

Spring 2025

UMBC

MAGAZINE

IT TAKES A SYMPHONY

Thousands of Baltimore City-area youth benefit from extracurricular musical pathways. Once one of them, music education major Nema Robinson is now poised to teach the next generation. — page 22

An abstract, vibrant illustration depicting quantum physics concepts. It features swirling, ethereal light trails in shades of green, blue, and purple. A central, bright yellow-green vertical beam of light is surrounded by concentric, glowing rings. Within this beam, two small, dark silhouettes of people are standing with their arms raised, as if reaching towards the light. The overall composition is dynamic and futuristic, with a sense of depth and movement.

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Detangling Quantum

In the quantum kingdom, particles flirt with the impossible, defying the tidy laws of Newton's world. UMBC alumni are harnessing the field's mysteries to unlock a new realm of possibilities.

By Sarah L. Hansen, M.S. '15

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Back on the Air

WMBC—UMBC's radio station—is getting a second life after combining operations with *The Retriever* and *Bartleby* in the new Student Media Center.

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It Takes a Symphony

Nema Robinson, a music education major and Linehan Artist Scholar, now teaches at the Baltimore City-based nonprofits that set the stage for her own success.

By Randianne Leysbon '09

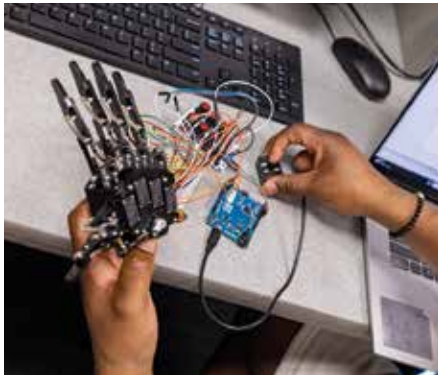


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Where Bright Ideas Come to Life

UMBC is pocketed with hubs of creative innovation. Whether they want to 3D print a mechanical arm, edit their podcast, or design costuming for a UMBC theatre production, students can bring their ideas to life.

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This Gathering Is Magic

Tabletop and role-playing games have emerged from the musty cabinet of kids' amusements as a creative method of bonding for UMBC alumni and students.

By Susan Thornton Hobby



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ON THE COVER

We caught up with Linehan Artist Scholar Nema Robinson at the Peabody Institute in Mount Vernon, Baltimore.
Photo by Kiirstn Pagan '11.

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TO YOU



Dear Retrievers,

The other morning at breakfast, I told my son I could draw an infinite line on two sides of a single piece of paper. He, of course, scoffed. So, I found a scrap sheet, made a half twist of the paper, added a crucial piece of tape, and proceeded to blow his mind with his very first Möbius strip.

Now, am I equipped to explain *why* a Möbius strip works the way it works? I am not. But, did I open the door to a “whoa!” moment—and the possibility of him finding it out for himself? Absolutely.

Every day at UMBC, you'll find plenty of “whoa” moments—occasions of curiosity and delight that challenge minds and broaden perspective—across the disciplines. And best of all, these moments can happen to anyone, anywhere, because we're all about opening doors here.

One great example is quantum, a timely topic as our governor hopes to “make Maryland the quantum capital of the world.” We have amazing alums harnessing this information (page 30) to build secure communications and ultra-precise sensing, but they—like all of us—started out as curious students. They just needed to show up and have their minds blown!

An eye-opening moment at Artscape brought our cover-story subject Nema Robinson to UMBC in a roundabout way (page 22)—now, she is poised to be the full-circle door-opener to a new generation of music students. And what could be more whoa-inducing than being able to build whatever you might dream up in a campus makerspace (page 38), or to collectively flex your imagination with friends through long-term gaming communities (page 44)?

I recently celebrated a pretty major milestone at UMBC—my 20-year work anniversary. And in that time, I have experienced a bunch of personal “whoa” moments, many of which I have had the honor of sharing right here. So many Retrievers have opened my eyes—and now, as my work at UMBC evolves, it's my turn to open a door of my own.

I am happy to share that starting with this fall's issue, managing editor Randianne Leyshon '09 will be taking on the mantle of editor of *UMBC Magazine*. She is smart, kind, and curious, and I am so happy for her—and for all of you, who will benefit from her excellent editorial leadership going forward.

Thank you for sharing so much of yourselves with me over the years, dear Retrievers. I look forward to seeing you around campus!

—Jenny O'Grady
Editor, UMBC Magazine

WEB FEATURES

See web-only videos, interviews, and more all year long at magazine.umbc.edu.



The Class of 2025 included UMBC's 100,000th graduate



UMBC's Ethics Bowl team wins national championship two years in a row



Bio-inspired “batteries” will use phytoplankton to power underwater sensors

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OFFICE HOURS



Sheares Ashby: It literally means that we serve the people. It means when I wake up every day, I have to be asking: How are we serving the people of Maryland? And here is the key—not the people who are my students, but the whole state of Maryland. We are serving the people of our state and the nation, whether they ever come to UMBC or not. The research we do should make the lives of people in the state better.

I particularly love that UMBC has a home here in Shady Grove. We are in a place where students do not have to pay room and board because we are embedded in the community. That is cutting the cost of education in half already. Think about people who have full lives, full families, full jobs—it is hard to make education happen on top of that.

The other piece is that because of proximity to D.C., a lot of students are attracted to this location. So many Marylanders have lost their jobs in the federal government. One of the things I am proud of is that UMBC has launched something called Paws and Pivot through our Career Center, providing résumé assistance, job opportunities, and other resources for all these folks, particularly our alums, who are needing to actually pause and pivot. There is so much that a university does beyond just the four-year degree.

Seavey: Arguably, I would not be a student at all, much less potentially re-endeavoring to complete another degree, if I had to pick a university with a traditional location outside of my community. As a Marylander and an adult student with a full-time job in public service, it was about it being realistic and available. So the availability here made it realistic. Imagine the people that have the fire inside them right now that want to do it. Then they say, “But I can’t get there.”

Sheares Ashby: That is the work that we have to continue to do—to take away the financial barriers, the geographic barriers, whatever it may be—to take that barrier down.

Photo by Kiirstin Pagan '11.

On a windy April day, President Valerie Sheares Ashby arrived at UMBC at the Universities at Shady Grove (USG) for her regular student office hours on the Rockville, Maryland, campus. Established in 2000, USG unites nine public universities in one convenient location, creating Retriever degree pathways for folks who might not otherwise be able to make it around the beltway for classes in Catonsville. James “Jimmy” Seavey Jr. sits across from the president today. Seavey is a second-generation firefighter in the D.C. area and in his first semester at UMBC-Shady Grove studying political science. Seavey, who comes from a long line of public servants, discusses the growing importance of public service and education with President Sheares Ashby.

James Seavey: So, like I said, my name’s Jimmy.

President Valerie Sheares Ashby: By the way, Jimmy. My dad was James. My brother is James. My nephew is James. My son is James. And Jimmy is what my oldest brother goes by. So, the name means something to me. Tell me about yourself.

Seavey: I’m an adult full-time student, and I work as a lieutenant for a fire department in the D.C. metropolitan area. I’m on a little more of a slow roll than a conventional student because of

my full-time job. In public safety and sometimes in academia too, I feel the weight of assumptions about who we are and why we do things. Do you feel that as president?

Sheares Ashby: I really consider this role to be two things—which may seem like opposites but are not really. One: It is a privilege, because for me, leadership is service. What you do, that service—it is a privilege to serve a community. The second thing, I keep telling people, “I just have a job, like you do.” Those things are both true. It is a privilege to lead, and it’s just a job.

Seavey: I can certainly understand the weight of that privilege. Outside of my profession, there’s not many times that people will open their door and blindly tell you, “Please come in and help me.” When an Amazon package comes to your house, they leave it outside. But if there’s a problem in your home—an electrical fire or medical issue with a family member or yourself—immediately you’re encouraging someone like me to come inside. There’s a large amount of responsibility not readily visible.

Sheares Ashby: They are trusting that you are going to be what the role says. You’re going to be respectful, caring, a person of integrity, somebody with some professional expertise.

Seavey: Can I ask, what does public service mean to you as a university president?

DAWG'S EYE VIEW



HITTING THE RIGHT NOTES

Donna Helm '70 gave the gift of music in the form of a baby grand piano taking up residence in The Commons. Students have been drawn to the sound of music as they plunk out everything from Chopsticks to Chopin.

 @umbc_researchgraphics



FOR THE BIRDS

As part of this year's Earth Week celebrations, our dawgs took some time out to help their feathered friends by decorating future homes for local songbirds. Other initiatives led through the Office of Sustainability recirculated about 150 pounds of clothing to on-campus students and donated another 150 to So What Else, a nonprofit in Baltimore City. UMBC student eco-ambassadors and the grounds and landscape shop also helped remove about 150 pounds of invasive plant species.

 @SustainableUMBC



WORLDWIDE FASHION ICON

While traveling in Japan, **Michelle Martir** '12, visual arts, and **Andy Hsu** '06, M.F.A. '10, did a double take when they walked past a thrift shop. Hanging outside the shop—front and center—was some familiar black and gold... only approximately 6,700 miles away from its UMBC Bookstore origins.

 @UMBCalumni



GET AIR, IT'S MY BIRTHDAY!

While everyone at UMBC *loves* research, **Adele Hare** wins the prize for most excited. This Undergraduate Research and Creative Achievement Day-winning selfie snagged the presenter a \$100 gift card to the UMBC Bookstore... on their birthday to boot!

 @umbc



KEEP BALTIMORE VISIONARY

UMBC's 10th run in the American Visionary Arts Museum-hosted Kinetic Sculpture Race resulted in a 1st place Art Award. No ordinary race, this one requires custom-built amphibious, human-powered works of art that can cover 15 miles through the city, including a trip into the Chesapeake Bay. UMBC staff and mechanical engineering students teamed up with Volunteers for Medical Engineering to create a superhero in a wheelchair flying over some of Baltimore's iconic buildings.



@The Image Center for
People with Disabilities

SCHOOL IS IN SESSION

This is not your high school English class's reading of *The Crucible*. UMBC Theatre's rendition of *John Proctor Is the Villain* by Kimberly Belflower gave Retrievers the chance to go back to high school and reimagine the classic text while navigating young love, sex education, and the founding of a feminist club.



@UMBCtheatre



FLY AWAY HOME

Based on his experience raising ducks at home, **Ralph Eriksen**, facilities management, rescued 28 goose eggs that were removed from nests on campus for routine goose population control. They hatched in an incubator in his office, and within a day grew steady on their feet in a tub on the floor. Then he released them to a pond in Sykesville—where they were immediately adopted by adult goose foster parents.



@umbclife



DON'T CALL IT A "MIRACLE"

For the first time in program history, UMBC's club ice hockey team clinched the Atlantic Coast Conference North Division title. The mighty Retrievers have been hitting the ice since 1988—next up, the Stanley Cup!



@UMBCIceHockey

WHAT'S YOUR VIEW?



Share your Retriever perspective on social media using the hashtag #UMBC, and your image could be included in a future issue of *UMBC Magazine*!

THE NEWS

Built for Student Success



Since UMBC opened its doors in 1966, faculty, staff, and students have collaborated to create successful routes to graduation for undergraduates, graduate, adult learners, and other non-traditional students. This emphasis on inclusive excellence—and redefining success for all students—means that UMBC also must continually revisit how to improve its practices.

Since 2021, UMBC has been a member of the University Innovation Alliance (UIA), a leading national coalition of public research universities committed to increasing the number and diversity of college graduates, particularly low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color in the U.S. As the only institution in Maryland selected to take part in the alliance, and guided by UIA Fellow **Ronita Walker**, UMBC has been able to take advantage of resources like the National Institute for Student Success (NISS).

After a rigorous review, NISS has offered UMBC some essential implementation steps that will shape the way the university approaches student success in the years to

come—making the financial aid process more transparent, streamlining communications, central review of the student demand for courses, and better coordination of student advising between departments, colleges, and related support services.

Stephen Freeland, interim dean and vice provost for undergraduate academic affairs, says these changes will position UMBC to make a sizable impact on the student experience; if implemented correctly, students probably won't notice the individual changes but instead experience the increased efficiency as a whole.

"It takes a machine—UMBC is the size of a small town—to operate the institution that delivers your degrees," says Freeland. "Students shouldn't have to understand it all—but behind the scenes we're trying to make the machine operate more smoothly through numerous, parallel, and subtle changes. The result will have a significant impact on you earning a meaningful degree in a timely fashion."

Something students can expect to change? A noticeable decrease in the volume and

frequency of communications sent their way. Through interdepartmental streamlining and organization, students will receive fewer emails from fewer sources so that messages critical to their academic and personal success are easier to identify and access. This centralization of critical messages will also be reflected structurally, as the university hopes to eventually build a Student Success hub near The Commons, the Library, and the Center for Well-Being as part of a student success district that will emphasize learning, caring, supporting, and engaging.

In some areas, changes are on the cusp of implementation. "We are aware that financial stress is a major determinant of student success at UMBC," says Freeland, "and financial aid reform is one of the four NISS priorities that we have already started taking, with more positive changes to come."

UMBC is required by federal regulations to monitor if a student is making satisfactory academic progress (SAP) in order to maintain aid eligibility. In past years, this was only calculated once a year in June, and at that point it was sometimes too late for students to make a positive change in their GPA. Students who do not meet the SAP requirements may lose their financial aid eligibility. Starting this June, the financial aid office will review SAP data three times a year to give students more information and time to correct course earlier.

"I'm excited by the impact the UIA is having on UMBC's campus," says Walker. "It's inspiring to see faculty and staff learning more about our UIA membership, engaging with our projects, and supporting these innovative student success efforts."

Student-centered redesign is an ongoing process. The May 2025 Commencement ceremonies saw the 100,000th Retriever graduate walk the stage, and the hope is that for the next 100,000 future alumni, the journey to crossing that stage will be even smoother.

—*Randianne Leysbon '09*

Going for Gold



Lea-Pearl Njei, biological sciences; **Caly Ferguson**, mechanical engineering; and **Jariatu Kargbo**, biological sciences, have each received the prestigious Goldwater Scholarship, which supports outstanding STEM students, for the 2025 – 2026 academic year.

“Caly, Lea-Pearl, and Jariatu emerged from a field of well-qualified juniors to represent UMBC in the Goldwater competition,” shares **April Householder** ’95, director of undergraduate research and prestigious scholarships. “Their dedication paid off.”

Njei is conducting colorectal cancer research with Jean-Pierre Raufman at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. Ferguson is developing a prosthetic arm that is affordable and runs on machine learning with **Ramana Vinjamuri**, associate professor of computer science and electrical engineering. Kargbo is studying melanopsin, an eye protein, with **Phyllis Robinson**, professor of biological sciences.

In Robinson’s lab, Kargbo found “a really safe lab environment for me to make mistakes, learn from them, and then grow as a researcher,” she says.

Vinjamuri is “open to ideas,” and tells his students that “the biggest thing you have to do is learn,” Ferguson says. “He’s been an incredible help to me.”

To find your support network at UMBC, Njei says, “You don’t even have to look too far, because they are all right there at your doorstep.”

— *Sarah L. Hansen, M.S. ’15*

Left to right: Jariatu Kargbo, Caly Ferguson, and Lea-Pearl Njei are UMBC’s 2025 Goldwater finalists. Photo courtesy of Michael Mower/UMBC.

Forward Thinking



UMBC President **Valerie Sheares Ashby** shared her vision for a “UMBC 3.0” rooted in inclusive excellence during a campus strategic-planning conversation in April. Joining with Provost **Manfred van Dulmen** and nearly 450 community members in person and online, Sheares Ashby outlined the generations of growth and leadership that have brought UMBC to where it stands today.

Speaking of a university history grounded in purpose and values and service to the people of Maryland, the president described “UMBC 1.0” as a community that stood for accessibility from day one, opening its doors to all and setting early standards for student success.

“I’m really grateful for that beginning, because from the very beginning, the seeds of what UMBC is today were planted,” she said. “It was really clear...that they knew who we were and who they wanted us to be.”

During “UMBC 2.0,” the university grew exponentially in size, research, and reputation—contributing to history in ways as varied as basketball success and COVID research, earning its place as an R1 research institution, and creating the vision statement still used today.

When Sheares Ashby arrived at UMBC in 2022, UMBC had already moved far beyond a moniker bestowed for many years straight by the *U.S. News* “Best Colleges” list.

“No longer are we ‘Up and Coming’... We have arrived,” she said, launching into a vision for

UMBC’s future informed by the series of “Bold Conversations” she led when she first arrived at UMBC, as well as a campus values survey, the University System of Maryland’s “Vision 2030” plan, and similar initiatives. The strategic priorities include: growing student opportunity and success; transforming teaching and learning; redefining excellence in research and creative achievement; cultivating organizational innovation and vitality; and strengthening Maryland and its communities.

During the conversation, Sheares Ashby challenged the audience to imagine with her a UMBC that would use a lens of inclusive excellence to approach every aspect of planning. Moving forward, a strategic planning steering committee led by the provost and co-chaired by **Renique T. Kersh**, vice president of student affairs, and **Charissa S.L. Cheah**, professor of psychology, is in the process of bringing these themes to the broader community for further discussion.

In a message shared with the community on the final day of classes, the president underscored the need to look ahead and stay true to the university’s mission.

“I am inspired and energized to work with all of you in setting our sights on the future—on purpose, in purpose,” she said. “I want to acknowledge that these are very challenging days, and part of the challenge is uncertainty. Especially when it comes to the impact of the many federal orders and actions on UMBC. There is much that we simply do not know yet, but I do know that our mission, our values, and our vision are not changing.”

— *Jenny O’Grady*

Watch the full “Conversation About Strategic Planning” discussion at planning.umbc.edu.

THE NEWS

In Brief

Welcoming New Leaders

This summer, a slate of new senior leaders are coming to campus to advance the mission of the university. **Jeanne M. VanBriesen** joins UMBC as the dean of the College of Engineering and Information Technology (COEIT). **Patrick Roche** begins his role as the new vice president for institutional advancement, and **John Stolle-McAllister** starts his tenure as interim dean of the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences.

VanBriesen joins UMBC from Carnegie Mellon University where she served as the Duquesne Light Company Professor in the departments of Civil and Environmental Engineering and of Engineering and Public Policy. An accomplished scholar, VanBriesen's research focuses on environmental systems. At UMBC, she will build on the tradition of integrating undergraduate and graduate education, research, innovation, and service to address evolving global needs.

Anupam Joshi, who served as the interim COEIT dean for the past two years in addition to his roles as the Oros Family Professor and director of UMBC Cybersecurity Institute, will be transitioning to a new role as the special assistant to the provost for AI and computing.

Roche joins UMBC from the University of Minnesota Foundation, where he most recently served as vice president for principal gifts and interdisciplinary initiatives. The foundation, a separate nonprofit organization from the University of Minnesota, serves as the central development office for the university. Prior to assuming his current role in 2024, Roche served for three years as associate vice president for central programs.

Stolle-McAllister, professor and current chair of modern languages, linguistics, and intercultural communication, brings two-and-a-half decades of experience at UMBC to his interim role. **Kimberly Moffitt**, dean of the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences since 2022—and in an interim role for two years before that—is joining Howard University, her alma mater.

Supporting Federal Workers

UMBC continues to monitor and respond to actions and executive orders from the federal government, including the impact on displaced federal workers. This spring, in collaboration with the state and campus partners, the university launched a number of resources to assist Marylanders in need.

In partnership with the Governor's Maryland Workers Impacted by Recent Federal Actions, UMBC created a website hub of services and opportunities that all displaced federal workers can access for support. In addition, the UMBC Alumni Engagement and Career Center offices are offering several resources specifically for alumni and the UMBC community.

The Office of Professional Programs is also empowering individuals in the Baltimore and Washington metro areas impacted by recent workforce changes through UMBC's webinar series, Paws & Pivot. This series provides a crucial platform for recently laid-off federal workers and other affected professionals to connect, learn, and thrive.

For more information, visit umbc.edu/ogrca/resources-for-displaced-federal-workers.

Sustainable Goals

UMBC has received a \$1.2 million solar energy grant from the Maryland Energy Administration to support solar power installations on campus and other sustainability initiatives.

The funding will enable the construction of solar canopies over the north portion of the Stadium Lot. Rooftop solar arrays will be mounted on UMBC's central receiving warehouse, located adjacent to the lot. The installations will be highly visible to the UMBC community and members of the public attending events at the Chesapeake Employers Insurance Arena.

Together, these solar installations will generate 1,000 kW of clean, carbon-free energy, or about 2.5 percent of UMBC's current annual electricity. The solar panels' output will reduce UMBC's carbon footprint by roughly 500 tons per year and earn Solar Renewable Energy

Credits (SRECs) from the state of Maryland, which can be sold to power companies. The combined savings from the electricity generation and accompanying SRECs may save UMBC \$200,000 to \$300,000 annually.

On Track to Lead

UMBC senior track and field student-athlete **Anjayooluwa “Jayo” Adegboyo**, biochemistry and molecular biology, was named the 2025 Arthur Ashe Jr. Male Sports Scholar of the Year by *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education* magazine. The publication sponsors the Arthur Ashe Jr. Sports Scholar Awards to honor students of color who have excelled in the classroom and on the athletic field and demonstrate a commitment to community service and student leadership.

“Since his arrival to UMBC, Jayo has brought his dynamic approach to his athletic and academic experiences,” said UMBC head track and field coach **David Bobb** '02. “Jayo's fun-loving personality disguises his relentless pursuit of excellence, and that combination makes him an obvious asset.”

— UMBC News Staff

Anjayooluwa “Jayo” Adegboyo, right, at a track meet this spring. Photo by Pamela Cowart-Rickman/UMBC Athletics.



AT PLAY

A Class Reunion Half a World Away



With such a large population of Marylanders at UMBC, it's not that unusual to run into someone you went to high school with. But when that someone is from your high school in Canberra, Australia, that's a little more unexpected.

It was the love of the game that unexpectedly brought senior **Annie Grove**, biology, and junior **Erin Behel**, mechanical engineering, back together a few years after and a few thousand miles from where they first became friends. Behel is a softball player and daughter of a U.S. Marine, so moving was a regular family pastime. When she found herself in Australia (her mother's home country) in grade seven, she met Grove, a soccer player, in high school. Once Behel's father's contract ended in 2018, she returned to Maryland. Unbeknownst to one another, they were both looking for athletic opportunities in the United States.

"I posted my announcement on social media saying I committed to UMBC, and I started getting all these messages from friends in Canberra saying, 'We're pretty sure that's where Grove is going!'" recalls Behel. "It was just insanity that out of all the colleges in the U.S., we'd both end up here."

The friends can't remember their first on-campus meeting (probably either the first student-athlete meeting or a visit to Behel's dorm where Grove recalls "seeing all her pretty plants!"). But it's certain they've enjoyed each

other's support since reconnecting and cheering from the stands at one another's games.

Grove and Behel are just two of the many international student-athletes who have made UMBC their home away from home, and support is at the forefront of those decisions.

Bruna De Padua, media and communications studies, originally traveled from Brazil to a small university in rural Missouri to pursue swimming. After a few months, she knew the fit wasn't right and joined the NCAA transfer portal. Enter UMBC.

"As soon as I committed to UMBC, the process was so different from my other university," De Padua says. For example, she appreciated how head swim coach **Matt Donovan** made sure she knew who to contact around campus for questions and help. Behel and Grove echo these sentiments, especially as it pertains to being able to focus on academics.

"I've heard from former teammates at other schools that they feel like they're being punished if they choose to go to class and I've never, ever felt that," says Behel.

Grove agreed, sharing, "Our coaches have always said that we need to go to class. And there's so much emphasis on communication."

While they all agree the coaching staff has been invaluable in making their time at UMBC successful, they're also grateful for fellow Retrievers.

De Padua is navigating her junior year now and knew she needed an internship to fulfill her academic requirements. After doing commercial modeling at an agency that a fellow swim team alum, **Rola Hussein** '24 from Egypt, worked for, De Padua was able to parlay that into her own spring/summer internship opportunity for the agency, doing social media and marketing.

She's not the only one who was helped academically by her peers. Behel recalls a mechanical engineering softball player several years ahead of her who "paved the way for us to be able to show our coach and ourselves it's possible to do both."

In turn, Behel, De Padua, and Grove all seek to offer support to others. "I've had so many conversations with people about how to get a bank account, how to get a phone number... really adult tasks that I had to figure out early on and now I'm passing it along," says Grove.

They see UMBC as their home away from home and would encourage any international student-athlete to consider joining them. When asked what advice she would give to any new Retrievers from across the world, Grove simply summed up her experience by suggesting, "Just say yes to things and see what happens."

—Kait McCaffrey

Top: Annie Grove, left, and Erin Behel, right, take a walk down memory lane. Photo by Mashaal Awan '25.

Below: Bruna De Padua, right, congratulates teammate Makaela Hill, left. Photo by Ian Feldmann '21/UMBC Athletics.



Community Starts in the Kitchen

The tantalizing aroma of food from everyone's favorite UMBC alumni-founded restaurant, Ekiben, wafts through the air of the Albin O. Kuhn Library and Gallery. People are drawn in by the steamed buns and tofu nuggets and stay for the community, including a Q&A with Ekiben co-owner Steve Chu '12, economics, and Mark Padoongpatt, associate professor and director of the Asian and Asian American Studies Program at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Part of the Reframing Global Asias Conversation Series, postdoctoral fellow Mika Thornburg led the guests in discussing Padoongpatt's book, Flavors of Empire, with Chu providing support using his own experience creating community through food.

Mika Thornburg: Tell us a little about your personal history and how you came to work with food.

Steve Chu: When my family immigrated from Taiwan to the U.S., most decided to go into the restaurant business. All my aunts and uncles had restaurants at one point in time, so I grew up with it. I understood the work hours behind it, the work ethic. When I was 13, I read Anthony Bourdain's *Kitchen Confidential*. I told my mom that this is what I wanted to do, and she was like, "No, you're going to college." So I came to UMBC, studied economics, and every paper I did was about food. I did a paper on Taco Bell, did a paper on Chipotle, and around sophomore year I was like, alright, this is getting kind of silly. So I decided to get my first job in a restaurant and work and go to school full time. That's when I started diving into this industry and I haven't really looked back since.

Mark Padoongpatt: Growing up as a Thai American, you get associated with food even if you have no professional relationship to food at all. I didn't want to perpetuate that stereotype, so I avoided even thinking about food until graduate school. And that's when I realized Thai people are so visible through food. Thai food comes to stand in for Thai people and there's really nothing else we know about Thai people. So instead of talking about the community outside of food, I thought maybe I should just think about that. How did we come to this point where Thai food comes



to stand in for Thai people? Since then, I've been thinking about food as a very dynamic way to study communities.

Thornburg: Our event theme is about food and community. Can you speak a little bit about your perspective on the relationship between these two things from your respective position?

Chu: Food brings people together. You see that at this event, you see that at Costco with the free sample line. When we opened Ekiben in Baltimore City, we realized that it was a very polarized city, so we built a space where people from all walks of life could come, afford the food, and sit next to someone that they typically wouldn't be sitting next to. On any Saturday, you'll have a squeegee kid sitting next to a Jewish grandmother listening to Cardi B on the speakers, eating some fried chicken. It's things that you normally wouldn't put together. Food is a really, really powerful tool to build a community.

Thornburg: What role can food play in changing culture and relationships between different groups of people, whether they be individuals, local communities, or entire nations?

Padoongpatt: Food culture is incredibly transformative. Just look at European empires. How did they grow? Through food commodities. They created political and economic systems that were around food and food production. And so in terms of nation building, the evidence is all there in terms of the

significance of food and the role that food can play. The Thai government for the last 15 years has been pouring a lot of effort, time, and energy into this through a kind of gastro diplomacy so that more people will come to Thailand. I think it is a great way to stimulate curiosity and human connection, but just the eating of the food itself is not enough.

Chu: What I find really cool is if you grew up in a very diverse community, chances are you've had a very diverse group of friends and you've tried a very diverse group of foods. And that helps break down walls and allow for understanding and the building of community. One of the coolest things about coming to UMBC was how diverse a group of friends I was able to meet. After UMBC, I went to New York and worked as a line cook, and I brought back a lot of creativity with me. I sat down with my two future business partners, [Ephrem Abebe '13, information systems, and Nikhil Yesurpriya '13, M.S., '16, biological science]. I said, "Hey, bring me all these random ingredients that your moms aren't using in the pantry." And so they bring me all this stuff, and over time we just learned how to incorporate it into our core menu. Honestly, there wasn't a lot of thought behind it—except "that tastes good."

—JJ Gee '25

Left to right: Mika Thornburg, Steve Chu '12, and Mark Padoongpatt. Photo by Randianne Laysdon '09.

AT PLAY

Back on the Air

“You’re listening to WMBC, UMBC’s freeform student radio station. And you’re in the 2000s right now, thanks to the radio time machine.”

Four years ago, hearing those words would have been impossible. UMBC’s radio station, WMBC—now a bustling hive of musical joy, live concerts, and record-painting parties—had been silent after a lack of student staffing and resource issues, leading the student group to hang up their headphones. But recently, music is on the airwaves again as students and staff work around the clock to breathe new life into the station. After combining operations with *The Retriever*, UMBC’s long-running student newspaper, and *Bartleby*, UMBC’s Creative Arts Journal since 1972, WMBC found a new home in the University Center (UC) and a fresh start as part of the newly chartered Student Media Center.

Retrievers have been media-conscious from the university’s inception—the first issue of the student newspaper was published on September 19, 1966. By 1979, the student-run radio station, WMBC, was founded. Originally called the WUMD Radio Club, the station began broadcasting over carrier current circuits, enabling students to tune in from their dorms and at a couple of dining areas on campus. Ever since then, the tradition of reporting student and campus life continued to expand and evolve.

In recent years, these media outlets, which depend on the ever-changing student body, took a hit. But students weren’t willing to give up their media platforms so easily.

Before COVID-19, WMBC was having trouble staffing the station, but the org really lost its footing—and its physical space—during the pandemic. **Sean Stultz** ’24, computer science, WMBC’s station manager his senior year and their chief engineer prior to that, was storing the station’s equipment in his Hillside apartment in Breton, until the station found a permanent place for it.

Around the same time, *The Retriever* ran into similar complications. They were working without a dedicated advisor, and the weight of managing everything became too much for students to handle alone. That changed at the end of 2023, when **Ann Tropea**, the assistant

director of the Center for Democracy and Civic Life, was hired as the newspaper’s media advisor. *The Retriever* members say she has helped immensely with finding advertisers, organizing documents, and advocating for them as a student organization. WMBC approached her for similar assistance.

“I began working with students from *The Retriever* and WMBC to create a shared structure that went beyond the two groups simply sharing space in our suite of offices in the UC,” says Tropea, who has a background in law and communications.

Bartleby joined the other media groups in 2024, and after a year of planning, the Student Government Association recently approved a new charter organization—the Student Media Center. The group’s stated mission is to “create a more engaged, informed, and civically empowered student body and assert First Amendment freedoms at UMBC through the active production of student-run media.”

The new structure ensures the longevity and continuous operations of not just WMBC but *The Retriever* and *Bartleby* as well, says Tropea, who during this planning period was directing her efforts into assisting with WMBC’s revitalization.

Michelle Ibino, a biological sciences junior and the events manager for WMBC, says, “Sharing a space and a mission has been positive as it allows for students to cross over into each club. Members of the station have found and gone on to write/work for *The Retriever* and vice versa.”

The Retriever covers the station’s events, and it’s common to see members of *The Retriever* enjoying WMBC’s events, which turn the newsroom into a Tiny Desk Concert situation. “The WMBC/Retriever space is small, but turns out to be a really cool music venue if you just rearrange a few chairs and tables,” says sophomore **Tim Rogers**, *The Retriever*’s music columnist. “The efforts of *The Retriever* and WMBC bring life to campus.”

When it comes to on-campus events, WMBC hosts concerts, album listening parties, zine creations, record painting, and

other activities. WMBC puts together bills that showcase student artists as well as local bands from the surrounding Baltimore area.

Ibino knows how crucial it is that the students have both on-campus and off-campus options. “The off-campus concerts we run are especially important because they allow UMBC students to connect with the large local Baltimore/DMV music scene,” she says.

In addition to being the events manager for WMBC, Ibino is one of the many DJs who broadcast a show through the station. Currently, there are about 40 different shows, and the station is on air weekly from Monday through Friday. With her show “Reverie,” Ibino connects with other students and educates anyone interested in the goth subculture.

Another DJ, **Daniela Salguero**, a junior psychology major, uses her show as a way to explore her cultural identity. Her show, “Luna Roja Radio,” focuses on alternative Latin American music, and she connects the songs to a wider political context. “Every week, I pick a theme to hone in on, and I think it’s a really great way for me to just get my feelings out there and to connect more with myself.”

The door to the Student Media Center is almost always open. With the station broadcast aired on the office speakers, students are there, working and socializing under the band posters and stories that dot the walls—they’re making and sharing media but they’re also continuing a legacy for the next generation of Retriever writers, editors, and DJs.

— Cristina Reid ’24

Clockwise from top: An editorial roundtable event of Student Media Center participants. Photo by The Retriever staff photographer Joshua Able-Carter, sophomore visual arts major; The station held a record-painting party to draw in students to the UC 214 space. Photo by Miani Kozlowski, sophomore computer engineering major; Students perform at a WMBC-hosted Off the Record event. Photo by Connor Gilger ’24, computer science.



DISCOVERY

From Soccer Balls to Batteries



In high school, **Samuel Bendek** worked in a soccer ball factory, where he was charged with figuring out how much energy the balls retained after bouncing off a wall.

"It turned out to be very efficient," Bendek, a mechanical engineering sophomore at UMBC, says. "I was surprised!"

The balls were made of natural rubber from the sap of Amazonian rubber trees. When a ball hits a wall, the rubber compresses, storing the kinetic energy from its motion in elastic potential energy. Then, as the ball bounces back, the potential energy turns back into kinetic energy, with very little energy loss.

The experience got Bendek thinking—what if rubber could store more energy than that in a soccer player's kick? What if it could store significant energy from sunlight and wind?

About five years later, Bendek and his sister and co-entrepreneur Juliana Bendek pitched that idea at the inaugural Maryland Student Ventures Showcase, held February 18 in Baltimore to celebrate nine local student ventures selected for the first-ever Pava LaPere Innovation Awards. As an award winner, Bendek's company, Elastic Energy, will receive \$50,000 from the state of Maryland to further develop its mechanical battery made from natural rubber.

"I have always wanted to create things, since I was a kid destroying my grandmother's clock

to build a new toy," says Bendek. "This is an opportunity to create something that makes the world a better place."

Shortly after his soccer-ball-inspired light-bulb moment, Bendek began experimenting with different ways to stretch rubber and store energy. When he had a prototype, he recruited his sister to join his efforts.

With seed funding from family and friends, the two started developing the next phase of the technology, pitching new investors, and building out their team. Along the way, Bendek, who is also a competitive swimmer, was recruited by UMBC and decided to become a Retriever. It didn't take him long to connect with UMBC's resources for student entrepreneurs.

"I met Samuel when he was still a first-year student," says **Kevin Fulmer**, the director of the Alex. Brown Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation. "He came in with a slide deck and a

working prototype, and I was really impressed. We started meeting on a regular basis. It's been really fun to see his progress and certainly exciting to see him win things like this \$50,000 grant."

"Kevin has helped me a lot," says Bendek. "He helped me build a business model and put me in touch with local experts and helped find opportunities like the Pava LaPere Innovation Acceleration Grant."

The batteries Bendek's company plans to build are slim cylinders a little taller than an average person. Each battery can store about 1 kilowatt-hour of energy—for comparison, a typical American household uses about 30 kilowatt-hours of electricity a day.

While Elastic Energy's batteries cannot provide as much energy as chemical batteries of the same weight, Bendek says they are long-lasting, relatively inexpensive, and don't require mining minerals like lithium, which can damage the environment and lead to geopolitical tensions due to the minerals' uneven global distribution.

The company plans to offer the batteries as backup power for homes or RVs first. Eventually, they hope they can become part of the solution for grid-scale energy storage.

"These batteries are a technology that really has the potential to grow; I'm confident of that," says Fulmer. "And Samuel has a great mindset—the entrepreneurial mindset of making things happen."

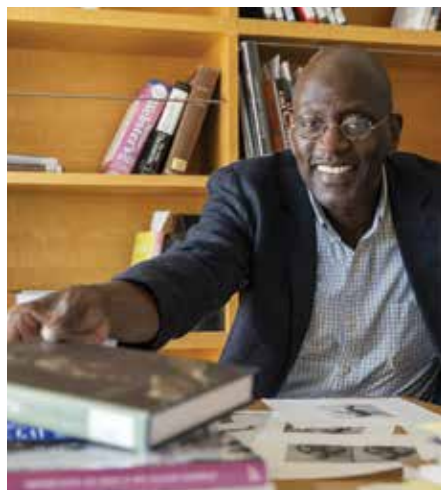
—Catherine Meyers

Samuel Bendek speaks about Elastic Energy at the Maryland Student Ventures Showcase in Baltimore, Maryland. Photo courtesy of UpSurge Baltimore.

"I have always wanted to create things, since I was a kid destroying my grandmother's clock to build a new toy. This is an opportunity to create something that makes the world a better place."

—**Samuel Bendek, mechanical engineering sophomore**

Unearthing an Artist's Legacy



Art historian **James Smalls**, professor of visual arts, is on an adventure to uncover the life and legacy of the Senegalese performer known as *Féral Benga*. In a twist of fate, his research might also protect *Benga's* grave. Smalls spent nine months in 2024 at the Getty Research Institute (GRI) in California as a Getty Scholar, working on his next book, *Féral Benga: African Muse of Modernism*, and connecting the dots of *Benga's* artistic impact.

Q: What led you to research *Féral Benga*?

Smalls: I found a black-and-white photo of a sculpture by Richmond Barthé, an African American sculptor of the Harlem Renaissance, of a Black man holding aloft a kind of saber, doing this hypnotic dance. It was titled *Féral Benga*, and I wondered if that was a type of dance. Eventually, I found out it was the stage name of François Benga, who adopted the name when he began performing at the Folies Bergère [a famous cabaret music hall in Paris]. Benga's technique combined African dance with classical ballet and acrobatics. I wanted to learn more, which led to years of research trying to create an archive of his life and art.

Q: What were some of *Féral Benga's* contributions before and after World War II?

Smalls: Benga became a muse for visual artists during the early 20th century. He had a magnetic personality and had many amorous affairs. Benga was gay and belonged to a gay circle of avant-garde artists. Jean Cocteau was

one of those people and included him in his first avant-garde film, *The Blood of a Poet*, in 1932.

Before WWII, Benga owned a cabaret and a Senegalese restaurant in Paris where he performed. After WWII, he established a cabaret called La Rose Rouge where young African artists and students gathered, leading to the beginning of the Négritude movement within the performing arts.

I want to dispel the notion that women and people of color did not contribute to modernism [an early 20th-century art movement] and the avant-garde movement. They are sort of written out of art history. I've learned that Benga contributed greatly to these two movements. Through my research, I want to bring that to the surface.

Q: Did your research bring any unexpected finds?

Smalls: I put an alert out on eBay for imagery of *Féral Benga*. For a while, I didn't hear anything. Then a woman in France started selling photographs of him without knowing who he was. She had this huge box of images. Each time she sent me a photo, she added some candid shots of the dancer. One shows him smoking a cigarette at a party and another in a park. Suddenly, Swiss art dealers bought the rest of the collection. They have agreed to let me use the photos for my book. It turned out the woman's father, an estate dealer, found this box of photos in a house in Châteauroux, France, that I later discovered was *Féral Benga's* house.

Q: Did you find additional traces of *Benga's* life during your trip to France?

Smalls: I went to the Saint-Denis cemetery in Châteauroux and found the family tomb where he is buried. Researching the family is difficult because there are no records. I'm trying to piece together this life that was very popular at the time but then suddenly sort of disappeared from history.

The concession [rights to the plot of land] on the family tomb is set to run out in 2028—the French government will disinter the remains and put them in different ossuaries. I'm

petitioning the French government to preserve *Féral Benga's* grave because he is an important icon of Black diasporic modernism.

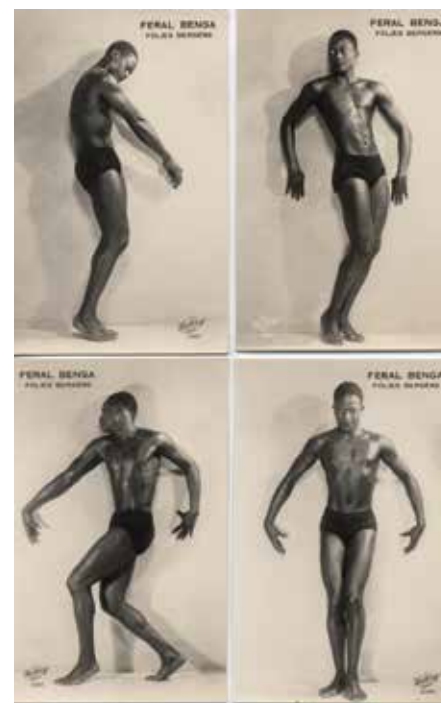
Q: Are there connections between this research and the research for your first book, *The Homoerotic Photography of Carl Van Vechten: Public Face, Private Thoughts*?

Smalls: Carl Van Vechten was a great patron of the Harlem Renaissance, a writer, and a photographer. If you see old photographs of African Americans from the Harlem Renaissance—portraits of people in music, dance, and theatre—they are by Carl Van Vechten. He was very well known during the period. He also did a lot of private erotic photography, which is what my book was about. The connection to my new book is that *Féral Benga* arrived in New York City in 1937, and Carl Van Vechten invited *Féral Benga* over into his studio apartment and took many interesting photographs of him.

It's been a great journey piecing all this research together. Now, I must finish the book.

— Catalina Sofia Dansberger Duque

Above: James Smalls, GRI Scholar 2024, at his desk.
Below: Postcards of *Féral Benga* at Folies Bergère, about 1930, Lucien Waléry. Images courtesy of the Getty.



DISCOVERY

Finding the Harmony Within Art and Science

At UMBC, undergraduate students are redefining the boundaries of scientific and artistic pursuits. From a chemical engineer who graces the stage with his cello to a bioinformatician who paints and a biochemist who ignites the dance floor with Latin rhythms, these scholars thrive in an environment that celebrates their diverse passions.

This spring, several U-RISE Scholars—the National Institutes of Health’s Undergraduate Research Training Initiative for Student Enhancement—shared their multidisciplinary interests with **Jacqueline King**, associate director of the U-RISE program, and **Mariano Sto. Domingo**, associate director of research and evaluation within the Meyerhoff Scholars Program. As a result, King and Sto. Domingo started researching how the arts and science blend in these students’ lives, and presented their findings at an academic conference this spring. What they learned was that here, rigorous research and creative expression intertwine, fostering a vibrant community where students explore every dimension of their talents.

Ajeetha Aruchandran, a senior bioinformatics and computational biology major, studies how the neural tube—a precursor to the spinal cord—forms in zebrafish embryos with **Rachel Brewster**, professor of biological sciences.

The development of the embryos, which are transparent, “is a very visual process,” Aruchandran says. Her artistic skills have allowed her to generate beautiful and accurate diagrams that communicate her research, she says. “When you’re not able to communicate science well, then the meaning is lost. So I think my art has really strengthened that aspect of my science. The connection has surprised and delighted me, because for a long time I thought my science and my art had to be separate.”

Lesley Hernandez, a senior majoring in biochemistry and molecular biology, is hunting for factors that regulate how viruses like HIV multiply in cells with **Michael Summers**, University Distinguished Professor of Chemistry and Biochemistry. The ultimate goal is to disrupt the viruses’ replication. She also loves to dance.

“My family is from the Dominican Republic, so I grew up surrounded by music and movement. I embraced that part of my culture at UMBC by joining the Latin Dance Club,” Hernandez says. “I love incorporating dance into the workspace by sharing a laugh with my peers and dancing between experiments. It fosters stronger connections and creates an enjoyable work environment.”

And, when the science gets intense, “I can go to my dance class and come back with a refreshed mind,” Hernandez says.

For **Daisy Parry**, a senior majoring in biological sciences, that outlet is singing, and her music minor has created dedicated times that provide a respite from the demands of science, she says.

Parry is a member of The Stilettos, an all-woman a cappella group at UMBC, and her church choir. She arranges songs for The Stilettos to perform, which permits taking some creative license with the original work. “I like changing up the rhythms and dynamics to add depth to the music, and that’s encouraged me to think a bit outside the box with my science, too, in terms of trying new experimental techniques.”

For now, her work on cell migration in fruit fly embryos with **Michelle Starz-Gaiano**, professor of biological sciences; her classes; and her music keep her busy, but Parry is looking forward to pursuing a master’s in public health after UMBC. She emphasizes how the concept of harmony—so central to music—carries over to the kind of work she wants to do. Factors such as research, clinical care, public policy, economics, the environment, and how they intersect are all relevant to public health outcomes, she explains.

Ella Reinders, a junior biological sciences major, also likes to tackle projects—scientific or artistic—from many angles. Watercolor and acrylic paints, sketching and drawing, handicrafts, sewing, and ballet have all captured her interest.

Reinders does behavioral research with **Tara LeGates**, assistant professor of biological sciences. The lab needed a new piece of equipment, but it was too expensive to buy off the shelf. “So I decided, why not create our own?” Reinders recalls.

She sketched it out, learned how to render it on the computer, how to 3D print it at the UMBC Library, and then how to wire it. “And now I’ve

actually been using it, and it works,” she says. “I love turning something from my brain into something that I’m actually holding.”

There is also direct overlap between Reinders’ science and her art. “I’ve done imaging of neurons, and being able to turn them into this piece of artwork that you want to hang on your wall is really exciting. Moving through life with both scientific and artistic interests just makes everything more interesting and is a way to express all sides of myself.”

For **Joshua Dayie**, a senior chemical engineering major, both discipline and creativity are required for his research and his art—playing the cello. “You really have to strike a balance between them to make any meaningful progress,” he says. Practicing cello requires hours of repetition, until technical passages flow out of his fingers from muscle memory alone. In the lab, sometimes experiments must be repeated many times before they’re successful—that’s the discipline.

Then comes the creativity. Only after someone masters the fundamentals can they explore nuance in the tone or emotion conveyed on the cello, Dayie says. Similarly, in science “a lot of the innovation that you generate is really only meaningful after you’ve spent a lot of time understanding the core scientific concepts behind everything.”

“I think that’s been the most surprising thing: The creativity that comes from a very sound foundation of discipline is something that is translatable pretty much anywhere,” Dayie reflects.

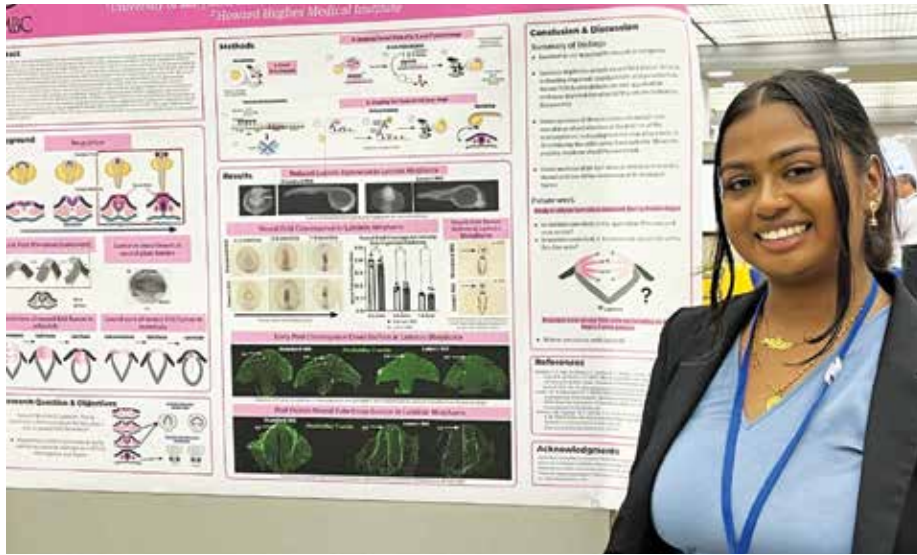
As an added bonus, “music has been a really nice outlet for me to use a different part of my brain,” he adds. “I feel like it makes me a little bit more whole.”

— Sarah L. Hansen, M.S. ’15

Top: Ajeetha Aruchandran finds balance between the structure in research and freedom in painting. Middle row: Joshua Dayie applies the same discipline to perfecting a technical cello passage and complex procedures in the lab. Bottom: Lesley Hernandez shares laughter with her peers by dancing between experiments. Photos by Melissa Penley Cormier, M.F.A. ’17.



Watch the video version of this story!



IMPACT

Finding the “Forever Chemicals” in Local Waters



On an unseasonably warm Halloween in 2024, a group of costumed UMBC students strolled the banks of Baltimore’s Inner Harbor. The costumes were in good fun, but the spirit driving them to the city that day was more scientific than spectral: They were there to check on samplers they had installed around the harbor as part of a study to measure the concentrations of chemicals called per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS.

Thousands of different PFAS are used in a range of products, including cleaning products, clothing, and fire-fighting foam. They have earned the nickname “forever chemicals” because of the way they persist in water, soil, air, food, and even the blood of humans and animals. Exposure to some PFAS has been linked to a range of health problems, including decreased fertility in women, developmental delays in children, reduced immune function, and increased risk of cancer and obesity. In recent years there have been efforts to eliminate PFAS from some consumer products and regulate their concentrations in drinking water.

“I’ve lived in Baltimore most of my life,” says **Margaret Siao**, a master’s student in chemical and biochemical engineering, who took a lead role in the work as part of the ICARE (Interdisciplinary Consortium for Applied Research in the Environment) program, which links researchers and Baltimore community members on environmental projects around the city. “The harbor is a big part of the city,

although many people don’t go out on the water. And that’s one of the reasons I wanted to look at the water quality.”

Siao is working with **Donya Hamidi**, an environmental engineering Ph.D. student, in **Lee Blaney’s** lab. Blaney, an environmental engineering professor, is an expert on PFAS. His lab is a leading partner with Baltimore community members who advocate for and are responsible for the quality of the water.

For the ICARE project, the lab partnered with the U.S. Geological Survey Maryland-Delaware-D.C. Water Science Center and Blue Water Baltimore, a nonprofit working to restore the quality of Baltimore’s rivers, streams, and harbor. Blue Water Baltimore shared their knowledge of the harbor and area waterways and their connections with the community while lab members lent their expertise on technical aspects of the project.

“PFAS is a hot topic, so Margaret’s project is really good timing,” says Barbara Johnson, Siao’s mentor at Blue Water Baltimore. “I think her data will be very useful for us in helping inform the public about PFAS chemicals.”

Sometimes the community comes to the lab. When Mohammed Almafrachi, who works as an engineer for the Baltimore City Department of Public Works, became interested in PFAS, he reached out to Blaney. “Last year, I found Dr. Blaney’s name on the internet. I drove to the campus, found his office, and he was there. I introduced myself as an engineer at the city of Baltimore, and we sat

down and started talking,” Almafrachi says. He helped Siao and Hamidi gain access to sample the water at the outlet of Baltimore’s Patapsco Wastewater Treatment Plant and gave Blaney’s class a tour of Baltimore’s largest drinking water treatment plant.

Almafrachi said he was happy to provide students with a window into a real-world workplace where their skills might one day be applied. “If you have not gone to the field, then you are not yet a full engineer,” says Almafrachi. “We can talk about theories and textbooks endlessly, but the field is where you really test your skills.”

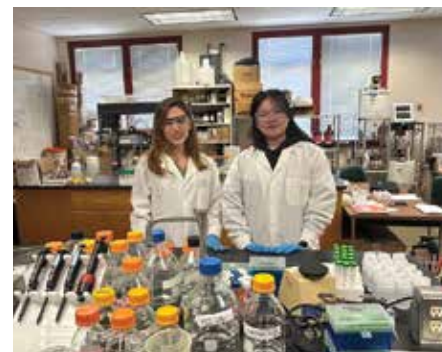
Siao and Hamidi agree with Almafrachi about the value of field work. They installed their PFAS samplers at three of the four floating trash wheels that collect trash from the harbor. “Almost every time we collected a sampler, we saw something new or unexpected, for example algae growing on the sampler, and we had to figure out what was going on at that particular site,” says Hamidi. The findings will serve as a foundation for future studies about PFAS in the local environment.

“If you are stuck in a lab all day, it’s easy to forget why you’re doing research,” says Siao. “This project gave me a chance to interact with people outside of academia. I learned about what’s important to them and how to talk about science with them, which is a really important skill.”

— Catherine Meyers

Top: Margaret Siao, left, and Donya Hamidi, right, collect water samples in the Baltimore Harbor. Photo courtesy of Siao.

Bottom: Hamidi and Siao in the lab, analyzing samples for PFAS concentrations. Photo courtesy of Hamidi.



Retrievers Behind the Scenes



Dave Anguish came to UMBC in 2008 to study political science as well as modern languages and linguistics. After

graduating in 2012, he hopped on a plane to Mexico City thanks to a research award from the Fulbright U.S. Student Program. He returned to UMBC as a staff member and earned an M.P.P. in grant management in 2019 while working with UMBC's international students and faculty.

Q: What's one essential thing you'd want another Retriever to know about you?

A: An urgent need for an advisor in International Education Services (IES) ended up being my big break. Learning and explaining to others the complexity of immigration law planted the seed of an idea that blossomed into the decision to become an immigration lawyer.

Q: What do you love about working at the Center for Global Engagement (CGE)?

A: When CGE was still IES, we were a small but mighty team of five or so people. Today, CGE has nearly 30 staff. My team handles immigration services for the thousands of international students coming to UMBC to study as well as those who have graduated and are working around the country.

Q: Tell us about someone in the community who has inspired you.

A: My former co-worker, supervisor, and current friend, **Michelle Massey**, taught me so much. She is the reason why my emails are littered with happy exclamation points, and her example of servant leadership has stuck with me and set a standard that I try to live up to in my work.

Q: What support have you found here?

A: It's clichéd to say "it's the people" that make UMBC what it is, but it's true. We're writing the story of UMBC every day. It's been fascinating to see how much UMBC has changed since I was an undergraduate, but how the ethos has remained constant.

Public Law for Public Good

On a fall Saturday morning, **Mohammad Arshad**, an information systems senior, greeted clients arriving at the Erickson School of Aging Studies looking for a fresh start with the help of UMBC's first Expungement Clinic. After completing the intake forms, Arshad passed the files to pro bono lawyers and staff from Maryland Legal Aid and pro bono lawyers from the Baltimore County Bar Association. They carefully reviewed each client's criminal record to determine eligibility for clearing or sealing certain charges or offenses that can create barriers to jobs, housing, and education.

When **Jessica Cook**, associate director of the Sondheim Public Affairs Scholar Program, noticed that Loyola University has this program, she connected with **Molly Timko**, UMBC's pre-law academic advisor, and discussed bringing the program to UMBC. They established the clinic with funding from UMBC's Center for Democracy and Civic Life. As soon as a call was made for 20 student volunteers, the response was overwhelming.

"The exposure to public-interest law—doing law for the greater good—and to network with lawyers in various fields broadens students' understanding of what being a lawyer can look like beyond arguing in a courtroom," says Timko, a licensed attorney in Maryland; Washington, D.C.; and New York. In her role at UMBC, Timko provides career pathway counseling and

law school application support for UMBC students of all majors as well as alumni.

"It was the first time I saw a law-related volunteer opportunity on campus," said Arshad. He serves as the lieutenant governor for Maryland Student Legislature, which includes delegations from 15 colleges and universities across Maryland. In this role, he oversees inter-delegation communication and serves as senate president. "As someone interested in the legal field, I saw this as a meaningful way to deepen my understanding of the legal process."

The expungement clinic was streamlined to assist as many clients as possible. No appointment was needed. Lawyers arrived equipped with laptops and printers, prepared to complete and file paperwork. Angus Derbyshire, director for pro bono at Maryland Legal Aid who spearheads expungement clinics across Maryland, reported that 14 clients were served at the UMBC Expungement Clinic, and 10 of them had cases that were deemed potentially eligible for expungement. "This resulted in the preparation of 24 expungement petitions, which is a meaningful outcome for both the clients and the community," said Derbyshire.

As a first-generation college student, Arshad had never seen the legal process in action firsthand, let alone been part of it. What surprised him most was the collaboration and community focus. "I had always assumed legal work was mostly done behind the scenes, but this clinic showed me how much personal interaction and empathy are involved," said Arshad, who plans to practice intellectual property law defending the rights of inventors, entrepreneurs, and developers. "It also gave me a better understanding of expungement and how access to legal resources can significantly improve someone's future opportunities."

— Catalina Sofia Dansberger-Duque

Mohammad Arshad stands at the Maryland State House podium presiding as senate president of the Maryland Student Legislature. Photo courtesy of Arshad.



IMPACT

Starting His Freshman Year

When **Johnny Olszewski** walks the halls of the Longworth House Office Building across the street from the Capitol dome, he stands head and shoulders above most of his peers. And while his height may be the first thing that sets him apart from the flood of new legislators in Washington, D.C., his consistent dedication to his home-base constituents—including much of Baltimore County where he was born, raised, and eventually earned a Ph.D. in his backyard at UMBC—has helped him arrive as a first-term representative in Congress with a solid reputation preceding him.

Before getting sworn into the U.S. House of Representatives in January 2025, Olszewski, Ph.D. '17, public policy, served as the Baltimore County executive, leading the 73rd most populous county in the country after serving two terms in the Maryland House of Delegates. When he originally won the delegate position, Olszewski was a 23-year-old social-studies and special-education public-school teacher.

Many students daydream about an out-of-state school experience, but for Olszewski—seated in his congressional office with an extra-large painting of a crab with a can of Old Bay across from him—staying local was the goal. “UMBC was a no-brainer,” says Olszewski, “first and foremost, because of the reputation of the institution. Secondly, the availability of and reputation of the public policy program. I also believe in taking advantage of it being a state school, and it’s in my county.”

Roy Meyers, professor emeritus, was Olszewski’s dissertation chair. “It was a great benefit to have him as a current legislator in the classroom,” says Meyers. “Other students learned from the real-world examples he provided, either confirming or improving on what I taught.”

Renee Whitby, M.P.P. '15, one of Olszewski’s fellow students in a sociology course at UMBC, says, “Johnny was smart, down to earth, and had a good sense of humor. We often have a preconceived notion about politicians, but he proved to be a regular person.” Whitby, who now works in Towson University’s College of Education, was excited to cast her vote for her

former classmate in his congressional run. “Johnny brings a wealth of knowledge and common sense that will benefit the constituents of District 2 in shaping federal legislation,” she says.

Olszewski now represents the majority of Baltimore County, Carroll County, and a northern sliver of Baltimore City—as well as global reach with his foreign affairs committee assignment—and he’s ready to call on his academic background and history of legislative experience to lead on a larger scale on issues like affordable housing, gun safety, workforce development, and other areas he took on as county executive.

“One of the things that I prided myself on as county executive was how open, accessible, and transparent we were about what was going on, how we made decisions, and what was happening. And I expect to continue that approach here,” says Olszewski. “We passed bipartisan police reform. We had Republicans and Democrats voting unanimously for budgets, which is just unheard of these days.”

Olszewski’s dissertation explored research-based policymaking as opposed to other considerations. He found that “policymaking, unfortunately, isn’t just an academic exercise,” says Olszewski. “Many academics and researchers invest time developing thoughtful research and understanding of the world...and there might be compelling policy prescriptions that will move the needle on any number of issues. But there are folks across the aisle who, because of personal beliefs or political considerations, just can’t support that.”

“It’s still a little humbling and inspiring to know that a first-generation college student from Dundalk is now part of a group that is responsible for leading our nation, but also still just being a kid from Dundalk,” says Olszewski. His commute and title have changed, but Olszewski plans to still bring the best of himself, all 6 feet, 6 inches, to the job at hand. “Compromise is possible without compromising values,” he says. “And that’s where it gets complicated. It might not be the pure, perfect answer, but I think that there are places where we can still find common ground.”

—Randianne Leysbon '09

U.S. Representative Johnny Olszewski, Ph.D. '17, outside his office in D.C. Photo by Marlayna Demond '11.







IT TAKES A SYMPHONY

By Randianne Leyshon '09

Photos by Kiirstn Pagan '11

All musicians start out as absolute beginners. Some might progress as self-taught, others might have private music lessons, and many will pick up their first instrument in school. But without a musical pathway—consistent access to physical instruments and dedicated music educators year after year—budding musicians will falter on their journey.

For **Nema Robinson**, and the thousands of other Baltimore City student musicians who have benefited from extracurricular, free, equitable music education through programs like the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's OrchKids and Peabody Institute's Tuned-In, these communities have opened musical doors to a professional career in music and so much more. Now on track to graduate with a music education degree, Robinson has reached a full-circle moment to teach at the programs that set the stage for her own success.

Philip Mann, conductor of UMBC's Chamber Ensemble, leads the group in the Linehan Concert Hall. Nema Robinson is standing far left and Rickerra Bassett, far right.



The first violinist plays a long, drawn-out A. The other musicians settle their feet against the stage floor and their backs hover near, but don't quite touch, the backs of their chairs. Suddenly, the noise of the orchestra breaks across your ears—briefly discordant and separate—but as the players all search for the same A, the notes weave together into a pleasing buzz of anticipated energy. In tune together, they look expectantly at the conductor.

Among the Uggs and Vans and Crocs and Nikes nestled under the music stands are Nema Robinson's double-buckled black platform Mary Janes. Robinson, a fourth-year music education student and Linchan Artists Scholar, is at one of her teaching gigs that supplement and complement her degree. Today, she's in Friedberg Hall at the Peabody Institute of The Johns Hopkins University in Mount Vernon, Baltimore, as

part of Tuned-In, a free musical study and youth development program for Baltimore-area students. The elegant marble relief sculptures that flank either side of the stage and the gentle curve of the stairs leading to the second story seating section are just the background to the real art on the stage: Middle and high schoolers are making music.

In Baltimore City, only 60 percent of public schools have some type of musical component, says Nick Skinner, the vice president and founding team member of Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's (BSO) OrchKids—which also offers free, community-based, high-quality music instruction and programming in the city. Of that, only 12 percent of city schools have instrument programs, compared to nearly 100 percent in nearby Baltimore, Howard, and Montgomery county

schools. "There's no musical pathway. So if you're lucky enough to have music in your elementary school, you may not be able to continue that music study sequentially into middle or high school," says Skinner. "It's a really patchwork model of how students can progress musically through their education."

When former BSO conductor Marin Alsop began her tenure in the city, she saw a need to fill this gap, and in 2007 founded BSO OrchKids. As Skinner tells it, Alsop saw that "many of our students here in the city were locked out of these opportunities to have the power of music in their life—to benefit from the inherent value of playing an instrument and the benefits that come from the study and the artistic process of learning an instrument."

Asked to lead

When Robinson was a kid, she was walking around Artscape with her mom waiting to see her cousin perform on stage. Artscape in Baltimore City is the nation's largest free outdoor arts festival, famously held on whatever is the hottest weekend in the summer. Robinson recalls getting to the event early and waiting in the unbearable heat. They found a place to sit and wait for her cousin's opera performance, and during that period OrchKids took the stage. "And my mom was like, 'Oh my God, all these Black musicians playing classical music.' We immediately got applications, and all of this started from there."

In fourth grade, Robinson joined OrchKids and thought she wanted to play

On stage in the Linehan Concert Hall rehearsing with UMBC's Chamber Ensemble, Robinson stands in a semi-circle with a dozen other musicians. At this point, she's been playing for 10 years. As the group launches into a slow baroque minor key waltz, **Philip Mann**, the conductor and assistant professor of music, stops them short. "Let's move closer," he says to the collection of string instrumentalists. With a shuffle of music stands, the ensemble tightens the circle. Black leather Doc Martens now firmly planted beneath her, Robinson leans into the music with her instrument familiarly tucked beneath her chin.

Before UMBC had a chamber orchestra—an intimate group of musicians—Robinson played in UMBC's

"I slowly adapted," says Robinson, "and then I started to realize that music majors—maybe that's why we are the section leaders—because we are setting an example for the community members."

Listen to nuances

Ann Sofie Clemmensen, director of the Linehan Artist Scholars Program, knows this was intentional. "Across the arts, we do lean on scholars to lead some assignments because they are receiving resources that others are not. In the music department, in dance and theater and visual arts, we're identifying leaders and those who can become leaders. And I think that's what UMBC is very good at."

This May, the Linehan Artist Scholars Program is celebrating three decades of supporting an arts-focused community at UMBC. Founded with support from Earl and Darielle Linehan, the scholarship supports students with an exceptional interest in the arts. Specifically, the program "acknowledges the importance of artists as leaders. As artists, we understand that a production or an orchestra is a component of many things that have to have some sort of organizational aspect," says Clemmensen. "You have to listen to the different nuances."

Robinson has found the scholars community to be uplifting and collaborative. "Insanely great," to use her exact words. "It's really cool to see how everyone else is very invested in their art, and it made me realize how it's all tied together," Robinson says. When she heard fellow OrchKid and Tuned-In student **Rickerra Bassett** was thinking about UMBC, Robinson immediately connected the young violist to Linehan, where she is now a first-year double major music education and performance scholar.



the tuba. Her mom shot that down for practical reasons, like 11-year-old Nema being able to even carry the instrument. "I'm still too small to play the tuba," says Robinson. Her instrument of (second) choice was the violin, and through the daily after-school sessions at OrchKids and the all-day Saturdays at Tuned-In, along with numerous other musical opportunities she's taken part in, Robinson has far surpassed the lauded 10,000 hours on her way to becoming an expert.

Symphony Orchestra, which is open to staff, students, and community members.

She was a section leader her first year at UMBC. "I had to make sure I was locked in because this was a really big deal in a university just starting out. I think for me it was definitely nerve racking, like, 'Oh, I can't mess up.' But the conductor said, 'You're doing great. Just play.'" As time went on, Robinson saw that as a music major and a Linehan Scholar, she was being asked to lead.

Robinson gives extra instruction to musicians at Peabody's Tuned-In program for youth.



This is the dream

Bassett started at BSO OrchKids during kindergarten, practically still a baby, she says. She stayed through her senior year, and like Robinson, has continued to work for the program as a graduate. Despite the camaraderie and the support BSO OrchKids offers, Bassett says it is rare for a student to stay in the program for their full K-12 experience. “The main reason why I stuck with it is, well, I enjoyed it. I also realized how high demand violas are—there’s not as much competition for me to participate in orchestras compared with violin, so I feel like I’ve gotten way more opportunities because I play viola.”

“Rickerra and Nema are in so many ways, shape, and form what we always hope OrchKids to be,” says Skinner. “We’re always striving to improve, but looking at their trajectory—that is the dream in a lot of ways.” OrchKids has paved and paid the way for Robinson, Bassett, and many other musicians to attend prestigious music camps in other states, perform on the BSO’s Meyerhoff stage with world-class professional musicians, and participate in the YOLA National Festival in Los Angeles as well as so many other opportunities in addition to their daily musicianship classes and other education supports. And now they’re at UMBC, learning to mentor the next generation of musicians.

“In so many ways,” Skinner says, “they are the definition of what OrchKids is hoping to achieve.”

Watching other young people discover the joy of sticking with an instrument gave Bassett the idea to double major in music education. “Seeing the younger students get so excited about things that we would probably think of as small was just the sweetest thing,” says Bassett. “I was seeing myself in them since I started that young. And I’m just hoping that they keep going. I want to motivate them to keep going.”



Top photos: Robinson at Encore Coda, a summer music camp in Maine. Bottom photos: Left, a group of BSO OrchKids: Robinson is crouching in the purple shirt. Bassett is front in the teal shirt. Right, a young Bassett poses with her viola. Photos courtesy of Robinson and Bassett.

Music as social transformation

It’s not just about the music. Or rather, the music is more than the music classes. “I can’t believe how much the musical development and the social development are connected,” says Daniel Trahey, who co-founded Tuned-In at Peabody in 2007, coincidentally the same year he was a founding team member at OrchKids. “When you see someone like Nema—when she saw what she was able to do—her confidence level just skyrocketed once she started practicing. And this is so key to all of our kids; we need our kids to be thinking about themselves and investing in themselves in order to be better for others. And the thing that’s the most amazing to me is to see someone like Nema start to invest in herself, start to map out time for only themselves to

sit down and practice when their other friends are off doing other things.”

Skinner puts it similarly: “When learning an instrument, you’re developing skills that you don’t even really realize that you’re forming—creativity and collaboration, leadership, the responsibility of practicing your instrument or making sure you have your music for a rehearsal. These are skill sets that our students are forming from a very young age that become embedded in them and can then easily be reapplied. There’s a tremendous amount of research that’s been coming out over the past decade about the power of music and how it impacts the brain. There’s almost nothing like playing an instrument when it comes to really enhanced brain function and activity, cognitive development, and executive function capabilities.”

For Robinson, the structure and consistency of the programs she played in was key. They gave shape to her education

“When learning an instrument, you’re developing skills that you don’t even really realize that you’re forming—creativity and collaboration, leadership, the responsibility of practicing your instrument or making sure you have your music for a rehearsal. These are skill sets that our students are forming from a very young age that become embedded in them and can then easily be reapplied.” — Nick Skinner, vice president of BSO OrchKids

and the expectation of practice and performances and ultimately shaped her talent and her work ethic that shines through her myriad teaching roles.

Trahey stops mid-sentence to brag on this young professional. “Nema is what, 20 years old? She has the best attendance, the best timeliness. She is the most professional at sending emails. She takes her job so dang seriously; it is inspiring to me. And Nema

plays a very important role at Tuned-In because for our high school kids, who are really sick of hearing from me, they’re listening to Nema because Nema’s got real-world experience.”

Trahey’s hopes—and part of Tuned-In’s goals—is that the program would be fully staffed one day by graduates of the program. Commitment to continuum is how they put it: Students become the

teachers. “By valuing the community the student comes from, the student will want to come back and work toward creating an even healthier community,” says Trahey.

In the big picture view, the musicianship classes and camps and performances—they’re all leading toward social transformation, but Trahey doesn’t want that to mean that the students leave their communities behind along the way. “I hope for most of the kids, to do what they want to do and then find a way to also give back to their communities. We’re already seeing this where our students have gone on to get political science degrees or medical degrees, and then they become our largest advocates—for us and for so many of the communities that we’re working in.”

“We are really looking at how we can use music as a vehicle to open up the world to our students,” says Skinner.

Rickerra Bassett, right, a first-year Linehan Artist Scholar, practices with the UMBC Chamber Ensemble.







Robinson saw music education in action by watching **Brian Kaufman**, associate professor of music education, teach at BSO OrchKids. He helped her discover music education as a major and the idea to pursue it at UMBC. “He was just very passionate about it. And you can just see it in the work and the community he created,” she says. “And when I visited, UMBC felt so welcoming.”

From his years of watching her as a student and then as an assistant, Trahey says, “Nema’s always had it, but I think UMBC and the music education program have really helped her get a more global perspective. Before she would concentrate on maybe one kid’s problem or two kids’ problems. And now I’m seeing her be able to really serve the needs and hear the voices

of every single child in her ensemble or in the room that she’s working in, and that’s been a huge growth point for her since being at UMBC.”

Really put your all toward it

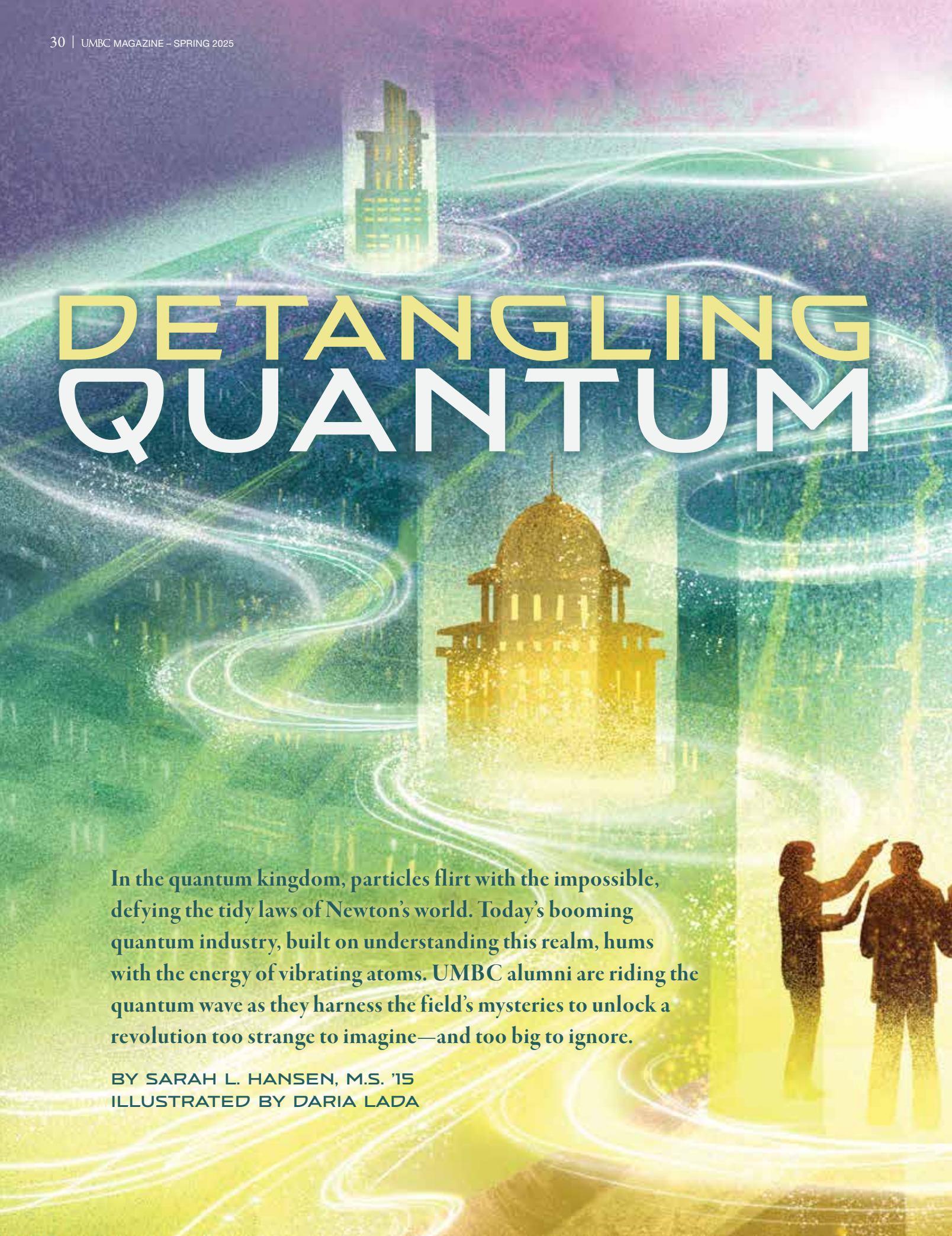
Back in the marbled hall at the Peabody Institute, Robinson is threading through the music stands on stage to offer encouragement and correction to the young people on stage. The lead instructor has stepped away to give the reins to Robinson.

Mi’onte McGhee, a high school violinist who has been playing with Tuned-In for four years, says, “Nema is such a big help

to us. She’s really good if you ask her a question about technique—you don’t even have to ask sometimes, she just comes up and says, ‘I can help you with that,’ but she’s really nice about it. She never makes you feel like you can’t play. She’s really kind and knowing that she’s gone through all this before helps me relate to her.”

For Robinson, there’s nothing like the feeling of creating music with people. “It’s like you’re in a different zone, if that makes sense. It’s not necessarily an everyday type of thing, she says. “You definitely have to have a good intention and really put your all toward it. It’s doing something you’re very passionate about and then putting it forward. It doesn’t always make sense, but when you do it, it feels right.”

DETANGLING QUANTUM



In the quantum kingdom, particles flirt with the impossible, defying the tidy laws of Newton's world. Today's booming quantum industry, built on understanding this realm, hums with the energy of vibrating atoms. UMBC alumni are riding the quantum wave as they harness the field's mysteries to unlock a revolution too strange to imagine—and too big to ignore.

BY SARAH L. HANSEN, M.S. '15
ILLUSTRATED BY DARIA LADA



Cory Nunn, Ph.D. '23, physics, conducted astronomy research as an undergraduate, studying enormous objects scattered across the galaxy. But in the end, he fell in love with the physics of a much tinier universe, where you can never quite be sure where the electrons are and the simple act of observing a system can shift its properties.

That kingdom is quantum, a field that, as it matures, is likely to lead to a revolution in communications, cybersecurity, scientific observations, and more. In Maryland today, political and business leaders are committed to investing in these new technologies and building a hub for quantum research.

Quantum theory emerged in the early 20th century when scientists like Albert Einstein and Erwin Schrödinger cracked open a subatomic universe where

most ubiquitous example; they power all computer chips. Driven by what are called “quantum effects,” or the perks of quantum over classical systems, transistors shrunk room-sized computers into pocket calculators and sparked the digital age. Then came lasers, which used the quantum effects of excited atoms to beam data across continents, and atomic clocks, which keep time with extreme accuracy based on the vibrations of single atoms. These breakthroughs rewired society, powering the gadgets and networks of today.

Quantum research has come a long way since quantum 1.0, which lasted through the 1970s, says **Tom Smith**, Ph.D. '21, physics. “Now we’re in quantum 2.0,” Smith says. “There’s another wave of interesting quantum effects that we can take advantage of, like quantum

WHEN ALICE MEETS BOB, THEY BOTH MEET CHARLIE

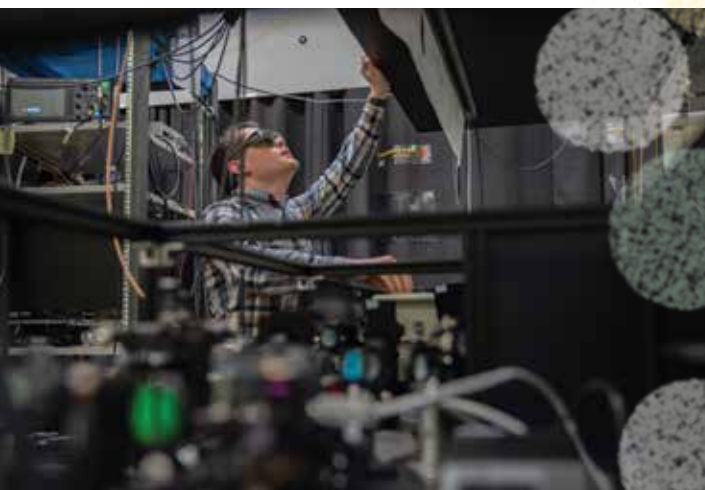
While quantum 1.0 generated foundational technologies, quantum 2.0 is about harnessing quantum phenomena to build next-level systems. Multiple companies and researchers have made strides in building “qubits,” or “quantum bits,” that can be coaxed to exist long enough to perform useful computations. The first qubits only lasted a few microseconds, but today’s qubits can exist for milliseconds—1,000 times longer—making it possible to scale up quantum computers.

A key quantum effect called “entanglement” has also shifted from being a quirky laboratory phenomenon in quantum 1.0 to a workhorse in newer quantum systems. Researchers who showed that entanglement is real and exploitable received the 2022 Nobel Prize in Physics. Their work paved the way for huge advances in quantum communication across long distances and quantum-based encryption methods.

“As our control of very small, isolated systems gets better and better over time, what we’re realizing is that there are new capabilities that come with working with single atom systems or single ions,” Nunn says. “And they have new properties—quantum properties—that let us leverage different kinds of processing power than what we had with classical computers.”

Today, Nunn is a postdoctoral fellow in the Quantum Optics Group within the Quantum Measurement Division at the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST). His research on quantum networking seeks to harness the power of quantum entanglement at a distance.

“It’s really hard to send these fragile quantum bits of information over a



Cory Nunn, Ph.D. '23, adjusts an experimental setup at the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST). He says his advisor Todd Pittman prepared him well. “There’s a lot of ambition in Todd’s group; I feel like we were encouraged organically to push ourselves because we were convinced what we were doing was really cool and worth exploring,” Nunn says. Photo courtesy of NIST.

particles could sometimes behave like waves—common knowledge today, but revolutionary at the time. Their research left Isaac Newton’s straightforward rules behind, replacing them with probabilities and uncertainty.

By the 1950s, what we would now call “quantum 1.0” hit its stride, turning theory into world-changing tech. Transistors—tiny devices found in everything from PCs to cars to smartphones—are the

superposition,” when a particle can temporarily be in two states at the same time, until the particle’s state is measured.

Huge improvements in laser technology and optical components have advanced the field and “opened the door for other quantum phenomena to be implemented experimentally. It’s been a gradual development—baby steps over the years,” Smith says.

long link. So the solution most of us are pursuing is a quantum repeater, which is basically just a node in the middle that breaks up this longer link into two smaller links that are easier to manage,” Nunn says—or, if the link is long enough, many smaller links. He refers to one end of the link as “Alice” and the other as “Bob,” to talk about how information travels from point A to B.

“So that repeater in the middle is going to have to take a signal from Alice and a signal from Bob, and if they don’t meet at exactly the same time, so the repeater can perform an operation and link the two together, then one or both of the signals is going to have to be stored in a quantum memory.”

That “operation” at the node (which Nunn calls “Charlie”) entangles the photons coming from Alice and Bob, which Nunn says is the “most interesting, weird property that quantum particles can have.” In entanglement, the signals become “inherently linked, so that these quantum systems are correlated in a way that’s just stronger than classical physics could explain.”

After the operation at Charlie, Nunn says, “Alice and Bob’s systems, which are at separate labs that never directly interacted with each other, now share entanglement.”

Nunn’s team at NIST is working to develop a range of technologies to make this long-distance entanglement possible, including sources of entangled photons, quantum memories and methods of stabilizing links. Nunn is focused on developing specialized sources of single photons that can send synchronized quantum signals across the network.

Quantum systems don’t have to use photons, but they are “the best carriers of quantum information,” according to Nunn. “They can travel at the speed of light, don’t have to be cooled to an



extremely low temperature to work (like some other quantum systems), and they can make it out of your lab and travel over fiber or from satellite to satellite through space and the atmosphere. So these are inherently mobile ‘flying qubits’ that can actually take quantum information and fly from one place to another.”

TECH IS CATCHING UP TO THEORIES

In the current wave of quantum 2.0, new materials and fabrication techniques have enhanced researchers’ ability to produce tiny, precise quantum systems, opening the doors for creating quantum networks. Finally, software is starting to catch up to mathematical theories proposed decades



Tom Smith, left, and Binod Joshi, Ph.D. '25, physics, at work in Yauhua Shih's lab at UMBC. Photo by Melissa Penley Cormier, M.F.A. '17.

ago—but there's still much work to do.

Although fully capable quantum computers are still years away, researchers, businesses, and governments are already preparing for how they might disrupt current practices. For example, powerful new tools like Shor's algorithm would leave most modern encryption methods vulnerable to attack. In addition to quantum measurement science, NIST is playing a leading role in standardizing new cryptography techniques, called post-quantum cryptography, that better prepare us for a world with advanced quantum computers.

Quantum 2.0 is about control—taking the weirdness of quantum mechanics and engineering it into tools that outperform classical limits. Unlike quantum 1.0, it's less about discovering quantum rules and more about exploiting them for computing, secure communications, and ultra-precise sensing. The field is growing rapidly, and governments and tech giants alike are spending billions on developing the next big breakthroughs.

Smith, who is a physicist at the Naval Air Warfare Center (NAWCAD), Aircraft Division, believes quantum sensing is one of the most exciting areas in quantum. It refers to the use of quantum systems, such as atoms or photons, to measure physical parameters with unprecedented precision and sensitivity.

While quantum computing deservedly gets a lot of airtime, "I believe quantum sensing is equally far along in its R&D but doesn't get as much attention because it's not the darling of private industry currently," Smith says.

For example, he says, the Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory (LIGO) is designed to detect gravitational waves, which Einstein's general theory of relativity predicts. The LIGO team updated the observatory's systems to take advantage of quantum effects, specifically squeezed light. Squeezed light helps make the timing or detection

rate of photons more predictable, like steadying the flow of raindrops into a cup to produce consistent readings from measurement to measurement, Smith says. After LIGO made the switch, it started detecting a lot more gravitational waves.

Other companies have built quantum sensors that detect exceedingly minute shifts in gravity or magnetic fields, which can be used for anything from detecting underground tunnels to measuring brain activity to improving GPS systems. These advances come from better control of quantum states and miniaturization, which has moved tech from lab benches to the field.

"At the Navy, we're going to keep an eye on, and in some cases have a hand in, making improvements to various types of sensing. We're getting to the point now that maybe we can actually make a product out of this and utilize it in the field," Smith says.

While systems like LIGO are already active, there are only a few instances of the technology around the world. For a technology to truly be "in the field" from Smith's perspective, it must be produced at scale and put to work on, for example, a large number of aircraft carriers or military planes.

"I would like to think that certain quantum sensors could be used in the field within the next decade," Smith says.

"MY BEST ADVICE FOR ASPIRING QUANTUM RESEARCHERS IS TO MAKE SURE YOU FIND JOY IN UNRAVELING THE MYSTIQUE AROUND QUANTUM PHYSICS."

—TOM SMITH, PH.D. '21

'FUTURISTIC, STAR-TREK- LEVEL INTERNET'

Nunn was a junior at the University of Delaware when LIGO upgraded. During his astronomy research, he attended conferences for quantum optics because the first quantum optics experiments were designed to observe starlight. "All the signals that LIGO uses rely on the same type of physics that I'm studying now," he says.

Today at NIST, his work builds directly on his Ph.D. research with **Todd Pittman**, Ph.D. '96, professor of physics and director of UMBC's Quantum Science Institute.

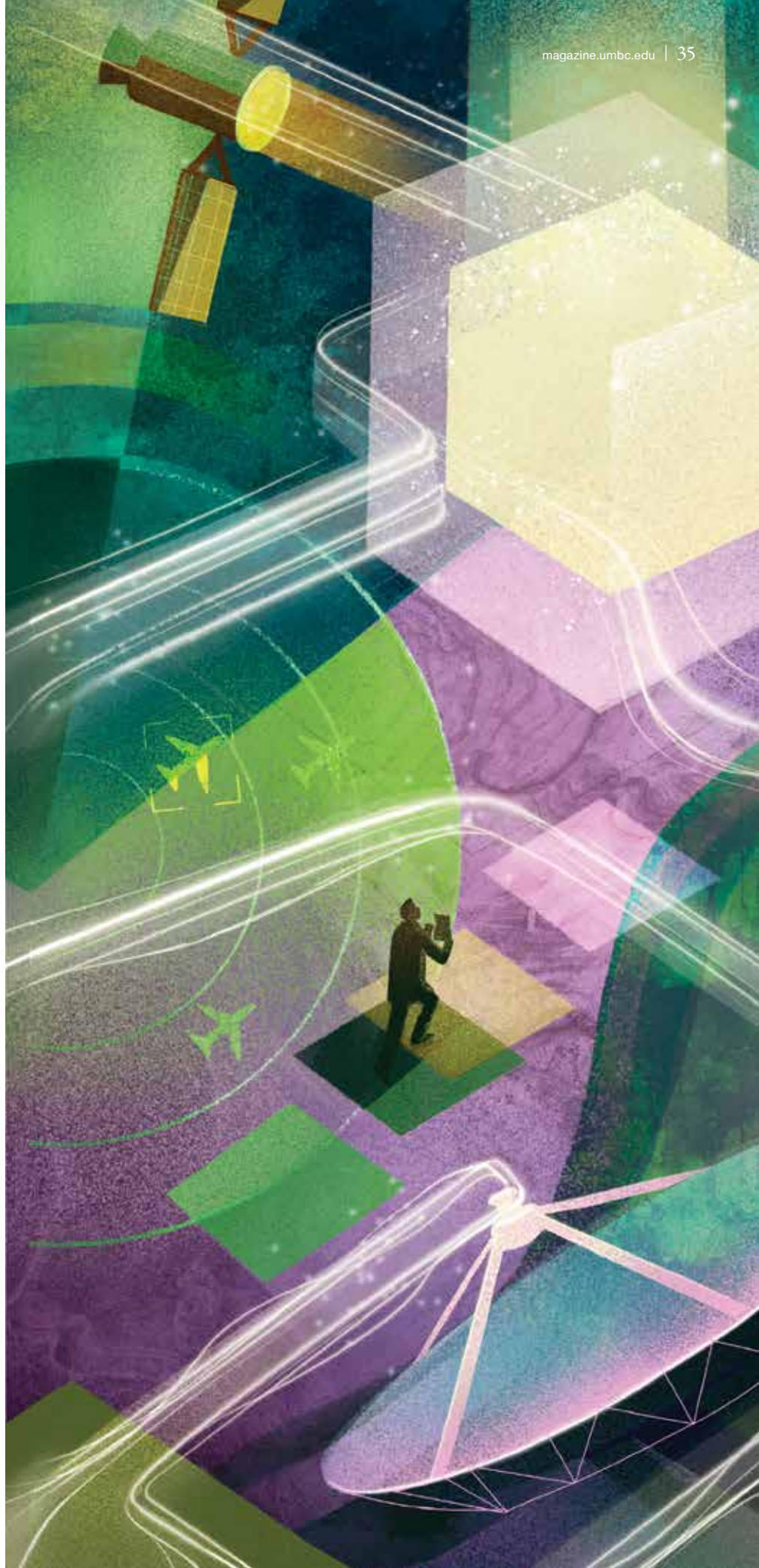
"There was a lot going on in Todd's lab that I was able to directly transfer to my research at NIST," Nunn says. "Now I am directly applying the same skills, the same systems, that I was used to working with as a member of the quantum information group at UMBC."

Some of Nunn's current quantum networking projects involve work with the Washington Metropolitan Quantum Network, or DC-QNet. Quantum networking involves connecting quantum devices to increase their capabilities, just as classical devices are connected today to create systems like the World Wide Web. The DC-QNet "is a bonafide networking application," that relies on the research he did with Pittman, Nunn says.

The DC-QNet links four federal agencies plus the University of Maryland via fiber optic cables that travel below ground and high in the air.

"As a photon travels along the link, it might get lost along the way, because it's just one itty bitty photon against the whole world, traveling across kilometers of fiber," Nunn says. The fiber "is basically a kilometer of glass that it has to see through."

Today, researchers are still investigating what's possible and building prototype



quantum networks. Once full-fledged quantum computers exist, we'll connect them and enhance their capabilities with networking, Nunn explains. Eventually, he hopes, "we'll have the next, futuristic, Star-Trek-level internet that relies on quantum physics."

ALL THE BETTER TO DETECT EAVESDROPPING

One big goal of quantum 2.0 is to minimize the amount of light required to send a usable signal—even down to single photons, Smith says. In the context of quantum communication, "you send this train of individual photons with independent polarizations, and if you can control those polarizations—the direction the light waves are vibrating—you can transmit information that way," he explains.

Both Nunn and Smith emphasize that information sent via quantum versus classical communication signals is more

secure. When information travels via a classical laser pulse from Alice to Bob, an eavesdropper, typically referred to as Eve, could take away or analyze some of the light, and the recipient would still receive a pulse, not realizing their signal had been tapped.

"But at the single-photon level, if an eavesdropper takes away one photon, or even obtains information about the photon, the intended receiver registers an error, so it's easier to detect eavesdroppers," Smith explains. That's a huge advantage for sending confidential information—whether it's an everyday banking transaction or a matter of global diplomacy.

QUANTUM INCUBATOR

Today, Smith still does work in the lab at the NAWCAD but spends much of his time keeping tabs on what's happening in quantum technology across academia, industry, and government so that he can recommend research NAWCAD ought

to support elsewhere or pursue in-house.

"We have a lot of support right now from our chain of command to do the research that we think is best, that we think will be the most impactful, which is always a great place to be in, to have that type of freedom," Smith says.

Smith has also continued to collaborate with his Ph.D. advisor, UMBC physics professor **Yanhua Shih**. Shih is a first-generation quantum optics researcher, having done pioneering work in interferometry, one of the technologies LIGO relies on. His current work on quantum sensing is complementary to active NAWCAD research.

"By collaborating directly with academia, it feels like we're having a bit more of an impact," Smith says. In fact, the UMBC Physics Department partnered with NAWCAD through a program that supports NAWCAD staff to complete their doctoral degrees. A new Ph.D. candidate is joining UMBC



through the program in fall 2025.

Nunn, too, is thriving. He loves what he does at NIST and would like to stay on after his fellowship concludes.

"There's just a lot of good research that goes on at NIST, and the people I'm working with are amazing sources of information. I've grown a lot as a postdoc here," Nunn says. "It's really inspiring to work with hard-working and clever people on new solutions for quantum networking."

Pittman isn't surprised by Nunn's success.

"Cory had a knack for experimental work and really took advantage of every opportunity to become a top-notch independent researcher at UMBC," Pittman says. "By the end of his time in my lab, working with Cory was more like collaborating with a senior colleague than mentoring a student. In his final year, our one-on-one meetings usually started with me asking, 'OK, Cory—what are you going to teach me today?'"

"Todd was supportive and eager to give guidance early on and then also eager to step back when he felt I was able to tackle a problem on my own," Nunn says. "Getting to a point where he could tell me, oh, I'm learning something from you, was really encouraging, and the fact that he was so open to that really helped me to grow."

Smith connected with Shih via a research rotation, and "it was a perfect match," he says. "I learned a lot from him, but he was also hands-off in a way that allowed me to learn on my own."

All new graduate students in the UMBC Physics Department share office space, an arrangement that Nunn and Smith praised for the way it organically built community among the students.

"We had a great camaraderie. That was a key aspect that allowed me to achieve as much as I did in grad school," Smith says. But at bedrock, the thing that excites them both is the science itself and the autonomy to pursue it.

SCALES OF UNDERSTANDING

Nunn has always been intrigued by questions like, "How does light really work?"—even discussing them at high school sleepovers. It wasn't until he arrived at UMBC that he learned that "this is an active field of research, where we're trying to understand what quantum mechanics tells us about the way nature really works."

Part of the excitement, he says about working in Pittman's lab, was research into quantum memories and quantum sources that have exciting, real-world applications. "But at the core, our excitement is really investigating the way the world works on different scales that we're not used to thinking about in our day-to-day life."

And even as Nunn learns more and more, the mysteries of how the quantum scale operates feel limitless. He takes the attitude of a true scientist, recognizing that while "I understand more, I also understand that there's more than ever that I don't understand."



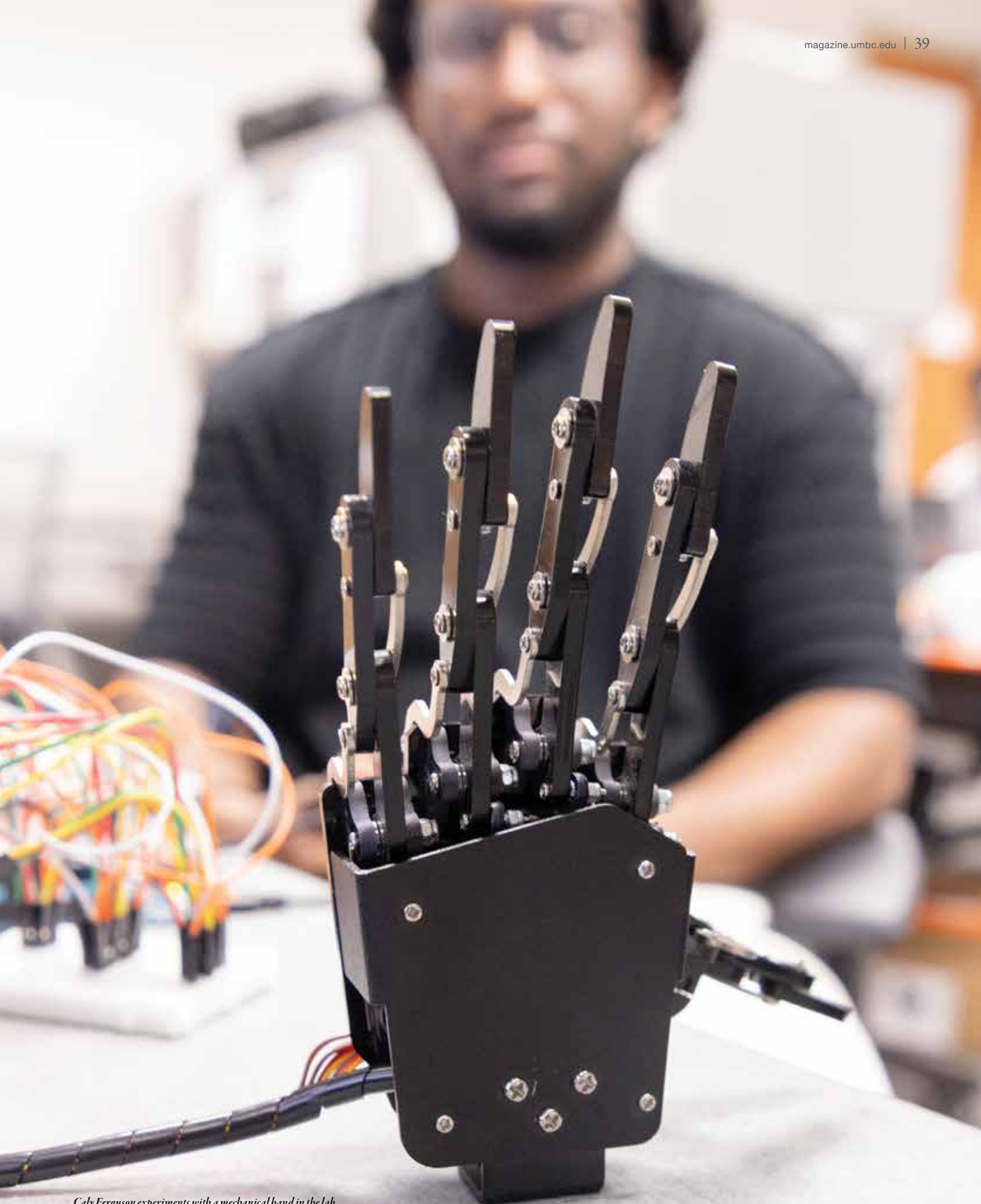


Where Bright Ideas Come to Life

Sometimes the ideas come so quickly, you have to jot them down on a napkin before you forget. Maybe you share that napkin with a couple of friends and brainstorm it a bit more before realizing—hey!—you're on to something kind of cool here. If only you had the tools to build it.

Look no further than UMBC's own campus, pocketed with hubs of creative innovation. Whether you want to 3D print a robot arm, edit your personal podcast, or design costuming for a UMBC theatre production, Retriever makerspaces and research labs provide tools and training so students can bring their ideas to life.

*By Catalina Sofia Dansberger Duque and Catherine Meyers
Photos by Melissa Penley Cormier, M.F.A. '17*



Caly Ferguson experiments with a mechanical band in the lab of Associate Professor Ramana Vinjamuri.

Building a community of builders

On the ground floor of the Albin O. Kuhn Library and Gallery, just past the checkout desk, what was once a quiet reading room has been transformed. Tools, including laser cutters, 3D scanners and printers, computer workstations, soldering irons, and pliers, line the walls. A large table in the center offers visitors space to plan and work on projects.

Retrievers from all around campus come to the newly opened Alan and Wendy Wilson Innovation Lab to create—making fidget toys, figurines, model planes, hydroponics equipment, custom vacuum-cleaner parts, and more. They also come to collaborate. On a recent Friday afternoon, the lab buzzes with students chatting and troubleshooting manufacturing challenges.

“It’s definitely the community that attracts me,” says **Jack Spence**, a senior information systems major who has come to the lab nearly every weekday since it opened in the fall of 2024. “Everyone

really helps each other, and it’s nice to hear different perspectives.”

Spence has made geared clock replicas and large mechanical gauntlets inspired by the anime series *Arcane*. He’s currently working on a giant hammer and an artificial-intelligence-powered robot that can converse with a human. Before the lab opened, he was making things in his dorm room, he says, but it’s much better to have a communal space. “It’s so empowering—you can come in and build whatever you want and follow your passions.”

Lukas Anderson, a first-year computer science major, learned about the lab from a Google search for makerspaces and drops by about once a week. He has come to the lab to fix electronics and to make custom enclosures and adapters for a variety of projects. “The most exciting part is learning and then having that knowledge immediately applied to something tangible,” he says. Plus, it’s a lot cheaper to make things than to buy them, he adds. “You can make a custom phone case in about two hours for about 60 cents,” he says.

Jake Vann, the library IT specialist who co-manages the lab with fellow staff member



Jason Conti, says the space has a vibrant DIY vibe. A core group of students regularly use the lab while others come for particular projects or drop by out of curiosity. Staff and faculty are also welcome, and Vann encourages everyone to check it out: “Even if you are feeling intimidated, there are people who will help you.”

Now that the lab is smoothly up and running, Vann and Conti are investigating ways to expand the community and offer new learning opportunities. They are looking into acquiring new equipment, such as sewing machines or vinyl cutters, hosting workshops and seminars, and hiring student workers to help manage the lab.

“Seeing such amazing and talented people in the lab each day is an inspiration,” Vann says. “We like to tell students: This is your space.”

— Catherine Meyers

Above: Jack Spence works on the wiring for a robot.





Lilli Malone, left, discusses costume details with lead actress Katie Hetzer, right. Below: Taylor Holmes working with a miniature version of a costume.



Custom costumes

It is three weeks until opening night for UMBC's production of *John Proctor is the Villain* by American playwright, Kimberly Belflower. At the costume shop, **Lilli Malone**, student costume director, weaves through the six cutting tables and greets two of their mentors: **Margaret Caster**, assistant costume shop manager, and **Becca Janney**, visiting lecturer of costume technology and design. Malone pulls a loosely stitched dark brown and white muslin dress from a clothing rack packed with costumes, each labeled by students with a manila tag noting its stage of production. They lay the mock-up on a cutting table next to a full-color digital rendering Malone designed of the costume for the character Ivy Watkins—one of nine high school English students reading *The Crucible*, a play about the Salem witch trials, while grappling with their identity, relationships, rumors, and secrets in 2018.

"I use the app Procreate to draw the costumes on an iPad. The designs are printed out and posted in the shop for me to use as a reference," says Malone, a theatre production and history major. "We choose plays a year in advance. While I wait for the play to be cast, I sketch costumes based on the script, costumes we own, and research of the period. Once the play is cast, my renderings are adapted for the actors' bodies."

Students from any major can participate in the process or work on their own projects after completing the introductory costume construction course and annual boundary training, which teaches designers how to create and respect boundaries. To

develop costume-making skills, students cut mini patterns of current costume renderings for small portable mannequins. It's a space where they're encouraged to make big mistakes on a small scale. Students experiment with various fabrics, draping techniques, color schemes, and other materials while receiving feedback as they develop complex costumes that reflect both the designer's vision and the character's personality.

Across the room, **Taylor Holmes** is sewing a pair of pants with Sabrina the Teenage Witch's help—one of 10 sewing machines the students nicknamed. The geography and environmental science junior is at home in the costume shop. She steps away from Endora—another machine—to fix a type of rope scarf on her mini-mannequin costume of one of the three witches in the play based on a sketch by **Megan Hromek** '20, theatre. Holmes began developing her needle and thread skills in high school. She plans on making it a proper business after she graduates. In addition, she plans to map weather for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. "I like to make my own things," says Holmes, "and the feeling I get from doing something with my hands and mind."

Malone enjoys the stark contrast between the students' and the witches' costumes. Malone's vision for Watkins's costume included a dress with a heart-shaped neckline and a button in the front, which was difficult to find online, in thrift stores, or in storage like the other costumes. When this happens, the team builds the costume instead.

This requires an assembly line of sorts as students and faculty work together over the year to take measurements of the actors, purchase patterns if needed, cut the patterns on muslin, loosely sew the edges, and complete the final costumes. Today **Katie Hetzer**, who plays Watkins, is trying on the mock-up in a small private room where Malone and Caster use safety pins and heat-erase markers to draw where the garment needs to be taken in or cut.

"This is a unique experience because some of my closest friends, like Lilli, are in the cast, this is my fourth and last UMBC play, and the first time a costume has been designed for me," says Hetzer, an early childhood psychology senior. After the fitting, they look over a Pinterest board to review lipstick shades and hairstyles. "I've never doubted that Lilli was going to do it right," says Hertzler. "Throughout the process, if I said I don't like how something works, they fix it, and I appreciate that. It is a lot about trust."

—Catalina Sofia Dansberger Duque

Katie Hetzer, right, in the final costume in the show. Photo by Kiirstn Pagan '11.





Mei-Lian Vader shows the files for 3D printing a needle threader and the finished product.

Tools to put a wider world at hand

A 3D printer sitting in the Designing Participatory Futures (DARE) Lab at UMBC has made all sorts of objects, including figurines, toothpaste squeezers, 3D maps of campus, and more. It's that versatility that makes the equipment attractive to the research efforts of **Mei-Lian Vader** '22, mechanical engineering, who is now a Ph.D. student in human-centered computing.

Vader is working with Blind Industries and Services of Maryland (BISM), a local nonprofit, to develop a curriculum to teach blind and low-vision individuals how to use 3D printers.

The project grew out of research Vader conducted with Associate Professor **Ravi Kuber**, information systems, showing that blind small business owners, as well as blind workers in garment manufacturing, prefer simple tactile tools to help them do their work over more complicated electronic assistive devices.

"For example, if a worker is looking for an item on a shelf, they have electronic devices that can scan a barcode and read out the label. But the technology can break, gets out of date, or it sometimes just doesn't work. And we found people preferred a simpler solution, like a 3D sticker to label items," Vader says.

The DARE lab supports a program run by the Maryland Department of Disabilities to 3D print such tactile tools—such as tools that can add braille labels to paper currency—for individuals who

request them. But Vader says offering blind individuals training to design and print their own items should ultimately be more effective and empowering.

Anica Zlotescu, the manager of training and accessibility at BISM, says having a 3D printer will speed up how quickly the organization can design, make, and improve tactile tools to serve the blind community. She says working with Vader has been a joy: "She brings passion and enthusiasm, asks great questions, and wants to be a part of finding solutions."

Reaching toward ambitious goals

Meanwhile, a floor down from the DARE lab in the Information Technology and Engineering Building, **Caly Ferguson**, a junior mechanical engineering major, is working in the Vinjamuri Lab of the

Department of Computer Science and Electrical Engineering, headed by Associate Professor **Ramana Vinjamuri**, on a different type of assistive technology: a prosthetic arm and hand.

Ferguson says, like many kids, he was impressed with the futuristic tech in movies like *Batman* and *Ironman* and also loved building with LEGOs and other toys. In high school, as he thought more seriously about his plans for the future, he was inspired by his own birth defect, in which he lost four fingers from his hands, to work toward a career developing biomedical devices such as prosthetics.

With guidance from his advisors in the Meyerhoff Scholars Program and Vinjamuri Lab, he fleshed out an ambitious goal of developing and building a full prosthetic forearm and hand by the end of his undergraduate study.

Starting in the spring of his first year, he began work on machine-learning software that could interpret electrical signals from the nerves in the arm and translate them into desired movements of a prosthetic hand.

"I'm not a computer scientist, so it was a steep learning curve understanding how to code and understanding the foundations of AI," he says.

Ferguson is currently testing and improving the code and hopes soon to start designing and building the mechanical parts of the prosthetic from scratch, using a 3D printer.

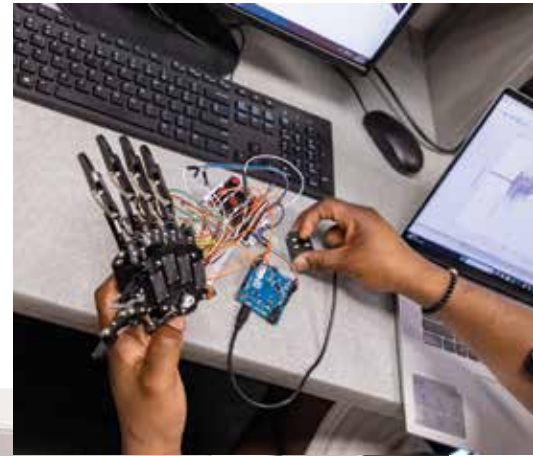
The project, which Ferguson has mainly self-directed, has been a great learning experience, he says. When he has questions or gets stuck, his labmates and faculty mentors offer ready advice. Ultimately, Ferguson wants to work on developing cost-effective biomedical devices.

"A lot of the technology that's really advanced, maybe there's only one, and it's sitting in a lab somewhere," he says. "I'd

like to find ways to bring down costs and take devices to market so more people can benefit from them."

— Catherine Meyers

Ferguson has written software to move a mechanical hand based on electrical signals from nerves in the arm.

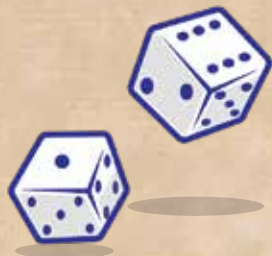


A Digital Creative Sandbox

Inspiration has an all-access pass at UMBC's Albin O. Kuhn Library and Gallery Digital Media Lab (DML). Whether you need a hyper-quiet room to record, film a magical setting, or transcribe your novel, the DML's whisper room, green screen wall, and transcription foot pedal will get the job done. Need to do some tweaking? Level up with the lab's audio, image, and video editing software. "The lab supports all types of audio/video projects and anyone on campus, no matter their major, can borrow equipment and use it for anything—coursework, vacations, or a podcast with friends," says lab supervisor **Nett Smith '10**, modern languages, linguistics, and intercultural communication. "Our biggest value is that there's no gatekeeping of our services; if you have a campus card, you can borrow our equipment."



This Gathering Is Magic



By Susan Thornton Hobby

Illustrations by Hugo Pablo Moreno

Tabletop and role-playing games have emerged from the musty cabinet of kids' amusements as a creative method of bonding for UMBC alumni and students. *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Magic: The Gathering*, *Root*, *Catan*, *Pandemic*—there's a game for every interest. And games, players say, are a low-stress, high-pay-off way of meeting people and staying connected in a difficult, digital world.

Ryan Jose remembers starting at UMBC in the fall of 2013 as a commuting first-year student, flailing around like every other newbie, trying to make friends.

"I hardly knew anyone and was desperately looking for the people I could possibly vibe with," Jose remembered. "I was able to make some connections at orientation, including some that are still good friends today. But it almost felt like survival. Like if I didn't find my group fast, I'd be alone for my whole time at UMBC."

"And yet, after all that fuss, I remember just walking into the game room, asking to join a group that was setting up a game of

Monopoly, and naturally making friends that turned out to be friends for life! With Monopoly. No one even likes Monopoly."

These four Monopoly friends—Jose, Jonelle McKenzie, psychology; Jerry Quijote, mathematics; and Takreem Zulfikar, American studies—scattered across the country after their 2017 graduation. But they still meet online to play games every month. And it all started in the commuter lounge in 2013, where the crew sometimes commandeered all the tables and chairs and pulled 30 people into a game (anything but Monopoly). But the core four of them were always studying together, then taking a break to play.



“We really made the most of that space,’ is the kind way to put it,” Jose said. “But that’s what I love—that it facilitated a community. We would still likely be good friends without games, and we quickly were just hanging out to hang out. But games made it easier to open conversations, to just have a break from all the stress that classes brought, and to just be in the same space and learn about each other.”

MOVE FORWARD ONE SPACE

Get to Know Your Friends Quickly

After graduation, the Monopoly crew moved to different parts of the country—Zulfiqar is married and working for a job-training nonprofit in Boston; McKenzie is in behavioral health and lives in Louisiana; Quijote is in procurement in Baltimore; and Jose teaches at Anne Arundel Community College. Once they weren’t all hanging out in the commuter lounge any more, they had a hard time getting together but kept in touch. Then the pandemic hit.

“We missed our friends,” Zulfiqar said. “So we set up a few game nights online, and that re-sparked our interest. Now we play once a month minimum and also play one-on-one or two or three of us. Jerry was playing Magic: The Gathering with my husband this morning.”

Quijote even devised a Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) campaign based around an evil professor trying to take over UMBC and the band of time-traveling superheroes who try to stop her. “The whole campaign was reminiscing about what we did as undergraduates,” Quijote said. “The UMBC Library was the headquarters for the professor.”

Games, they all said, help you learn about people in a way that other social interactions don’t.

“What I love about board games is that they open up a space to connect and that they show off aspects of people that aren’t normally visible,” Jose said.

“You learn when you play together,” McKenzie said. “You watch how they react, how they interact with people, you see bonds between people.”

The bond between the four of them is so strong that they’re all going on a cruise together this year to celebrate their 30th birthdays.



"We're all so different," McKenzie said. "I brag on this friend group because we are so diverse, different religious backgrounds, different ethnicities. But we can always find a point of connection."

MOVE FORWARD TWO SPACES

A Haven in the World's Storm

Tonight, outside this room: federal job slashing, wildfires, midterms. Tonight, inside this room: Five people teaming up to fight chupacabras and banshees; alumni, undergraduates, and grad students collecting and trading peanut-sized blocks representing cardamom and turmeric; three friends all sucking on Dum-Dum lollipops as they scheme as woodland animals.

With the state of the real world, no wonder folks are retreating to games as a way to build friends and community.

"It's been a stressful day," club president **Josh Bowman** told the UMBC Tabletop Gaming Club from the podium at 7 p.m. on the Thursday before spring break. "I'm glad you are all here to spend time with one another. It's important in times like this."

After a few announcements, Bowman, a junior in graphic design, called, "Game on!" The players—in Pikachu hoodies, graphic tees, jeweled barrettes, flannel shirts—turned toward each other and their shared quests contained on foldable cardboard squares.

The club, which meets Tuesdays and Thursdays in a huge Interdisciplinary Life Sciences Building classroom, is a haven for members. Some eat their dinner salads or sushi while they roll dice, others raucously greet late-comers by name, and potential players lurk behind tables, learning the rules of games, many of which have instruction books as thick as a thumb. This Thursday, more than 50 people gathered to play games such as Horrified, Century: Spice Road, Kites, and Root. The camaraderie is evident in gentle (or less-than-gentle) ribbing over a small victory, a sudden groan when a ranger usurps the rabbit's forest haven, and a genuine cheer when a monster is defeated.

"Gaming opens up a free space for being yourself," said **Vance Wild**, a sophomore studying psychology, just before his turn at the Century: Spice Road table. "I come almost every week."

"Join in," players encourage, as more people arrive from late classes or dinner, and chairs are added to tables and the room grows louder and more crowded.

"Us officers do try very hard to ensure that we are able to offer everyone in our club a safe space to relax and 'nerd out' with other people who are also looking for a bit of an escape," said the club's ambassador, **Andrew Kozikowski**, a senior studying computer science and philosophy. "Games are great because they offer a way to put your mind to a task without needing to be stressful. Do you



want to play a relaxed game just to blow off some homework? Great, play a quick card game. Do you want to focus and think and really strategize to win against some other players? Play a deck builder or a strategy game like Catan. Do you just want to escape reality for an afternoon and beat up some monsters to save a town? Play D&D or any of the other tabletop role-playing games we have."

For about an hour, a group of six has been setting up their game on two tables at the back of the room. They're arranging batteries of miniature red, blue, purple, black, yellow, and green spaceships, carriers, cruisers, and space docks, arraying cards and fitting together the playing board covered with glowing planets and stars. A redhead with thick glasses is knitting while she listens to the elaborate rules of *Twilight Imperium*, a strategic game of galactic domination, from a guy in a burgundy hoodie.

"It's a quick two-hour explanation," hoodie guy begins, and they all laugh. It's 9:30 p.m. and they're just getting started.

"I'm in," a girl with blue hair yells. "I just have to do laundry tomorrow—I have zero clean clothes."

"I have to work at 2 a.m., graveyard shift," says the knitter. "We might be done by then."

All the players look supremely happy about that timetable.

There's an intrinsic empathy in playing games—there's lots of self-discovery.

— ANYA GRACE HART '22

you are collaboratively building something creative. And it helps build friendships. I think seeing these fantastical characters offers a glimpse into the players' minds."

She has expanded to play D&D games with other groups, too. "Two of my best friends in the world" play D&D online on Discord servers, Hart said. She's never met them in person.

Gaming transcends campaigns and turns around the board, allowing practice for social skills, problem-solving, and creativity. Players learn vital lessons about working together, allowing others to be the main characters of the story, and creating a world in which, despite challenges, the quest continues.

Games may even help the players' mental health. A 2024 National Institutes of Health study on "the Efficacy of the Tabletop Roleplaying Game Dungeons & Dragons for Improving Mental Health and Self-Concepts" determined that "participants demonstrated significant decreases in depression, stress, and anxiety and significant increases in self-esteem and self-efficacy over the study period." The researchers concluded that D&D may have the potential as a "wellbeing intervention or prevention program."

As well, scientists have studied the capacity of role-playing games to increase empathy.

A 2015 study in the *American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis* concluded, "fantasy role-players report experiencing higher levels of empathic involvement with others."

MOVE FORWARD THREE SPACES

Practice for Life

Tabletop gaming offers both connection and a creativity boost for **Anya Grace Hart '22**, visual arts. Hart serves as dungeon master for one of UMBC's cappella groups, the Mama's Boys. She started playing D&D in 2021 and now steers the game for eight or so Mama's Boys players.

"We started a little adventure, and I find great joy in running these games," she said. "It feeds my creativity. You have a vast array of characters, and you put a scenario in front of these characters and



With tabletop gaming, you can be vulnerable; you're acting as 'not you,' but your emotions are behind your actions. It's easier to work through things in games with the lens of fantasy and lore behind it.



– DARCIE ADAMS '23



“Role-playing makes you think about other players,” says Hart, who developed her first character, an orange gecko named Artie, for an animation project. “You learn more about others and it can change who you are as a person. There’s an intrinsic empathy in playing games—there’s lots of self-discovery.”

Darcie Adams, who graduated in 2023 with a degree in political science and gender and women’s studies, absolutely agrees. While an undergraduate, he started playing a tabletop role-playing game online with a group of four others at UMBC’s LGBTQ club four years ago, at the pandemic’s peak. They’re still playing the same game, about three hours a week, still online.

“This has honestly been the only thing that’s been consistent in the last four years,” said Adams, who is currently getting a master’s degree in community leadership at UMBC. His group of gamer friends, he says, “get my experiences.”

They play a “homebrew game that borrows from *Monsters of the Week*,” Adams says. “The core theme is trans Gothic, finding your identity through monstrosity.”

This game, Adams said, has allowed him to address themes that are difficult to take to a therapist. “With tabletop gaming, you can be vulnerable; you’re acting as ‘not you,’ but your emotions are behind your actions. It’s easier to work through things in games with the lens of fantasy and lore behind it.”

Gaming, Adams says, puts decisions in front of you in a safe space, not the “cold unfeeling world. In real life, no one gives you a situation and asks you, ‘how do you react?’ You’re just expected to react. The framing in a game gives you time and opportunity to think and reconsider. And if it’s a cooperative game, it forces you to consider other people at the table.”

MOVE FORWARD FOUR SPACES

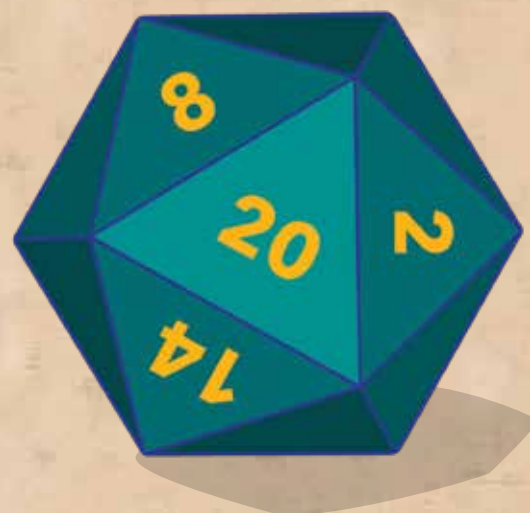
Play for Life

That Monopoly game that started in 2013 with the four commuters? They never finished it. In fact, they feel like if they finished the game that started their friendship, they’d jinx their bond. So none of them ever play Monopoly.

But they play everything else and pull in other friends and partners. Quijote and his partner have two whole Ikea shelves full of board games. McKenzie’s friends in Louisiana know that she’ll bring the games to parties, and Zulfiqar made friends in her new home city of Boston by joining board game groups.

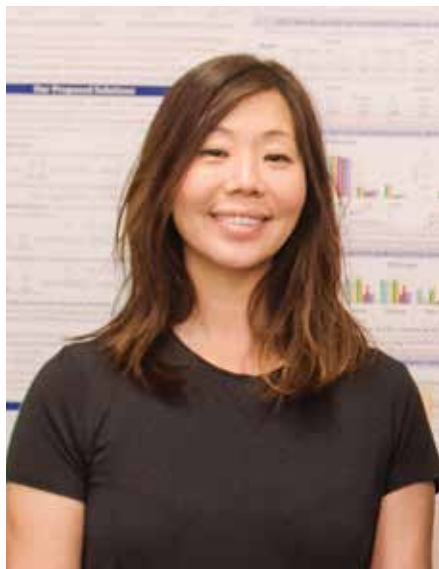
“As a quieter type of person, it’s also nice to be able to express myself through gameplay and through reacting to others,” Jose said.

“Little did we know 12 years later, we’d be attending each other’s weddings, planning group vacations, and still having game nights even from different cities across the country every month,” Zulfiqar said. “We never did finish that game of Monopoly, but we did start a whole new game of life, together.”



HOW TO CREATE A NEW WORLD

With Catherine Ordun, Ph.D. '23, information systems



*In her day job as a vice president at the advanced technology company Booz Allen Hamilton, **Catherine Ordun** leads teams of engineers working on far-out artificial-intelligence tech. In the evenings, she crafts a different type of futuristic world, putting the finishing touches on a sci-fi trilogy featuring two alien brothers at odds with each other over a plan to invade Earth, which she hopes to publish in early 2026.*

*Ordun started writing the books in 2022, as a break from her intense computer science Ph.D. research work, which she completed in 2023 under the direction of UMBC Assistant Professor **Sanjay Purushotham**. Although fiction writing and coding seem to call for different skill sets, the two pursuits share some defining features, from the mental challenge of connecting ideas to the satisfaction that comes from completing a herculean task. In both, Ordun embraces the thrill of creating—whether an imaginary world where characters grapple with technologically infused questions of identity and purpose, to the seemingly sci-fi, yet very real, AI tools that will shape our own tomorrows.*

Tools of the Trade

1. A thirst for knowledge
2. Pens and paper
(when you need old-fashioned tools)
3. A computer
(when you need digital assistance)
4. Vision and discipline
5. Lots of coffee

Step 1

HIT THE BOOKS

Ordun voraciously consumes knowledge and ideas. Although she earned her bachelor's degree in biology, not computer science, she became deeply interested in machine learning around 2015 while working as a data scientist for Booz Allen Hamilton. "I became fascinated by the idea, just like really, really obsessed," she says. "And for five years, I taught myself."

Ordun's favorite book from this time was *Deep Learning*, by Google AI researcher François

Chollet. "It is like dogeared to the max. I went through every page, and I typed out every line. I learned so much, from natural language processing to computer vision."

When Ordun decided she needed a brief break from technical research, she kept right on reading—though she turned to sci-fi books, from the cyberpunk novels of William Gibson to the technically elaborate works of Neal Stephenson. "At the time, I was also very interested in simulation theory, this kind of Matrix-like idea that we could be living in a computer simulation.

"And I thought, 'You know what, I'm going to write my own sci-fi book, so I can explore this idea.'"



Step 2

GET YOUR HANDS DIRTY

Once you have some background knowledge, it's time to dive in. Ordun wrote the first draft of her novel (which she eventually split into three parts and named the Morfyk Trilogy) in under three months. "It was a horrible, horrible first draft. And it was huge, like 600 pages long," she says. She revised it multiple times herself and then hired a professional editor.

Ordun says working on the book has become a nightly ritual. “Every night, even if I’m dead tired, I tell myself to just put five words down—it’s better than zero.”

In her AI-work, Ordun tackles problems on a similarly compressed timeline. “One team I lead is called AI rapid prototyping, and we basically crank out prototypes for exquisitely hard AI problems in about four weeks.”

Ordun isn’t committed to any one way of transforming ideas from her brain into a tangible object. Sometimes she reaches for pen and paper, other times she is coding and typing on a digital screen. What unites the efforts is the desire to build, be it novel AI-tools for a client or a different universe she can escape to when the workday is over.

Step 3

TACKLE THE HARD PROBLEMS

Book authors and scientific researchers share the challenge of birthing something entirely new. When searching for the fertile ground that could yield unique knowledge, tools, or stories, it helps to lean into profound, hard problems.

Ordun says the most rewarding part of her Ph.D. work was tackling a long-standing challenge in computer science—how to match up differently sized images of the same object and find a new way for computers to train themselves to do it.

She says her book writing also took a more fulfilling turn when she started to reflect on her own traumas and anxieties and the big themes of purpose and identity. She explored morality, the nature of reality, and her characters’ fluctuating sense of themselves. “I found I was pouring a lot of my own self into this book, so it became much more than ‘What if we live in a simulation?’”



Step 4

ASSEMBLE YOUR TEAM

The work of creating new worlds is monumental, so it helps to have a solid cast of characters supporting you. Ordun praises the engineers she leads at Booz Allen, who she says are tackling some of the toughest technology challenges out there and pioneering innovative solutions.

In the writing sphere, she credits editors and volunteer readers for helping her hone her “horrible first draft” into polished prose.

More recently, Ordun has turned to teaching, in a sense educating future collaborators. She joined UMBC as an adjunct assistant professor in summer of 2024, and she regularly engages with aspiring young computer scientists on TikTok, answering questions and commiserating about coding problems.

“I learn by imagining having to teach a concept to someone else,” says Ordun. “So now I’m actually teaching and it’s something I really enjoy doing.”

Step 5:

CELEBRATE YOUR SUCCESSES

Ordun isn’t shy about admitting setbacks. She talks about her strings of rejected papers, the coffee-fueled problem-solving sessions that turned into pure error-finding missions, and the red-ink-filled drafts that her book editors send her. Sometimes to release stress, she needed to lace up her shoes, grab the dog, and just go for a run.

Obstacles are a natural part of any pursuit where you push into the unknown. And so, when you do have success, it’s important to take a moment and take it in. “The moment I finished my book, I was out on my deck, it was 10 p.m. at night. I don’t want to sound melodramatic, but I almost cried,” Ordun says. “I felt I had created something totally new, a new universe. It was a similar feeling of pride to passing my Ph.D. dissertation defense.”

— Catherine Meyers

Left: Catherine Ordun in front of a poster presentation and reading at home. Photos courtesy of Ordun. Above: Catherine Ordun talks machine learning with her Ph.D. advisor Sanjay Purushotham (seated, center) and other members of his research group at UMBC. Photo by Marlayna Demond '11.

ALUMNI ESSAY

My Life Between the Yellow Borders

*At UMBC, students get a versatile education that Retrievers can draw on to succeed no matter where their career lands them. But sometimes, you hit the homerun and end up with your dream job. For **Kennedy Lamb** '20, English—who also played softball for UMBC—that meant a role in the storied legacy of National Geographic. But dream jobs don't land because of random luck or chance. Lamb knew early on that she wanted to lean on her love of science in her English degree and topped off her UMBC education with a graduate degree from Johns Hopkins University's program in science writing. Ultimately, when she applied for the gig at Nat Geo, she'd loaded her bases and was ready to knock it out of the park.*

Seven years ago, I sat in my academic advisor's office in the Performing Arts and Humanities Building mulling over which classes to take next semester. The meeting, like all meetings with English professor **Christopher Corbett**, mostly consisted of discussing select passages from Phillip Lopate's *Art of the Personal Essay*, the Baltimore Orioles' record, and Babe Ruth. I always looked forward to them.

"What do you want to do after college?" he asked, chuckling good-naturedly. I smiled politely and fiddled with my earrings. At 19, the prospect of securing a full-time job was daunting. I knew I loved to write. I knew I loved science. I did not know how to combine the two. "I'm not sure," I said. "Write, I guess."

Corbett took a sip out of his coffee mug and sat back in his chair. "Well, I can tell you where others have gone on after college, if that would help." I nodded. In his Maine

drawl, he rattled off a few media outlets, some of which I was familiar with. Nothing piqued my interest.

"And one alumna went to write for National Geographic," he said, almost as an afterthought. I looked up at him. "Really?" I replied.

Corbett hadn't heard me and continued recounting the various places alumni from the English Department went on to work. But my mind was stuck: National Geographic. Now that would be something special. I pictured the iconic yellow borders in my head and pondered the pathway from college sophomore to Nat Geo writer.

At the end of the meeting, I had signed up for a handful of writing seminars, an introductory biology class, and **Deborah Rudacille's** science writing class. As semesters turned into years and my time at UMBC came to a close in 2020, the



dreams of National Geographic lingered in the back of my mind. *What if?* I would wonder. *And how?*

Fast forward to 2025, and that dream has become a reality. I am a communications specialist at the National Geographic Society, the centuries-old nonprofit dedicated to illuminating and protecting the wonders of our world. As a public relations professional, I'm tasked with translating stories of scientific discovery into well-packaged pitches to writers around the world. No two days are alike. Some days are spent decoding technical science papers about extinct human ancestors or writing a press release about cutting-edge conservation tactics that aim to save a slimy snail. Other days are spent digging through National Geographic's colossal photo archive to find just the right picture for a reporter or presenting



to leaders from Pacific Island countries about how to communicate the benefits of marine protected areas.

Perhaps my proudest moment came when a team of scientists and filmmakers from National Geographic Pristine Seas uncovered the world's largest piece of coral (dubbed the "mega coral") while on expedition in the Solomon Islands. After being briefed on the discovery by the expedition team and Solomon Islands scientists, our communications crew began a two-week sprint to craft a press release and press kit, organize a press conference,

and pitch the story to reporters across the globe. And that work paid off: The story went viral. In three weeks, the story was picked up by over 3,000 outlets in 50 countries. The mega coral graced the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*, was featured on Germany's largest television show Tagesschau and even became the butt of a joke on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. (All press is good press, right?)

In moments like this, I'm reminded of the privilege of working for such an iconic brand. It's easy to trudge to the next assignment and never truly celebrate the amount of work that went into making a piece of coral in the Pacific Ocean a viral sensation. But after the story had run its course, I reflected on what got me to this moment.

What I realized is that there is no secret to landing a dream job. It is hard work with a healthy serving of serendipity. I took nearly every internship offered to me (including one at *UMBC Magazine*!) and tried to view even the most mundane task as a chance to learn something new. When it came time to apply to the National Geographic Society, I trusted my skills.

All writers know there is no such thing as perfection. Instead, I try to strive for the asymptote of perfection. It is demanding and, at times, downright exhausting. But because I know the impact of conservancy in action—from coral reefs to slimy snails—I wouldn't have it any other way.

Across: Lamb poses between National Geographic's iconic yellow borders. Photo by Ian Feldmann '21.

Above: Lamb works on an article about the Mars rover Perseverance for her summer internship with the National Association of Science Writers. Photo by Ian Feldmann '21.

Above left: Lamb runs to first base during a game against Coppin State University. It was her last collegiate game before the COVID-19 pandemic canceled the 2020 season. Photo by Ian Feldmann '21.

*Left: Lamb poses with a copy of *The Wall Street Journal* featuring the "mega coral." Photo courtesy of Lamb.*



CLASS NOTES

UMBC Class Notes is compiled by *UMBC Magazine* staff from items submitted online and by mail from alumni as well as from news articles and press releases received by the university. This edition of Class Notes contains information processed by April 21, 2025.

How to Submit Class Notes

The deadline for submitting Class Notes for the next print issue of *UMBC Magazine* is October 20, 2025. Submit your class note and photos online at umbc.edu/magazine or by email to magazine@umbc.edu.

1976

Jerry Cimino, history, is opening the Counterculture Museum—a nonprofit institution at the intersection of Haight and Ashbury, San Francisco, dedicated to celebrating and preserving the stories of transformative social movements. Cimino has run The Beat Museum in San Francisco since 2003.

1977

Joan Louise Wharton, sociology, was honored with a two-day retirement celebration concluding her 39-year pastorate in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

1979

Mary Jumbelic, biological sciences, is publishing her second book, *Speak Her Name: Stories from a Life in True Crime*, in June 2025. Jumbelic says UMBC prepared her for a life in science and writing, and that her feminism was born on campus and is at the heart of these personal and professional reflections about violence against women.

Roland Owens, biological sciences, was promoted to principal deputy director of the Office of Intramural Research in the Office of the Director at the National Institutes of Health at the end of 2024. This office oversees the approximately 1,000 in-house research groups at NIH.

1981

Howard Siskind, M.A. '85, psychology, played with his band *Stillwaters* at Ram's Head On Stage in March 2025, in the "In The Vane of The Who" show.

Debora Fajer Smith, political science, an active attorney, co-founded Amron Home and Health in 2024 to provide patent-pending unique supportive accessories to CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) users. Fajer Smith teamed up with students from UMBC's Alex. Brown Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation to help launch the company. **Scotty Collinson**, senior political science major, and **Nikos Bourazanis** '24, financial economics, have stayed on as co-founders.

1983

Gail Cook, economics, was named a new board of directors member for the Marriage and Relationship Education Center in Westminster, Maryland, in 2025 after formerly serving as the center's bookkeeper for nine years.

1985

Timothy Dzubak, psychology, retired in February 2025 after a 35-year career as court psychologist for the 31st District Court Services Unit in Manassas, Virginia.

1986

Claire Katz, philosophy, transitioned from department head of teaching, learning, and culture to associate provost for faculty advocacy at Texas A&M University in October 2024.



Abigail Granger '10, M.P.S. '15, eloped with her husband, Sam Kramer, at Anne Arundel County Public Library. Photo by Marlayna Demond '11.

1987

Kevin John, emergency health services, is learning to fly a two-seat Grob G103 glider plane.

Dwayne A. Price, information systems management, is a senior technical project manager for CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield and was featured on the *CyberWire Daily* podcast in February 2025 to talk about his career journey from databases to project management.

1988

Clarissa Hill, information systems management, co-owns Design-A-Tee Company with her sister. The company is celebrating 13 years in business in 2025.

1991

David McDonald, history, was confirmed as judge of the Court of Common Pleas for Columbia and Montour counties, Pennsylvania, in February 2025. McDonald has a legal career spanning more than 30 years.

CONSTRUCTING THE EXISTING WORLD

Kelley Bell, M.F.A '06, imaging and digital arts



When **Kelley Bell**, associate professor of visual arts, thinks back to her childhood growing up in the Capitol Hill area of Washington, D.C., she recalls fond memories of playing in her neighborhood playground, locally dubbed as “Turtle Park.”

“I remembered the concrete structures behind the turtle in the playground, and it really inspired me to want to figure out how they came to be,” Bell says.

Bell, M.F.A. '06, imaging and digital arts, is a 2024 recipient of the Greater Baltimore Cultural Alliance's Baker Artist Award. This spring, the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) featured 20 works from five recent Baker Artist Award recipients, including Bell's “Fantastic Village.” The colorful geometries of Bell's installation draw on memories of now-demolished playgrounds of her youth in Washington, D.C., and Baltimore's iconic rowhomes, bridging together the two places she calls home.

Bell creates vibrant projection-mapping works on a grand scale and gallery installations emphasizing joy, playfulness, community, and human connection. Growing up in the nation's capital, Bell was heavily influenced by the city's independent music scene. During her wanderings through downtown Washington as a teenager, a chance encounter with a repurposed “five and dime” store (then home to the Washington Project for the Arts) changed everything.

“When I walked in that store, I never saw anything like it,” Bell recalls, “It was a window into this idea that art doesn't have to be this picture on the wall and that was an amazing idea to me even at a young age.”

Bell was accepted into the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, NY, where she was introduced to

the concept and the power of design. “A friend explained that designers construct the existing world, and I believe that's an amazing power to have,” says Bell.

After graduating from Pratt, Bell landed a designer role for a record-pressing plant that worked with dance music labels. Continuing her work in the entertainment industry, she freelanced for MTV for several years before she was encouraged to explore Baltimore after a recommendation from a fellow designer who boasted about the city's arts scene.

In 1997, Bell moved into Baltimore's now-defunct H&H Arts Building, a five-story warehouse where local artists lived and worked for more than two decades. It was at H&H where Bell was initially connected to performer and fellow UMBC alum **Beatrix “Trixie Little” Burneston '99**, visual and performing arts, a founding member of Fluid Movement, a Baltimore-based organization that utilizes public spaces to create joy and community through performance art, most notably the quirky water ballet performances in Baltimore City public pools.

“To see people pour that much love and effort into something that ultimately is incredibly silly and unusual is, to me, a heroic act,” says Bell.

Bell worked with Fluid Movement as a designer and the group then became a longtime client. Bell has also collaborated with a number of organizations and art collectives across Baltimore, including working with the Enoch Pratt Free Library and the community art space Creative Alliance.

In 2002, Bell decided to expand her skillset and enrolled in UMBC's M.F.A program. “I was like a kid in a candy store with all of the stuff that I could do. It was a new world being opened up to me,” says Bell.

After experiencing difficulties in executing her thesis project to her satisfaction, Bell was advised by her then-thesis chair **Preminda Jacob** to consider extending her time in the program for an additional year.

“That extra year was the year that I figured out projection mapping. Doing guerrilla projection projects changed the way that I thought about making art. That has been a form of art that's served me since I've graduated from UMBC and it was all because of that fourth year,” says Bell. Guerrilla projection mapping—the use of projectors to display images, animations, or videos onto various surfaces in public spaces without formal authorization or permits—helped to inform the foundation of Bell's artistic pursuits.

In addition to her artistic practice, Bell has been an educator at UMBC since 2008. Earlier this year, Bell presented a retrospective of her work and her research practice with the presentation “Projections, Inflatables, and Artistic Spectacles,” organized by the UMBC's Center for Innovation, Research, and Creativity in the Arts (CIRCA).

“The CIRCA talk was a breakthrough. It was the first time that I took in the full scope of starting with an M.F.A. and how that work led up to the BMA exhibit,” she says.

The motivation behind Bell's BMA exhibit “Fantastic Village” in part stemmed from her 2024 collaboration with UMBC theatre professor **Collete Searls** on “Enchanting Jangle,” an installation described as an “epic cardboard fort your five-year-old self dreamed of.”

“There's a playfulness about it but also a deeply weird and creepy aspect to it. This is the place I like to dwell—giving people something new and something that they can't figure out is something that is very important to me in my work.”

—Adriana Fraser

Installation views of Kelley Bell's Fantastic Village in the Baker Artist Awards exhibition at the Baltimore Museum of Art, April 2025. Photos by Mitro Hood. Bottom: Headshot of Bell by Melissa Penley Cormier, M.F.A. '17.



CLASS NOTES

1993

Luz Huntington-Moskos, biological sciences, was inducted as a fellow in the American Academy of Nursing in November 2024. A tenured associate professor at the University of Louisville School of Nursing, Huntington-Moskos has 25 years of nursing experience. Her primary program of research is focused on the report-back of research results to build environmental health literacy and promoting positive health behavior change among adolescents.

1994

Lisa Respers France, English, made the 2025 Atlanta's 500 Most Powerful Leaders list for her work as a reporter. A veteran of CNN's entertainment team, she has interviewed celebrities such as Oprah and Taylor Swift and previously worked for outlets such as the *Baltimore Sun* and *Los Angeles Times*.

Angel Shellie Reese, information systems, the mother of WNBA player Angel Reese, was given the gift of a lifetime in January 2025. The elder Reese, who played basketball at UMBC, found out her daughter paid off her mortgage as a birthday present.

Luz Huntington-Moskos '93, left, was inducted as a fellow in the American Academy of Nursing in November 2024.



1995

Alycia Marshall, mathematics, provost and vice president of the Community College of Philadelphia, was promoted by the school's board of trustees to serve as interim president of the institution in April 2025.

1996

Stephanie C. Hill, economics, president of rotary and mission systems at Lockheed Martin Corp. was elected to the National Academy of Engineering in February 2025 for leadership of aerospace and defense systems in cybersecurity, rotary wing systems, and uncrewed aerial vehicles.

1997

Elizabeth Donovan Stuelke, visual and performing arts, will go to Cannes, France, for the Marché du Film, part of the 2025 Cannes Film Festival. Stuelke is one of 20 filmmakers invited by Largo.ai to pitch their projects to potential partners and financiers. Stuelke's film, *Her Lover*, will be filmed in Ithaca, New York, in the summer of 2025.

1998

David Bever, social work, was elected to be the new executive director of the Rehoboth Beach Film Society, a group dedicated not only to celebrating stories but also to showcasing independent films and creating lasting experiences for all. His work will involve heading the society's strategic initiatives and fostering further growth of the society.

2001

Holly Warrenfeltz Armstrong, geography and history, M.A. '03, instructional development systems, published her first book in December 2024: *Draw Me Close: A Journey Towards Selfless Faith*. The book chronicles Armstrong's

journey of donating her kidney to a stranger, becoming friends with the recipient, and sharing her faith with her new friend.

2002

Thomas Campbell, history, will become the new principal of St. Mary's Ryken High School in Leonardtown, Maryland, in July 2025. Campbell has over 25 years of experience in Catholic education with a commitment to academic excellence, faith formation, and student success.

Keith Elder, Ph.D., policy sciences, president of Saint Xavier University, served as the opening keynote speaker for the 2025 John Robert Lewis Leadership Conference at Troy University in spring 2025. The conference, now in its 21st year, fosters multicultural collaboration to strengthen relationships and empower diverse leaders.

Brian Thompson, economics and information systems, was named 2025 in-house counsel Leader in Law honoree by *The Daily Record* and the Maryland State Bar Association. Thompson is the assistant general counsel at marketing and advertising agency Dentsu Americas.

2003

Millette Green, sociology, was announced as the seventh head coach of the Virginia State University women's basketball program in April 2025. Green played basketball at UMBC before going on to coaching jobs at William & Mary, Augusta University, and Wake Forest University.

Jasmine McDonald, biochemistry and molecular biology, earned tenure at the Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, Department of Epidemiology, in 2024. At UMBC, McDonald worked in **Michael Summers'** lab as a Meyerhoff Program and MARC scholar and then went on to earn her Ph.D. at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, before joining Columbia.



Kevin John '87 in a two-seat Grob G103 Glider plane.

David Porter Sr., M.A., sociology, released his newest single "Fabulous Great Day" in February 2025. Porter is an author, recording artist, family man, entrepreneur, senior pastor, and worship leader at Excel Church in Lanham, Maryland.

2006

Carla Guarraia, Ph.D., molecular and cellular biology, received a Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching in February 2025 for her work at the Park School in Baltimore. Only one award is given per state per year, and Maryland is known as an extremely competitive region. Presidential Awardees receive a certificate signed by the U.S. president, a trip to Washington, D.C., to attend a series of recognition events and professional development opportunities, and a \$10,000 award from the National Science Foundation.

Harriette Wimms, M.A., Ph.D. '08, human services psychology, was featured in *Baltimore Jewish Times* in December 2024 for her decades of work as a psychologist and extensive volunteer work and community organizing within the Baltimore Jewish community. She takes an approach of "radical hospitality" that she says she learned from her parents.

Adjoa Smalls-Mantey, biochemistry and molecular biology, was appointed to the Department of Health and Human Services interdepartmental serious mental illness coordinating committee. This committee reports to Congress and federal agencies on issues related to adults with serious mental illness and children with serious emotional disturbance. Smalls-Mantey was also voted president-elect of the New York County Psychiatric Society.

Tamika M. Williams, visual arts, was featured in *Sheen Magazine* in February 2025 as founder and executive director of Beautiful I Am Inc. Through her nonprofit, Williams works to help women and young girls rise above adversity. In March 2025, she launched and hosted the Beauty in You Community Awards, an event to celebrate the achievements of women making an impact in their communities.

Saaret E. Yoseph, English, writer, director, and producer, blends documentary storytelling with poetic form to provoke intersectional, cross-cultural, and intergenerational dialogue in her latest project, the five-part anthology, *Journey(s): From DC to Addis*, featuring voices of six women who immigrated to D.C. from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, prior to and during the 1980s.

2004

Alicia Wilson, political science, was named vice president for civic engagement and opportunity at Johns Hopkins University. In this new role, she will work closely with other university and health system leaders to strengthen partnerships across the city and maximize the impact of the university's civic engagement and investments.

2005

Kenny Gibbs, biochemistry and molecular biology, has been named director of the Division of Training and Workforce Development within the National Institute of General Medical Sciences in December 2024. As a UMBC Meyerhoff, MARC, and Howard Hughes Medical Institute scholar, Gibbs worked in biological sciences professor **Suzanne Ostrand-Rosenberg's** immunology lab before going on to Stanford University for his Ph.D.

2007

Brian S. Bailey, political science, was recognized as a 2024 Safety Professional of the Year by Signal Mutual, the nation's largest group insurer of longshore and harbor worker benefits. As director of safety for Tradeport Atlantic, he leads the company's corporate safety program, ensuring regulatory compliance and fostering a strong safety culture across its multi-modal transportation and logistics operations.

Shane McCormick, political science, M.P.P. '14, left the Maryland State Department of Education in June 2024 to take a new position at the University of Baltimore. He is now the assistant to the senior vice president for academic affairs and provost. McCormick celebrated 17 years in service to the State of Maryland in January 2025.

Adjoa Smalls-Mantey '07 was voted president-elect of the New York County Psychiatric Society.



CLASS NOTES

2008

Linette Boisvert, environmental science, is working as the assistant lab chief of NASA's Goddard Cryospheric Sciences Laboratory, where her team flew aircraft with scientific instruments over land ice and sea ice in the Arctic and Antarctic to survey the ice. She is also working as the deputy project scientist for Aqua Satellite, which is designed to measure Earth's atmospheric temperature, humidity, and trace gases.

Kizzmekia Corbett-Helaire, biological sciences and sociology, was featured in *Life* magazine's "Life's 100 Women Who Changed the World" as well as *The Washington Post's* Post Next list: 50 people shaping our society in 2025. Corbett-Helaire was scientific lead on the NIH Vaccine Research Center's coronavirus team before heading to Harvard's T.H. Chan School of Public Health, where she has assembled a team of scientists including protein engineers, immunologists, and mouse experts to tackle new challenges in vaccine development and, she hopes, prevent another virus from sweeping the planet.

featured in a story about library weddings in the *Capital Gazette* newspaper. Granger is the assistant director of undergraduate recruitment and retention at UMBC at the Universities at Shady Grove.

Jason Grant, computer engineering, served as the undergraduate consortium co-chair of the Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence conference held in Philadelphia in spring 2025. Joining him in co-chairing the committee were **Patricia Ordóñez**, M.S. '10, Ph.D. '12, associate professor of computer science at UMBC, and **Rebecca Williams**, assistant professor of computer science at UMBC. **Kendall Queen** '16, computer engineering, served as one of the conference keynote speakers.

Rafik Kechrid, M.S. '11, information systems, and the Kechrid family have opened La Cosette, a Tunisian pastry shop in a Locust Point, Baltimore, rowhome. As his day job, Kechrid runs Next Level Soccer, a nonprofit soccer academy in Baltimore.



Holly Warrenfeltz Armstrong '01, M.A. '03, published her first book: *Draw Me Close: A Journey Towards Selfless Faith*.

2009

Olufolakemi "Kemi" Awe, biochemistry and molecular biology, will lead a new office of Dermatology Partners, a privately owned, physician-led dermatology group, in Westminster, Maryland. Prior to joining Dermatology Partners, Awe was lead co-investigator for an NIH-funded project focused on novel topical therapies for preventing skin cancer.

2011

Lauren Romano, American studies, and **Daniel Supanick**, visual arts, tied the knot on May 25, 2025. The pair met at UMBC in 2009 and were friends for 10 years before beginning to date in 2019.

2012

Emma Marston, ancient studies and English, was appointed by the Elmhurst History Museum in April 2025 as curator of education and public programs. Marston will oversee the Illinois museum's education department and public programs, including a summer concert series at the museum's new outdoor public performance space.

2010

Charonda Boone, M.S., information systems, was promoted to associate director over security, risk, and compliance under the Verizon Business Technology Group in February 2025.

Abigail Granger, gender and women's studies and psychology, M.P.S. '15, industrial/organizational psychology, eloped with her husband, Sam Kramer, at Anne Arundel County Public Library over Valentine's Day 2025. The couple were

2015

Jo Klein, biological sciences, started a new role as the social science research and spatial data librarian at the Fine Arts Library at Cornell University in November 2024.

Victor Pham, financial economics, a lawyer in Howard County, Maryland, has attracted more than 375,000 TikTok followers by critiquing chicken wings at local food spots. He and his fiancée were featured in the *Baltimore Sun* last year after posting new wing content for 365 consecutive days.

2016

Christina Bartko, financial economics, was named the vice president of accounting and finance by the Academy of Country Music in February 2025. She began her career as an auditor before earning her certified public accountant license and moving to Nashville to work in the music industry.

2013

Amalia Mark, theatre, is now the community rabbi for GatherDC, working with young Jewish adults who are around the age Mark was when she decided to pursue the rabbinate—her mid-20s.

Jennifer Pumphrey, psychology, graduated with a doctorate in strategic security from the National American University in December 2024.

HOW TO TRAIN YOUR ROBOT

Randi Williams '16, computer engineering



As a senior in high school in Bowie, Maryland, **Randi Williams** '16, computer engineering, was almost certain she was going to MIT for undergrad. Since middle school, she'd had the understanding that MIT was the school "for people who want to build things," and by spring of senior year, she had already been admitted under early action. But fate had other plans.

Her mother had learned about UMBC's Meyerhoff Scholars Program from a *60 Minutes* segment that aired right around when Williams was applying to colleges. The nationally renowned Meyerhoff Scholars Program, founded in 1988, works to increase diversity among future leaders in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics by supporting students who intend to pursue a Ph.D. or combined M.D./Ph.D. in these fields.

Williams applied to the program, and it was during an on-campus event for top Meyerhoff applicants that her mind began to change. She was impressed with the support and camaraderie the program offered. In the end, Williams opted to become a Retriever—and never looked back.

"If I hadn't gone to UBMC, I don't think I would have developed the leadership skills I did," says Williams, who returned to campus as the 2025 keynote speaker for Undergraduate Research and Creative Achievement Day. "My mentors always encouraged me to speak up. I really benefited from that."

At UMBC, Williams embraced myriad opportunities to learn and grow. She excelled in her classes; conducted research in the Mobile, Pervasive, and Sensor System Lab of Professor **Nilanjan Banerjee**; and was involved in the Meyerhoff Scholars, Honors College, and Center

for Women in Technology communities.

In her sophomore year, she co-founded the hackUMBC student group with fellow Meyerhoff Scholar **Perry Ogwuche** '14, computer science and mathematics, and organized the university's first hackathon, a 24-hour competition where teams of students create innovative solutions to problems that matter to them. Using that experience, Williams also ran hackathons for youth in Baltimore, centered around issues of community safety and interactions with police.

Williams always wanted the people around her to succeed and worked hard to lift everyone up, says her UMBC roommate of four years, **Amreen Chadha** '16, financial economics: "I saw Randi pull all-nighters just to help her peers with studying and assignments that she had already completed."

Throughout her time at UMBC, Williams stayed true to her passions and ideals, Chadha says. "Randi was always herself in the absolute best way: She was honest, thoughtful, caring, and all around great. If I had something on my mind, I was never afraid to be open with her. She balanced her schoolwork and social life so well that it drove others around her to find the same balance."

After graduating summa cum laude, Williams did at last say "yes" to MIT, where she joined the Personal Robots Group at MIT's Media Lab. She earned a master's in media arts in sciences in 2018 and a Ph.D. in the same field in 2024. Williams studied how young children understand and interact with artificial intelligence and worked on tools and teaching methods to enable young learners to undertake their own AI-based projects. She developed robots, called PopBots, that can teach AI concepts to preschoolers through social interaction and also developed a middle school

AI and ethics curriculum used by thousands of teachers around the world called "How to Train Your Robot."

Williams tells the story of one young student she met who wanted to become a doctor and was not, at first, particularly interested in AI. But through a project in Williams' class, the student developed an AI tool to translate when a doctor and patient don't speak the same language. "This student was inspired by her own situation of translating for her mother in doctor's offices, and she imagined an AI companion that could do the same," Williams said.

Williams says the anecdote illustrates how she would like young people to see AI—as a tool to empower themselves and address the problems they see around them.

In the summer of 2026, Williams will head to Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh to become an assistant professor in the Human-Computer Interaction Institute.

Before beginning that next chapter, she is working as a research lead at Day of AI, a nonprofit organization spun out of MIT, with the mission of preparing K-12 students of all backgrounds and abilities to be successful, responsible, and engaged in an increasingly AI-powered society. The mission fits with Williams' passion for making technology education accessible to everyone.

Although pop culture often portrays AI as an adversary of humans, Williams prefers to focus on the collaborative potential.

"I tell my students, 'this is what AI can create,' and I'll make a small circle with my hands; 'this is what humans can create,' and I'll make a bigger circle; and, putting my arms out wide, 'this is what we can create together.'"

— Catherine Meyers

Top: Williams with some of the robots she uses in her trainings. Below, Williams (far right) and other hackUMBC attendees pose with then-President Freeman Hrabowski. Photos courtesy of Williams.



CLASS NOTES

Dunrick Sogie-Thomas, social work, successfully completed a doctorate in healthcare administration from Virginia University of Lynchburg in May 2025.

2017

Kevin Hsieh, financial economics, finished second in the 17th season of Food Network's *The Great Food Truck Race* in August 2024. Hsieh owns Bao Bei, which serves Taiwanese food and is opening a brick-and-mortar casual restaurant in Rockville's Montrose Crossing Shopping Center in 2025.

2018

Samuel Pascal, economics and political science, and **Rex Echevarria** '20, anthropology, founders of the Baltimore-based Rex Pax indie band, headlined at the "First Thursdays" in June 2025 for the 20th anniversary of Baltimore's largest free music festival series.

2021

Montia Gardner, Ph.D., language, literacy, and culture, was unanimously elected to be principal of Central High School in Champaign, Illinois, by the district's board of education. Gardner starts her position in July 2025. It is the first time the school will be led by a Black principal.

Brandon Horvath, economics, began his professional basketball career in France in 2022 before moving on to Belgium, and this season, he is playing with Bamberg Club in Germany. Horvath's career has spanned five teams in five years, and he was part of the memorable upset over Virginia in the NCAA Tournament as a first-year player.

2023

Emmanuel Payano-Frias, M.P.S., community leadership, earned a doctorate of education in higher education administration

from Bradley University in December 2024. Currently, Payano-Frias manages the doctor of nursing practice program at the University of Maryland School of Nursing.

2024

Wendy Bickersteth, information systems, is one of five Carnegie Mellon doctoral students chosen as part of the inaugural cohort of the Carnegie Mellon University Rales Fellows Program. The program is cultivating the next generation of science, technology, engineering, and math leaders while also increasing access to graduate-level education. Bickersteth's project is about generative AI risks and failure modes—the factors that contribute to those risks—and creating a taxonomy for them both.

Maxine Elovitz, design, got engaged to Maia Carlisle on September 14, 2024. They met online shortly before Elovitz started school at UMBC in 2020. The couple lives in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, with their three cats: Oberon, Milo, and Mabon.

Friends We Will Miss

John Latchford Beck '75, sociology, was an assistant librarian of the special collections at the Albin O. Kuhn Library and Gallery for nearly 20 years. Beck, known affectionately as the "unofficial mayor of Ellicott City Main Street," died on January 30, 2025.

Zane L. Berge, professor of education, died on February 25, 2025. A cornerstone of the UMBC Department of Education for many years, Berge's contributions to the department and community will never be forgotten. Berge became a professor and director of the Training Systems and Instructional Systems Development program at UMBC, which laid the foundation for the department's current graduate programs in education. For nearly three decades at UMBC, Berge was a trusted leader in many capacities, including chairing department promotion and tenure committees and playing a key role in recruiting new faculty.

Annette A. Box '95, biological sciences, passed away on December 3, 2024. Known as a beacon of light and love to all who knew her, after graduating from UMBC, Box pursued

her masters in science of pharmacy at the University of Florida. She thrived as a forensic scientist for over 20 years, contributing immeasurably to her field.

Warren I. Cohen, a scholar of U.S. diplomatic history, specializing in America's evolving relationship with China and the rest of Asia, died April 30, 2025. Cohen taught at UMBC from 1993 until his retirement in 2008. He was regarded as a dedicated classroom teacher and mentor.

E.B. "Pat" Furgurson III, '99, interdisciplinary studies, a longtime *Capital Gazette* reporter who covered the 2018 shooting in that newsroom, died on November 25, 2024. On June 28, 2018, when a gunman killed five staff members at the Gazette, Furgurson, along with others who had been outside of the building, began reporting on the shooting from the back of Furgurson's pickup truck.

Deena Yoffa Gordon '73, biological sciences, education, passed away in Houston, Texas, on March 22, 2024.

Daphne Maxine Duval Harrison, retired chair of the Department of Africana Studies, died on December 20, 2024. Education was the hallmark of Harrison's life. A proud second-generation college graduate (Talladega College), Harrison would go on to earn her masters of music degree at Northwestern University followed by her doctorate of education from the University of Miami. UMBC became Harrison's home for nearly three decades—she made a lasting impact through her hard work and leadership. During her time at UMBC, she enjoyed working with students in the Meyerhoff Scholars Program. She retired from the university in 1999, and since then, the university has created the Daphne Harrison Lecture Series in honor of her many contributions to the school.

Robert Revere '79, interdisciplinary studies, passed away on August 17, 2024.

Patricia Rudolph '72, economics, passed away on May 2, 2024. She was a tenured professor of economics at the University of Alabama, where she taught for 25 years. Post retirement, she started a new career and successful business as a certified financial planner. She then graduated from the St. Mary's Ecumenical Institute in Baltimore, earning a master's degree in theology.

FINDING A LIFETIME OF PURPOSE IN GIVING BACK

Gary Brooks '79, history



A bright yellow bead slides over a red pipe cleaner, then a blue bead, followed by green. Soon, the rainbow of beads and wire is twisted this way and that until it resembles the Big Dipper. This same activity is happening throughout PHYS 401, a seminar room in the UMBC Physics Building, as 20 Baltimore City middle and high school students and their parents recreate the constellations.

These students are part of their local Sigma Beta Club, a youth auxiliary of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Inc., founded nationally in 1950 to help mentor young men and develop their leadership skills. "When we go out to UMBC, it's always something special," says **Gary Brooks '79**, history, who played a large part in bringing these young people to Hilltop Circle. "UMBC does things second to none."

The students came to campus in February with members of the Nu Sigma Sigma Alumni Chapter, which includes Phi Beta Sigma alumni—including Brooks—to tour the UMBC Observatory and attend a men's basketball game.

Nu Sigma Sigma partners with local universities like UMBC to offer Baltimore City youth interested in STEM the chance to experience college life. Most of these visits involve some sort of athletics event, and that's about it—but not at UMBC.

Another Sigma Beta Club visit to UMBC involved a FIRST LEGO League competition, and another saw the students observe a robotics event. Brooks also makes sure that each visit includes a member of UMBC senior leadership. Recently, the students had the chance to speak with UMBC President **Valerie Sheares Ashby** and Athletics Director **Tiffany Tucker**.

Brooks wants each visit to UMBC to be as meaningful as possible for these young men because he knows how UMBC can change lives.

Even though Brooks graduated 45 years ago, he never really left UMBC. He remains closely involved with Phi Beta Sigma at UMBC, helping mentor

students, and he is an active member of Nu Sigma Sigma, working closely with the university to bring Sigma Beta Club members to campus.

"The fraternity got me involved in community service," says Brooks—a personal mission he carries on to this day.

"Since I met Gary almost 20 years ago, he has been a dedicated champion of UMBC," says **Stanyell Bruce**, director of alumni engagement at UMBC.

Brooks also serves on the UMBC Second Generation Scholarship Fund committee. The Second Generation Scholarship is awarded annually to outstanding undergraduate students who intend to pursue study at UMBC, are enrolled in or have completed a course in Africana studies, and demonstrate a commitment to improving the lives of racial/ethnic minorities through community service, extracurricular activities, or other community involvement. Brooks has served on the committee since 1986, when the scholarship was established.

"Education is dear to my heart," says Brooks, who went on to earn his M.P.A. from the University of Baltimore and his J.D. from the University of Maryland School of Law—an impressive résumé for someone who initially struggled in college.

"My first semester at UMBC wasn't the best," admits Brooks. "I didn't do well at all."

Instead of giving up, Brooks decided to lean into his weaknesses—reading and writing—by taking courses in Africana studies, a subject that interested him a great deal. Brooks found himself more immersed in the work. It was still difficult, but he enjoyed the subject matter, and the faculty was incredibly supportive. As a result, his grades began to improve.

"I saw that success, and I got more and more serious about school," says Brooks.

After graduation, Brooks remained close to the Africana Studies Department. He spearheaded a committee tasked with hosting the annual "Party with a Purpose," whose proceeds supported Africana studies and the Second Generation Scholarship.

After Brooks graduated from law school, one of his professors, **Willie Lamoué-Smith**, former chair of Africana studies, asked Brooks to step out of his comfort zone and step into the classroom to teach a course on the impact of the criminal justice system on the Black community. Despite some hesitancy—"I do estate planning and bankruptcy," says Brooks. "I am not a criminal justice attorney"—the young lawyer decided to take the leap into teaching after more than a little encouragement from Lamoué-Smith.

"Dr. Lamoué-Smith said, 'Mr. Brooks, you are smart enough,' and that was enough," says Brooks. "He believed in me."

Brooks taught this class for six years, connecting UMBC students with impactful, African American leaders, including the Baltimore City police commissioner and the Baltimore City state's attorney. Brooks eventually handed the class over to his good friend and former law partner, **Larry Wiggins '75**, political science, who played a large role in helping Brooks study for and pass the bar exam.

Over the years, Brooks has continued to give back to the UMBC community because of how much the UMBC community has given him.

"Gary's commitment to UMBC never wavers," says Bruce. "He's someone I seek out for advice and guidance, and he embodies what it means to be Retriever Proud."

— *Bobby Lubaszewski '10, M.P.S. '23*

Top: Brooks on a recent visit to campus. Below: Brooks regularly brings groups of young men to UMBC through his fraternity. Here, they're visiting the Physics Building and getting a feel for campus. Photos courtesy of Brooks.



THEN & NOW

Home Sweet Home

“Hey UMBC, and welcome to my crib!” This is probably not verbatim what students said when UMBC’s first dormitories opened, but there’s always a possibility. Starting from humble beginnings, UMBC opened its residential doors to the first cohort of 118 on-campus Retrievers on March 15, 1970. More dorms would follow—along with apartments and living learning communities—and here we are in 2025 with an on-campus population of approximately 4,000.

While some may take today’s dorm amenities for granted, a November 1969 edition of *The Retriever* reported on the forthcoming residential spaces promising, “The new dormitories boast of many features not currently found in other residence halls. On-campus residents will enjoy wall-to-wall carpeting, numerous lounges and study facilities, and kitchenette facilities for snacks. Each room will have a telephone and individual climate control (air conditioning included).”

While phone and air conditioning were probably great perks, what really made a lasting impression on the first residents were the intangibles. **Tom Stewart** ’74, psychology, remembers how much it bonded him and his friends to the campus.

“It was a bit of a ‘suitcase school’ back then, so when the commuters went home on weekends, we had the whole place to ourselves,” he said. “I was living on the other side of Baltimore, and I knew I wasn’t going to get any kind of college experience if I continued commuting.”

Much like the UMBC we know today, there was always an emphasis on making sure that students who lived on campus and those who commuted still had plenty of opportunities to interact through mixers, concerts, and movie nights, many of these being entertainment options still offered through Campus Life in 2025.

In addition to improving his social life, having a dedicated spot on campus to buckle down and do his work inspired Stewart to grow academically.

“When I started, I was just a slightly-above-average student, but things really kicked in for me at UMBC,” he said. “For some reason, this really seemed like the environment to take this whole academic thing seriously.”

During Homecoming 2024, a group of alumni from the 1970s, including Stewart, got together for a reunion tour of campus and had the opportunity to revisit some of their old haunts, including the dorms, and the memories all came flooding back. Stewart and his wife, Wendy ’77, sociology, agree that the friends they made at UMBC “are our lifelong friends.” And that’s something we can all agree on, no matter your graduation year.

—Kait McCaffrey

From top to bottom:

The Retriever Weekly announces the new dorms opening in 1970. UMBC Special Collections.

Resident friend group photographer Leo J. “Nick” Nicaise ’75, interdisciplinary studies—film and theatre—broke out from behind the camera to pose for a shot with friends (on the right).

Residing in a place of distinction, Stewart’s intramural football jersey hung proudly in the Dorm One lobby. Stewart, a close friend of photographer Nicaise, was the founding member of the Dorm Chargers team.

Bonnie Garron Lardieri ’81, sociology, and friend Steve Leibowitz explore all the amenities of the new dorms, including the large common rooms that are perfect for socializing. Photos courtesy of Nicaise.

Cathy Amayab ’26, business technology administration and media and communication studies, (seated on beanbag) loves living in the dorm with her built-in friends. “It always guarantees that you have someone to explore with and go on a few side quests.” Photo by Marlayna Demond ’11.





WILD CARD

The Fellowship of the Ring

Like most dads, Chris Burk immediately told his 10-year-old daughter that the object she was trying to fish out of Pig Pen Pond was probably trash. Emily was not to be deterred, and Burk said he “had egg on his face” when lo and behold, the piece of trash was actually a ring. A West Point class ring from 101 years ago. And wait, was that a name inscribed?

The Burks live a few miles from UMBC and occasionally use it as a place to take a family stroll. When they visited last summer, Burk noticed the water level was a little lower than usual in the body of water formally known as CERA Pond, which sits between the bwtech@UMBC Research and Technology Park and the loop across from Admin Garage. That’s when Emily got a stick to try to snag a shiny tab settled at the bottom of the shallow embankment.

The name on the ring—Santiago G. Guevara—led Burk, who is a land surveyor and well-acquainted with historical research, on an internet crusade to 1) reunite the ring with the owner’s descendants and 2) figure out how in tarnation the ring got there in the first place. So far he’s only been able to check off the first item.

Enter Nick Guevara, a U.S. Navy veteran, dedicated family historian, avid blogger, and most importantly, Santiago Guevara’s grandson. Nick also has no clue how the family heirloom ended up in UMBC’s pond. (Although he does have a nephew, **Quintin Simmons**, who graduated in 2020 with a degree in geography and environmental systems. Simmons, who coincidentally has swum in Pig Pen Pond, didn’t know his great granddad went to West Point, much less had a class ring from 1923. In another twist of coincidence, Simmons works at a company housed in bwtech and can see the pond from his office.)

“I’m so flabbergasted that these things can still happen,” says Nick. “It makes the world feel small in a good way. We need more stories to bring people together.”

—Randianne Leysbon '09



Top left: A young local girl pulled this ring from Pig Pen Pond on a low-water day. Photo courtesy of Chris Burk. Top right: After the ring was cleaned, a name appeared on the inside band. Photo courtesy of Nick Guevara. Above: Pig Pen Pond sits nestled between bwtech@UMBC and the loop adjacent to Admin Garage. Photo by JR Resolutions for UMBC.



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SAVE THE DATE

Homecoming: October 10 – 12

Mark your calendars for Homecoming 2025, October 10 – 12, when UMBC Retrievers, family, friends, and community members are invited to celebrate all things black and gold!

UMBC Homecoming is a time to reconnect and celebrate your Retriever pride—come enjoy the carnival, puppy parade, pumpkin painting, men's and women's soccer games, 5k and family fun run, GRIT-X, and so much more.

Check homecoming.umbc.edu for updates.



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