demonstration of how hard work and success can unite an entire community. I saw firsthand how the dedication and spirit of our team rallied everyone — students, parents, faculty, and local supporters — creating an incredible sense of pride and unity. It also opened my eyes to the power of community spirit, and significantly influenced my approach to leadership.

PALACIOS

As a teacher, I believed the education and welfare of my students was paramount, and this has continued to inspire me to advocate for teachers who are in the unique position to shape the educational experiences of children. Teachers need to be empowered, funded, and supported to teach the whole child at their full capacity, and be appreciated for this extremely impactful role in the lives of their students.

ON THE ISLAND

GUERRA

I am so thankful for the time I spent at TAMU-CC. The professors and mentors I had were passionate, knowledgeable, and dedicated to making sure we left college prepared to be effective teachers. I felt so confident in my first year of teaching because of these professors, and I want my students to feel as supported and cared for as I was at TAMU-CC.

STEINBRUCK

Texas A&M-Corpus Christi will always hold a special place in my heart, not just for the education I received, but for the way it shaped my career and supported me in achieving my goals. My mentors on the Island taught me that education is not just about content; it's about connecting with people and making a lasting impact. This university is not just an institution; it's a community that has been instrumental in my journey, and for that, I am forever grateful.

PALACIOS

My fondest memory of Corpus Christi State University was working in the wonderful Early Childhood Resource Center on campus while I undertook my master's degree. That center was a treasure trove of great ideas and resources — many of which I took with me into my professional career. I, along with thousands of teachers and students, was deeply impacted.

ON LOOKING BACK

GUERRA

The advice I wish I'd been given early in my career is to accept feedback, because it is crucial for growth. As a new teacher, it was very difficult for me to accept constructive criticism because I thought it meant that I was doing a bad job. Once I let go of this mentality and stopped being so hard on myself, I became a better teacher for my students.

STEINBRUCK

Reflecting on my career, I wish someone had emphasized just how fast the years go by. Too often, I was focused on the next challenge; always moving forward without appreciating the wins along the way, and by this, I mean the lives we've changed for the better. As a coach, you don't always see the impact you've made until years later, when a former player tells you how much you meant to them.

PALACIOS

The best advice I was given was to meet the needs of my students, while focusing on the positive. I also learned early on to adopt the motto, "You never get a second chance to make a good first impression." •





SERVING UP

A WINNING TRADITION

ISLANDERS TENNIS CHARTS PATH TO HISTORIC SUCCESS

The Islanders women's tennis team celebrating its fourth straight Southland Conference Championship in 2024 to advance to the NCAA Tournament for the fourth year in a row, the first time in the 61-history of the conference this has been done.

Success can be hard to define. Many times, it's in the eye of the beholder. But if you stroll through the university's Thomas J. Henry Tennis Center, located on Nile Drive, success isn't hard to miss. It's captured in the championship banners and player tributes that adorn the courts. It's a winning tradition built on a set of unwavering core values.

"We run the team as one big family."

STEVE MOORE, Head Coach of Islanders Men's and Women's Tennis

"We call them the four pillars. They come from my grandfather, Paul Laudadio," said Steve Moore, Head Coach of Islanders Men's and Women's Tennis. "Put God and family first, work with an extreme work ethic, do the things you

say you're going to do, and treat people the way you want your children treated. That makes up family, character, grit, and discipline."

Those pillars helped lay the foundation for the university's current tennis program which began in 1998 with Coach Moore at the helm of the men's team. Back then, the courts were located on the university's main campus, where Island Hall now stands. At the time, there were only two courts, and a hole in the fence which led to the occasional early morning greeting from a fox or opossum. It wasn't much, but it was enough for Moore, who turned humble surroundings into an asset.

"We had no flash, but we had a blue-collar mentality to sell. We had grit," Moore said. "We were going to outwork everyone. We tied resistance bands to the hole in the fence so players could get in a strength workout. The springy fence was also perfect for throwing a medicine ball against."

That hard work would pay off. Both Islanders Men's and Women's Tennis have become the winningest programs in Southland Conference history, holding all-time records for NCAA appearances and conference championships. In 2023, both teams made the NCAA Championships; only 29 universities in America had both their men's and women's teams at the championships that year. Also, the women made the NCAA Championships four years in a row, from 2021-2024; only 34 Division I schools accomplished this. Coach Moore's 16 NCAA tournaments and 14 Coach of the Year awards represents the most in conference history for any sport.

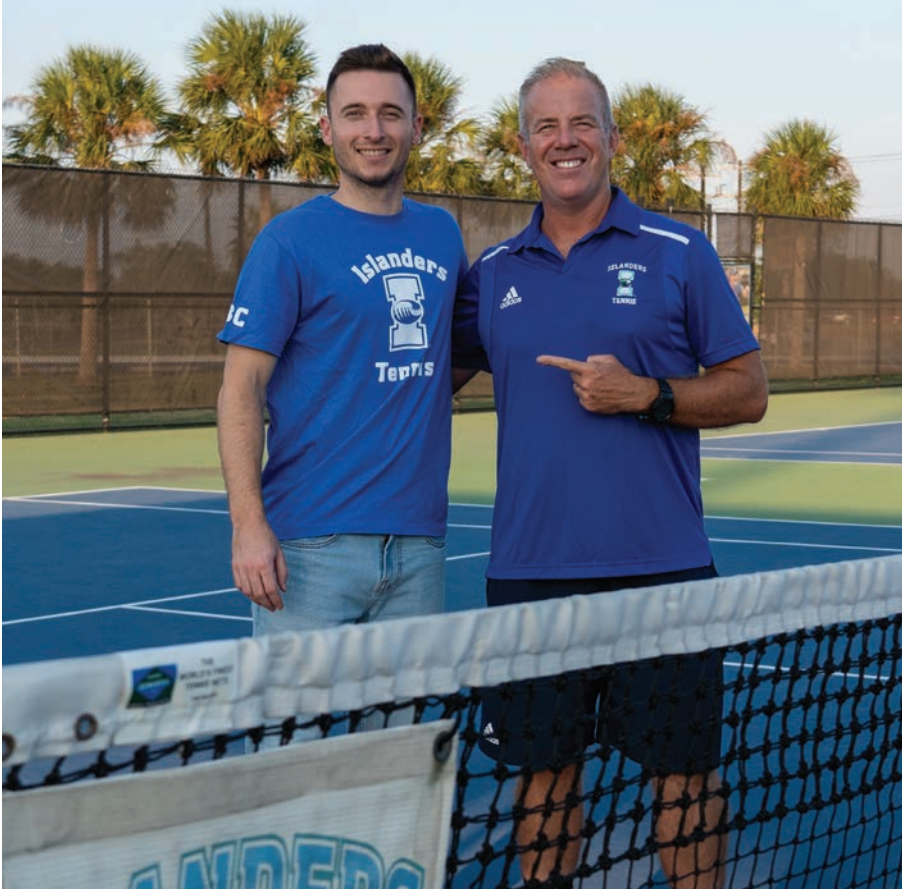
"We run the team as one big family," Moore said. "We practice hard. Our sessions usually go about three and a half hours. But we support each other throughout. We bond. We become family."

Continued on the next page.



Head Coach Steve Moore and players celebrate the Men's Tennis 2021 Southland Conference Tournament Championship, which qualified the team to advance to the NCAA Tournament.

From left: Carlos Pedrosa '20, who graduated Summa Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Science in Mechanical Engineering, with Head Coach Steve Moore.



That family atmosphere, and a tradition of winning, has attracted players from all around the world to play at the Island University. Among those players was Carlos Pedrosa '20, from Spain.

“Coach Moore convinced me to come to TAMU-CC,” Pedrosa said. “He highlighted the character, values, and success of the team.”

Character would come to define Pedrosa's time with the Islanders. He was a successful singles player, earning Second Team All-Southland Conference during his senior year in 2019. But the toughest opponent he faced that year was his own health when he was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes.

“The doctors told me it was going to be difficult to come back and play at the highest level,” Pedrosa said. “After a week in the hospital, I came back to practice, and after a lot of hard work, I won every conference match.”

Pedrosa's comeback story had a triumphant conclusion during the finals

of the Southland Tournament that year. After being down two sets, he rallied back to win the deciding match and led the men's team to yet another Southland Title.

“We always say tennis is ‘life in miniature.’ It's a chance to show your character and your heart,” Moore said. “When you have adversity, do you rise up and grind and work harder? Carlos rose up that day.”

“After a week in the hospital, I came back to practice, and after a lot of hard work, I won every conference match.”

CARLOS PEDROSA '20

Pedrosa's triumph that day is forever marked at the Islanders tennis facility where a sign that says “Carlos' Courage” is hung with pride.

“Having that sign at the courts means a lot to me,” Pedrosa said. “It makes me remember all the great moments with the team and how much I learned through those years.”

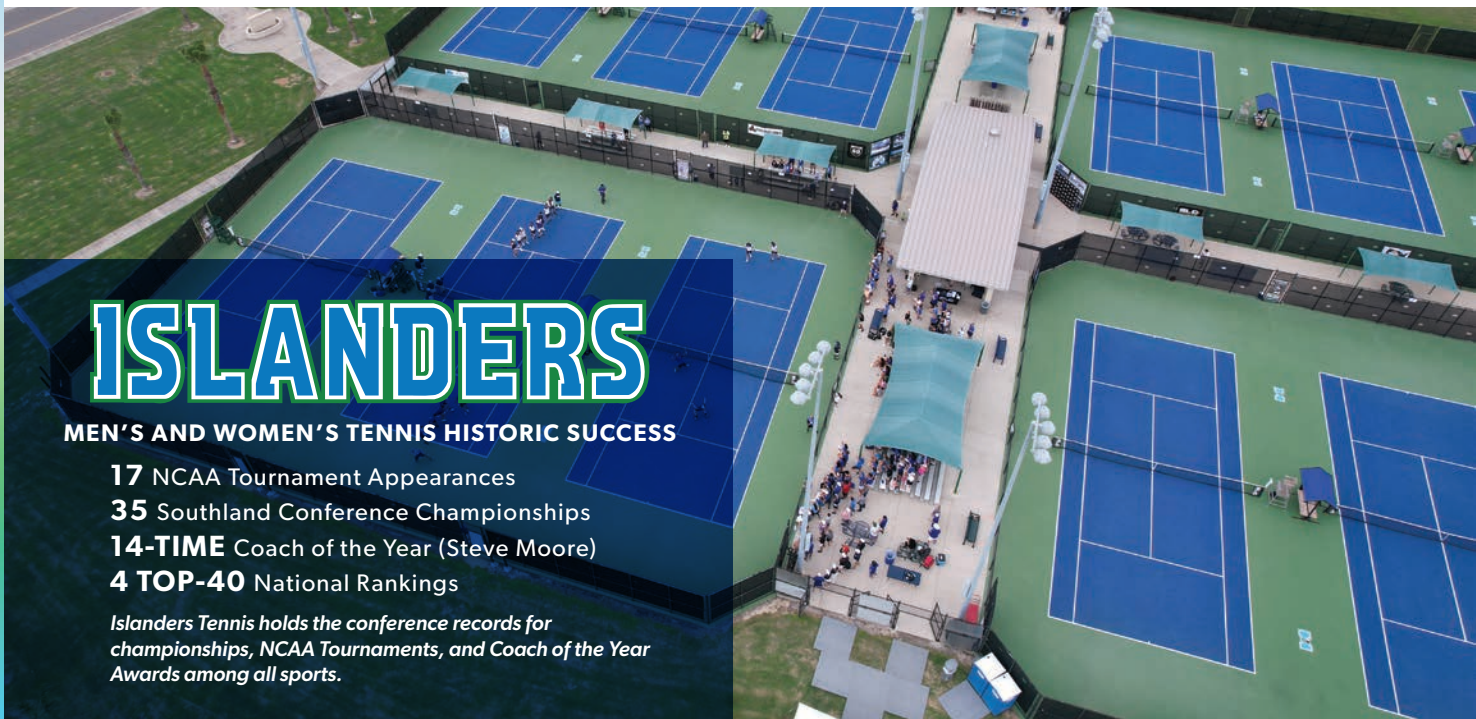
The lessons learned from hard work and a winning mentality also caught the attention of Emma Aucagne '24, '27, a native of France.

“Before coming to the United States, many people I spoke with told me that the TAMU-CC tennis team was one of the most competitive teams and that the coaches push you to do your best,” Aucagne said. “That's what I was looking for. That discipline. That structure. People need to be pushed to do their maximum, on and off the court.”

Aucagne quickly made her mark after arriving on campus in 2020, earning Southland Conference Freshman of the Year honors. She continued to dominate and was named Southland Conference Player of the Year both as a sophomore and again in her senior year. Her discipline in the classroom, where



From left: Assistant Coach Manuel Lopez, Head Coach Steve Moore, Associate Head Coach Olga Bazhanova, University President Kelly M. Miller, Emma Aucagne '24, '27, Kate Rublevska '24, Naomi Moi-Mckenzie '24, Valeria Cherfus '24, Victoire Delattre '23, and Vice President of Intercollegiate Athletics Adrian Rodriguez, as Islanders Women's Tennis is presented with the 2024 Southland Conference regular season trophy.



ISLANDERS

MEN'S AND WOMEN'S TENNIS HISTORIC SUCCESS

- 17** NCAA Tournament Appearances
- 35** Southland Conference Championships
- 14-TIME** Coach of the Year (Steve Moore)
- 4 TOP-40** National Rankings

Islanders Tennis holds the conference records for championships, NCAA Tournaments, and Coach of the Year Awards among all sports.

she was a criminal justice major, earned her three appearances on the Southland Conference's All-Academic First Team and she graduated Summa Cum Laude with a perfect 4.0 GPA. She now serves on the Islanders Tennis staff as a graduate assistant coach while she works on a master's degree in clinical psychology.

"The tennis program taught me to focus on doing everything that matters at 100%," Aucagne said. "That philosophy allowed me to be where I am today."

If you ask Coach Moore, academic excellence means more than trophies. His teams have averaged a 3.0 GPA or higher for 43 straight semesters. In the

2023-24 academic year, the women's team averaged a 4.0 GPA.

"Islanders Tennis excels with high-character players who shine in the classroom and are ready for success in the real world," Moore said. "One of my main mentors was Forrest Gregg, my athletic director when I was at Southern Methodist University. He told me once, 'Look son, you won't have time for hobbies as a tennis coach. Your hobby is pouring your life into your athletes and elevating the lives of the kids you coach.'"

And that, he has done. •



Emma Aucagne '24, '27 continues her legacy with Islanders Tennis as a Graduate Assistant Coach for the 2024-25 season.



GOLF CLASSIC

MONDAY, APRIL 14
 Corpus Christi Country Club
 1 p.m.



YOU'RE INVITED!

ISLANDER HOMECOMING

FEBRUARY 23-MARCH 1, 2025

Return to your alma mater and reconnect with one another! Join your classmates back on the Island for unique opportunities to engage and create new memories.

Check islanderalumni.org in January 2025 for the full schedule of events and ticket information.

CLASS OF '41



RECONNECT WITH OLD FRIENDS

Homecoming is the perfect opportunity for Islanders to reunite with classmates, professors, and fellow alumni. Share stories, catch up, and reminisce about your time on campus!



CELEBRATE ISLANDER SPIRIT

Feel the vibrant energy and pride that comes with being an Islander, regardless of when you graduated. Celebrate city-wide Bluesday Tuesday with us on Tuesday, Feb. 25!

SHAKAS UP!

WATCH ISLANDERS BASKETBALL

Join fellow alumni to cheer on the Islanders basketball teams as they take to the court. Experience the thrill of live sports and feel the adrenaline rush of game day! Visit goislanders.com to view the full game schedule.



EXCLUSIVE ALUMNI EVENTS

Enjoy special alumni gatherings and networking opportunities, where you can connect with other Islander graduates and learn about exciting updates from the university.



RELIVE CAMPUS TRADITIONS

Revisit beloved campus traditions, like Lighting of the I and Anchors Aweigh, and see how they've evolved over the years. Join in events that celebrate TAMU-CC's rich history and legacy, bridging the story of the Tarpons with that of the Islanders.



DISCOVER CAMPUS CHANGES

Witness the growth and transformation of TAMU-CC. Tour new facilities, see recent renovations, and appreciate how the university continues to thrive.

PARTICIPATE IN HOMECOMING FESTIVITIES

From the campus brunch tours, double-header Islander basketball games, and Alumni Corner at the Islander Block Party, there's so much to see and do!

ADVENTURE AWAITS

AWAKEN YOUR INNER EXPLORER WITH OUTDOOR ADVENTURES



Islanders explore Inks Lake State Park in the Texas Hill Country, northwest of Austin.

Islander alumni have a unique opportunity to explore the great outdoors with the university's Outdoor Adventures program. Designed to bring together Islanders who have a passion for adventure and a love of nature, the Rec Sports-sponsored program offers a variety of low-cost activities that cater to every thrill-seeker and nature enthusiast.

Whether you're an adrenaline junkie looking to skydive over the Texas coast, a surfer eager to catch your first wave, or someone who simply wants to unwind under the stars during a multi-day trip to a breathtaking national park, the Outdoor Adventures program has something for everyone.

"Our primary goal is to encourage anyone who has called our Island home to stay connected while kindling a love of shared adventure and the environment," said Katie Chambers '19, Program Coordinator. "We believe there's never a bad time to be immersed in nature — be it enjoying our beautiful surroundings in Corpus Christi or exploring the wilderness of Texas and beyond."

The Outdoor Adventures program is open to Islander alumni, along with current students, faculty, and staff.

"So far, our most popular activities have been group surfing lessons and skydiving outings in Port Aransas, but we also offer once-in-a-lifetime trips to some of the country's most beautiful national parks, including Yellowstone, Grand Tetons, and the Great Smoky Mountains," Chambers explained. "Each activity is carefully planned to ensure that our participants are safe and can enjoy themselves while making lasting memories and reconnecting to their Islander roots."

For Jordan Rodriguez '21, participating in Outdoor Adventures while earning a Bachelor of Science in Environmental Science allowed her to gain a new love for the outdoors while overcoming the stress and isolation that can sometimes be a factor in transitioning to college life.

"As someone who never really got the



Outdoor Adventures regularly hosts skydiving clinics in Port Aransas, TX.

opportunity to get out into nature as a kid, joining the Outdoor Adventures program was a life-changing experience," Rodriguez said. "Traveling in a safe, supportive environment was empowering and it sparked a new love for the outdoors. I took part in backpacking, caving, and surfing with Outdoor Adventures, and I am grateful to the program for the friends I made, and for having something exciting to look forward to during times of stress."

In addition to excursions, the program also provides affordable equipment rentals, making it easier for Islanders to embark

on their own adventures without investing in expensive gear. Rental items include kayaks, bikes, paddleboards, hammocks, tents, and various camping gear items. "We believe in the importance of fostering a community of explorers that can fully appreciate what our beautiful natural surroundings have to offer," Chambers said. "The rental program has proven particularly popular with current students — it saves them money and space without compromising their travel experiences."

Continued on the next page.



Islanders take a group tour of Longhorn Cavern State Park, a sister park of Inks Lake State Park.

Matthew Garcia '13, Regional Director of Community Relations for the Texas Oil and Gas Association and National Islander Alumni Association Board Member, signed up for a surfing session with the program this summer.

“When I signed up for the surfing session, I wasn’t sure what to expect — I hadn’t been on a board in years,” Garcia said. “But with Katie’s instruction and the support of the Islanders participating, it was a really enjoyable experience, and I left feeling more connected to the Islander community. I’d definitely encourage other alumni to get involved. It’s a fun way to bond and keep the Island spirit alive, no matter how long it’s been since you graduated.”

With its commitment to offering unique and affordable experiences, Outdoor Adventures invites all Islanders to embrace their adventurous spirit and discover the incredible opportunities that await. •

Matthew Garcia '13 takes part in a surfing clinic at Whitecap Beach on North Padre Island.



“It’s a fun way to bond and keep the Island spirit alive, no matter how long it’s been since you graduated.”

MATTHEW GARCIA '13



WORKSHOPS CLINICS TRIPS & EQUIPMENT RENTALS

OPEN TO ISLANDER ALUMNI, STUDENTS, FACULTY, AND STAFF

Learn about Outdoor Adventures at tamucc.edu/rec-sports/outdoor



NEWS FROM AROUND THE ISLAND



ARTS AND MEDIA BUILDING TAKES SHAPE

Construction continues on the university's new Arts and Media Building, the future home of music, theatre, and dance programs. The 85,000-square-foot, two-story facility will feature both a proscenium and black box theatre, a piano lab, a percussion suite, and a dance studio equipped with mirrors, barres, and a sprung floor. Inspired by the Gulf of Mexico, the building's design incorporates hues of blue, green, and sand. It remains on track for completion in spring 2026. To offer philanthropic support for the Arts and Media Building or for donor naming opportunities, contact Jaime Nodarse Barrera, Vice President for Institutional Advancement, at 361.825.3320 or jaime.nodarse@tamucc.edu.



NEW ERA FOR DRONE RESEARCH

The Lone Star UAS Center of Excellence and Innovation at Texas A&M-Corpus Christi recently marked its 10th anniversary by becoming the Autonomy Research Institute (ARI), highlighting its expanded leadership in drone and autonomous systems research across air, land, water, and space. As one of just seven FAA test sites in the country, ARI is further extending its capabilities with the upcoming launch of a second Mission Control Center in the university's downtown building.



ISLANDER ACADEMY INTRODUCES DUAL CREDIT OPPORTUNITIES

Local high school students are advancing their futures through the university's Islander Academy dual credit program, which launched in August. This program allows them to earn college credits at a reduced cost while they complete their high school diplomas. Students also gain access to resources like college readiness support, hands-on learning, and Islander events such as athletic games and concerts.

High schools can choose from three learning modes: an on-campus experience at the Island University, an online option for flexible scheduling, or a customized campus delivery. In the customized option, TAMU-CC instructors teach at the high school, or high school teachers are certified by TAMU-CC to lead classes and receive a stipend and ongoing support.

WELCOME TO THE ISLAND

ISLANDER LEADERSHIP UPDATES



DR. KYOKO AMANO
Dean of the College of Liberal Arts



JOHN LARUE '23
Vice President for Institutional Excellence and Chief Ethics & Compliance Officer



ANDREW RODGERS
Vice President for Finance and Administration & Chief Financial Officer



DR. CATHERINE RUDOWSKY
Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs

ANCHORED TOGETHER

ISLANDER ALUMNI CONNECTIONS

PICKLEBALL NIGHT

In September, local alumni gathered at the Al Kruse Tennis & Pickleball Center in Corpus Christi for an exciting evening of pickleball.



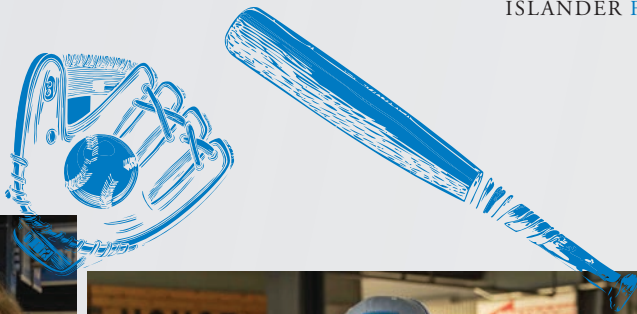
STATE FAIR MIXER

The Dallas-Fort Worth Islander Alumni Chapter hosted a festive gathering at Peticolas Brewing Company in September to celebrate the State Fair of Texas with fair-inspired treats and cold brews.



NIGHT AT THE HOOKS

In August, Islander alumni took over Whataburger Field to watch the Corpus Christi Hooks play the Wichita Wind Surge.



NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM

It was a family-friendly evening of creativity during a pumpkin painting party at the Art Museum of South Texas. The October event also included an exclusive museum tour.



CLASS NOTES

1970s

Dinah Bowman '72 is celebrating 45 years in business at Bowman Design and Framing. Before becoming an artist, she studied marine biology and chemistry at the University of Corpus Christi (now Texas A&M-Corpus Christi), where she broke several barriers — including becoming the first woman to take the university's reef ecology field study course in Belize. Dinah's image was featured in the university's recruitment materials, and in 1970, *Glamour Magazine* named her one of its top college girls. The magazine highlighted her volunteer work at the United States Geological Survey lab on campus, foreshadowing her later career as both a biologist and artist. In 2000, Dinah became the first Distinguished Alumni honoree at TAMU-CC. Her gallery, located in Portland, TX, serves as a working studio, art gallery, and framing shop, offering archival-quality materials and conservation glass.



1980s

Brian L. Lenhart '86 has been named associate dean of Weekend College for Collin College in McKinney, TX.

1990s

Windolyn Evon English '92, '96, who worked at TAMU-CC for 16 years in alumni engagement and fundraising, passed away on June 25, 2024. She also was a member of the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.

Eddie Deleon '96 retired from his career as a probation officer for the United States District Court in Brownsville in 2019. He is currently a licensed professional counselor.



Jeff Dupont '97, '00 has been selected as the chief executive officer of the Durango Chamber of Commerce by the company's board of directors. Jeff served in leadership roles at Fort Lewis College for 18 years, most recently as dean of student engagement. He serves as a board member of the National Islander Alumni Association.

Marti Salazar '98 retired from the Texas Department of Transportation in 2022 and has been dedicating her time to renovating her home and enjoying quality moments with her family.

Hugo Isensee '99 has begun a new journey as a marketing representative for Community First Health Plans, a division of University Hospital.

2000s

Ricardo Moreno '00 retired from the U.S. Marines in 2023 after 23 years of service. He served as an attack helicopter pilot, a primary flight instructor at NAS Corpus Christi, and with U.S. Special Operations Command. While in the Marines, he deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan as part of attack squadrons, the infantry, and as a special operations advisor. Since retirement, Rick has flown B-737s for United Airlines out of Los Angeles, CA.

Laura Fernandez Moran '03, '05 was recently hired as director of digital transformation for the University of the Incarnate Word. Previously, she was a strategic project manager for Unicon, Inc., managing higher education projects for the Gates Foundation, and a manager of student systems at Rice University.

Brandi Venable '03, '15, teaches forensic science at Flour Bluff High School (FBHS). Brandi is a dedicated mother of two — her daughter Madeline is a sophomore and feature twirler at FBHS, and her son Braiden is an FBHS senior who is dual-enrolled at Del Mar College and plans to attend TAMU-CC next fall.

Starla Wyatt '04 has been promoted to project engineer for the Houston Forensic Science Center.

Eduardo Gomez '05 was named vice president of throughput, efficiency, and labor modeling for St. Louis, MO-based Ascension Health.

Cassandra Self '05, DHA, FACHE, CMM is a 2024 graduate of the Doctor of Healthcare Administration program at Oklahoma State University Center for Health Sciences. She works at a large healthcare system in North Texas and is an active member of several professional and community organizations. She is married to Zeb Houston and they have five children: Grace, Maddie, Connor, Jackson, and Carter.

Sara Huerta King '06 earned her Doctor of Philosophy in Higher Education from Texas Tech University.

Adam Lopez '06, '16 was elected to serve as chapter president of the San Antonio Islander Alumni Association.



Andrea Carvajal '08 received the honor of 2024 Teacher of the Year at Tuloso-Midway Primary School and District Elementary Teacher of the Year for Tuloso-Midway ISD. She currently serves as the PK-2nd STEAM teacher and campus Gifted and Talented coordinator.

Dr. Noe Ortega '08, commissioner for the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, was featured by MassLive media group in an article about leadership and commitment to inspire change.
Continued on the next page.



Ikumi Tajima '09 recently traveled from Tokyo, Japan, to the San Antonio Islander Alumni Chapter Viva Fiesta event. She expresses deep gratitude to TAMU-CC for the opportunities it has provided her.

2010s

Lora Ayala '10 traveled to Virginia to fulfill her role as a bridesmaid at her sister's wedding on April 20, 2024. She started a new job at Evry Health in May 2024.

Dr. Megan Arnold-Gilliam '12 and Joshua Gilliam gave birth to their son, Tage, in March 2024. Megan has been a veterinarian for six years and practices in Sealy, TX. She was selected Texas Veterinary Medical Association Recent Graduate Mentor for the Texas A&M School of Veterinary Medicine Class of 2027.

Dr. Stephanie (Yuma) Bray '12 was promoted to assistant director of admissions for California Intercontinental University.

Josh Phillips '12 received his master's and doctorate degrees from Southern Methodist University in Dallas and is now an assistant professor of history at Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, TX. Josh and his wife Ebony, whom he met while attending TAMU-CC, celebrated 10 years of marriage this year and have three wonderful children.

Kacey (Harman) Hahn '13, '21, and Josh Hahn '16 welcomed their second child, Samuel Ryan Hahn, on Feb. 2, 2024. Shakas up to the family of four!

Mayra Lopez '13, '15, and the Garza family, welcomed baby Gabriel to their family.

Melanie Whitehead Lowry '14, former Islanders Spirit Team coach, passed away on April 10, 2024, at the age of 42. She was a stellar single mom and left behind two teen boys. She will be missed by her family and friends and her extended family of Islanders whom she coached and mentored.



Jeena Deleon '16 thanks the Island University for being the place where she met all her lifelong friends. Presently, Jeena works as a San Antonio influencer and loves sharing her travel adventures. Through her experiences, she aims to inspire others, showing them that with determination, anything is possible.

Olivia Andrade '17 works as a public relations specialist at KCS Public Relations. She and her husband, Jose, welcomed a baby girl, Maia, in 2023.



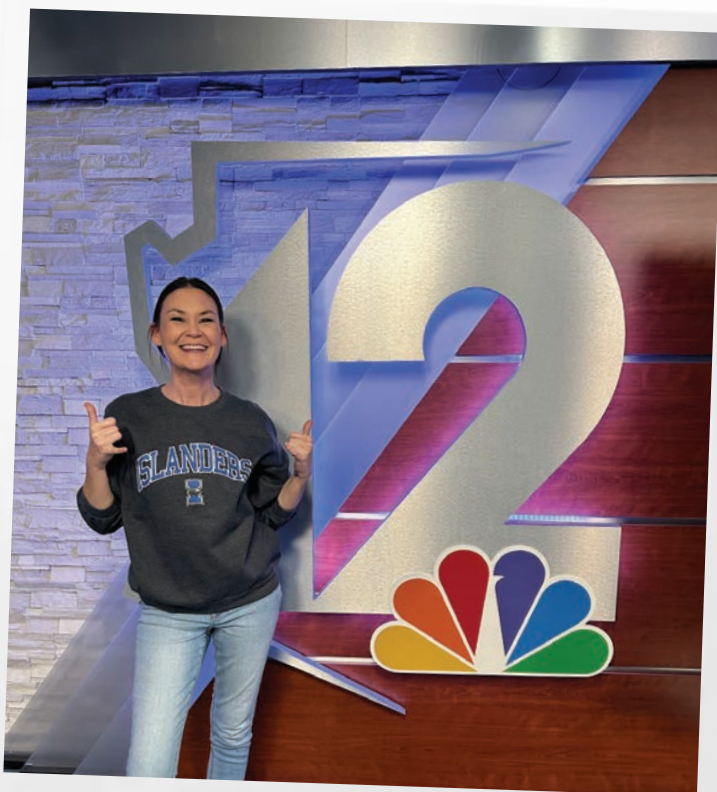
Scott Rios '17 recently joined Charter Bank as vice president of commercial lending in Corpus Christi. Scott brings seven years of local commercial banking experience to his new job and currently serves on the board of Halo-Flight, Inc.

Melanie Milner '17, '23, MSN, DNP, RN was named the statewide director of alignment for the associate degree nursing program at Texas State Technical College.

Israel Acevedo '18 and Crystal (Quevedo) Acevedo '18 both attended the Island University and then relocated to San Antonio to pursue their careers. Eventually, they returned to Corpus Christi to celebrate their wedding. They express their gratitude to TAMU-CC for the role it played in their journey.

Randy Treviño '18 and Paola Hernandez '21 met in 2018 and married in 2022. They live happily with their two yorkies, Lilo and Sadie.

Kayla Weeks '18 works as the social media specialist for the University of Florida's Strategic Communications and Marketing department.



Haley Williams '18 was named senior digital content producer at KPNX 12News, the NBC affiliate in Phoenix, AZ. She supplemented her journalism degree from Del Mar College with a criminal justice degree from the Island University and is using the knowledge to pore over court documents for investigative reporting purposes in the No. 11 news market in the country.

Selma Hernandez '19 has been hired by the graduate admissions department at TAMU-CC and is currently working on her master's degree in higher education administration.

Sofía Rodríguez Oropeza '19 is an internal communications specialist for the City of Corpus Christi. She is part of a team that recently launched Spanish-language communications for the city, including social media.

Chris Potter '19, '22 has accepted a role as business analyst with H-E-B's Operational Excellence team.



2020s

Megan Greige '20 successfully defended her master's thesis on water quality in urban streams in Columbus, OH, and received her Master of Science in Environment and Natural Resources from The Ohio State University.

Alimursal Ibrahimov '20, '22, has been hired as financial analyst II at the TAMU-CC Budget Office.

Sarah Tapia '20 earned a Doctor of Pharmacy from the Texas A&M University Irma Lerma Rangel School of Pharmacy in May 2024. She plans to pursue a career in community practice in the Dallas/Fort Worth area.

Brook Bennett '21 and Jorden Dunbar '21 married on Nov. 3, 2024. The couple met during their first year at TAMU-CC and both received a bachelor's and master's degree from the Island University. They are developing their careers in their respective professions, Brook in clinical psychology and Jorden in finance.

Jorge Garza '21, MBA graduate, successfully started his second year as the business owner of Millennial General Contractors, LLC., a commercial construction company in Mission, TX.

Alyssa Carreno '22, '25 started working as a student development specialist for the TAMU-CC Career and Professional Development Center. She said she loves her team and appreciates the opportunity to continue her education while gaining experience.
Continued on the next page.

Angel Garcia '22 earned a business degree from TAMU-CC and is proud to bring new students to the Island University thanks to his role as the university's graduate recruitment coordinator.

Erick Guillen '22 was hired as a federally contracted microbiologist at Johnson Space Center in Houston.

Vic Navarrete '22 achieved a significant milestone, being selected as a chief petty officer (E7), one of only 40 in this role within the Navy Reserve. Vic brings his extensive DoD/ Navy experience in communications and public affairs to Pacific Northwest National Laboratory in Washington, where he will develop social media strategies to enhance the lab's public engagement.

Maria Rodriguez '22 received her white coat for Medical Laboratory Sciences from UT-Health San Antonio.

Lauren Breckenridge '23 was accepted into the inaugural class of the Master of Science in Higher Education Administration at TAMU-CC.

Sabra Tourigny '23 has been named the Managing Director of Healthcare Practice, North America Applications Consulting for Oracle.

Paige Woelke '23, '25 continues to make a difference in her Islander community through her role as a donor relations assistant at TAMU-CC. She said it's an honor to be back on the Island, contributing to her alma mater's growth and development.

Ashley Flansburg '24, MBA graduate, accepted her first business adjunct teaching position. She is involved in the Lee College Prison Extension, a program for incarcerated students seeking degrees. Ashley recently completed training at the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, where she was certified in post-secondary education programs. •

ISLANDER FOREVER TOOL KIT

If you love being an Islander and want to stay involved with the university, here's how to get started.

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We always want to know what you are up to! Tell us about your new promotion, engagement, or bundle of joy at islanderalumni.org/classnotes.



JOIN A CHAPTER

We have Islander Alumni Association chapters in Austin, Dallas/Fort Worth, Houston, and San Antonio.



WEAR YOUR PRIDE!

We want to see Islander shirts and hats everywhere! Need an updated Islander alumni T-shirt? Get a new shirt at islanderalumni.org/store.



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Donate to the Islander Forever Endowed Scholarship fund to give back to current Islander students. Make a gift at giving.tamucc.edu.



VOLUNTEER

Join the award-winning Islander Mentor Program or sign postcards for admitted students. Tell us how you want to get involved at islanderalumni.org/getinvolved.

KEEP UP WITH US!

SHARE YOUR NEWS & UPDATES

Contact us at islanderalumni.org/update to submit your stories or update your contact information.



From left: Coach Mapes congratulates Humphrey Hose '71.



Above: Ken De Koning '73



From left: Ken de Koning '73, Humphrey Hose '71, and Jorge Andrew '73

CHAMPIONS OF THE COURT

THE TARPONS' TENNIS LEGACY

When it comes to Islanders Tennis, the winning tradition on Ward Island traces its roots back to the 1960s and early '70s.

In 1962, Bob Mapes became the tennis coach of the University of Corpus Christi (UCC) after a successful coaching stint at Mary Carroll High School in Corpus Christi. During his UCC tenure from 1962 to 1973, his Tarpons achieved an impressive 118-28-2 record, with the 1971 squad elevating UCC to national prominence.

That Tarpons team made history as UCC's first Division I team. Leading the charge was UCC player Humphrey Hose '71, the nation's top-ranked singles player and an NCAA All-American. The Tarpons finished the 1971 season 17-5, advanced

to the NCAA National Championships and ultimately secured a fifth-place national ranking.

The team's momentum came to an abrupt halt in 1973 when the university, now called Texas A&I University at Corpus Christi, discontinued its athletics programs due to budget constraints. During Mapes' 11-year tenure, his teams captured two NAIA singles and doubles titles and consistently ranked in the Division I Top 10.

After coaching, Mapes served 15 years as a tournament referee and 32 years as Head Tennis Pro at the H-E-B Tennis Center in Corpus Christi. He was inducted into the Texas Tennis Hall of Fame in 1994, the ITA National

Intercollegiate Hall of Fame in 1999, and the Islanders Athletics Hall of Honor in 2004.

After graduating from UCC, Hose went pro, competing in the Davis Cup, Wimbledon, the U.S. Open, and the French Open. He retired from professional play in 1980 and became head coach of Aruba's Tennis Federation, later captaining Aruba's first Davis Cup team in 2007. He was inducted into the Islanders Athletics Hall of Honor in 2009.

The 1971 UCC tennis team, which also featured Jorge Andrew '73, Marc Boule '71, Roberto Chavez '72, Ken de Koning '73, Fredi Oporto '70, and Oscar Salas '72, was inducted into the Islanders Athletics Hall of Honor in 2018. •

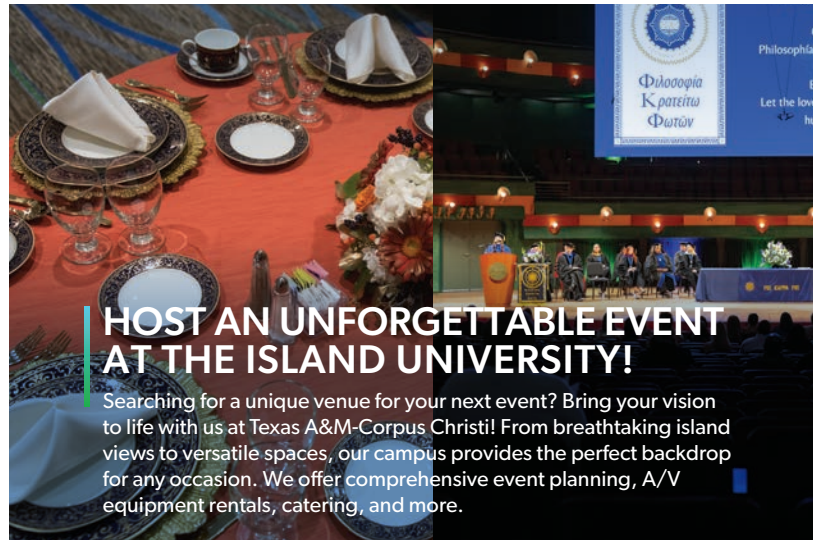
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