

SACRED HEART UNIVERSITY MAGAZINE

FORWARD ■ LEADING ■ SPIRIT
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SPRING
22



DEPTH (NOUN) — A DEEP PLACE IN A BODY OF WATER; A PART THAT IS FAR FROM THE OUTSIDE OR SURFACE

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ON THE COVER

Senior Tomas Koeck has a rare gift for seeing—and sharing—the invisible. *Story, page 20.*
(photo credit: Eric Torrens)

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THE ILLUSION OF TOUCH

I REMEMBER BEING A YOUNG CHILD and asking my mother how things touch. She looked at me the way every parent does when they don't want to take responsibility for their share of the genetics. What did I mean, *how*? It's obvious. They just *do*.

So I tried again.

For whatever reason (the context eludes me now) I had become aware that every journey has a halfway point—a place where you are closer to your destination than when you began, but not there yet. And between *that* point and the destination, there is another halfway point where you are closer still, but still not there. And from that point, another. And so on and so on. It wouldn't matter how small the distance left to travel ultimately became; it would always contain a distance that was even smaller. Meaning, every journey should be interminable. Two things approaching each other should never be able to touch. And yet, obviously, they do. How?

I was told to go play outside.

The question bothered me for ages. It was quite some time before I came to understand that, effectively, things *don't* touch. Whatever we may think we see and feel, at the tiniest, most invisible levels of the universe, atoms and their particles only interact, attracting or repelling one another to form bonds and barriers. But what we think of when we think of touching—that experience of contact—that's an illusion.

It's a good one, too. It's one we need. It allows us to get on with our days without being paralyzed by uncertainty over whether our feet will make contact with the floor. Oftentimes, trusting the simple answer is the best thing to do.

But it is incomplete.

My favorite part of helping to create this magazine is getting to speak on a regular basis with people who see and hear and think about the world in a way different from most. People who dig a little deeper, who find uncertainty inviting and who are excited by complexity rather than daunted by it.

People like Tolga Kaya who understand that engineering's best intentions are riddled with unintended consequences, and that navigating the latter in quest of the former is the discipline's greatest challenge ("Better By Design," *page 30*). People like Keith Hamilton Cobb who,



armed only with piercing questions and an indefatigable allegiance to honesty, stand before a demagogue, an industry and an entire culture and say, "Bring it" ("Farewell the Tranquil Mind," *page 13*). People like Will Mayer and Tomas Koeck who, each in his own way, elevate the act of listening and seeing to the art of shared experience ("Now. Listen. Here.," *page 42*, and "Seeing Beneath the Surface," *page 20*).

The truth is the world is vastly more complex than we are usually comfortable admitting, and to deny that complexity is to deny its truth. What might we see were we to really look at what we are seeing? What might we hear were we to really listen to all there is to be heard? The heavy lifting at any university is not the teaching of what we know, but the seeking of what we don't.

It makes for quite a journey—one might even say "interminable." But the things you learn along the way, and the people you meet, are so worth it. I promise.

Let's get going.

TIMOTHY DEENIHAN, EDITOR

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A little less
pomp. A lot less
circumstance.





SACRED HEART UNIVERSITY'S GREAT RIVER GOLF CLUB

SPECIAL ALUMNI MEMBERSHIP VALUE

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FORWARD

"HOPE IS THE THING WITH FEATHERS THAT PERCHES IN THE SOUL AND SINGS THE TUNE WITHOUT THE WORDS AND NEVER STOPS AT ALL."
EMILY DICKINSON



CHANNELS OF PEACE

At Sacred Heart's campus ministry, all are welcome who would welcome all.

THREE PRIESTS, two ministers, a rabbi, an imam and a monk all walk into a chapel. We wish we could say they all walked into a bar and set up an undoubtedly hilarious joke, but the truth is that gathering all the lead members of SHU's campus ministry in the same place at the same time is something of a feat. Father Tony Ciorra, Roman Catholic priest, is vice president of mission integration, ministry and multicultural affairs at Sacred Heart. The campus ministry team he is building has become a microcosm of what he believes the University—and the greater world around us—should be. →

→ FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

“The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in [non-Christian] religions,” Pope Paul VI wrote in 1965. “She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which ... often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.”

In other words, the best reason to have an interfaith ministry at a Catholic university founded in the inclusive spirit of the Second Vatican Council is specifically because it is a Catholic campus, says Colin Petramale, coordinator of community partnerships in Ciorra’s office.

For Father Danny Schieffler, who in addition to his duties within campus ministry is also an Orthodox priest in a New York City parish and a member of the College of Health Professions faculty, a diverse campus ministry offers practical benefits as well as ministerial

ones. “It represents the world we live in,” he says.

“It exposes students who may have grown up with a strong knowledge only of Christianity or Roman Catholicism to other religious traditions,” seconds Rabbi Josh Ratner, “what they’re about and how they are actually lived and practiced.”

Of course, the driving mission shared by all the faiths and practices represented in a campus ministry must be the students.

“In university chaplaincy in particular, you strive to see the students’ need,” says Imam Gazi Aga, who hails originally from Albania, where the interfaith environment is common. “And the biggest need is to be present. In campus ministry, you go back to the original mission of a chaplain: talking with one person, walking with one person.”

“I have come to know God more

deeply through our interfaith chaplains, by witnessing the love they give this campus community and their own communities of faith, says Valerie Kisselback, campus ministry’s Catholic lay ecclesial minister. “We all come from a place of love, for God, for our students and for each other.”

“I very much admire that true Catholicism embraces other religions,” says Reverend Sara Smith, Protestant chaplain within campus ministry. “To believe that being Catholic means having blinders on to other ideas sells Catholicism short, it sells Jesus short and it sells the rest of us Christians short.”

Smith increases the diversity of

**CAMPUS MINISTRY
LOOKS TO MEET
THE INDIVIDUAL
WHEREVER THEIR
FAITH TAKES THEM.**



campus ministry not only as a Protestant reverend; she is the only woman of the cloth in the office and an out-and-proud lesbian. “I think for some students, observing my progressive ideology allows them to realize, ‘Oh! I can think like that and still be in the family of faith.’”

Just a few short months ago, campus ministry consisted of all Abrahamic religions—Christianity, Judaism, Islam—all monotheistic religions whose roots lie in the God of Abraham. Venerable Shim Bo brought the teachings of Buddhism, which are not God-centered, but rather focus on self-awareness and ease of suffering in self and others, to campus.

“I’m learning a new language,” says Shim Bo, whose very name—given to him by his Buddhist teacher years ago—means “sacred heart.” “There are some unfamiliar yet liberating teachings in Buddhism; it’s important to share them with our students in a language they understand, to meet them where they are.” He’s not only speaking figuratively. Shim Bo is often seen in the hallways with an offering of “Tranquili-tea,” his practice of serving students a cup of hot tea and creating a safe space to be seen and heard.

“It’s not about coercion or conversion,” says Smith. “It’s all about relationships.”

Rounding out the office is Father Saji Thengumkudiyil, a Catholic priest whose ministry is guided by profound simplicity. “My interfaith journey can be tracked through my understanding of three little words,” says Thengumkudiyil. “We are one.”

The interfaith chaplains are not only involved with campus ministry; they also participate in volunteer programs and service learning outreach and hold many events that take place in Sacred Heart’s Multicultural Center. They are available to faculty and staff as well.

A natural camaraderie has been built between members of the ministry. “If you can laugh with each other, you are comfortable with each other,” says Ciorra. “That doesn’t mean there aren’t differences—there are—but what brings us together trumps any differences there might be. I love our interfaith chaplains. They have taught me a lot about loving, caring and being there for one another.” **SHU**



NO IVORY TOWER HERE.
SHU ATHLETIC DIRECTOR
JUDY ANN RICCIO KEEPS
HERSELF IN THE THICK OF
THE ACTION.

THE LOUDEST CHEERLEADER

As the University's first female athletic director, longtime administrator Judy Ann Riccio is striving to provide an excellent experience for student-athletes while fostering a culture of celebrating each other's successes.

IN DECEMBER, when the men's basketball team took a weekend trip to Rhode Island, joining them on the bus was Judy Ann Riccio. The new Sacred Heart athletic director cheered the team on as it competed against Brown University and the University of Rhode Island. She sat in on team practice and team-building activities, and even joined the players for team meals.

"I wanted to see the whole operation, to walk through the day with student-athletes and coaches, know how they operate and what they deal with," says Riccio, who became the first woman to lead SHU Athletics when she was appointed last fall.

Head Coach Anthony Latina says the players felt very valued by Riccio's time and attention.

"She has an amazing work ethic and intellectual curiosity. She asks a ton of questions and really wants to know why

we do things a certain way and how practices can be improved," he says.

For almost 18 years, Riccio led the finance and business administration of nearly every aspect of SHU's athletics program. Now, in her new role as AD, she gets to know the people whose lives are impacted by the budgets.

"In my previous roles, I was behind the scenes administratively—doing the work of athletics but not getting to interface with the students," she says. "In my new job, what keeps me going during the stressful days are the student-athletes. They are such great young people."

Fittingly, Riccio's top goal as AD is "to provide the best possible student-athlete experience." In her first year on the job, this means being "very, very hands on," she says. This spans everything from working with the provost to streamline academic eligibility standards to regularly attending team practices and meetings—even taking the team bus.

"Traveling on a bus. Trying to get



their academics done. Making sure they have access to Wi-Fi and study spaces. Making sure they have proper nutrition," she says. "I want to make sure they have everything they need to be successful academically and athletically.

"Presence is important. That's what I stress to my coaches and staff," Riccio adds. "I'm here for them, and I expect them to be present."

It also means celebrating each other's successes, she says. "When one of our programs succeeds, we all succeed." So when the women's volleyball team returned to campus fresh off its third consecutive Northeast Conference championship win in November, Riccio orchestrated a surprise celebratory gathering of students and senior administrators to welcome them home.

"No one was more excited than Judy Ann, who was the first one to meet us



"WHAT KEEPS ME GOING DURING THE STRESSFUL DAYS ARE THE STUDENT-ATHLETES."

at the bus," recalls Head Coach Robert Machan.

Riccio's passion for athletics runs deep. Growing up in Seaford, NY, she tried "a little bit of everything"—cheerleading, softball, dance—along with managing the wrestling and baseball teams in middle and high school. She's a self-described "long-suffering Jets fan" as well as a "Mets fan by birth, Yankees fan by marriage."

Riccio started her career as an auditor at Price Waterhouse, but "you can account for anything. Might as well do it for fun things like marching bands and football teams," she jokes. She went on to work in finance and business operations, first at Hofstra University, then Fairfield University, before coming to Sacred Heart in 2001.

At SHU, Riccio has served on the Title IX Committee, the Pioneer Journey of Transformational Education Committee and the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Working Group—experiences shaping her decision-making as AD. "I want to make sure that we are providing all of the participation opportunities we can for women," she says.

With Pioneer cheerleading and women's wrestling gaining national attention right out of the gate, she's off to a good start. **SHU**



JUDY ANN RICCIO, WITH JIM BARQUINERO (SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT, ENROLLMENT, STUDENT AFFAIRS & ATHLETICS) AND UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT JOHN PETILLO AT THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF HER ROLE AS SHU DIRECTOR OF ATHLETICS.



THIS PLACE IS GOIN' TO THE DOGS

Tails are wagging, the fur is ruffled and the treats are abundant, but the research being done at the Canine Cognition Lab is doggone serious business.

T

HE CANINE COGNITION program on SHU's Main Campus—run by Dawn Melzer, associate professor and chair of the psychology department, and Deirdre

Yeater, professor of psychology—serves three distinct functions: service dog training, animal-assisted therapy studies and comparative psychology cognitive studies.

Service dog training happens in conjunction with Exceptional Sidekick in Newtown, which specializes in training psychiatric service dogs for disabled teens and young adults. One of the goals of this program is “to start a conversation about mental health,” says Yeater, as students are training the dogs to help this specific population.

Student handlers—all of whom must live off campus in non-SHU housing—receive three class credits and go through two trainings a week with the dogs, one on campus and one in public. Once the dogs are able to sit still under a desk without being disruptive to their environment, they will even attend class with their handlers.

But the training doesn't end there. Beyond the behavioral requirements of an emotional support animal, these service dogs are trained to perform specific tasks such as getting medication, calming someone having a panic attack or retrieving a cell phone in a crisis. Upon completion, each dog is assigned as a companion to an Exceptional Sidekick client between the ages of 12 and 22 with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), schizophrenia, depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder or other psychiatric diagnoses.

Researchers in the Canine Cognition Lab are also studying the effects of animal-assisted therapy. During finals and other stressful times, SHU's counseling center and the Student Wellness Education and Empowerment Team (s.w.e.e.t.) program bring dogs to campus to interact with students. Melzer and Yeater partnered with Barbara Pierce, professor in the biology department, to study biological and psychological indicators of stress before and after the interaction by measuring cortisol and asking students to self-report feelings of stress and self-efficacy both before and after spending time with the dogs.

While the service training and



THE CANINE COGNITION LAB AT SHU IS THE FIRST IN THE COUNTRY TO ENGAGE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AS RESEARCH ASSISTANTS.

therapy studies focus on the dogs' interaction with humans, the comparative research “comes back to evolutionary underpinnings,” explains Melzer. “We take the same cognitive experiments we do with children, and we apply them in the lab space with dogs. When you see what is happening with the dogs at an advanced level, and you see the same behaviors with infants and children, it can give you an indication about why we have specific abilities and what behaviors are innate versus learned.” It gives researchers a better understanding of the evolutionary benefits of having certain abilities when they see them in species other than humans.

One of the experiments is an object permanence test often given to infants. This “looking” test, called a violation-of-expectations experiment, establishes certain expectations for what happens when a toy rolls into a wall, and then examines the subject's reaction when the toy appears to go through

the wall instead. In infants when the unexpected happens, the child will look longer at where the object disappeared, because that violated expectations.

“Nobody has ever used this same apparatus on dogs,” notes Melzer; she and Yeater will try to determine if the dogs understand the surprising event and what that means in terms of adapting to their environment. They believe that studying the dogs' behavior will give them insight into human behavior.

“This is always the question in comparative psychology,” Yeater explains. “Are we just studying dogs to become better-informed dog owners and better stewards of animal welfare? Or is it to have a better understanding of human cognition? I'm always giving examples from the animal kingdom related to human cognition.”

She's not alone, though the company she keeps in this field is both close and illustrious. “The New Science of Canine Cognition” was *Smithsonian Magazine's* December 2020 cover feature, and only a handful of other schools (such as Yale, Brown, Duke and Columbia) even have canine cognition labs, though the others are all dedicated to graduate-level study. Sacred Heart is the only school with a Canine Cognition Lab where undergraduate research assistants conduct the studies and run the lab under faculty mentorship, positioning SHU on the “cutting-est” edge of a cutting-edge research field.

To the dogs, coming to SHU may seem like playtime, complete with head scratches, toys and cookies—little do they know they may help unlock the mysteries of human nature. [SHU](#)

2

Number of years to train a service dog.

10

The interaction time (in minutes) that it takes for students to self-report significantly lower stress levels and increased self-efficacy.

Source: Exceptional Sidekick and SHU Canine Cognition Lab

LEADING

“I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOUR DESTINY WILL BE, BUT ONE THING I KNOW: THE ONLY ONES AMONG YOU WHO WILL BE REALLY HAPPY ARE THOSE WHO HAVE SOUGHT AND FOUND HOW TO SERVE.”

ALBERT SCHWEITZER



FAREWELL THE TRANQUIL MIND

Sacred Heart plays host to Keith Hamilton Cobb and the Untitled Othello Project, a multidisciplinary approach to unpacking a script that for centuries has stood at the intersection of art, race and culture—for better or for worse.

ART MAKES NO SENSE WHATSOEVER. It is utterly inefficient to make—a single work may take as little as hours or as long as a lifetime to complete—with no guarantee of success. Then, at its best, art's impact transcends any quantifiable measure—a touch of brush to canvas may teach as much about the emotions of love and loss as it does about the science of color and sight; a shift in key may reduce an audience to tears or send a nation to war; the truth of a moment in a book, film or play may reveal more about ourselves than we'd otherwise be willing to admit.

And, to this last, sometimes the opposite is true. Sometimes it is a moment's *un*-believability—and our willingness to accept it anyway—that is most telling.

Keith Hamilton Cobb has issues with *Othello*. "I don't think it's a great play," he says of Shakespeare's classic, which (it should be noted) ranks among the most frequently produced plays in the country year after year. "It's plot driven [meaning the characters do unbelievable things solely because the action of the play requires it]. The characters are stereotypical tropes. I don't like the character of Othello. He's badly written, boorish and blunt ... but I care for him."

That dichotomy—a feeling intellectual's frustration with ingrained and endorsed stereotype versus an empathic actor's mission to find the true human in every character—is at the heart of Cobb's Untitled Othello Project, which took up residency on campus at Sacred Heart for two weeks at the start of this past December. Stereotype and caricature are, of course, the antithesis of complexity and depth and, in a play notably built around racial tensions, now more than ever that lack of complexity is inexcusable, regardless of who wrote it. If *Othello* is to earn its production, it should be for more than name recognition and perceived diversity that is, in truth, little more than gross cliché.

Thus, moderating an assembled panel of artists and performers in collaboration with New York's Blessed Unrest Theatre Company, as well as historians, philosophers, theologians, ethicists and students of all disciplines from both Sacred Heart and afield, Cobb and company took a 60-hour, line-by-line



**WHITEWASHING
BLACKFACE.**

**OTHELLO WAS
WRITTEN RELYING ON
RACIST STEREOTYPES
400 YEARS AGO.
DOES THE PLAY HAVE
A PLACE ON TODAY'S
STAGE?**

deep dive into the text of the play. Weighing historical intention against modern sensibilities, cultural shorthand as it existed then and now and the understanding that a modern audience will never fully divorce itself from its modernity, the team sought to unpack the play's intentions and determine if a better narrative exists inside the one we've accepted on merit for so long.

"Stellar" is the word Cobb uses without hesitation to describe his two weeks on Sacred Heart's campus. The group pored over the script with an attention to detail never afforded in traditional theatrical rehearsal. Over the course of 60 hours, discussion never progressed past Act 2, Scene 1. For perspective, it's typically only 80 to 90 hours that most regional and small New York theatres get to attempt a fully fledged production of a play such as this.

"There may be a story in there where Othello's journey toward crashing and burning—which he does—can be made legitimate," he says. "But you're not going to find it when you've only got three weeks to recycle what everyone already thinks they know."

So when Cobb and company take on *Othello*, it's not just this play and its author they are putting under the microscope. They're holding a mirror up to an industry. How can the art of theatre truly be an art when its business model requires it to value profitability over authenticity? Furthermore, what does it say about a culture that not only accepts these stereotypes for so long, but elevates them unquestioningly as the work of genius?

Finding the *Othello* that could be there—indeed, the one some might say *should* be there—is no small task, but



KEITH HAMILTON COBB (ABOVE, CENTER) DURING THE UNTITLED OTHELLO PROJECT'S TWO-WEEK RESIDENCY ON CAMPUS. THE EVENT WAS LIVESTREAMED AND SHARED WITH UNIVERSITIES ACROSS THE COUNTRY.

the opportunities that quest presents are too rich to pass up. "From the first day [of the residency]," says Professor Emily Bryan of the department of languages and literature, "you saw human beings searching and reaching for hope about how to be in the world with each other, to be mindful of past harms, to forge a way forward."

In such a way, art becomes life becomes art becomes life—a visceral connection between creativity, intellectualism and humanity that is exactly the sort of project venture studio Midnight Oil Collective had been hunting. When Sacred Heart's opportunity to host the event was closing faster than the University's likelihood of securing



funding to support it, Cobb turned to the Collective for help. The group was instrumental in making December's residency happen and is looking to continue their work with the University on other projects down the road.

As for Cobb, standing before giants

ranging from the American capitalist business model of theatre in this country to the Bard himself, the man shows no signs of laying down his sword. "I've been swinging at this stuff all my life," he says. "So here I am. It's go big or go home." [SHU](#)

BREAKING THE MOLD

The sororities and fraternities on Sacred Heart's campus are less about following a stereotype and more about leading by example.

FIRST, let's address the elephant in the room. Traditionally, Panhellenic communities on college campuses do not enjoy the best reputation. It hardly matters if the phrase "Greek Life" calls to mind Elle Woods or Bluto Blutarsky; the difference is largely a generational one. The stereotype is essentially the same, and—opening with honesty here—it's not good.

Sacred Heart is changing that. The eight sororities and five fraterni-

ties on campus find their foundations in strong moral values, placing a focus on serving their communities and fostering development both locally and nationally. Even the 2021 Princeton Review made mention of the community outreach fostered by SHU's fraternities and sororities, noting that they contribute majorly to the school's philanthropic success. And, with roughly 2,000 students involved in the Panhellenic community, that's no small amount of influence.

"We want to nullify that movie image," says Inter-Fraternity Council

President Connor Cunha. "We have a purpose to support each other and everyone around us."

For a start, since 2008, four of the five fraternities and every sorority have joined national affiliations to ensure better oversight, transparency and accountability. Then, being nationally affiliated, each organization has a dedicated national philanthropy, working with larger groups like the Thomas Matthew Miloscia Foundation and The Ability Experience, to give back.

Locally, the student leaders of SHU's



THE SORORITIES AND FRATERNITIES AT SHU ARE MORE ABOUT PACKING CASES THAN CRACKING THEM OPEN...



Panhellenic communities also organize events to support the University, its campus and the surrounding region. Hosting events like student karaoke night, street cleaning, area landscaping or Wiffle Ball tournaments for unaffiliated students on campus, the students form a solid and uplifting community for everyone.

"We're a lot more focused on the little things," says Cunha. "I prefer the smaller approach because it's oftentimes more personal. We get to do more, see our impact more."

At their core, the sororities and fraternities on the SHU campus offer opportunities for empowerment and leadership, as well as a support system based in shared values. "We're constantly growing and reflecting the new faces of

the SHU community," says Alessandra Leone, Sacred Heart's 2019 Panhellenic president. "We examine service opportunities as a board and go where we can see we're needed."

In 2018, Leone saw one opportunity to use her position coordinating PR for the SHU Panhellenic community to connect with fellow students via social media. With the help of the sororities on campus, Leone promoted short, educational announcements about inspiring female figures. "We did Women Empowerment Wednesdays—now we do Panhellenic Woman of the Week—and I would put it into ways that were easily digestible to inspire others and shatter limitations."

And while direct involvement in

fraternity or sorority life might not be for everyone, Denise Tiberio, senior associate dean of students, is quick to point out those organizations' benefits to the University as a whole. "They offer a lot of people a sense of connection. And that helps with student retention, which in turn helps the complexity and diversity of the entire student body."

Lastly, on a campus as well known for its sense of family as is Sacred Heart, supporting their communities is often the biggest draw of joining a sorority or fraternity. "I'm someone who falls in love with the details," says Cunha. "And when you have a passion for something, you want to do more. Surrounding myself with similar people who feel the same is a gift." [SHU](#)

BLACK AND WHITE AND RED ALL OVER

Sacred Heart club chess makes its opening move.

T

HEY SAY you can tell a lot about someone by the company they keep. If that's true, the Sacred Heart University club chess team is going places.

When the fledgling squad competed in the 2022 Pan American Intercollegiate Chess Championship, members went head to head with major colleges in a field including five other teams from the Northeast: Harvard, Yale, MIT, University of Pennsylvania and Connecticut College.

OK, so they didn't win. In fact, they came in 46th out of 57.

"We now have the opportunity to compete against some of the best programs in the country," says team adviser Bill Sweeney. "Sometimes, it's just nice to be in the mix. And you know what? We're there—and we're going to get better."

Formed little more than two years ago, SHU's club has a lot to celebrate. In addition to gaining crucial experience at national competitions like the Pan Am, the team is turning heads in other ways. In December, SHU finished its fall season with a Division 8 championship in the Collegiate Chess League. Their thrilling finish over Cal Tech was highlighted in a widely read Chess.com article that called out freshman Brent McCreesh for his "astounding 41-0 record this season."

A month earlier, the University and the Chess Club of Fairfield County hosted the first-ever Pioneer Open Chess Tournament, welcoming 79 players from as far away as California and Texas to campus. And for his efforts getting the club off the ground, the Connecticut State Chess Association named Sweeney its 2021 Organizer of the Year.

When Sweeney, director, systems and data, and fellow adviser Paul Rychlik, director of divisional budgets, posted a

notice to form the club, one of the first interested players through the door was Danny Angermeier '22 of Franklin, MA. A finance major, Angermeier has been playing in chess tournaments since he was 5 and is nationally ranked.

"I like that you can control everything," he says of the game. "Everything's kind of on you."

Angermeier and McCreesh now anchor SHU's main team, which also includes contenders Declan Coleman '24 and Jordan Bauer '22. In addition to the formidable Northeast squads at the Pan Am, SHU went up against one of the teams from the University of Texas at Dallas, arguably the best chess program in the country after winning the tournament in 10 of the last 20 years.

"We were up against grandmasters," says McCreesh, a Fairfield resident who wasn't looking at SHU until he heard about its chess club. "It's good to get that experience, for sure."

While the team has a busy schedule

planned, some club members aren't interested in organized competition. English major Jill Amari '23, a former co-president of her high school team, has enjoyed the challenge of the game since third grade.

"I love chess most for its diversity," the Massachusetts resident says. "A lot of people look at chess and think it's one type of game that's really, really hard to learn. Other people look at chess players and think they're all computer science/math nerds. But neither of those stereotypes is true at all!"

Whatever their reason for being there, club members enjoy squaring off each Wednesday and Friday, both in person and online.

Meanwhile, Rychlik is looking forward to working with Sweeney to set up and host the next on-campus chess tournament later this spring. "This is another step toward introducing more folks to Sacred Heart chess, building the team of the future." **SHU**



THE SURFACE



BY GINA PRIBAZ

SEEING BENEATH



Name Tomas Skill: Sentence comprehension

Unscramble the sentence and finish the picture.

I see five fish. I five see fish

I can see 5 gretwit sharks.

T

The first-graders' task was simple: unscramble I FIVE SEE FISH to properly read I SEE FIVE FISH, and then draw those fish for the deep-sea diver in the picture. One student saw something more. "I can see 5 gretwit sharks," he wrote, and took up his crayon to draw five serene, close-mouthed great white sharks swimming peacefully along with the diver. Not what you'd expect from a boy imagining sharks—and not what the teacher expected either. The assignment was marked "wrong" and returned with a corrective note about following directions.

Today Tomas Koeck '22 is a senior in the School of Communication, Media & the Arts (SCMA), where seeing beyond what's expected is finally appreciated. He has been published by the National Audubon Society, PBS Nature Channel and the Smithsonian Channel, among others, and is already an award-winning documentary filmmaker with support from Canon USA. It seems that, even 15 years after the "gretwit" shark incident, he is still possessed of a creative vision that cannot be contained. And he's only getting started . . .

IT TAKES PATIENCE

Somewhere in the snow-clotted woods of the Sax-Zim Bog of northern Minnesota, a great gray owl was hunting. Koeck, in turn, was hunting her. He had been standing in frigid conditions for days, straining to detect feathers moving against columns of gray bark. His gloved finger itched to snap an image of that elusive icon of the boreal forest. Where was this bird?

Quite a lot was riding on his ability to get the image. Koeck had convinced not only his own faculty of the merits and feasibility of this great gray adventure, but several scientists and corporate supporters as well. He enlisted his father, Carl Koeck, and his uncle, Harold O'Brien, an avid birder, to accompany, assist and advise him on the 2,700-mile round-trip odyssey. Heading out in a pickup truck full of expensive camera equipment and optimism, the three found themselves stuck overnight at a rest stop in Ohio when a blizzard forced them off the highway. Bundled up in the cab of the truck, the trio slept out the storm before pushing onward.

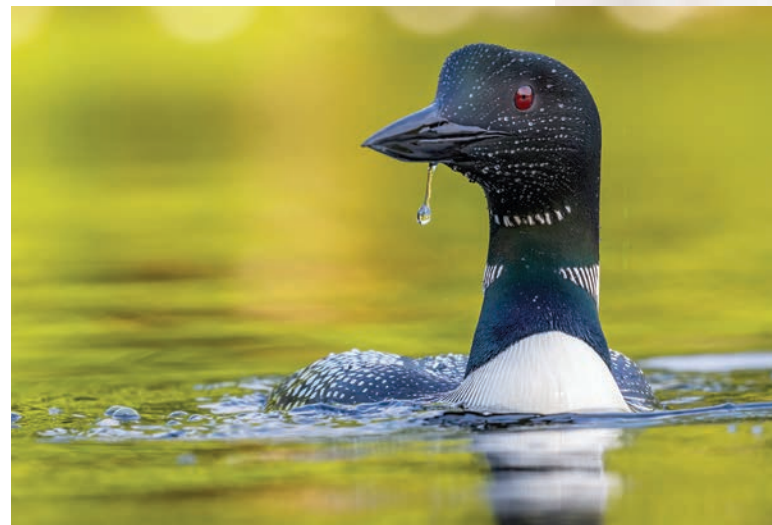
By Day Three of No Owls, the men, however committed to the project, were really feeling the cold. Koeck was feeling the stress. There was a Plan B, of course—in documentary filmmaking, there always must be a Plan B—but Koeck had done all he could to put himself in the best position to achieve his goal. He wanted that great gray to tell the story of the boreal forest. Settling for anything less would not quite satisfy.

It was 4:30 in the morning and negative 20 degrees on Day Four when Koeck and company drove out to the meadow to once again begin their predawn vigil. Snow crowded earth and sky, piling four feet deep on either side of the trail. Just as the sun was beginning to rise, O'Brien thought he saw a wing sweep the air. The Koecks followed him along some abandoned train tracks to a clearing, and there, 100 feet away on a beautiful black spruce, perched a magnificent great gray owl.

She was facing away, intent on hunting. Great grays can hear the minute sounds of a vole's foot-fall beneath the snowpack, and they wait for it with exquisite patience. This was exactly what



THE BOREAL FOREST—“NORTH AMERICA'S BIRD NURSERY,” AS THE AUDUBON SOCIETY CALLS IT—IS ONE OF THE LARGEST INTACT FORESTS LEFT ON EARTH. TOMAS KOECK'S SHORT DOCUMENTARY, *SENTINELS OF THE BOREAL*, IS AVAILABLE FOR VIEWING AT WWW.SACREDHEART.EDU/BOREAL.



the men had been working and waiting and freezing for—the whole point of the quest. Yet Koeck's reaction surprised even himself. He halted, transfixed, he says, by “a flawless beauty that wasn't trying to get anyone's attention.” It was the kind of beauty that can make an ordinary moment holy. Camera in hand, Koeck simply stood and gazed with his own two eyes. “I wanted to let the image mature in me before I froze it in time. It was a moment of pure connection to the world we live in.”

That moment of connection is everything to Koeck, and the thing he most wants to share with his audience. It's why he strives so hard to capture animal “personality” on film—that moment when an animal goes from just being an object of study and becomes a life, rich and complex and very much worth protecting.

Koeck became aware of frantic tapping on his shoulder and urgent whispers of his father and uncle at his ear. “What are you doing? Take the shot!”

He calmly adjusted his settings for the low light of the snowy dawn. Koeck leveled his lens and began shooting. As if on cue, the great gray swiveled her invisible neck to look right at Koeck with her piercing yellow eyes.

Gotcha.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING DIFFERENT

Perhaps Tomas Koeck is so protective of nature because it was always protective of him.

“I was definitely different,” he says, thinking back to his younger days. The disconnect of classroom social life propelled him out into the woods to hike and fish and immerse himself in a different kind of experience where he could be himself. “While other kids were playing with Gameboys, I was reading field guides,” he recalls, a habit he had picked up from his mother's science-minded family. “My family was always there for me,” Koeck says, “especially when it was a little bit lonely at school.”

At SHU, Koeck finally found professors and mentors who would appreciate his vision and treat him like family. James Castonguay, associate dean of SCMA, recognizes the maturity

of Koeck's aesthetic and marvels at his instincts. The story of Koeck's journey into the recesses of northern Minnesota, for example, just to catch a glimpse of the great gray owl for his documentary *Sentinels of the Boreal*, goes back much further than the young filmmaker's initial pitch of the idea. As Castonguay points out, Koeck started as a beginner accomplishing his coursework. In his community journalism class, he took advantage of a partnership SCMA developed with the *Easton Courier* to write a weekly column called “A Sunday Nature Walk.” “He gets these amazing shots right in our backyard,” says Castonguay. This consistently demonstrated potential made it much easier to support his idea for the road-trip documentary.

As a result, says Castonguay, not only did Koeck get his owl, but the bird mugged for the camera. “Tomas got that shot because he worked hard to get it. At some point you have to say it's not luck.

“I think Tomas is a great example of the student who takes the University and faculty at our word,” he adds. “Please challenge us. Take advantage of the resources here.” Resources, Castonguay says, include world-class facilities, deep talent in faculty and professionals working in the industry, a robust curriculum that delves into both history and theory and an emphasis on roll-up-your-sleeves applied learning. “Squeeze all the juice out,” he says. “Tomas has done that, and even pushed us.”

INTO THE DEEP

When Mary Jo Koeck saw her son's first-grade shark picture, she had it framed as an emblem of his free-thinking creativity. Now it's also a self-portrait.

For his senior project, Koeck wanted to dive with sharks. He hates how they are caricatured in the media. From *The Old Man and the Sea* and *Jaws* to *The Meg*, sharks are portrayed almost exclusively as man's enemy. Koeck urgently wanted to tell a different story. To make that happen, he would have to go the extra mile, and then some.

His shoot locations—Block Island, Guadalupe Island, the Florida Keys—spanned the continent. He had to learn to scuba dive. He



Not Crazy At All

They prepacked three times to make sure everything would fit: two high-end Canon mirrorless cameras, five lenses, four Go-Pros, a laptop, two hard drives and an external monitor. Eric Torrens '19, and Tomas Koeck '22 dragged the golf bag-sized case to the airport, where it weighed in at 65 pounds and received two labels: “heavy” and “SHU.”

It takes a lot to film great white sharks, including teamwork. Torrens, video production coordinator for SHU's marketing & communications team, would be Koeck's cameraman and would capture footage of Koeck in the cage. The pair lugged their gear to San Diego, hired a van to Ensenada, Mexico, and boarded an expedition boat that churned for 22 hours through six-foot swells to arrive at Guadalupe Island, where landing is off limits. “It was primal,” Torrens recalls of the location. Out there, one is completely detached from civilization, and communication is by satellite only.

He'll never forget the sea lions, which he could only hear. Their haunting “prehistoric” chorus made a perfect soundtrack for diving with a species that coexisted with dinosaurs. When he first submerged in the cage, alone, he had to remind himself to breathe. He shot Koeck in the next cage and followed the two-ton fish as they circled ever tighter. “Wow, it's wild,” he says. “It's all part of being a camera person. You never know where your camera is going to take you.”

The University supported Torrens when, as a student, he wanted to make a film about his grandfather. “It's nice to see this repeated,” he says, grateful for editing room time, loaned equipment and mentorship. He stresses the value of having your school's backing and not only material assistance. He loves that SHU tells creatives like Koeck and him, “Yes, you can make this. We can help you. No, it's not crazy. It's beautiful.” **SHU**

KOECK'S FILM, *KEEPERS OF THE BLUE*, IS AVAILABLE AT WWW.SACREDHEART.EDU/KEEPERSOFTHEBLUE. TO SEE ERIC TORRENS' DOCUMENTARY ON THE MAKING OF *KEEPERS OF THE BLUE*, GO TO WWW.SACREDHEART.EDU/BEHINDTHESCENES.

connected with several major shark conservancy organizations. He catalyzed collaboration across the University and even managed to get alum and SHU marketing & communications videographer Eric Torrens '19 (see sidebar) to agree to be his cameraman and project coordinator. Torrens recounts a moment of mental recalibration when, during their odyssey to Guadalupe Island, Koeck pulled out a laptop to catch up on homework. "I almost forgot that he's still a student!" Torrens says.

Arriving off Guadalupe, then finally submerged in the blue abyss and puffing on a regulator, it was time to wait. Sharks' skin uses countershading—light on the bottom and dark on top—camouflaging their presence from above and below. It makes them surprisingly difficult to distinguish from the surrounding blue. A shark could be anywhere.

Or worse, nowhere. An apex predator is critical to the health of its environment, and Koeck knows well that an ocean where sharks are nowhere is a dying ocean—a driving reason for wanting to make his film in the first place. But overcoming humans' collective fear of sharks involves learning to understand them as complex creatures. "That's why I wanted to capture the eyes," he says.

Finally, out of that nowhere, a curious 16-foot female great white appeared. Sharks can be recognized by the unique scars that life leaves on them—perhaps not altogether unlike people—and this one was known to the expedition crew. Circling the boat in an ever-tightening orbit, she finally got close enough for Koeck to see the blue pupil of her eye.

Gotcha.

LOOKING AHEAD

How peaceful these creatures really are, and how much we as species need one another, is the story told in his new documentary, *Keepers of the Blue*. He was inspired by his cousin, Dave Manoni, a diver and fellow ecological evangelist. Manoni, Koeck's brother Samuel, a marine biologist, and diver Craig Honeycutt, Manoni's father-in-law, are collaborating on the project. *Keepers of the Blue* is slated for release on Earth Day this year.



Koeck does not make documentaries to fascinate or even to merely educate viewers. He wants them to see what he can see, feel what he feels, love what he loves. His success in this effort so far has a lot to do with his penchant for lighting a spark of excitement that brings people together. To that end, Koeck has partnered with the Sacred Heart University Discovery Science Center & Planetarium (formerly the Discovery Museum & Planetarium) to help promote the film and assist in presenting it to the community, particularly to disadvantaged K-12 kids.

For Koeck, it's a matter of bringing the work full circle. "As a kid, life can be hard sometimes. You're exposed to the same things every day. You do what teachers tell you to do. You go home and play videogames. And there's nothing wrong with that," he says, "but it's on repeat. Documentaries share a different part of the world, and then you get perspective and insight. I want to help kids dream of cool new places, new things they can study."

Koeck's interest in letting his own passion expand outward for positive social and educational uses is rewarding for his professors to see. "That's our model at its best," says Castonguay. "Tomas connects all the dots." [SHU](#)

WITH FOOTAGE FROM LOCATIONS SPANNING THE GLOBE, *KEEPERS OF THE BLUE* IS SET TO RELEASE ON EARTH DAY 2022.



GINA PRIBAZ is a writer and editor whose work has appeared in *Ars Medica*, *Tampa Review*, *Notre Dame Magazine*, *Aleteia*, *Brain*, *Child Magazine* and elsewhere. Find her at www.ginapribaz.com.



BETTER BY DESIGN

The challenges facing the next generation of engineers aren't a matter of what is possible, but what is right.

BY STEVE NEUMANN



WRITING IN THE AFTERMATH of the Industrial Revolution, American philosopher and public intellectual John Dewey was clear that one of the essential purposes of education is preparation for a life of meaningful work. But he also argued that society should educate a student to have an interest in his community, “to recognize all his social relations and to carry them out.”

Now, more than a hundred years later, there may be no profession requiring an awareness of such broad social responsibility as much as the discipline of engineering, owing to the fact that, in all its fields, its products and designs eventually touch every aspect of human life on the planet.

The question, however, is do educational institutions have the wherewithal to turn out engineers with both the technical and the civic virtues to achieve such a balance?

Professor Tolga Kaya is endeavoring to do just that as he leads SHU's fledgling engineering program into the future. Kaya, who came to SHU five years ago just as the first cohort of engineering students began their studies, brings with him an ethos of community engagement and social awareness along with his own engineering and teaching expertise.

“I don't want to graduate students who just know the technical parts of engineering,” Kaya says. “They can do the math, they can design the circuits, they can build the machines—that's great. I want the students to have an understanding of what is really going on in the world, so we always talk about the social aspect of it.”

Prior to joining the faculty at SHU, Kaya—who has his doctorate in electrical engineering from Istanbul Technical University—was an associate professor at Central Michigan University's School of Engineering and Technology for seven years and worked as a research scientist at Yale University in the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences for three years before that.

As Kaya was contemplating moving from Michigan to Connecticut for personal reasons, the opportunity arose to get in on the ground floor of a brand-new engineering program at SHU. “We had a consultant who was the interim program director at that time,” Kaya recalls. “He proposed the engineering program to get things going.” The challenge of beginning a new journey with new students was simply too enticing to pass up.

That consultant, Professor Emeritus of Computer Science at Hofstra University John Impagliazzo, was helping SHU's administration with accreditation as well as the development of possible new programs. “I had indicated to them that they seemed to be lacking one of the dimensions expected of the modern university, and that is to have an engineering component,” Impagliazzo says.

Impagliazzo noted that there were several large research universities in the region with major engineering programs, and that the best way to compete with them would be to go into an area that was somewhat out of the mainstream of chemical, civil or mechanical engineering. Impagliazzo suggested computer engineering. The University already had introductory courses in computer programming and mathematics, so all they needed to do was to expand those to include the new computer engineering students.

“When Tolga came on board, he expanded the whole concept and brought it to reality, which is a major undertaking,” Impagliazzo says. “I did not expect them to go full force into it. But they've done it in a very expansive way, which I think is wonderful.”

Impagliazzo had also suggested that SHU's program include a “makerspace” where first-time engineering students could explore the concept of design. Kaya quickly expanded it, making it accessible not just to engineering students, but to students from any major who wanted to take advantage of the space—a testament to his vision of how the practice of engineering is woven into the broad fabric of society. Christened the “IDEA Lab” (short for “Innovate, Design, Engineer, Apply”), the space is 11,000 square feet of digital fabrication and advanced manufacturing, including desktop and commercial 3D printing functionalities, laser cutters and assembly studio spaces.

The first cohort of computer engineering stu-

dents graduated from SHU in 2021, with the first cohort of electrical engineering students due to graduate this year. One of those computer engineering students is Bridgeport native Gabe Bitencourt, who works as a computer/electronics engineer for Target Arm, Inc., a drone launch-and-recovery company in Brookfield. Bitencourt has been with the company for 10 months, including his internship with them that began in May 2021.

Bitencourt had originally intended to pursue a math major at SHU, but he had been interested in interacting with physical hardware and materials from a young age. The nascent computer engineering program sparked his interest.

At Target Arm, Bitencourt has the opportunity to work on the actual drones and fixed-wing vehicles that the company designs. He's as comfortable with his hand on a soldering iron as he is with his fingers on a computer keyboard.

“I don't really have a set task,” Bitencourt says. “It's whatever is within my area of expertise, which is robotics and mechatronics.”

As he cuts his teeth on the idiosyncrasies of the professional world, Bitencourt carries with him the social impact ethos he learned in his engineering classes with Tolga Kaya at SHU.

“Professor Kaya's really big on outreach and getting the community involved as much as they can,” Bitencourt says. “That's something that I admired as well, because it wasn't just, you know, stay in the classroom, learn what you do and then graduate.”

Kaya's approach was especially evident to Bitencourt during his senior year capstone project, titled “Autonomous Aerial Vehicle Vision and Sensor Guided Landing.” “That's when he really had us think about what impact our projects would actually have, whether it was social, economic, environmental or financial,” Bitencourt says.

The project was to design a drone that would be able to search an area for a location marker, and then land on it. He notes that the design could be used in package delivery—for example, a pharmacy could utilize it to deliver vital prescriptions during the pandemic: a drone could be sent to someone's house, find a place to land, drop off the medication and go on its way. “So we had to think about the dangers of this product,” Bitencourt explains. “How can it affect the local community? The drone

could run out of battery and fall out of the sky. Or just the batteries themselves: the kinds of batteries used in drones are highly explosive and flammable if they get popped.”

As he progresses with Target Arm, a small company where he gets the opportunity to be involved in virtually every aspect of design and production, Bitencourt hopes to have the chance to engage in similar community impact assessments.

“We're not doing things willy-nilly,” he says. “We've had several meetings where we tried to outline anything and everything that could go wrong, along with the solutions in those cases. So, we don't just focus on the current goal of getting the product to market, but also how to develop it to be safe and mindful of the environment that it's going to operate in.”

Kaya wants the engineering program at SHU to produce capable designers like Bitencourt who understand that engineering solves real-world problems that improve the world around us. But he also wants them to understand something more. Engineers don't just design and build things. Often, intentionally or not, the things they design and build become the fabric of our lives, impacting society and culture itself. Consider how the cell phone and the automobile, a century before, are not only technological marvels but have fundamentally changed the trajectory of humanity.

“Sacred Heart puts a lot of emphasis on critical thinking,” Kaya says. “In engineering, that's usually about learning to think like the computer—understanding how it reads the code we write so that we can anticipate or correct the bugs. And that's good. But it shouldn't stop there. Highly educated critical thinkers need to think about society, what kind of culture we want and in what sort of direction our innovations will take us.”

It's the classic conundrum of “Just because we can, does it mean we should?” Whether or not there's a right answer to that question, Kaya is intent on giving his engineering students the proper professional and civic tools to search for one.

“I realized that when students find a social meaning to their projects, they are more motivated to learn,” Kaya said. “I think this motivates them to pursue their studies and realize they can do much more than be an engineer—they can impact the world.” [SHU](#)



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STEVE NEUMANN is a writer and journalist whose work has appeared in numerous higher ed publications as well as *The New York Times* and *Audubon Magazine*.

ALL-IN ON ICE



The plans have been drawn. The ground has been broken.

The building is underway. The Martire Family Arena will be a reality in less than a year's time. Here's what we have to look forward to.



Imagine a homecoming somewhere you have never set foot. Someplace so special, so precisely built to spec, it breathes familiarity into your very bones upon first entry. So rise the Pioneer dreams for a hockey and skating facility now under construction on Sacred Heart's West Campus. And administrators are hoping the \$70 million undertaking will be a game changer for campus sports, both on and off the ice.



The puck is set to drop in the Martire Family Arena in January 2023. The men's team will open against Boston College on January 14. The women will skate against Harvard the next day. The state-of-the-art building, by then pitched to hockey recruits for more than two years, will be equipped with technologically advanced locker rooms, a strength and conditioning facility, a sports medicine and hydrotherapy suite, a rapid-shot puck room for off-ice training, and various meeting and lounge spaces.

ATHLETES WANTED

The notion "if you build it, they will come"

applies to more than just attracting figure skaters and hockey players. The competitive edge sought for two hockey squads, its club sport counterparts and an already top-ranked figure skating program is a big part of the ongoing recruiting pitch.

For Judy Ann Riccio, who was named SHU athletic director last fall, the promise of a premier skating facility shows a sincere commitment to all Pioneer sports, as well as those student-athletes. In fact it may be a defining characteristic of the department. "What's entrepreneurial about SHU athletics is we're always at the cutting edge of adding participation

opportunities," she says, and easily references women's wrestling—only the second Division I program of its kind in the nation and the first to be coached by a woman, former Polish national team wrestler Paulina Biega.

Of course those graceful young men and women on ice skates will reap the most immediate benefits. Both hockey teams currently play in larger, off-campus venues that can hold big crowds. The men play in the Webster Bank Arena, home to the Bridgeport Islanders, an American Hockey League affiliate of the New York Islanders. The women play in the Sports Center of Connecticut in Shelton. Their new

shared arena on campus is yet another nod for equity in athletics.

“Webster Bank is not the intimate arena that we’re going to have,” says Coach C.J. Marottolo, who has led the men’s team since 2009. “The rink we’re building, which seats 4,000 people, is much more suited for college hockey.”

For a taste of what a true home on campus might afford them, Marottolo said fans can look back to the Connecticut Ice Tournament of January 2020. Then some 5,000 to 6,000 raucous fans showed up each night to watch a four-way tournament between the state’s only Division I hockey squads—Sacred Heart, the University of Connecticut, Quinnipiac and Yale. The Pioneers defeated Yale in the opening round and a nationally ranked Quinnipiac team in the finals to claim the title and critical statewide bragging rights.

Thomas O’Malley has made a name for himself building women’s programs in college hockey. From Boston College to Detroit’s Wayne State University to two decades at Sacred Heart, O’Malley helped each of those teams transition into Division I competition. With the Martire Family Arena, O’Malley can shift focus to building an elite-level Sacred Heart team. “I can’t help thinking about the palace we’re going to be moving into and what it’s going to do for the team,” he says.

For both hockey coaches, whose careers are often measured in wins and losses, the new facility extends their recruiting reach, both nationally and internationally. There’s also already a bit of a buzz about bringing in the nation’s best teams for head-to-head matchups.

D-I DIVIDENDS

There’s no secret about the expectations that accompany such a gem of a stadium. The crowning jewel, undoubtedly, would be a national championship. Frank Martire, who alongside his wife Marisa Martire, donated \$5 million in support of the arena, mused about it at a March 2021 groundbreaking. He said the “icing on the cake” would come when they hang a banner for the men’s or women’s team.

An architect of the SHU hockey program, Jim Barquinero, senior vice president, enroll-



“I can’t help thinking about the palace we’re going to be moving into and what it’s going to do for the team.”

— THOMAS O’MALLEY,
HEAD COACH, WOMEN’S HOCKEY TEAM



THE MARTIRE FAMILY ARENA WILL PROVIDE MULTIPLE VIEWING OPTIONS FOR AN UNMATCHED FAN EXPERIENCE. WHETHER YOU WANT TO BE FRONT ROW LOOKING THROUGH THE GLASS OR IN ONE OF THREE LUXURY SUITES ON THE UPPER LEVEL. THESE THREE SUITES ARE FLANKED BY TWO LARGER CLUB STYLE AREAS WHERE FANS CAN EXPERIENCE MULTIPLE FOOD AND BEVERAGE OPTIONS.

ment and athletics, has long been aspirational about providing what he has described as one of the best “intercollegiate skating cornerstones in the Northeast.” In addition to being a “beautiful home venue for our teams,” Barquinero believes the facility will have rippling effects through the campus and regional community. “There are so many things you can point to at Sacred Heart and say, ‘This is what makes us great,’” he says, “and at the heart of all of them is that commitment we have to each other and the people around us. This facility is really going to highlight that—a space not only for us to be proud of, but one that best serves our student-athletes and enriches the community we serve.”

That feeling of a “long time coming” abounds among coaches and administrators. In fact, O’Malley said Barquinero talked about a new hockey facility on the coach’s first day on campus in 2002. “I’m happy for everyone,” says O’Malley. “But I’m really happy for Jim because this has been his thing.”

Construction on campuses is commonplace. Indeed, colleges coast to coast are building everything from academic buildings and new sports homes to dorms and dining halls as an enticing call to incoming freshmen. That said, Riccio has witnessed tremendous growth at SHU in her work here for nearly 20 years, most of that with an eye on finances. Like everything else newly dotted on campus maps, she’s not surprised that a new hockey and skating home is top of the line.

To seemingly go all in on hockey makes sense because the Pioneers can compete there on a national level. “Hockey will be a rallying point for our institution,” says Riccio. “Their success helps all boats rise, and I think it’s the next step in elevating the campus facilities for all sports.”

CULTURAL CONVERGENCE

In a media-rich market within a virtual slapshot of Boston and New York, Riccio hopes Sacred Heart will continue to build a brand through hockey. The rallying cry for Pioneer hockey teams making inroads into the top 10 will be heard beyond the full houses that let fans feel like they’re sitting on top of the action. A rise through national rankings may accom-



pany new perceptions of the Pioneers.

There’s a skating and hockey culture extending into the nearby community, too—one reminiscent of what Coach Marottolo grew up with as his father helped create Yale Youth Hockey. And one O’Malley, a Bostonian, recalls from taping his first stick and knowing where he watched Bobby Orr’s Stanley Cup-clinching goal on Mother’s Day 1970.

From elite-level NCAA skaters and players who grew up on the ice to the kids coming up now, the new facility extends into that next generation of athletes. The Martire Family Arena promises to create family gatherings around youth sports.

The Pioneers also take their club sports seriously. Maybe more so than any university in the country. Recruited players and paid coaches are common. For Ray Mencio, director of club sports, fitness and recreation, a new hockey and



THE PIONEERS (#PIOS) ARE AS DEEP IN TALENT AS THEY ARE IN FAN LOVE AND SUPPORT. THE NEW MARTIRE FAMILY ARENA WILL BE A HOME FOR BOTH.

skating facility helps to further expand the club community—one seeking those high school athletes who may not yet be ready to hang up their skates.

Mencio helped build SHU’s club sports program. In 2008, about 125 students competed in three club sports—men’s rugby, women’s rugby and a dance program. A junior varsity men’s hockey team transitioned to a club sport.

“In that first year, we grew club sports to about 400 students,” Mencio says. “Today, there are 1,100 students actively involved in club sports.”

That focus on serious academics and sports helps make SHU a destination for athletes of all levels. The University now has three men’s club hockey teams. The first women’s team coincided with the hiring of Becky Robitaille last fall. A captain on O’Malley’s first hockey team in 2003, Robitaille led those first Pioneer teams

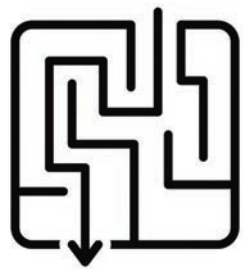
into D-I competition.

“For me, hockey has come full circle,” says Robitaille, who is also a director of marketing at the University. “I grew up playing hockey, played at SHU and now I’m coaching. I also have a 7-year-old son playing.”

That full circle is equated with both her team and the larger hockey culture. In addition to having a campus facility to practice and play in as she grows her program, Robitaille is excited about maintaining a hockey connection to her alma mater, from which she never strayed too far.

For the rest of the Pioneer faithful, there’s going to be a whole lot of skating going on, offering fans a chance to cheer on everything from triple axels to hat tricks. And that building excitement, which will burst open officially next January, should give a whole new meaning to home ice advantage. [SHU](#)

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WILLIAM MEINERS is the founding editor of *Sport Literate*, a literary magazine primarily focused on creative nonfiction, and the coauthor of *Though the Odds Be Great or Small*, with Terry Brennan (Loyola Press 2021).



NOW. LISTEN. **HERE.**

Today's youth are growing in a world unlike any that has come before, facing challenges that are uniquely their own. Among the many ways for us to help them navigate the path to adulthood, the simplest may be the best.

We can listen.

Here.

And now.

BY WILL MAYER, PSY.D.





As both a clinical psychologist and an educator, I have the pleasure of spending the majority of each day with young people ranging in age from 10 to 25 years old. They are a population that represents energy, curiosity, growing confidence and **hope.**

Look at Morgan as an example. A successful student and athlete taking pride in that moniker, Morgan gets excellent grades in school, is a starter on the soccer team, is generally considered popular and is usually seen with a smile. “Morgan” could stand in for any number of young people in that 10-to-25-year-old range. Of course, the level of play and the academic and social challenges along that age spectrum differ greatly, but the difference is a matter of scale, not of substance. In these broad strokes, these are amazing individuals who offer untold promise for the future.

Yet even with all this promise and potential, many are deeply struggling with anxiety, depression and other mental health concerns. On the one hand, this is a population that may experience some turmoil as they figure out their identity, navigate social relationships and transition into young adulthood. However, recent years have shown an increase in mental health concerns and low self-esteem with the younger generation.

Some may be inclined to suggest that this increase is not really an increase at all, but rather the product of destigmatizing mental health issues. In short, they would say, the issues were always there; we are just talking about it more freely.

While it is true that we are talking about it more, we have not made enough headway on addressing mental health concerns. More youth are self-identifying concerns of depression and anxiety. Tragically, suicide rates are rising. In essence, we are falling behind before catching up.

Looking specifically at that 10-to-25-year-old population, it is important to recognize that there is a host of challenges unique to them and their generation. First and most glaringly, they are engaged with social media as a fundamental means of communication—a facet of life that did not even exist in their parents’ youth. Like all of us, they are bombarded with dire statements about the future of the environment, divisive politics and social justice concerns. Unlike many of us, they have never known a world not dominated by these crises. School violence and shootings are tragedies of epic proportions.

But many of us think of them in a general sense: “I hope that never happens here.” For this population, it’s something much more personal: “I hope it never happens to me.”

Then of course there is the elephant in the room. COVID-19 has exacerbated mental health concerns for all ages, and youth are no exception. Some were struggling before, and the pandemic has only added to their emotional turbulence. Others are succumbing to symptoms as they see the world radically change and impact their lives. In the past two years, some students have spent more time learning through a screen than in person. Masks are part of everyday attire. Extracurricular activities have been altered, postponed and canceled. Some missed the opportunity to have a sports season, attend a prom or walk in a graduation ceremony.

Any one of these challenges would be a burden added to the longstanding navigation of standard growth and maturity. This generation has to juggle them all. And somehow they do. Because they must.

But it is taking its toll.

Some adults may say, “Hey, let’s put this in perspective—people are dying.” Ironically, that is exactly young people’s perspective already. People are dying—whether by pandemic or social injustice or school violence or the impacts of a changing climate—and the younger generation knows it. It scares them. They even feel guilt for wanting to be appropriately selfish and have what they have always known or been promised and looked forward to. They ask, “When will it be over?” as they struggle with the idea of the “new normal.” All of this is to say we have a younger generation struggling to cope with both their personal situations and the state of the world.

Furthermore, we may not even know that they are struggling. Many appear to have it together so well that there is often a lack of recognition, understanding or compassion for that age group from older generations. Morgan, our picture of success who opened this article, often stays up late finishing school assignments that have created an overwhelming cloud of stress. When Morgan does finally head to bed, it will



likely be a restless night as anxiety and mental fatigue tend to keep sleep at bay. The next day begins with the classic dread of school and relationship issues, added to which is the ongoing conflict between needing to wear a mask and Morgan's own desire to do everything possible to keep an immunocompromised classmate safe. Hope requires seeing the possibility of a better future, but that is easier said than done.

The original title and message of this article was "Let's Talk." It's not a bad idea. Destigmatizing conversations around mental health is an essential step toward the higher-level policy changes that ultimately benefit the population. But as good as it is for authority figures to take greater note of mental health concerns, please know that young people have been aware of what is going on for years. They have long been destigmatizing mental health and openly discussing these issues with their friends, therapists and others who will listen.

"The experiences we lived are not the ones they are living, and the urge to problem-solve is often received as patronizing and dismissive."

And that is the subtle, simple, yet dramatically important point. They are doing plenty of talking. What they need is someone to listen.

Consider how many parents, educators, coaches and other authority figures move straight to trying to solve problems when they see a young person struggling. As we grow older and wiser, we tend to talk to younger people in a way that we believe is helpful, offering advice that comes from a place of lived experience. But as noted above, the experiences we lived are not the ones they are living, and the urge to problem-solve is often received as patronizing and dismissive.

So do not fall into that trap of relating your youth to theirs. And try not to tell them that it will be better in the future. However well intentioned, it is a passive promise and they frankly do not want to hear it. They are living now and want assistance in the present. The younger

generation is smarter and more perceptive than we adults give them credit for being. Honor their perceptions and ideas, and be an active listener with care and understanding.

When further intervention is necessary, there are resources available—from crisis hotlines and counseling centers to individual therapists and psychiatrists. Additionally, there is a lot of great work being done to assist this population in their everyday lives, including mental health education and destigmatization in middle and high schools, as well as mental health coalitions at universities like the one at Sacred Heart. The best of these seek input from the population they are trying to help. With all of those resources available, parents, caregivers and authority figures do not have to be professional therapists as well. They just have to listen with patience and compassion. If it is time for advice, it will be asked for.

The emotional dread Morgan grapples with

is real, but so are the connections made with teachers, coaches, friends and therapists. It can be a challenging balance, but today is a day to look forward to—for those connections and the understanding, the laughter and the positivity they will bring.

Here's to more of those. [SHU](#)



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SPIRIT

"IT IS ONLY WITH THE HEART THAT ONE CAN SEE RIGHTLY; WHAT IS ESSENTIAL IS INVISIBLE TO THE EYE."
ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY



OUR NEC
OF THE
WOODS

The last few years have been a challenge for everyone, and collegiate athletics is no exception. But in true Pioneer spirit, our student-athletes have turned adversity to advantage.

BACK-TO-BACK-TO-BACK CONFERENCE CHAMPIONS, THE SACRED HEART PIONEERS ARE THE TEAM TO BEAT IN NEC WOMEN'S VOLLEYBALL.



"THE SUCCESS WE'VE HAD, and the support from behind the scenes, is incredible," says SHU Football Head Coach Mark Nofri. "You can't even name everybody."

He might be speaking of his own team—Pioneer football recently won its fifth Northeast Conference championship—but he could just as easily be speaking of Pioneer athletics in general. In 2018, the women's golf team won their first NEC title. That same year, the women's track and field team won its fourth consecutive indoor championship and third outdoor championship. Indeed, hot on the heels of football's success, SHU women's volleyball landed their third straight conference title.

SHU joined the NEC in 1999 and immediately began competing against larger teams with bigger pools of talent. Volleyball Coach Rob Machan remembers it wasn't an easy start. "The conference elevated, and I think we had to set a new standard. We had to step it up."

"Nothing came easy," recalls Nofri.

But now, with nearly 30 conference titles brought back to campus by various teams and student-athletes since joining the NEC, Pioneer athletics may need to consider changing its status from "underdog" to "powerhouse."

And it's not just team titles SHU grabs in season. In 2019, Sacred Heart



had four student-athletes across various sports selected as NEC Scholar-Athletes of the Year. That same year, the Pioneers won the NEC Building Communities Award for the sixth time, contributing over 8,844 volunteer hours during various seasons.

What's more, Pioneer athletes haven't sacrificed their close-knit, family mentality to do it. "That's what prospective athletes see first. We support each other on and off the field," said Nofri, who sees his role as "not just about coaching football; it's about coaching men through life."

In fact, members of the Pioneer athletic community believe that the "family aspect" is just as important as athletic training and competitive matches. Student-athletes of all sports cheer for "SHU-fan" and work together to elevate each other in everything they do. From inter-athletic support and sharing court schedules for practice, to helping each other study, the success in the familial approach is apparent. "And, of course, our favorite day is graduation day," says Machan, "because that is the day the athletes achieve what they're really here for." [SHU](#)



FLOW STATE

A new head coach has women's rowing primed for the season to come. Just add water.

E MMA SCHEIBL is in the zone. Wedged in a racing shell with eight other women, she concentrates on a spot on the back of the crewmate just inches in front of her. Her mind races to remember the minute adjustments—arms out faster, don't twist your wrists—that Head Women's Rowing Coach Luke Wilhelm assures her will shave crucial tenths of a second from the team's time.

"It's about brute strength and power—and also body angles," explains the sophomore majoring in coastal marine science. "We're all on top of each other, so we have to work together. It's very technical. But you have to be focused inward, too."

Welcome to the world of rowing—a sport that seems to be defined as much by the athlete's state of mind as by her physical prowess.

"People find flow state," says Wilhelm, who started coaching the team for the 2021–22 season. "You're just kind of in the zone."

To hear him tell it, it's the absolute best place to be. A walk-on team member at the University of California at

Santa Barbara, Wilhelm, who majored in linguistics, found his true calling in the natural camaraderie of the racing shell.

After coaching a freshman squad at his alma mater, he enlisted in a fellowship program at the Institute for Rowing Leadership, taking a professional track. With stints at Boston College and Indiana University, he and his wife, a Yale University crew coach, are now taking Connecticut by storm.

Deputy Director of Athletics Charlie Dowd says Wilhelm and Assistant Coach Megan Hinkle are bringing fresh energy to the SHU squad. "The team is delighted with Luke and Megan," he says. "I'm really looking forward to the spring season and making it a great student-athlete experience for the team."

While rowing may look smooth and graceful from the shore, crew members say it's a brutal workout. During the season, the team is usually out on the water for three early-morning hours, with an hour later in the day for lifting weights to build the kind of muscles the sport loves to punish.

"You're pushing yourself and seeing

THE SHADOWS SAY IT ALL. MORNING COMES EARLY FOR SHU WOMEN'S ROWING.

just what limits your body has," said Emily Iannantuoni, a senior psychology major who was inspired to row by her fitness-conscious grandfather. "It's a certain kind of crazy."

"It's, like, shared pain," agreed Jordan Italia, a sophomore health science major from New Hampshire.

While some on the 50-member team are veterans of high school and club teams, many, like Wilhelm, took up rowing as a way to stay fit and make friends in college. Now, recent recruiting combined with a returning crew of seasoned rowers has him excited to get shells in the water for spring competition.

"Historically, we've struggled a bit," he admits. "But a team that's on the rise is more fun to coach. We have some freshmen and sophomores who are going to redefine things."

Having fallen in love with the sport, Iannantuoni is already eyeing opportunities to row after college. But first, there's the season ahead. After a winter of weight training and indoor work, she's primed to race.

"It's a different beast. You hear the speed. You see the speed," she says with a wistful sigh. "We're going to be on the water soon." **SHU**



SPEAK SOFTLY (AND CARRY A BIG TROPHY)

SHU cheerleading's three back-to-back-to-back national championship titles come from an uncommonly quiet place—the heart.

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HERE'S A SAYING: "Athletes lift weights—cheerleaders lift athletes." If that's true, then CJ Sereno '15, SHU cheerleading team head coach, is the one who lifts the cheerleaders who lift the athletes. And she's really good at it.

Like, really good. Like, she was named head coach of the team just six years ago and this January, they won their third straight national championship title. She's *that* kind of good.

And yet, like any good cheerleader, she'd much rather turn the spotlight on the team. "The skills these girls are bringing to the mat versus when I was on the team"—Sereno is a veteran of the SHU squad, having cheered as an undergrad while earning her degree in criminal justice—"it's just night and day. So, I mean it when I say I can't do much as a coach if I don't have an amazing group of athletes. But if you've got the talent, the sky's the limit."

What she doesn't say is that the sudden rise in the talent and success of the team also tracks perfectly with her own time at the helm.

After graduating, Sereno returned to the team in 2016 as assistant coach while earning her master's and working for the Westport Police Department. In 2017, she took over as head coach. Her first year in the role, Sacred Heart placed near the bottom of the final rankings at the Varsity Universal Cheerleaders Association Nationals. Her second and third years, they came in sixth, then 11th.

The year after that, 2020, they won it all. With a surprise upset besting legendary cheer powerhouses Morehead State and the University of West Georgia, the Pioneers walked off the mat with the UCA Division I All-Girl title.

In 2021 they did it again—this time in the Open All-Girl Game Day division—and then again in 2022, making their national championship win this past January the team's third national title in Sereno's short tenure as head coach.

To Sereno's point, the team certainly has the talent. And with three national titles and an organization fully supported by the school (cheerleading falls under the athletic department's umbrella), they've got the draw to attract even more. But talent alone doesn't make champions.

Just ask Gabby Alonso '23 or Lizzy



Szachacz '22, both of Long Island and both now three-time national cheer champions. Alonso and Szachacz have been cheering their whole lives and have known the cheer coaches most people imagine. "Their first thing is to yell," Alonso says. Szachacz recalls her high school cheer coach taping a number 8—their previous year's ranking—onto their practice mat as a daily reminder of the squad's inadequacy. For most cheer coaches, there are winners and there are losers, and only the trophy signifies who is who.

"CJ is a very different kind of coach," Alonso says. "For a start, I've never heard her raise her voice."

"I want them to be themselves," Sereno says. The sport is meant to be fun, she observes (is it *cheer*-leading, after all), and that fun is meant to be infectious. "The pressure they put on themselves is enough," she says. "We never try to win. We work to ensure we

CONNECTICUT STATE SENATOR TONY HWANG (ABOVE, CENTER) INVITED SHU'S CHEERLEADING TEAM AND COACH CJ SERENO (ABOVE, RIGHT) TO THE CONNECTICUT STATE CAPITOL LAST MONTH TO RECOGNIZE AND CELEBRATE THE TEAM'S THIRD CONSECUTIVE NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP.

walk off the mat with no regrets."

"CJ just wants us to do our best," Szachacz says. "But that just ends up making us want to do our best *for her*."

"Other places, cheer is a job," says Alonso. "And when you're working a job, a lot of the time you want to quit. Here, we're a family. I know that's cliché. And sure, we work—we work hard—but we work hard so we can be here for each other."

"Yeah," she says, sounding convinced even though she never sounded like she needed convincing. "We're a family." **SHU**

FROM THE ARCHIVE



IN 1967, commencement exercises included a procession wending its way from one end of campus to the other — that is, from the Main Academic Building up the hill to Curtis Hall.



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