



The Cal State Fullerton Titans dance team celebrates its big win.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TITAN DANCE TEAM

SPORTS

CONSISTENCY: DANCE TEAM WINS 18TH NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

1st in Division 1 Jazz, 3rd in Pom

By Lou Ponsi, contributing writer

Going into each new season, the Cal State Fullerton dance team selects a team motto for the year ahead, a word or phrase designed to define, motivate and unify the Titans through months of rigorous practices and training to prepare for a single goal — a national championship.

This year’s motto: consistency. “That’s just what we wanted to be all season long,” Titan dance coach Jennie Volkert said. The Titans were indeed consistent, and at the highest level. The CSUF Dance Team won its 18th National Championship in the Division 1 Jazz competition at the Universal Dance Team Championships, held Jan. 12-14 at the ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex in Orlando, Fla.

CSUF also placed 3rd in the nation for its routine in the Division 1 Pom category. “We were just so excited,” said Volkert, who has served as head coach since 1997 and has been the coach for all 18 national championship teams. “The competition is really tough, and all the teams are good. And everybody kind of has their own style, and dance is very subjective, so you never know what the judges are going to want. We just

stayed focused.” The competition was tougher in this year’s championship, with the UDA adding a preliminary round for the D1 Jazz category. More than 30 teams competed in the first round, 20 teams advanced to the semifinal round, and then 10 teams advanced to the final round, which was won by the Titans. “It was scary going into it knowing

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HEALTH AND WELLNESS

‘Becoming Austin Nation’: A story of recovery and redemption

Professor takes biographical show on road

By Lou Ponsi, contributing writer

In the mid-80s, at the age of 26, Austin Nation was sure his life was over. Amid the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, Nation, a gay man, discovered that he was HIV positive and believed he was destined to be among the more than 46,000 people who died from AIDS from 1981 to 1988, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “Doctors said there was not much we could do for you and get your affairs in order,” said Nation, an as-

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PHOTO COURTESY OF AUSTIN NATION

CSUF assistant professor of nursing Austin Nation wrote, produced and performs in his one-man autobiographical stage show.

CULTURAL STUDY

What’s motivating us to organize and declutter

Professor explores trend in new book

By Nicole Gregory, contributing writer

Carrie Lane, professor of American Studies at Cal State Fullerton, believes the wave of interest in organizers to declutter and organize living spaces for a fee reveals failings in traditional employment that leave workers with little time to do this themselves. She’s been studying the phenomenon for the last several years. Her findings will be published in her book, “More Than Pretty Boxes: How Pro-

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#7

IN THE NATION FOR
BEST VALUE

The Wall Street Journal, 2024

Cal State Fullerton

Austin

FROM PAGE 1

sistant professor of nursing at Cal State Fullerton.

Believing he, too, would become a statistic, Nation deliberately embarked on a reckless drug- and alcohol-fueled road that he hoped would “medicate myself out of the world.”

“I was on a mission to kill myself,” Nation said. “I didn’t care. Drugs and alcohol seemed like a good idea. I was partying my way out. It was a soft suicide attempt.”

But nearly 40 years later, Nation, 62, is not only very much alive, he is thriving.

Now clean and sober for 21 years, Nation checks items off his bucket list and then adds more.

One bucket list item he checked off was an autobiographical, one-man stage show that Nation wrote, produced and performs.

The title is a summation of his life in a single phrase:

“Becoming Austin Nation. From Crack to PhD: A Drag Queen’s Story.”

In “Becoming Austin Nation,” Nation chronicles his journey from growing up in Milwaukee in an alcoholic home, moving to Southern California, his HIV diagnosis, watching friends die, his addiction and subsequent recovery, and his life today.

In sobriety, Nation has discovered and embraced what he describes as his “alter ego,” that being his drag queen persona, “A’Freeka Nature,” who, of course, makes an appearance in the show.

Nation debuted his one-man stage show in February 2022 as part of the Wayward Artist Ensemble at the Grand Central Theater in Santa Ana, which operates within CSUF’s College of the Arts.

Following the performance, Brooke Aston Harper, director of programming for Wayward Voices, wrote, “The Wayward Artist was thrilled to host this heartfelt, funny, and vulnerable telling of Austin’s life. Audiences are sure to enjoy ‘Becoming Austin Nation.’”

Nation has now performed “Becoming Austin Nation” about 15 times, most recently at the Long Beach Playhouse in January.

Other performances have been staged at the Hollywood Fringe Festival, the Brea Curtis Theater, the Kraine Theater in New York City and a virtual perfor-



PHOTO COURTESY OF AUSTIN NATION

Austin Nation assumes his drag queen persona, A’Freeka Nature.

mance at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in Scotland.

Nation is also applying to perform the show at the Long Beach Pride in May.

A book and movie deal are also being discussed, he said.

“I was incredibly moved by the courage, perseverance, and hope expressed in Austin Nation’s journey from crack-head to PhD,” wrote Craig Tyrl, Wayward Artist’s artistic director. “This story of transformation is inspirational, deeply moving, and sacred. Anyone who has ever struggled with addiction, identity, or sexuality must see this show. It leaves a lasting impression which you won’t soon forget.”

Over his two-plus decades in recov-

ery, Nation earned a bachelor’s degree in nursing from Cal State Fullerton and then a doctorate in nursing from the UC San Francisco.

In 2016, Nation returned to CSUF, this time for a position as assistant professor of nursing.

Nation says he is a “Proud Titan.”

He also works part time as a registered nurse supervisor for Providence and a clinical administrative supervisor at University of Southern California’s Keck School of Medicine.

Currently, Nation is on a sabbatical from CSUF to conduct research on LG-BTQ health care issues.

He plans to return to teaching at CSUF in the fall.

In his one-man play, Nation talks about the moment of clarity addicts typically experience when they decide to choose life over addiction.

“I was in my bedroom, where I was doing all my drugs,” Nation recalls. “And looking in the mirror at myself because I wasn’t getting the same high. I was chasing that elusive high. And I was like, what the hell am I doing? I’m still here and there must be something else I’m supposed to be doing with my life. I’m not dead.”

For more information on “Becoming Austin Nation. From Crack to PhD: A Drag Queen’s Story,” including upcoming performances, Nation can be found on Instagram, X and Facebook.

Declutter

FROM PAGE 1

fessional Organizing Shows Us the Way We Work Isn’t Working,” from University of Chicago Press, in November.

“I’m interested in the idea that decluttering and organizing are supposed to make us better, happier people,” Lane said. “That’s a pretty big cultural assumption, and I wanted to discover where this idea came from and why it was gaining so much attention of late. I wanted to find out what it was that was drawing people to hire organizers to help manage even the most intimate aspects of their lives and homes.”

Born in New Jersey and raised in Bakersfield, Lane earned a BA in anthropology with a minor in women’s studies from Princeton University and her Ph.D. in American studies from Yale University. She’s been at Cal State Fullerton since 2005 and has taught classes such as Americans at Work, The Office: White Collar Work in American Culture, and The Search for Community.

“I researched the origins of the professional organizing industry, which was founded by women in the 1970s,” Lane explained, pointing out that women still make up about 98% of organizers. “I then spent years interviewing and working alongside organizers to better understand what the organizing process looks like in real life.”

Time demands of traditional employment create the need for people to hire professional organizers, she said. “Over the last half-century, American households have found themselves increasingly exhausted and overwhelmed, beleaguered by competing demands around work, home and family. In response, many have sought solutions in the form of paid support, much of it provided by women.”

Lane also looked at reasons behind the burgeoning profession of organizers. “Most of the people who become organizers do so because standard employment isn’t working for them. They want flexibility and independence, and they want to do work that feels meaningful.”

The National Association of Productivity and Organizing Professionals has chapters in 19 states, according to its website, and its membership has expanded rapidly, Lane said.

“On the one hand, this has created a lot of new jobs for expert service providers like organizers, but it also distracts attention from systemic problems around how much Americans are working and how overwhelming contemporary American life feels to so many people,” she said.

“A UCLA study found that women’s stress levels, but not men’s, increase when they view cluttered areas of their homes,” she said. “This is in great part because traditionally maintaining the home



PHOTO COURTESY OF CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES
Carrie Lane, professor of American Studies at Cal State Fullerton


has been seen as women’s responsibility, so women more than men feel cultural pressure to meet ever-rising standards for organization and decor. Even in homes where women are the primary earner, they still do more housework and childcare than men.”

Organizers can relieve the pressured and overwhelmed female in the house and offer reassurance that a little clutter does not make them bad, she said. “Organizers (can) encourage clients to consider that maybe they’re asking too much of themselves and their homes and that they should reject the impossible standards being placed upon them.” Professional organizers can help clients appreciate items they ultimately choose to keep in their homes, Lane said.

To gather material for her book, Lane interviewed more than 50 organizers and attended conferences held by and for professional organizers. “I also worked as an unpaid assistant to organizers in Los Angeles and Orange County, clearing out attics, basements and storage units; setting up home offices; unpacking moving boxes; helping with estate sales; and assisting on pro bono jobs for teachers and victims of domestic violence.”


Lane hopes her new book will help readers understand that organizing is about “more than putting things in pretty, color-coordinated boxes. It’s a field with a rich history in which organizers offer empathy and connection to people who feel unmoored and overwhelmed by the demands of contemporary life.


“Organizers help people envision new ways of relating to one another and to the objects we possess, offering an alternative to consumer capitalism’s endless cycle of buying and discarding,” Lane said. “It’s a far more complex and meaningful profession than most people realize.



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VISION & VISIONARIES

Schweitzer celebrated for her commitment to health services

Alumna a leader in federal programs

By Jenelyn Russo, contributing writer

In honor of their accomplishments in their respective fields and their service and support of the university, Cal State Fullerton is recognizing four Distinguished Alumni and two Honorary Alumni on Feb. 24 as the 2024 CSUF Vision & Visionaries Award recipients. Established in 1994, the biennial awards are the highest honors presented by CSUF to alumni and community supporters. Over the next several weeks, we will profile each of this year's honorees and highlight their achievements and contributions to their profession and the community.

When Rear Adm. Pamela Schweitzer graduated from Cal State Fullerton in 1982 with a bachelor's degree in biological sciences, she wasn't exactly sure where her career path would take her.

Schweitzer's time at CSUF laid the foundation for a nearly 30-year career in federal service that included regional and national positions within Indian Health Service and a four-year term as the assistant surgeon general and 10th chief pharmacist officer of the United States Public Health Service Commissioned Corps.

Her service to our country, along with her continued commitment to the Titan community, has earned Schweitzer a selection as a 2024 CSUF Vision & Visionaries Distinguished Alumni award winner.

A Placentia native and one of five children, Schweitzer attended Troy High School in Fullerton and applied to CSUF because it was the most affordable college option for her family. She

lived at home during her undergraduate years but spent time on campus whenever she could, participating in various clubs and activities.

One of Schweitzer's most influential professors was the late Miles D. McCarthy, a CSUF founding faculty member and founding chair of the Department of Biological Sciences. McCarthy's impact fostered a love for her chosen field.

"The light bulb turned on, and I really loved that college was so different than high school," Schweitzer said. "McCarthy had this health professions group that I participated in, and he introduced us to all the different career options that were out there for health professionals. He was so excited that we were interested in going into the health profession."

Once she earned her bachelor's degree, Schweitzer stayed at CSUF to pursue a master's degree in immunology but left for UC San Francisco after being accepted into the university's School of Pharmacy. After earning her doctorate in pharmacy, she completed her residency in ambulatory care/administration at UC Irvine Medical Center, eventually working as an outpatient pharmacy supervisor.

Her next career steps took Schweitzer to the Black Hills of South Dakota, where she worked for Indian Health Service, the federal health program for American Indians and Alaska Natives within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. She spent time at Pine Ridge Indian Reservation and then relocated to Northern Arizona, where she worked in Tuba City and on the Gila River Indian Reservation, helping to ensure access to public health services.

"I love helping people, and so it was an adventure being able to go and work on the Indian reservations and help there," Schweitzer said.

After advancing to national positions within IHS, she headed to Washington

D.C. to work with the Department of Health and Human Services and other federal agencies on regulatory and policy matters. While there, Schweitzer was appointed assistant surgeon general and 10th chief pharmacist officer, the first female to hold this position, serving under former U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Jerome Adams, and current U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek H. Murthy.

During her term, which ran from 2014 - 2018, Schweitzer provided leadership and oversight to more than 1,300 Public Health Service pharmacy officers across the country and focused on emergency response initiatives that included Ebola, H1N1 and the opioid crisis. The role was a 24/7 commitment, but she loved every minute.

"I worked with absolutely amazing people," Schweitzer said. "I felt like I was really fortunate to be around a lot of people that were very committed."

Although currently retired, Schweitzer is still active in the health care space, serving on advisory boards to help with strategic planning on several public health initiatives, splitting her time between Washington, D.C.; South Dakota and Arizona. She is also a member of CSUF's Philanthropic Foundation Board of Governors and enjoys sharing her story with the next generation of Titans.

Her years at CSUF set the stage for a career path that captured both her interest in science and her heart for others while instilling a love for learning that remains with her to this day.

"When I was there (at CSUF), I learned to love learning," Schweitzer said. "I had this great attitude, and I acquired it from the professors because they loved



PHOTO COURTESY OF CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES
Cal State Fullerton alum Rear Adm. Pamela Schweitzer

their subjects so much. I've kept that attitude my whole career, and I'm grateful that I had those experiences at Cal State Fullerton where people really, genuinely wanted to help me learn."

Schweitzer and her family will join the other five 2024 Vision and Visionaries honorees at an awards dinner on Feb. 24 where their accomplishments will be celebrated. She is grateful for the recognition and credits those who have provided unwavering support throughout her career.

"This is not about me, it's about the team, the people that have been around me," Schweitzer said. "I've had amazing people to work with. This is not something I did. None of us can do anything without our wonderful support systems."

SCIENCE

Alum's amphibian and reptile research recognized

CSUF News Media Services

Conservation biologist and alumna Maureen "Mo" A. Donnelly has had a 50-year affection for poison-dart frogs that live in Central and South America rainforests.

Donnelly has spent her career studying the tiny strawberry poison-dart frog with bright red skin in Costa Rica and other tropical critters like salamanders, lizards and snakes.

Since graduating with honors from Cal State Fullerton in 1977, Donnelly has dedicated her decadeslong career to the ecology, behavior and conservation of tropical amphibians and reptiles.

"The diversity of amphibians and reptiles is amazing," said Donnelly, who earned a bachelor's degree in biological science. "The diversity of reproductive modes in amphibians — second only to fish — captured my fancy early on, and they continued to amaze me during my career in biology."

For her research accomplishments, Donnelly received the 2023 Henry S. Fitch Award for Excellence in Herpetology from the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists, the highest honor within the field of amphibian studies.

Donnelly, a professor of biological science at Florida International University since 1994, was nominated for the national accolade by her students for her many contributions to the field. She is the 25th recipient and only fourth woman to receive the award.

"It means everything to me as a herpetologist to be recognized for my research, teaching and service efforts," said Donnelly, who served as the society's president in 2016, secretary for 15 years and even helped write the award's protocol in the late 1990s.

"To receive this award is a testament to all my mentors, including at Cal State Fullerton. I thank all of them for helping me get to this place where I can make an impact on my field."

At the University of Miami, where she earned a doctorate in 1987, Donnelly focused her dissertation on the poison-dart frog and the development of tadpoles and their environment. During her career, she examined the loss of amphibians and reptiles and identified widespread declines in species and habitats.

Donnelly recalled how her CSUF educational experiences gave her opportunities to pursue graduate studies and prepared her for a teaching and research career in higher education.

"My education at CSUF made my career in biology possible. I discovered early on in my college education that I was interested in field biology and learned how to do field biology at CSUF," she said. "The professors helped me develop my skills by getting me out in the field as frequently as they could."

Donnelly credits mentors like the late biologist Lon McClanahan, who took his students to the local canyons and deserts and pushed them to "do science" in the field.

She also recalled how the late C. Eugene Jones almost converted her to becoming a botanist, and Bayard H. Brattstrom, professor emeritus of zoology, encouraged her to become a researcher.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MAUREEN A. DONNELLY
Alumna Maureen A. Donnelly has been studying tropical reptiles and amphibians since graduating in 1977.



Mo Donnelly studied the tiny strawberry poison-dart frog, or oophaga pumilio, its scientific name.

And Michael H. Horn, professor emeritus of biological science, was an example of what "scholars did."

"All of these professors instilled in me the knowledge that I could make a career in field biology," she said.

What's been most meaningful throughout her career has been mentoring graduate students and helping them with their research endeavors.

To help support CSUF's master's students, she is a donor to the Violet Horn Graduate Research Fellowship in Ecology, Evolution and Conservation Biology.

"The Violet Horn fellowship aligns with aspects of education that are important to me. I am delighted to contribute to a fund that helps graduate students," Donnelly said.

The fellowship was established in 2015 by Horn in memory of his aunt, an award-winning teacher. Each year, a graduate student is selected to receive the \$10,000 fellowship and gets the opportunity to pursue research alongside a faculty mentor.

Donnelly, who lives in Miami, said it's important to her to give back to her alma mater.

"I would not be where I am today without the education I obtained at CSUF. I feel lucky to be able to help support the academic missions I care about."

COMMUNITY

University hosts Little Saigon engagement day

CSUF News Media Services

Cal State Fullerton hosted a community forum in January to better understand how the university can contribute to the aspirations and meet the needs of Orange County's Vietnamese American community, which is the largest Vietnamese population outside of the country of Vietnam.

Higher education, business, community and government leaders — many of whom are Titan alumni or parents of CSUF students — gathered for a discussion at Coastline Community College's Garden Grove campus before participating in a daylong learning tour at DeMille Elementary School, the Vietnamese War Memorial, the Asian Garden Mall and Advance Beauty College.

"Cal State Fullerton has always been deeply committed to engagement, inclusivity and building bridges with our diverse communities," said CSUF President Sylvia Alva. "The Vietnamese American community is an integral part of Orange County and a source of inspiration."

Cal State Fullerton serves more than 3,100 Vietnamese students, the largest Asian demographic on campus.

"Our Vietnamese students are a significant contributor to who we serve," said Alva. "Understanding the unique challenges and needs of this group is something that will serve all of us well."

Scores of Vietnamese alumni have graduated, joined Orange County's workforce and continue to be supported by the university through such programs as the Center for Family Business in the College of Business and Economics.

One of these alumni is Tâm Nguyễn, who earned a master's degree in business administration in 2005, chairman of Advance Beauty College, who now serves as chair of the Cal State Fullerton Philanthropic Foundation Board of Governors and helped host the community en-

gagement day.

Lisa Kim, Garden Grove city manager, participated in the forum and shared that her daughter is a senior at Cal State Fullerton and will graduate this year.

"I'm a proud Titan mom. Through CSUF, my daughter is coming out with a full-time job. Your internships, collaborations and alumni resources have been tapped into," said Kim. "Certainly, she is the individual she is today because of Cal State Fullerton."

Mary Anne Foo, executive director of the Orange County Asian and Pacific Islander Community Alliance, emphasized the need for bilingual and bicultural clinicians who can work with diverse communities and the need for affordable housing — especially following the COVID-19 pandemic, which shuttered many Vietnamese-owned businesses and contributed to high rates of depression.

Christine Cordon, Westminster city manager, discussed the Vietnamese community's aging population and the desire to help the next generation carry on their family's businesses and preserve their culture and history.

Notably, CSUF Professor of Secondary Education Natalie Tran is at the forefront of developing Vietnamese dual-language immersion programs in Orange County and the state. As director of the National Resource Center for Asian Languages and director of the California State University Asian Language Bilingual Teacher Education Program Consortium, she has helped secure millions of dollars in grant funding for such programs. Most recently, the consortium secured a \$5 million grant to address the statewide shortage of K-12 educators to teach in Asian languages.

Westminster School District Board of Trustees President Frances Nguyễn and Superintendent Gunn Marie Hansen spoke highly of the dual-language immersion programs in their district.

"Not only will students in this program have an advantage in business someday, they will have a deeper appreciation of their culture and heritage," Alva said. "I grew up in a bilingual household, and I consider it one of my superpowers."



PHOTO COURTESY OF CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES
Tâm Nguyễn, chair of the Cal State Fullerton Philanthropic Foundation Board of Governors, and CSUF President Sylvia Alva

FUNDRAISER

Dinner with the Titans honors 2004 College World Champions

The Titan Baseball community came together to celebrate the storied 2004 College World Championship team at the annual Dinner with the Titans fundraiser at the Richard Nixon Library and Museum. The Jan. 19 event included former players and coaches from the

championship team along with current players, donors, alumni and fans. More than \$170,000 was raised for the baseball program.
Under former head coach George Horton, the 2004 Titan team won its fourth College World Series title,
Photos courtesy of CSUF News Media Services

defeating the University of Texas at Austin. The talented lineup featured Justin Turner, who went on to an MLB career with the Los Angeles Dodgers and the Boston Red Sox, and Kurt Suzuki, who played 16 years in the majors.



Members of the team that won the 2004 College World Series attended the dinner.



The dinner was held at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum in Yorba Linda.



CSUF President Sylvia Alva speaks at the dinner.



The event raises money for the baseball program.



Attendees check out the program.

ADMINISTRATION

Stern at work as interim dean of Humanities and Social Sciences

CSUF News Media Services

Jessica Yirush Stern, a historian of early America and former chair of the Department of History, has been appointed to serve as interim dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Stern, professor of history, began her new position Jan. 1. Her appointment is effective until a national search has concluded, with the selection of a permanent dean expected by July 1.

She has served as the college's associate dean of student relations for the past five years. The college has nearly 500 tenure-track faculty members and lecturers, and more than 20 departments and degree programs. An average of 2,500 students graduate each year.

"I am looking forward to supporting and promoting the signature programs in HSS that have such a powerful and long-term impact on students and faculty," said Stern, who joined the university in 2007.

"As dean, I will strive to work with the coordinators of these programs to lighten their loads, increase program visibility and weave a college narrative highlighting these programs to the campus, local and national community."

These programs and initiatives include the Institute of Black Intellectual Innovation, Latinx Lab for Storytelling and Social Justice, Digital Ethnic Futures, Passage to the Future, Cal State DC Scholars, U-ACRE and the moot court team.

Stern also would like to develop a curriculum on Native American and Indigenous studies: "Our university is sorely in need of this curriculum. I eagerly want to help the college fill this void."

During her tenure as associate dean, she has immersed herself in the college's departments, programs and values.

"I believe I have created the relationships and gained the knowledge and skills needed to shepherd the college during the next leg of its journey — and to push it into some new directions," she said.

Stern shared she has benefited from the mentorship of Dean Sheryl Fontaine, professor of English, comparative literature and linguistics, who is stepping down after serving in the role since 2014. Fontaine will teach the university's Lon-



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

Professor of history Jessica Yirush Stern will serve as interim dean while CSUF conducts a national search for the position.

don study abroad program in the spring.

"Dean Fontaine showed me how critical strategic investments can be in successfully fulfilling the college's mission," she said. "The skills I have learned from her have set me up to serve the college well."

Stern's goals for the college include bolstering opportunities for students to enhance their academic success. These include strengthening the college's tandem advising model in which each department has at least one staff adviser who works alongside faculty advisers to guide students on their academic pathway.

The adoption of the tandem advising model grew out of a project Stern created by being part of the American Asso-

ciation of State Colleges and Universities' Emerging Leaders Program. She worked with faculty and staff advisers to analyze college advising.

"This model ensures that students will get the academic advising support they need from trained professional staff and allows faculty advisers to devote more time to mentoring students on post-graduation paths and navigating academia," said Stern, an advisory board member of the California State University Student Success Network.

Through the Passage to the Future program, which prepares students for paid internships and various careers, she wants to enhance high-impact practices

that help them gain skills and experiences for the workforce.

Stern believes the college can serve the campus community by using the humanities and social sciences to help students, faculty and staff understand the world around them and to model civic discourse. Her plans include expanding the college's lecture series with topics focusing on current events.

Stern's research interests include examining the interactions between Native Americans and British settlers in the colonial period. She earned a doctorate and master's degree from Johns Hopkins University and a bachelor's degree from Reed College, all in history.

Dance

FROM PAGE 1

we were going to do it three times," senior co-captain Carissa Hobbs said. "Normally we do it twice. But honestly, going through it three times, when we got to finals, I know we were way more confident stepping on that stage, and we knew what we needed to do because we had already done it two times."

The road to the championships begins in April when tryouts are held.

This year's group of potential dancers was the largest and most talented ever, said Volkert, who was herself a Titan cheerleader, performing on the sidelines for CSUF's last football team in 1992.

Even members of the previous year's team are required to try out again to make the team.

Once the final cuts are made — never an easy decision — Volkert said, the 21 Titans who make the team attend a few camps over the summer.

The day after Labor Day, practices for the season get underway and are held three days a week.

After Christmas, practices are every day in preparation for the national championships.

Having been part of a national championship team as a sophomore, winning is always special, Hobbs said, but her motivation to be part of the team each year hasn't only been to win another title.

"We just love each other, and it's like a family here," Hobbs said. "So that's why we keep coming back. Not necessarily because of the winning, but because of the people on the team, our coaches, the environment."

Balancing practices, academics and a job took some getting used to, freshman dance team member Kennedi Sandidge said.

To be part of a winning team, Sandidge was willing to make the commitment, and support from her teammates and the coaches made the adjustment period easier, she said.

"It was definitely something I haven't experienced before," Sandidge said. "I knew that when I wanted to go to college, I wanted to be on a really strong team that had a good reputation and seemed to just be well-rounded. I had looked at old videos of Cal State Fullerton, and they had everything I was looking for. I knew a few girls going into it that are also freshmen, and so it already made it feel like home."

Senior co-captain Jordan Takai, who was also part of the Titans' national championship team as a sophomore, said winning a second national title is a great way to cap off her senior year, especially coming off a disappointing team showing during her junior season.

"Because when you feel so defeated last year, and just to come back as a new team, it felt really good," Takai said.

Titans' assistant coach Krysten Dorado was also a member of the dance team, from 2010 to 2013, and part of three national championship teams before being asked to come back as a coach.

"It was an incredible opportunity,



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TITAN DANCE TEAM

The 2023-24 CSUF dance team had the largest pool of tryouts ever.

The Titans Dance Team will be performing its Pom and National Championship Jazz Routines at the following upcoming Titans Basketball games:

Thursday, Feb. 29 – Women's Basketball vs. Long Beach State at 7 p.m.

Halftime – 3rd Place Pom Routine

Saturday, March 2 – Men's Basketball vs. UC Santa Barbara at 6 p.m.

Halftime – National Championship Jazz Routine and Trophy Presentation

and especially being a part of the program before, I definitely couldn't pass it up," Dorado said. "Jennie has done an amazing job with the dance team, and so to be a part of this is awesome."

Aside from competing and performing at basketball games, the Titans are also active in the community, reading to children in local elementary schools and participating in toy drives during the holiday season.



The team performed its routines three times at the championships through two rounds of eliminations.

PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL

Kelsie Whitmore: Blazing trails, changing perceptions

By Brian Robin, contributing writer

You can see Kelsie Whitmore’s memorabilia in this little town in central New York, Cooperstown, where two of Whitmore’s batting helmets, a bat and some batting gloves keep company at the Baseball Hall of Fame with memorabilia once used by guys named Ruth, Cobb, Williams, Mantle, Ryan, Seaver — and Robinson.

“I’ve always been a fan of Jackie Robinson and knowing my stuff is in the same building as Jackie’s gives me chills to this day,” Whitmore said.

You can read about Kelsie Whitmore in such publications as the New York Times, the Washington Post, The Athletic, ABC News and even England’s Guardian — all of which made the requisite pilgrimages to Staten Island, N.Y. over the previous two seasons to chronicle Whitmore’s history-making summers playing for the Staten Island FerryHawks.

Whitmore spent the 2022 and 2023 seasons playing for the FerryHawks, a team in the independent Atlantic League, where she was the first woman to play professional baseball that high up the baseball pyramid in more than 70 years. The Atlantic League is akin to Class AAA, one level below the major leagues, which explains why Whitmore’s teammates included former major leaguers such as Julio Teheran, Rusney Castillo, Justin Williams and David Martinez.

It also explained why she’s a novelty to the naked eye on so many levels.

“I didn’t expect that kind of impact or interest. I was not expecting that at all,” a still-bewildered Whitmore said about the media attention. “I’m not playing baseball to try to get that kind of attention. It just happened. And that’s the best part, when things happen organically and naturally.”

By the numbers, Whitmore batted .026 (1-for-39) in 2022 and was 0-for-13 in 2023. On the mound, she had a 12.19 ERA in 2022, lowering that to 9.49 last season throwing a pitch called “The Thing” — basically an offshoot of the knuckleball Whitmore discovered while “messing around with some other pitches.”

Nelson Figueroa, who played for six major league teams between 2000 and 2011 and served as the FerryHawks pitching coach in 2022, mentored her on using “The Thing” and pitching like a surgeon to get batters out. After all, Whitmore is no threat to blow away hit-

ters with high-octane gas. Not with a fastball topping out at around 80 mph, 14 mph slower than the average major-league fastball.

But that’s not the story. The numbers are not the story. They never have been. To the outside eye, to those who don’t know Whitmore, there is nothing natural about the way she has changed perceptions throughout baseball, one milestone at a time. To them, Whitmore talks about the women who bring their daughters to see her play, who tell her afterward their daughters now want to play baseball because she showed them it is natural.

“They don’t go for things. Sometimes, it takes someone to just go for it, even though they’ve never seen it,” Whitmore said. “You don’t want to wait to do something in order to do it. Just doing this and stepping on the field, I feel like it’s a difference. Then, when you put in the work and make the plays and throw the strikes and getting the hits adds to that. It shows that females can play baseball and get after it.

“The whole big part of it is the simplicity of just suiting up and stepping on the field. Nobody knows or understands this unless you’re a female who plays baseball. “... Understanding how much courage it takes to suit up and step on a field. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been terrified to put on a uniform and step on a field. The moment you put on a uniform, you’ll get looked at a certain type of way. It can be uncomfortable because the moment you step on the field, all eyes are on you, and you have to perform. That’s a lot of pressure. But just suiting up and stepping on that field and being ready to compete is already changing the game.”

You’d never know Whitmore’s inner terror because this is where her story brings understanding nods from those who knew her from before she played for the Sonoma Stompers in the independent Pacific Association in 2016. To those who know Whitmore from her days playing on the baseball team (yes, the baseball team) at Temecula Valley High School, or on the Cal State Fullerton softball team — where she was the Big West Player of the Year in 2021 after batting .395, with a .507 on-base percentage and .824 slugging percentage — this is not the stuff of nightmares. It’s a dream. All of it.

Because you could always find Whitmore on or near a baseball field. Even when she was playing softball at CSUF, baseball was never far away. If she wasn’t training with the Titans’ base-

ball team, Whitmore was playing for the U.S. Women’s National Baseball Team, where she won a silver medal at the 2014 Women’s Baseball World Cup and the gold at the 2015 Pan American Games. Over her five years playing for the national team, Whitmore compiled a 1.35 ERA as a pitcher. She also played the outfield.

But this ... this is something else. This is where Whitmore wants to be, where things are natural. When she played for the Stompers in 2016 and 2017 and collected her first hit on July 20, 2016, her bat and helmet were shipped to Cooperstown. They were later joined by the bat she used and the batting gloves she wore while rapping out her first hit for the FerryHawks in September 2022.

More accessible Whitmore memorabilia is available. You can buy a Kelsie Whitmore No. 3 FerryHawks jersey for \$100 at the team’s gift shop. Follow Whitmore’s lead, walk into the gate, go down the stairs, turn left and there’s the team store. You’ll likely have a different reaction to it than the woman with her name on the back.

“It’s one of the coolest things ever,” she said. “When I was a little girl, I imagined my last name on a professional jersey. To actually live that out, even in independent ball — which is still professional — is amazing. But it’s even better to look in the stands and see someone wearing my jersey.”

When Whitmore talks about playing baseball, she talks with a calm, yet determined, assurance that this experience — the baseball part of it, at least — is not just what drives her. It’s who she is. It’s what she’s always wanted to do since she was a little girl going to minor-league baseball games in Lake Elsinore. Everything else is extraneous. Everything else is geared toward get-



PHOTO COURTESY OF CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES
Kelsie Whitmore gets ready to bat May 20, 2018, during the NCAA Women’s College World Series Los Angeles Regional.

ting Whitmore to her happy place — a baseball field.

This is why she had to regrettably cancel a speaking engagement for the CSUF softball team last weekend. There’s a one-month winter league starting up in Palm Springs, and Whitmore needs to be there with all the other free agents trying to catch on with a team for the 2024 season. After all, unless you have a multiyear contract, you train, you grind, you take nothing for granted.

Even if you’ve got Hall of Fame real estate, your own wing of a library in newspaper and magazine clips, and little girls all over New York City wearing your jersey.

“Before games, my heart would be racing. The moment I step into the box or step on the mound, my heart races. I would be so excited, but also so nervous,” she said. “At the end of it all, it would always just feel right. That’s the biggest thing. It’s the game I love, so it feels just right.”

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WANTED TO
TEACH
SPECIAL EDUCATION

At Cal State Fullerton, I earned my teaching credential and master’s degree, and researched communication strategies for children with Down syndrome.

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