



PHOTO BY JEFF ANTENORE, CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

University President Ronald S. Rochon greets one of the therapy dogs at the Doggy Therapy tent during CSUF's 4th annual Student Mental Health Resource Fair on April 22.

## SERVICES

# MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCE FAIR HIGHLIGHTS THE HELP AVAILABLE

### Event promotes preventative care and reducing the stigma

By **Larry Urish**  
*contributing writer*

Life as a student isn't easy, especially in this day and age. Managing a challenging academic load alone is stressful. Then add personal and family obligations, Orange County's ever-rising cost of living, future uncertainty and greater loneliness inherent with social media and it's no wonder that depression and anxiety are but a few of the issues common among today's students.

Cal State Fullerton's fourth-annual Mental Health Resource Fair, which

took place on April 22 in the campus' Central Quad, helped address this topic by providing access to an assortment of helpful resources in a fun, welcoming environment. The event, which drew more than 750 student attendees (a significant uptick from the 500 last year), was co-hosted by CSUF's Counseling and Psychological Services and Connect-OC, a program for teens and young adults that serves to increase mental health awareness and provides access to related resources throughout the region.

"The fair was amazing," said Jacquelyn Gerali, Counseling and Psychological Services' prevention education co-

ordinator and faculty counselor who helped organize the event. "It was such a delight to see so many students enjoy mental health in an approachable and inviting manner. Many expressed appreciation for the variety of our activities."

Those activities included dog therapy, music and food, a photo booth, a colorful assortment of arts activities, and raffles for prizes.

"It's important to shed light on the different resources available for students to take care of their mental health proactively," Gerali said. "Students should know that it's OK if you're not doing OK. This event helps make addressing

mental health very approachable and fun. It gives space to experience joy as we take care of our mental health."

About 35 no- and low-cost mental health resources — including the Arise Wellness Center, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, Mindpath College Health and OC's chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness — were available to share how they can help CSUF students, faculty and staff. A variety of university resources were also on hand: CSUF Basic Needs Services, Counseling and Psychological Services, TitanWELL and TitanTHRIVE, among others.

**MENTAL » PAGE 5**



PHOTO COURTESY OF CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

Undergraduate researcher Ashley Robinson and Anton Peshkov, assistant professor of physics

## RESEARCH

### Physics major finds her niche studying vinegar eelworms

Their collective motion may have practical applications

By **Jenelyn Russo**  
*contributing writer*

Each week, Cal State Fullerton physics and philosophy student Ashley Robinson spends time in the campus lab studying millimeter-long vinegar eelworms under the microscope. These tiny nematodes have a unique behavior in that they can synchronize their body movements and perform in collective motion.

Similar to a school of fish or flock of birds, this characteristic allows the eelworms to create movement and generate force to push fluids and objects many times their own weight.

Robinson is part of a team of Titan students conducting research on vinegar eel-

worms under the guidance of CSUF assistant professor of physics Anton Peshkov. The work is funded by a \$375,000 grant from the National Science Foundation.

When Robinson began at CSUF her freshman year, she intended to major in biology with the goal of becoming a veterinarian. But after taking a first-year physics class, she became inspired and switched her major to physics. Now in her junior year, she has spent more than two years working alongside Peshkov and the team to learn more about these nematodes.

"What I do with my research is I'll replicate the condition of confinement that's necessary for that collective motion," Robinson said. "I basically work by using 3D objects that I design around that, and I will manipulate the area of confinement and the angle of confinement so that I can direct them in specific ways to perform collective motion."

Discovered in the 1600s, these tiny roundworms, or *turbatrix aceti*, are most commonly found in unfiltered vinegar or other fermented fluids. They thrive in acidic environments, feeding on the natural bacteria and yeast produced during fermentation. In today's food products

**PHYSICS» PAGE 2**



## I WANT TO MAKE MY CHILDREN PROUD

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INCLUSION

# New SWANA Resource Center opens with a cultural celebration

A place to find support and community

By Nicole Gregory  
contributing writer

The new SWANA Resource Center officially opened on Monday, April 21, in Cal State Fullerton’s Pollak Library, with a celebration that featured food, speakers and musical performances.

The acronym SWANA stands for Southwest Asian and North African, and students come from countries such as Lebanon, Afghanistan, Armenia, Iran, Syria, among others in the area often called the Middle East, a term originated by the British.

CSUF President Ronald Rochan made opening remarks and stood before a ceremonial ribbon while surrounded by smiling faces of students and staff who attended the event. Speakers also included Phenicia McCullough, vice president of human resources and inclusive excellence and student leader Talia Boukhalil, among others.

The SWANA Resource Center is a place where students whose family heritage and traditions are rooted in SWANA countries can find support and a shared sense of community.

On the Cal State Fullerton campus, resource centers provide a welcoming place for students to study, socialize, get academic support or just have some quiet time.

“I feel so privileged to have a SWANA Resource Center on our campus that represents my community,” said Boukhalil, who was born in Lebanon and graduates this year. “The generation before us recognized the need for this space and advocated for it at a time when they knew they may never experience it themselves. For so long, we’ve been erased, from checking ‘white’ on forms that don’t see us and living between the lines of systems that were never built for us. But this center changes that. It’s more than a space, it’s a statement that we exist, we matter, and we have a home here. It’s a quiet but powerful reminder



PHOTO COURTESY OF CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

CSUF President Ronald Rochon, students and alumni celebrate the opening of the university’s SWANA Resource Center.

that we belong here too.”

Studies show that spaces like resource centers can go a long way in motivating students to stay in college.

“Cal State Fullerton is committing very intentionally and consistently in resourcing SWANA communities and ensuring that students retain in higher numbers, that they matriculate and they’re able to graduate and meet our student success goals and outcomes because they feel a sense of belonging on campus,”said Saby Labor, interim associate director of the diversity initiatives and resource centers. “Resource centers are shown to positively impact student

retention rates,” she said.

This is especially true for students attending college for the first time — they’re the ones most at risk of dropping out in their first year, Labor explained. “We try to be intentional about having them be part of smaller communities as possible in that first year,” she said.

A SWANA club was started by students several years ago, and last fall a minor in SWANA studies was approved after students presented a detailed proposal for it. The SWANA Resource Center is lnear the Native American and Indigenous Resource Center and the Women’s Resource Center, among oth-

ers that have spaces on the first floor of the library.

Resource Centers also play a role in enriching the knowledge in the campus community of cultural traditions from around the world. For instance, a few weeks ago, SWANA students put on a cooking demonstration about the popular grain dish tabouleh, showing the many variations of tabouleh that are prepared in the various SWANA countries.

Feeling recognized and validated for who they are can help students face difficulties of being in college. “It will be one of the reasons that they choose to stay when there’s so many hardships and challenges that students encounter that might give them reasons to leave even temporarily, their academic journey,” Labor said.

In the resource centers, Labor can maintain contact with students in a nonpressured environment and track anyone who is struggling and provide support. “We try to provide them more reasons to come back. We have really amazing staff and faculty who work here at the university, and we’re always checking in on students, asking them how they are doing. We’re genuinely interested in the answer to that.”

Boukhalil concurs that this kind of recognition and attention is critical for students. “Having a resource center specifically for the SWANA community makes us feel seen, heard and supported in a way that many of us have never experienced before,” she said. “It validates our identities and creates a space where our cultures, histories and stories are valued. The SWANA Center is more than just a room, it’s a living symbol of resilience, hope and belonging. I am forever grateful to the students who stood up, spoke out, and fought for our community to be seen. They have changed the lives of so many SWANA students without even knowing it.”

The grand opening of the new SWANA Resource Center, with positive messages from speakers, lively music performances and sweet desserts, was a welcoming event that demonstrated just a few of the cultural traditions that SWANA students bring to Cal State Fullerton.

## Physics

FROM PAGE 1

like commercial vinegar or wine, they are generally removed through filtration and pasteurization.

Peshkov brought his passion for studying vinegar eelworms with him to CSUF. Originally from Moscow, and having studied in Paris, he began researching the eelworms in 2020 while doing postdoctoral work at the University of Rochester. After he arrived on campus in 2022, he applied for and was awarded the three-year grant that has allowed him to continue this exploration of active matter in physics.

“I’m not a biologist, I’m a physicist, so we study this from the point of view of physics,” Peshkov said. “We look at how they can organize themselves to move in the same direction or have the same oscillation.”

Peshkov initiated the research, and aside from collaborating with a small group in San Diego, few others are working in the field. He hopes to take this study of collective motion and use it to inform future applications in disciplines such as robotics and health care. He intends to publish several findings from the study soon.

“I think we already have some very interesting results and hope to be able to publish,” Peshkov said. “If wae have good results, we can maybe continue the re-

search of this topic.”

Robinson’s contribution to the project focuses on generating on-demand fluid flows and tracking the ability of the vinegar eelworms to move objects suspended in the liquid. It is research that is in many ways the first of its kind.

“Soft matter physics, or the kind of physics that I’m studying, is still relatively understudied, so understanding active matter systems, which would include the nematodes, is still very fresh in the field of physics,” Robinson said.

As a double major in physics and philosophy, Robinson sees her two interests as both compatible and complementary. She draws from each field to expand her understanding and approach to complex problems.

“Philosophy helps to get me to ask the questions, and physics gives me the tools to be able to answer them,” Robinson said.

A first-generation college student, Robinson acknowledges the unique opportunity she has been given to be involved in such groundbreaking research as an undergraduate. To date, she has received more than \$13,000 in scholarship awards from both the California State University STEM-NET Summer Student Research program and the Dan Black Family Fellowship.

“The really good thing about Cal State Fullerton is they make research and getting research experience very available to their students,” Robinson said.

Her future plans include pursuing a master’s program at CSUF, and given her involvement in Peshkov’s vinegar eelworm research, Robinson hopes to continue the work for the foreseeable future.

“I am pretty inspired by how niche of a topic this is and how far you can really take it,” Robinson said. “I still have a lot of ways that I would love to be a part of (the research) in terms of exploring their capabilities. ... The progress that we’ve made is going to be the backbone for being able to make certain advancements toward getting a better understanding of active matter systems.”



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

Physics student researcher Ashley Robinson works on vinegar eel research in the lab.

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RECOVERY

# Artists find the healing power of art after losing work to LA fires

## Response, rebound from devastation

By Lou Ponsi  
contributing writer

A Cal State Fullerton art instructor and her student were among the thousands who were victimized by the wildfires that wreaked devastation throughout the Los Angeles metropolitan area in January.

A 10-piece exhibition titled “Quiver,” featuring the airbrushed paintings created by CSUF assistant art professor Mary Anna Pomonis opened at the Alto Beta Gallery in Altadena on Jan. 5.

Two days later, the entire exhibition, which was the culmination of five years of research, was destroyed in the Eaton Fire, the second-most destructive wildfire in California’s history.

Meanwhile, CSUF art major Mia Aghili was asleep in her home on Jan. 7 when she was awakened by her father and forced to evacuate with her family as the fire burning nearby was swiftly approaching their home.

Aghili and her family escaped with a precious few items, but their home — including all Aghili’s artwork and supplies — was destroyed.

“We evacuated Jan 8 at 6:30 a.m.,” Aghili said. “My dad went back and he saw that our house was on fire. All I kept saying to myself was, ‘I just really want to draw.’”

Both Pomonis and Aghili, who didn’t know each other prior to the fires, turned to their art to heal the trauma.

Pomonis said she had started working on pieces for the “Quiver” exhibition during the COVID-19 pandemic as a way to “create shields” and protect herself from anxiety and lack of social interactions caused by the virus.

She felt a sense of dread and wasn’t sure she even wanted to return to teaching right away.

“I was concerned about my ability to be present and effective as an instructor due to the overwhelming tasks of dealing with insurance and grant forms.”

Aghili also was overwhelmed by feelings of angst and disorientation during the days and weeks after the fires.

Then an angel appeared in the form of Caroline Harrington, assistant director of academic advising for the art department.

Harrington made the effort to contact art students who were impacted by the fires and then reached out to their teachers.

“Caroline Harrington called me,” Aghili said. “I think that was just my saving-grace moment. She saw my address, and she asked what my situation was. She said, ‘Do you need anything?’ and the first thing that popped into my mind was that I need art supplies. I can’t express how grateful I am.”

Harrington connected Pomonis and Aghili, and now Aghili is a student of Pomonis’ in the class, “Creative Thinking in the Studio Art Classroom.”

Hearing about a student who’s lost everything has helped Pomonis to channel



Mary Anna Pomonis, assistant professor of art, and Mia Aghili, art student

PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

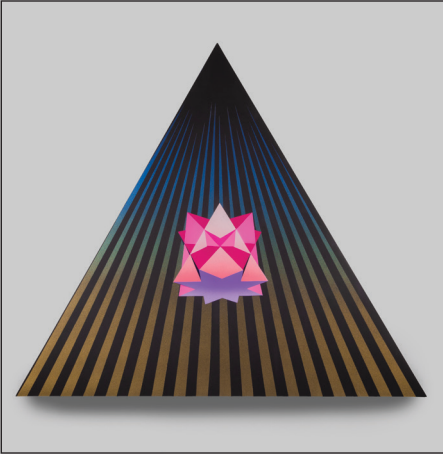


PHOTO COURTESY OF MARY ANNA POMONIS

CSUF assistant art professor Mary Anna Pomonis lost this piece to the Eaton fire.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MIA AGHILI

CSUF student Mia Aghili turned to art to help her heal from the trauma of the fires.

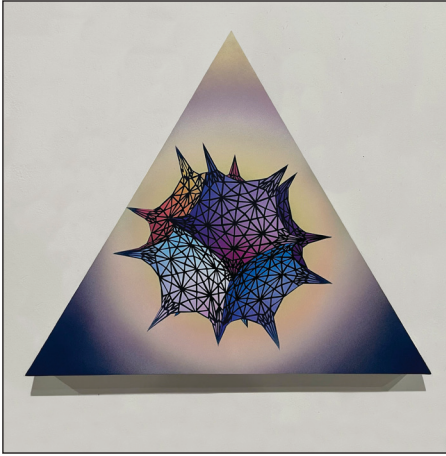


PHOTO COURTESY OF MARY ANNA POMONIS

One of Pomonis’ works lost when the Alto Beta Gallery burned

her focus away from her own loss to a desire to help somebody else.

Pomonis said Aghili’s ability to rebound and continue to create art in less-than-ideal surroundings has been a source of inspiration for the entire class, Pomonis said.

“That’s just been positive peer pressure,” Pomonis said. “And I definitely have noticed that there’s a leveling up that’s happened because people respect her tenacity, and there’s a lot of admiration and respect. And I feel that every day I’m here.”

Aghili’s work this semester is “incredibly beautiful,” Pomonis said.

One piece in particular depicts the bombed-out interior of her burned-out home with a beautiful landscape visible

through the destruction.

“These paintings convey a sense of alienation and dissociation that happens in a traumatic event but also show hope and possibility of what’s next. Mia’s work has a sense of urgency and importance, reflecting the need to express oneself and make work that matters.”

Aghili said Harrington’s gesture provided hope during the transition to the spring semester.

Pomonis has come to view the loss of her art as an act of “atonement and sacrifice” that serves a higher purpose and led to a more introspective level of creativity for making new art.

“The catastrophic event changed and activated our imagination in different ways,” Pomonis said. “And I think that it’s

been super helpful because Mia is making incredible artwork this semester, and a lot of it is processing the loss of certain things, and now their significance.”

Both Pomonis and Aghili agree that their connection is serving as a testament to the healing power of art and the importance of community support.

“Art builds resilience in people,” Pomonis said. “That’s why we need art. It helps us to transcend the complexities of life or things that we can’t control.”

Aghili echoed these sentiments, emphasizing the transformative power of art in her life.

“Art is what keeps us human, and it helps us to transcend the complexities of life,” Aghili said. “It gives us a reason to be alive, to be here.”

MOBILE OUTREACH

# Outstanding Senior educates peers about health and well-being

CSUF News Media Services

TitanHEALTH peer educator and graduating senior M Smith offers a listening ear to educate Cal State Fullerton classmates about the importance of health and well-being.

Smith participates in the TitanHEALTH Hut mobile outreach program, which gives students a safe and welcoming environment.

The program provides peer-to-peer education to promote healthy choices and behavior, focusing on health topics related to nutrition, food insecurity, safe sex and sexual violence.

Smith, a public health major studying global health, engages with hundreds of students each week, empowering them to make informed decisions about their health by sharing information and campus resources.

“M has demonstrated initiative, passion and an unwavering commitment to collective health and well-being,” said Lynnette De Los Angeles, TitanHEALTH health educator.

In recognition of Smith’s excellence in service, the Class of 2025 graduate is the recipient of the Alumni Association’s Outstanding Senior Award.

“This recognition makes me feel seen and heard for the work that I do, and have done, to not only better myself but my community and people around me,” Smith said. “I’m able to reach students and help to build rapport and a healthy community.”

Smith joined TitanHEALTH to prepare for a career in public health. After graduating in May, they plan to pursue a master’s degree in public health at CSUF in the fall. Smith is the first in their family — the eldest of seven siblings — to earn a college degree.

They aspire to pursue a Ph.D./M.D. program to research public health issues, such as the effects of climate change on reproductive care and maternal health.

“Working as a peer educator is giving me the tools I need to work toward my future,” Smith said.

As a peer educator, Smith enjoys



PHOTO COURTESY OF CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

M Smith is a peer educator for the TitanHEALTH Hut, which promotes student health and well-being.

meeting other students and relaying campus resources. These resources include medical and mental health care services and healthy food available at The Pantry, an Associated Students Inc. program for those facing food insecurity.

This spring semester, Smith is an intern with TitanHEALTH’s community engagement services, focusing on research and supporting curriculum development.

Since graduating from high school 10 years ago, Smith started and quit college numerous times. During the pandemic, Smith worked as a certified doula. This experience inspired Smith to pursue a college education and strive for a ca-

reer in public health to ensure access to quality and preventative care.

In June 2023, Smith earned an associate degree in public health from Santa Ana College and transferred to CSUF the following fall.

“I’m proud of myself for sticking to a degree and career path that benefits many people,” shared Smith, a community volunteer at local food banks and Elevate, a Los Angeles youth mentorship program.

At CSUF, Smith found a place where they could thrive.

“Since I left high school, I’ve come into my own with my queerness and being trans/nonbinary,” Smith said. “On this campus, it’s been easy to be my au-

thentic self, and I’ve developed a community with others that has enhanced my well-being.”

During Smith’s undergraduate education, they participated in a research project focusing on health insurance and access to health care among CSUF students, directed by Shana Charles, associate professor of public health. They also served on an education advisory committee to create an inclusive curriculum for medical students about reproductive justice and LGBTQ+ health.

Smith looks forward to graduate school and a career advocating for the well-being of others.

“If I can better the lives of a few people, it will have been worth it.”



UNIVERSITY DELEGATION

# CSUF urges Congress to protect critical funding for students

CSUF News Media Services

Cal State Fullerton President Ronald Rochon and a university delegation traveled to Washington, D.C., April 8-11 to advocate for CSUF’s top federal priorities. This effort was part of an annual California State University advocacy week in the nation’s capital.

Their conversations centered on the need to preserve Pell Grants, increase aid to Minority Serving Institutions, and to find a bipartisan pathway to citizenship and support Dreamers. The delegation also emphasized the incredible scale, impact and return on degree investment of the CSU — the largest and most consequential university system in the nation.

“When we invest in students, we’re investing in the future of our communities and our nation,” said Rochon. “A CSU degree changes the trajectory of lives — for graduates and their families for generations to come.

“We simply cannot afford federal cuts to higher education — not when the stakes are this high. Every dollar

invested in our students pays dividends in a stronger economy, a more skilled workforce, and a more just and equitable society.”

Nearly half of CSUF students — approximately 22,000 — and a total of 207,000 students across the CSU system rely on Pell Grants.

“The Pell Grant is the foundation of federal student aid,” said Megan Hannoun, chief governmental officer for Associated Students Inc. at CSUF. “If Pell were altered or reduced, students would scramble to find financial solutions to finish their degrees. We request that the California congressional delegation challenge any cuts to this program.”

CSUF also advocated for preserving other federal grants, which help drive innovative academic programs and hands-on learning opportunities to prepare students for the evolving workforce.

At Cal State Fullerton, the number of grants and contracts has surged by 110% since 2018, with nearly \$58 million in external funding secured in 2023-24.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

CSUF delegates, from left: Elva Rubalcava, associate vice president for government and community relations; Kimberly Shiner, vice president for university advancement; Nina Garcia, chief of staff; Megan Hannoun, Associated Students Inc. chief governmental officer; CSUF President Ronald Rochon; Annie Yea, senior director of government relations and advocacy; Tran Le, director of executive communications



PHOTO COURTESY OF CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

Grace Lorenger accepts her offer of admission to Cal State Fullerton

EXPERIENCE CSUF DAY

# Newly admitted students begin their Titan journeys

CSUF News Media Services

Grace Lorenger was accepted to several colleges, but it was Cal State Fullerton’s new Bachelor of Arts in urban learning program and a College of Education scholarship that brought her to the university on April 12 to accept her offer of admission.

Joining approximately 5,500 admitted students and 9,000 guests on campus for Experience CSUF: Become a Titan, the Lorenger family was excited to learn about the resources available to help Grace transition to college in the fall.

“I really want to be an elementary school teacher, so I am excited about the urban learning major,” said Grace, a senior at West Covina High School. “I’m also excited to learn more about what activities I can get involved with.”

No stranger to Cal State Fullerton, Grace previously toured the campus with her high school AVID class and attended the university’s Fall in Love With Cal State Fullerton Day, an open-house event for prospective students and their supporters.

Throughout the day, Titan Gym was bustling with excitement as students accepted their conditional offers of admission at the Admissions Acceptance Center. The center offered onsite support services, free T-shirts and pins, and 360-degree photo booths — helping newly admitted students and their supporters celebrate the beginning of their Titan journeys.

In addition, financial aid advisers met with students in the Titan Student Union to offer personalized assistance with scholarships, grants and other financial aid options, while Next Steps presentations guided new students through the transition from acceptance to enrollment. Parents and supporters had opportunities to attend bilingual sessions that provided insights into how they can support their students’ college journeys.

“Experience CSUF gives students and their supporters a premier opportunity to explore our dynamic community and resources we offer, showcasing



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

Experience CSUF 2025

why CSUF is the ideal place to continue their academic journey,” said Kevin Martin, director of outreach, recruitment and orientation. “It is more than just a campus visit; it’s a chance to see firsthand why CSUF should be their No. 1 choice.”

Representatives from all eight of Cal State Fullerton’s academic colleges were available to discuss academic programs and opportunities, and a student clubs and organizations showcase highlighted the vibrant extracurricular

scene at CSUF.

For Lyndie Lorenger ’02 (B.S. child and adolescent studies), watching her daughter become a Titan was an exciting and emotional milestone.

“Grace is our first child to go to college, so it’s really special. I wanted her to go where she felt was right for her,” said Lyndie. “I’m very happy that she chose Cal State Fullerton.”

Lyndie shared that her own college years were some of the best of her life. In addition to receiving a strong edu-

cation that prepared her for a career as a high school teacher, she created lifelong friendships as a member of the Delta Zeta sorority.

“As a commuter, joining a sorority allowed me to have a home base on campus with an amazing group of friends,” said Lyndie. “It was one of the most rewarding times in my life and I’m still friends with many of my sorority sisters today.

“I would do college all over again if I could.”



BEYOND THE CONVERSATION

# ‘Encanto’ actress Stephanie Beatriz: ‘Your story matters’

CSUF News Media Services

With candor, humor and a heartfelt message of authenticity, award-winning actress Stephanie Beatriz captivated a room full of Titans during Cal State Fullerton’s April 10 Beyond the Conversation event.

From voicing Mirabel in Disney’s Academy Award-winning film “Encanto” to portraying Rosa Diaz in the popular sitcom “Brooklyn Nine-Nine,” Beatriz spoke to the CSUF community about her career, her deep love for storytelling, and the power of representation on screen and in life.

“If you’re an artist, or you want to dabble in the arts, I think bringing yourself, your taste and your viewpoint to what you’re doing is priceless,” said Beatriz. “Your individual journey of life is so interesting and so you and so great. It deserves to be heard.”

Raised in Houston, Texas, Beatriz didn’t consider acting a viable career until middle school: “My resources were limited, but I felt really compelled to act. I was pulled to it in a way that I wasn’t pulled to anything else.”

After graduating from Stephens College in three years, she moved to Los Angeles, where she landed her breakout role in “Brooklyn Nine-Nine.”

“One of the things I really loved about ‘Brooklyn Nine-Nine’ was that they embraced who we were. They even changed my character’s name from Megan to Rosa because they wanted her to be Latina like me,” said Beatriz.

When asked about voicing Mirabel in “Encanto,” Beatriz reflected on what the role means to her.

“I’m a massive Disney fan. I always have been. I grew up on ‘The Little Mermaid,’ ‘The Lion King’ and even the deeper cuts like ‘Robin Hood.’ I’ve always loved the heroines in Disney movies,” she said. “To be in a Disney movie as the main character is something I never thought I’d get.”

She also opened up about her ongoing journey with mental health, encouraging students to ask for help and take advantage of mental health resources on campus.

Above all else, Beatriz empowered students to embrace their creativity and individuality: “I hope you remember that your story matters. The world doesn’t need a copy of someone else. It needs you.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF ASSOCIATED STUDENTS INC.

Award-winning actress Stephanie Beatriz

## Student interviews award-winning actress

Hosted by Associated Students Inc. and the Division of Student Affairs, the Beyond the Conversation series invites speakers to campus to share their stories and inspire the Titan community.

Beatriz was interviewed by CSUF graphic and interactive design student Tanya Gonzalez, who also serves as chair of ASI’s Association for Intercultural Awareness. She said that the “Encanto” discussion was her favorite part of the event.

“Never did I imagine that two years after attending my first Beyond the Conversation installment, I would be on stage interviewing one of these guests,” said Gonzalez, who previously interviewed “Hamilton” actor Daveed Diggs. “It was honestly an eye-opening moment and a full-circle moment.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF ASSOCIATED STUDENTS INC.

Tanya Gonzalez, CSUF graphic and interactive design student, interviewed award-winning actress Stephanie Beatriz.

# Mental

FROM PAGE 1

“At many colleges, the faculty and staff who see students in the counseling center don’t have the time to make the connections with the mental health programs out in the community,” said Crystal Bleicher, program director of Connect-OC, a Partners4Wellness project funded through the Orange County Health Care Agency. “That’s where we come in. ... Even today, there may be a stigma around visiting the counseling center. This is part of the reason we’re doing this out in the open Quad, where so many students pass through.”

Along with addressing this stigma, “A big part of this resource fair is to shed light on the importance of taking care of our mental health in a preventative fashion before it can become an issue of concern,” Gerali said.

This year’s Mental Health Resource Fair furnished more arts-related activities, thanks to student feedback from the three previous events. This included creating affirmation signs and friendship bracelets, as well as hope-stone painting.

“With hope stones, students paint an inspiring message on one side of a stone, like ‘You are enough,’ and on the other side is information about the National Crisis Hotline,” Bleicher said. “They can take the stone home or place it out in the community for someone else to find.”

“Making mental health a priority as part of a student’s to-do list can be very useful for their academic success,” Gerali said. “It’s part of their ability to manage the academic load that they have every semester. As a student years ago, I would’ve really appreciated knowing that taking care of my mental health is just as important as taking care of my physical health. We want students to understand that health is health, and mental is a part of that.”

The university and Connect-OC have worked together for years. “Cal State Fullerton has been one of the best relationships we’ve built,” Bleicher said. “They’ve been great to work with, and we’ve been able to grow this fair every single year. The management team there is fantastic and passionate about everything they do.

“And this year’s event was wonderful,” Bleicher added. “We received great feedback from students and staff, as well as the various mental health vendors, and we were joined by CSUF President Ronald Rochon, who walked the entire event and greeted all the attendees and resource organizations. It’s always great to have the support of leadership at these events and have them show recognition for the importance of access to mental health services for college students.”

Students can connect with CSUF’s Counseling and Psychological Services by calling 657-278-3040 or visiting fullerton.edu/caps. To learn more about Connect-OC, visit connect-oc.org.



PHOTO BY JEFF ANTENORE, CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

CSUF faculty counselor Solomon Massin, center, welcomes students Maria Estrada and Christian Barrientos.



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A collection of signs with encouraging and positive messages, available for students to take, hang on hooks at the Titan Affirmation Station.



PHOTO BY JEFF ANTENORE, CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

Abby Hunt, center, and Diamond Garcia, from the LGBTQ Center of Orange County, give information to CSUF student Clover Moshir during the 4th annual Student Mental Health Resource Fair, organized by Counseling and Psychological Services, in the Central Quad on April 22.



PHOTO BY JEFF ANTENORE, CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

CSUF students visit the Doggy Therapy tent, getting to spend some relaxing time with calming therapy dogs, provided by the Pet Prescription Team.



WOMEN'S GOLF

# Smith leans into pressure to capture Big West title

**By Brian Robin**  
*contributing writer*

It was almost unfair. At the same time, it was a fair example of Kaitlyn Zermeno Smith's ability to own the moment — whatever and wherever the moment.

During the second round of the Big West Women's Golf Championships, Zermeno Smith was standing behind a tree, lining up her second shot on the 18th hole at Spanish Trail Country Club in Las Vegas. CSUF golf coach Kathryn Hosch went up to her to discuss her options.

Zermeno Smith wasn't in the mood for discussion.

"She immediately said, 'I know I can work it between these two trees. Plus, I'm about to tie the school record, so I have to go for it.' I've never had another player who can think about where they are on the leaderboard and use it for motivation, rather than feeling the pressure," Hosch said. "Needless to say, she birdied the hole. It's so much fun to watch her in those moments."

Not if you're one of her opponents, paired with a player who can overpower golf courses with routine 290-plus-yard drives. And not if you're a rival conference golfer treated to the sight of Zermeno Smith rising from seemingly out of the clouds to win the Big West Individual Championship — largely on the strength of that second-round 65 that tied the program record.

Now, add this variable to the unsettled feeling equation. If it weren't for a decision seven years ago, Zermeno Smith wouldn't be dismantling golf courses up and down the West Coast. She wouldn't be destroying the will of golf opponents by sheer power matched by few, if any, of her counterparts. There would be a different Big West Women's Golf Player of the Year — likely teammate and 2024 Big West Player of the Year Davina Xanh, who finished second in her conference title defense to Zermeno Smith.

We'll get to that decision in a moment, because that's not the only twist in the road that made Zermeno Smith only the second Titans' women's golfer to win the Big West Conference title and the keystone to CSUF winning its first team championship in program history. Because if there's one thing more pronounced than Zermeno Smith's power, it's her persistence.

"We first became aware of Kaitlyn during the recruiting process because she was incredibly persistent with her emails," Hosch said. "She would update us after nearly every junior event she



PHOTO COURTESY CSUF NEWS MEDIA SERVICES

Kaitlyn Zermeno Smith is all smiles after winning the Big West Individual Championship.

played, and to be honest, I often read them without replying, which is pretty common, since our inboxes are flooded with recruiting messages. What really stood out to me, though, was how her scores steadily improved over time and, more importantly, her athleticism.

"At the time, we had already secured verbal commitments from a couple of experienced European players, so it made sense to take on a 'project' player. Normally, I'm hesitant to bring in players who are newer to the game because it takes a lot of time to develop them, and in college golf, we just don't have that luxury. But Kaitlyn was different. She had an extreme amount of speed and athletic ability — the kind of natural tools you simply can't teach."

Even then, Hosch remained noncommittal until literally the 11th hour. Cal State Los Angeles was hot on Zermeno Smith's trail and had an offer waiting for her, with a deadline to accept it. Zermeno Smith was blowing up Hosch's inbox — and getting nothing but crickets in return.

"On that day, I was praying about it. I needed a sign to know I was going to the right place," Zermeno Smith said. "I sent Coach Hosch another email that day saying, 'If you want me, speak now or forever hold your peace.' She sent a text, called me and offered me a position on the team. At 7 p.m. that night, I declined

Cal State L.A. and went to Cal State Fullerton."

Instead of defenestrating courses in the Division II California Collegiate Athletic Association, Zermeno Smith was a Division I golfer. And Hosch instantly understood and became very familiar with one of the eternal truths of golf: You can't teach a collegiate woman golfer to possess the kind of power Zermeno Smith brings to a golf course.

She regularly flirts with 300-yard drivers and is constrained only by the courses the Titans play and her own daily-improving short game. On many occasions, Zermeno Smith encounters obstacles off the tee accessible only to her, forcing her at times to put the driver away and hit 3-wood or long iron.

"Then, I'm back where everyone else is," she said.

To put Zermeno Smith's power into context, Julia Lopez Ramirez of Spain leads the LPGA in driving distance with an average drive on measured holes of 289.45 yards. Nelly Korda, the No. 1-ranked woman in the world, is ninth at nearly 279 yards, about what Zermeno Smith averaged her freshman year, when she barely got into tournaments.

That Zermeno Smith may have possessed elite distance. She also possessed less-than-elite skills on and around the green, which explained why she played in one event her freshman year — and that

as an individual.

"My putting and short game weren't great. I would say my putting and short game were well below average," she said. "I was the worst putter in Division I golf."

Extensive work with her personal coach, Perry Johnson, whom Zermeno Smith credits for understanding her fluid, changing swing and being able to instantly spot imperceptible changes in it, helped close the gap between her long and short games.

But there was more to it. Zermeno Smith has an innate ability to see several moves down the chessboard and understand the importance of her decisions — and their likely outcome.

Witness the decision she made at 14: the one that now has opponents throwing their hands in the air in resignation. Growing up in Covina, Zermeno Smith was a standout softball player, a power-hitting catcher who drew interest from Pac-12 schools as a high school freshman. To this day, Zermeno Smith swears she's a better softball player than she is a golfer.

But during her sophomore year of high school, she realized something that changed the trajectory of her life — and college future.

"With softball, there's nothing after college, and I knew for a fact I wanted to play a pro sport as a job and a career," she said. "I loved softball, but I ended up quitting. ... It was so hard. I had so many coaches telling me I could go Pac-12 in softball and go really far in it. And it was tough because I love being part of a team and playing for something other than myself. It was hard to give up softball and say goodbye to all my friends, but for the sake of my future and what I wanted to do, it was the best decision I could make."

Even with the late start, which delayed the recruiting process, Zermeno Smith saw golf as the right road ahead. She and Johnson just had to put the work in. Her natural ability to process information and shrug off pressure would do the rest.

"What makes Kaitlyn different is her ability to embrace pressure and competition — she thrives on it," Hosch said. "During her freshman year, it was almost comical. She was constantly challenging Davina Xanh to chipping contests, putting contests, closest-to-the-pin contests — anything. And honestly, she used to lose a lot. But she never gave up."

"Watching her compete — and lose — in all those little games might actually be the reason she's so comfortable in pressure situations today. ... Some of her best rounds, and even her best tournaments, have started off terribly. She is never out of it, and she knows it."



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