From Panic to Peace
Chari Hawkins’ Olympic Dream Nears Reality
Do you miss Utah State?
We miss you!

We’re collecting fun facts and updates on our Aggies and we want to hear from you!
We have so much to share — whether you’re hoping to network with fellow alumni, you’d like to get an invitation to an alumni chapter event, or you’re just wondering what’s new at your alma mater, we’ll keep you in the know.

Create Your Aggie Impact by supporting USU’s mental health support funds today at give.usu.edu/mentalhealth.

Scan the QR code to learn more.

COMMUNICATION FROM CANTWELL //

Cultivating A Brighter Future

The topic of mental health and well-being is truly multifaceted, and it’s more crucial than ever to shed light on it positively. We’re living in a dynamic era where it’s understandable to feel anxious amidst the various challenges we encounter daily. Yet, amidst these challenges, there’s an opportunity for growth and resilience.

On college campuses, where the vibrancy of student life intersects with the pressures of academia, we’ve seen a rise in mental health concerns by nearly 50% in the past decade. However, this is not a struggle exclusive to students — it affects our entire community, including faculty, staff, and alumni. At Utah State, we’re dedicated to utilizing all available resources to empower our Aggie Family and beyond to embrace resilience and take charge of their own paths to happiness and wellness.

Despite the complexities of the world around us, it’s essential to consciously cultivate moments of joy and gratitude daily. Even the smallest acts of reflection can have profound positive effects on our mental wellbeing. Through the experiences, resources, and insights shared within these pages, we aim to foster resilience and showcase the remarkable efforts being made by the Utah State University community to tackle mental health challenges head-on. Together, we can navigate these complexities and create a brighter, healthier future for all.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Cantwell
President, Utah State University

Help Our Community Thrive

From individual counseling and group therapy sessions, to crisis intervention support, Utah State University offers a range of mental health services tailored to the diverse needs of students, faculty, staff, and members of our surrounding communities.

A contribution to one of USU’s mental health support funds directly impacts the well-being of our community, creating a supportive environment where everyone can readily access essential resources to navigate life’s challenges and thrive.

Create Your Aggie Impact by supporting USU mental health services today at give.usu.edu/mentalhealth.

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Photo by Levi Sim.
You Are Not Alone

It’s been 21 years since I graduated high school (about out Sky View Bobcats!), and during my senior year I discovered I had a herniated disc in my lower back at my L5S1 vertebrae. There was no single moment I know of where the injury happened, but as I geared up for my senior year of track, persistent pain through my sciatic nerve and down my right leg led me get an MRI and ultimately discover the injury.

Following the diagnosis, I embarked on a rehab journey that included a lot of physical therapy and multiple epidural injections into my spine. Unfortunately, I couldn’t compete in track that spring as I recovered — a disappointment since we were returning the majority of our 4x100 meter relay team that had taken seventh in state the year prior. However, I was able to more or less return to normal activity without major pain or issues.

After high school, I planned on serving a mission for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and spent nearly all of the next nine weeks of language training required for that mission in Provo at the Missionary Training Center, but the herniated disc flared up and instead of traveling to Germany with the group I’d been training with, I returned home to take care of my back.

I had more epidural injections, visited with specialists, and eventually had surgery — a microdiscectomy — in January of 2004. It’s been a long journey, but I’ve been able to get back to some level of activity and competition. The key has been consistent rehabilitation and a focus on staying active.

Photos by Levi Sim.

20 // Cover Story
From Panic to Peace: Chari Hawkins’ Olympic Dream Nears Reality

How the former Aggie All-American addressed years of panic attacks, embraced her true self, and put herself in position to achieve her dreams one step — or bit — at a time.

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On the Cover: Former Utah State Track & Field athlete Chari Hawkins recently represented the United States at the World Athletic Outdoor Championships in Hungary and the World Athletic Indoor Championships in Scotland, and now has her sights set on the Paris Olympics this summer. Photo by Levi Sim.
The Utah State University men’s basketball 2023–24 season was one of the most improbable in all of college basketball. Not only were the Aggies breaking in a new coach, but the team didn’t return a single player that scored a point during the previous season and welcomed 13 new players total.

Picked in the preseason to finish ninth in the Mountain West, the Aggies instead finished first with a league-best 14–4 record to secure USU’s first-ever outright regular season championship in the conference. At one point, Utah State even boasted the nation’s longest winning streak, reeling off 15 consecutive victories.

The Aggies clinched the league crown on March 10 in thrilling fashion, as senior guard Darius Brown II buried a contested 3-pointer as the shot clock expired — and only 4 seconds remained in the game — to break a tie with the New Mexico Lobos and propel USU to an 87–85 victory. Following the win, Utah State’s famous 3,600-member student section, the HURD, stormed the court to celebrate the victory.

The Aggies had claimed a share of the regular season Mountain West championship in 2019, as well as back-to-back MW Tournament Championships in 2019 and ’20, but this was their first outright conference regular season title since USU was a member of the Western Athletic Conference, winning four consecutive regular season titles from 2008–11 under legendary coach Stew Morrill.

Though USU fell in the semifinals of the Mountain West tournament, the magical season continued as Utah State earned its first NCAA tournament victory in 23 years with a resounding victory, 88–72, over TCU in the first round before falling to eventual national runner-up, Purdue, in the second round of the tournament.
Standing on an Aggie blue carpet, surrounded by dozens of championship trophies, awards, and basketball nets his teams cut down during his 17 years as the head coach at Utah State, Stew Morrill’s eyes suddenly locked in on a particular part of the floor of the Dee Glen Smith Spectrum about 15 feet away.

“I spent a lot of time over in that spot,” Morrill said, gesturing towards the coach’s box area of the Spectrum sideline. “A lot of time” would be an understatement.

While it’s impossible to calculate exactly how much time the winningest coach in USU history spent on or near the Aggies’ bench, considering that he coached 280 games at the Spectrum during his tenure, that adds up to well over 13,000 minutes. Thrown in countless hours of practice time, and it’s hard to argue anyone has spent more time than him on the floor of the Spectrum. And now his name is literally on it.

During the weekend of Feb. 9–10, the USU Athletic Department hosted Morrill, his wife, Vicki, and the couple’s four children — along with their families — as the university officially designated the basketball floor at the Spectrum as Stew Morrill Court.

Utah State’s winningest men’s basketball coach, Morrill made the honor all but inevitable after guiding the Aggies to 402 total victories between being hired on Aug. 7, 1998, and his retirement at the end of the 2014–15 season. But it still took a substantial fundraising effort by deputy athletic director Jerry Bovee to make it a reality. Backed by longtime USU boosters Jim and Carol Laub — along with other donors — Bovee kicked off the effort last spring while serving as interim athletic director. The campaign brought in well over $2 million to help fund the project and aid the Aggie basketball program.

“It’s really an honor to be involved with this, and really I’d like to thank Jerry Bovee because it was his vision, and he really completed the task,” USU athletic director Diana Sabau said.

Morrill’s big weekend began with a private unveiling for him and his family at the Spectrum on Feb. 9. After coming down the Aggies’ tunnel, he was greeted by four tables’ worth of hardware from his coaching tenure at USU. The 71-year-old Provo native then stood off to the side as two of his grandchildren pulled back a cloth covering his signature in blue, which now sits at midcourt just below the U-State logo.

“It’s like nothing I’ve ever felt before,” Morrill said with a grin. “When I’m long gone and my grandkids turn on the TV and Utah State’s playing, unless they sand that thing off, they’ll be able to see their grandpa and it’s his name on the court, and that’s pretty dang special.”

On Feb. 10, Morrill reconvened with many of his former players during lunch at the West Stadium Center. He was then honored in front of a sellout crowd at the Spectrum that night during halftime of the Aggies’ game against Boise State, a contest which, thanks to Tim Duryea and Larry Eustachy’s inclusion on the BSU coaching staff, also led to a brief gathering of seven total Aggie coaches: Danny Sprinkle (2023–24), Duryea (2016–18), Eustachy (1994–98), Kohn Smith (1989–93), Rod Tueller (1980–88), Dutch Belnap (1974–79), and, of course, Morrill.

Flanked by his family while more than 60 former Aggies lined up along the sideline, the winningest coach in USU history took the microphone and thanked the older USU fans “for remembering me” and the student section “for pretending to remember me.” The driving force behind seven conference titles, six postseason championships and USU’s 2001 NCAA Tournament victory then thanked his family, former players and assistant coaches, and the current USU administration before sharing the details of a recent “dream” with the crowd.

“I was walking on campus, and this guy says, ‘Is that the old Aggie coach?’” he recalled. “And the other guy says, ‘No, he’s dead.’”

As the crowd erupted in laughter, Morrill proclaimed: “Well, I am still alive. And I am still an Aggie.”
It’s a bluebird day in Cache Valley. One of those winter days beloved by skiers and snowboarders when the skies are blue and clear, and the sun is shining brightly the morning after a snowstorm.

And inside of Blake Anderson’s office on the east side of the Jim and Carol Laub Athletics Complex, Utah State’s head football coach realizes that on this day the glare coming through the large window behind his desk might be a little too much to handle due to the pristine blanket of snow covering Merlin Olsen Field at Maverik Stadium.

“Sometimes when the sun’s out, and it’s glaring off the snow, it gets too bright in here,” Anderson notes as he pulls the blinds partially closed.

“But I love looking out at the field when it’s just untouched snow that no one has walked on yet.”

And like that unblemished field of white outside his window, Anderson also viewed coming to Cache Valley as a blank canvas when he was hired in December 2020. He was hoping for a fresh start personally and professionally following a painful period when he lost his wife, Wendy, to breast cancer in August 2019, and his father, Scotty Anderson, nine months later.

Previously the head coach at Arkansas State, Anderson guided the Red Wolves to one of their biggest wins ever, a 35-31 victory at Kansas State in September 2020. But soon after, COVID-19 hit the team hard, forcing the program to cancel its ensuing two games. Anderson also caught the virus, losing nearly 120 pounds before finally fighting it off as Arkansas State wrapped up a disappointing 4-7 season.

Despite those struggles, former USU athletic director John Hartwell liked what he saw in Anderson, who won 51 games in seven seasons in Jonesboro, and hired the Texas native as the Aggies’ next head coach. And somehow, during recruiting and getting ready for spring practices, Anderson also found the time to marry Brittany King, a woman he met at his church in Arkansas. At the time of their meeting, Brittany was mourning the loss of her mother, Mary DeClerk, who, at the age of 62, had died just 12 days after Wendy.

“I think it’s been really good for me,” Anderson said during an interview in June 2021. “It’s been great, personally. The change of pace that I was hoping it would be. I still have bad days like anybody, but it’s about starting to create new memories, and just starting to create good, positive thoughts and relationships. That’s really what I was looking for.”

Anderson’s new beginning in Logan also paid off professionally during the 2021 season, when the Aggies won at Washington State in their season opener and kept on rolling. Picked to finish fifth in the Mountain Division, Utah State won its side of the Mountain West, defeated No. 19 San Diego State in the conference championship, and upended Oregon State, 24-13, in the Jimmy Kimmel LA Bowl on its way to an 11-3 season.

“Following his wife’s death after an arduous battle with cancer, Blake Anderson left Jonesboro, Arkansas, for a fresh start in Logan. In his inaugural season he led Utah State to its first Mountain West Conference championship and found happiness off the field as well, getting married. However, a little more than a year into his tenure, it all came crashing down again with the death of his son, Cason. Photo by Jeff Hunter.”
“I felt different here. It was a fresh start and a breath of fresh air for me, and I think for her and the girls, too. And you can't write a script any better than to go win a championship the first year.”

Anderson then adds quietly. “But all that came crashing down.”

Just as it appeared Anderson’s “fresh start” was even better in reality than he could have envisioned, that untouched snow was trod upon one late February day. The sun disappeared once again, its warmth and light cruelly replaced by the return of an aching darkness.

Shock Beyond Words

By all accounts, 2021 was a pretty good year for the Anderson family. And to celebrate, Blake went back to Texas to spend New Year’s Eve with his mother, Donna, his brother, Bryan — who died on April 20, 2024 after a battle with Stage 4 colon cancer — and the rest of his family at a river house near Austin. Bryan, who was working as a welder for Bryan’s Vegas work or not.

In September 2022, the USU Athletic Department created the Robert Cason Anderson Mental Health and Wellness Fund to provide increased counseling services, educational opportunities, and training and programming for student-athletes, coaches, and support staff. Photo courtesy of the Anderson family.

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“Then we lost him that weekend sometime after late Friday night.”

Mental Health Matters

Losing Wendy at the age of 49 came incrementally. It was two years from the time she was diagnosed with breast cancer until her passing became following a valiant fight. Losing Cason was very different. It was terribly abrupt and unimaginable.

“Cancer is a really, really tough battle to watch, and so just the thought of losing a child or a sibling to suicide in your mind is really not fair,” Anderson says. Anderson says neither he nor his children saw any signs of Cason’s mental struggles, but that his son had “demons I could not see.” Somewhere beneath his quick wit and happy demeanor around his family and friends was something that Cason tragically viewed as too much to overcome.

“Blake came home that day, and I didn’t say much because I didn’t even know what to say other than, ‘Have you ever known a family that has endured this much this quick?’” Brittany remembers.

“We kind of just sat there and cried until it was time to have to get up and do something. ‘It felt almost like a movie because only in movies do you see ridiculous storylines like that. Some good things and some bad things, all within three years.’

Following Cason’s funeral in Andersen’s hometown of Hubbard, Texas, Blake and Brittany drove Cason’s truck back to Utah. Brittany says that difficult trip ended up being somewhat therapeutic as they had time to discuss how to navigate the impact of another tragedy. It was also spring break at USU when they returned to Cache Valley, which meant things were a little quieter when Anderson got back on campus and the couple turned much of their focus towards moving into their new home in Hyde Park.

Over the next few months, Anderson didn’t talk much about Cason’s death publicly. But that changed in late September 2022 when he released a video through USU Athletics telling Cason’s story as a part of Suicide Awareness Prevention Month.

“Mental health matters,” he continued. “I encourage you, if you or someone you know is suffering, step up, speak out and do everything you can to help them find the resources they need. Staying silent is too costly. I pray that those that are listening — if you’re hurting — that you won’t wait.”

The video was incredibly powerful, and its impact was felt right away, including inside the Aggie football program. Thanks to Anderson being open about an extremely painful subject, some
It’s possible to stop it before it gets to that point, and we’ve got to do everything we can to keep it from happening.”

Joy Comes with the Morning

The Utah State Athletic Department announced in September 2022 the establishment of a special fund in memory of Cason. The Robert Cason Anderson Mental Health and Wellness Fund was created to, “provide enhancements to the USU Athletic Department’s mental health and wellness program through the Robert Cason Anderson Fund will help increase awareness and tackle the stigma surrounding mental health challenges, while offering greater support to Aggie student-athletes.”

As Brittany points out in the ESPN segment, with Anderson’s position as head coach of the Aggies, he interacts with more student-athletes, coaches, and support staff. Continuing to develop USU’s mental health and wellness program through the Robert Cason Anderson Fund will help increase awareness and tackle the stigma surrounding mental health challenges, while offering greater support to Aggie student-athletes.

That means Anderson is looking at his players just a bit differently as he prepares for his fourth season at the helm of the USU football program.

“I just keep reminding myself and my staff that we have to be available, we’ve got to be open,” Anderson says. “And we’ve got to be willing to stop football and do life, and let these guys know that if they need us, man, we’re here.”

“I didn’t do a good job with that before, I really didn’t. I was like a lot of guys who just want to focus on the job, dust yourself off and keep moving forward, even when I was struggling myself. That’s why the grief of losing Wendy and my dad, I probably did a poor job of self-care.”

But now Anderson, who turned 55 in March, has something else to look forward to just before the start of fall camp in late summer. He says when he and Brittany first became a couple, they talked about the possibility of adding to their blended family, but that he felt he was “done” after losing Cason. However, after losing Cason, Anderson says his heart was “softened a little more,” and he prayed about it and “asked God what was really right for us.”

Ultimately, the decision was a painful one for Anderson — mostly because it required a vasectomy reversal.

“I wouldn’t advise to anybody,” he says with a smile while shaking his head. “It’s not for me.”

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Utah’s farmers, producers, and agricultural workers grapple with challenges often beyond their control — unpredictable weather, financial strains due to fluctuating commodity prices, labor shortages, relationship complexities, and the delicate balance between work and family life, which are often intertwined. Compounding these difficulties is a general reluctance to talk about mental health challenges, further jeopardizing their overall well-being.

Statistics from the National Rural Health Association show that agricultural workers are at a higher risk for mental health stressors, causing a suicide rate 3.5 times higher than the general population. Josh Dallin, a Utah State University Extension associate professor and rancher himself, says USU Extension is acutely aware of the challenges faced by those in the agricultural community.

In 2020, the Agricultural Wellness Program (AgWellness) was established to provide education, support, and mental health resources for farmers, ranchers, and their families.

In partnership with the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food, AgWellness offers the Mental Health Assistance program, which connects farmers who need mental health support to local therapists. The program provides up to $2,000 per person through a voucher system to cover behavioral health care appointments and services (outpatient, virtual, or hospital) for Utah farmers and their immediate family members. They can receive help for anxiety, depression, attention deficit disorder, bipolar disorder, grief, insomnia, mood swings, panic attacks, post-traumatic stress disorder, relationship challenges, stress, substance use disorders, and many other conditions.

Dallin says in 2023, the vouchers helped around 250 individuals statewide, covered over 1,600 therapy appointments, and paid approximately $263,000 in behavioral health expenses. The funding supported things such as admission to behavioral health centers, family therapy and counseling for farm succession planning, substance use disorder recovery, weekly therapy visits for anxiety and depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder treatment from farm-related work injuries.

“The biggest takeaway here is that those who have sought help have seen a big difference in their lives,” Dallin says. “Our office is getting 10–20 calls a week about the vouchers, and we are optimistic that we will be able to find the funding to continue helping those in need. In the meantime, the Extension AgWellness website includes information on other helpful programs we have available, including a podcast and two online courses.”

AgWellness team members have been astounded by the response from those in the agricultural community who need help. The program became so popular that, as of December 2023, federal grant money for the mental health care vouchers unfortunately ran out. Dallin says the program is seeking other funding sources, including state funding, private donations, and additional grant options.

Sadie Wilde, USU Extension assistant professor and a member of the AgWellness team, often fields calls for the program. She says it has been incredible but also heartbreaking to hear the stories of those who finally mustered the courage to reach out.

“I think everyone on our team has shed tears over the touching stories and thank you letters from individuals and families we have had the privilege of supporting this year,” she says. “We have also had some close-call situations, including someone who had a suicide plan for the very evening they called in. We know this program has saved lives this year, and I am so grateful to be part of such a meaningful effort.”

As part of their education, AgWellness team members participated in a mental health first aid training course that provided suicide prevention education.

When Dallin participated, he felt like the information was helpful, and he hoped it would be useful to those in attendance. But in the back of his mind, he didn’t think he would personally ever use it. He felt like things were going well
in his life and in the lives of those close to him. But two weeks later, everything changed.

"I was visiting my parents, and my little brother, who is very successful and has a lot of great things going for him, sat across the room from me," Dallin recalls. "To my shock, he told me he had contemplated suicide and didn't want to live anymore. I had absolutely no idea. It turns out he had been suffering for years, and he knew something was wrong, but he didn't want to admit it.

"Little did I know that all the things I learned from that training were going to come into play, and they were coming quickly. Questions I needed to ask him, how I should respond — they were readily available to me because of that training. This started a movement for me personally, just because it hit so close to home. I thought, 'If my brother is one of those people I had no idea about, then how many other people's brothers and sisters and moms and dads are also struggling?'"

Dallin says they learned his brother had a traumatic brain injury earlier in his life, and something physical was causing his issues. He finally got the proper treatment and is doing well. In fact, he became an ambassador, trying to help break the stigma and encouraging people to reach out for help if they feel something is wrong.

"If you had a tractor run over your foot and break it, you'd definitely go to the doctor," Dallin says. "You'd wear a boot, you'd wear a cast, you'd do whatever you had to, to fix it. But for whatever reason, a lot of people don't think the same way when it comes to their mental health. They feel ashamed or embarrassed and don't consider getting help for these issues as they would for physical health issues. But we have to realize that the more we talk about it, the more normal it will become to seek help. Our AgWellness program has multiple resources to help encourage people to open up and share."

The AgWellness Podcast explores mental health in farming and ranching communities. Podcast moderators Dallin and Jacob Hadfield, also a USU Extension assistant professor, share stories about the impact of mental health challenges and provide information about where to obtain resources. The AgWellness podcast website includes 13 episodes.

In addition, there are two free online courses. Through self-guided learning modules, the AgWellness Course helps participants learn skills to manage stress and improve well-being. The Mental Health Awareness and Advocacy for Ag Course helps participants identify mental health concerns, locate community resources, develop skills to identify someone experiencing a mental health challenge and refer that person to the appropriate resources. Dallin and Hadfield have also taught "The Biggest Asset is YOU," a class they've delivered 20 times to groups around the state.

"We are excited to be part of this program and see the positive changes it can make for those in agriculture who need mental health assistance," Hadfield says. "Though many in the ag community perceive it as a weakness to admit they are struggling, it is just the opposite. Having the ability to admit we need help is truly a strength."

For further information about the program and resources, visit the Extension AgWellness website. In addition, those wishing to donate to the program can visit the USU giving website.
Chari Hawkins clearly remembers the day in February 2019 when she realized she could no longer just “live” with her panic attacks and anxiety. By that point, it was something the former Utah State University All-American heptathlete had battled with during every competition for nearly a decade. However, this particular episode—which took place at the 2019 USA Track & Field Indoor Championships in Staten Island, New York—was one of the worst yet. She was hyperventilating, losing her vision, sobbing uncontrollably, and couldn’t think straight. She describes it as a “full-blown breakdown.”

After the meet, where Hawkins ultimately recorded a DNF (Did Not Finish) due to only competing in four of the five pentathlon events, something finally snapped and she told her parents, “I’m done with this.” At first, they thought she meant her track and field career, but she was referring to the panic attacks. “I decided that I’m going to get over this, I’m going to figure this out,” Hawkins recalls. “I actually said that statement in New York City in 2019 to my parents. It was a declarative statement, and I said, ‘I am done with it.’ I looked them in the eyes, and I said, ‘I will not cry or panic, and I’m going to figure out what’s going on with me mentally. I’m not doing this anymore.’”

The declaration was her first step. Her second step was to start asking questions. She asked friends, coaches, other athletes, people she didn’t know, anyone who would listen. And through those questions, she discovered two things that really hit home for her. One, she wasn’t alone—far from it in fact—and two, she was negatively basing her self-worth on her performance as an athlete.

“I realized that I had put so much of my value as a human being on my performance. That I was basically gambling my worth as a human every time I competed. I mean, who wouldn’t have a panic attack? If you don’t do well, you’re no longer worthy as a human. That’s the story that I was telling myself, and I had no idea that was the story I was telling myself,” Hawkins says. “So, then I was like, ‘Wow, OK, I’m going to take one step forward every day. I’m going to remind myself that win, lose, or draw, I’m worthy.’”

Hawkins has always had talent, but it was a focus on her mental state, not her physical strength, that helped her move into the top 10 in the world rankings. 

By Timothy R. Olsen ’09, ’18 M.B.A.
One Step, Or Bite, At a Time

Hawkins has a favorite example for how she approaches obstacles in her life, an example she uses as a metaphor for many things. As she recounts, she was looking to park at a grocery store on a busy day and all the spots were filled. Finally, annoyed, she found a spot in the very back and started the long walk to the store entrance. While walking, though, she explains she had an epiphany:

“Despite the long walk and the annoyance of not finding a closer parking spot, she more or less kept moving as though she had to do was keep moving to make progress toward her goal. “I think that’s true with any single thing you want to accomplish, no matter how far it looks, really just taking the first step forward,” Hawkins says. “Making one bite at a time happen — that’s how you’re going to eventually reach your goal.”

She relayed this story while “cleaning the sink” at Angie’s restaurant in Logan during USU’s Homecoming weekend this past fall, hence the “one bite at a time” reference.

Regardless of whether she’s measuring by steps or spoonfuls, though, the 33-year-old is on the cusp of reaching her Olympic bid. This past August she was selected to represent Team USA at the World Athletics Championships in Budapest, Hungary, representing the United States at the World Athletics Indoor Championships in Glasgow, Scotland, in March, and at the Olympic trials in Eugene, Oregon, from June 21–30.

“Establishing Value
Three months after her February 2019 Olympic trials, Hawkins found herself in Austria for an international competition that was, at that time, the biggest stage she’d competed on in her career. During those three months — along with her regular training — she’d spent time researching anxiety and panic attacks, asking questions of others, and building a positive relationship with herself.

On the day of the meet, she says she promised herself that regardless of the outcome, she would remember her value as a person outside athletic competition, and remind herself that her accolades were not a reflection of her self-worth.

The outcome? “I’m going to be honest. I think I jumped better in high school than I jumped in the high jump as a professional athlete that day,” Hawkins remembers with a laugh. “I didn’t clear the bar and I shrugged my shoulders and I laughed. I came back to the other girls and I was like, ‘Well, that’ll get ya,’ and they all started laughing.”

But it’s what happened next that really cemented in Hawkins’ mind that she was on the right path. She was approached by Katarina Johnson-Thompson — at the time Hawkins’ idol, now one of her best friends, and the reigning heptathlon world champion. She says “KTJ” told her that she really admired Hawkins’ attitude after hanging off her high jump struggles and that the reaction was “refreshing.”

“It was this lightning strike in my body and in my soul. That was an ‘aha’ moment for me. I felt like I just fought for myself, I just did the worst I’ve done since high school and somebody whom I admire is telling me that they admire me,” Hawkins recalls.

“It really showed me that performance had absolutely nothing to do with my value as a human being. I’d worked really hard on practicing that my value has nothing to do with my performance, and I was just shown all the things that I was practicing this whole time. It shifted a lot for me.”

It’s been a little more than five years since Hawkins made her declarative statement in New York. It has not, however, been five years since her last panic attack — something she thinks is important to

“Sic Parvis Magna
Sic Parvis Magna is a Latin phrase that means “greatness from small beginnings,” and that’s exactly how USU track and field head coach Matt Ingebritsen describes Hawkins. He was Hawkins’ throwing coach while she was competing for the Aggies from 2011–15 and says he knew USU had something special shortly after she joined the program in 2010. Hawkins made an immediate impact at USU, winning her first conference title as a freshman. Photo courtesy of Utah State University Athletics.

Hawkins made an immediate impact at USU, winning her first conference title as a freshman. Photo courtesy of Utah State University Athletics.

Along with her work ethic and coachability, Ingebritsen notes, Hawkins’ positive attitude and desire to learn have been instrumental to her success — even if that positivity would sometimes lapse into playfulness. One of his favorite stories to tell about Hawkins is when they were at an indoor meet in Boise, Idaho, waiting for her turn to compete. Ingebritsen remembers she was holding a shot put and he told her to drop it and just roll it forward with her feet to avoid burning unnecessary energy. Chari did indeed drop the shot, but then proceeded to kick it rather forcefully across the track.

“I was like, ‘Ok, it’s going to be one of those kinds of days,’” Ingebritsen recalls with a chuckle.

“I think that her work ethic is unbeatable. All our kids’ work ethic has been really good, but she has an unbelievable work ethic,” Bill says. “And the other thing is that she’s very, very coachable. I mean, I think sometimes to a fault. But she is, very, very coachable.”

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I will give my all every single time because that’s what a lionness does.” — Chari Hawkins

Becoming a Lioness

Studies have shown that a lion hunting on its own only triumphs in its pursuit of prey about 20% of the time. That means the majority of its hunts, roughly 8 out of every 10, is a failure. An avid watcher of nature documentaries, this stat jumped into Hawkins’ mind when her sports psychologist started talking to her about adapting the mentality of a lion.

She says the original message was more about being aggressive, assertive, the king of the jungle in competition. And while that message was well-received, she says it was her own interpretation of the message that really hit home.

“I made this connection of when you’re approaching life, and you’re approaching competition, and even practice. I’m here to win every time. When a lion hunts, they give their all because they don’t know when that 20% is going to be, and they don’t think about that, they give their all every time. But they can be patient … because they don’t need to win 100% of the battles,” Hawkins explains.

“For me, I want to approach my competitions, and honestly life, in this way: I will give my all every single time because that’s what a lioness does. But if everything doesn’t work out perfectly well, I am still going to survive. So, it doesn’t need to be a fight-or-flight, life-or-death situation.”

Between the panic attacks, self-doubt, poor metrics for measuring self-worth, and injuries, the transformation into a lionness has been a slow process. Part of that process has included working with Sheila Burrell, the current San Diego State University track and field head coach.

A former two-time Olympian, competing in the heptathlon in the 2000 and 2004 games, and a five-time U.S. National Champion in that same event, Burrell says when she first began working with Hawkins during the 2018–19 season that she had to repeatedly tell Chari to just be herself and “stop trying to be special.”

Burrell says when she first started working with Hawkins, she was trying to be special all the time. A mindset that, ultimately, was holding her back. Through their time working together, Burrell says Hawkins is now much more comfortable in her own skin and more trusting of her own talent.

“I think she accepted that she’s not like everyone else and that her path and her journey are not like anyone else’s,” Burrell says. “And once she embraced that, it just got a lot easier for her.”

“She embraced the hardships of [training]. She embraced the challenges of it. And she fought for every little thing,” Burrell recalls. “You have to realize that Chari was never anybody’s favorite. She was never the ‘it’ girl, never the one to pick, but she was always there.”

And now through that training, through overcoming pain and adversity — both mentally and physically — Hawkins is on the cusp of accomplishing something she’s dreamed of for two decades. No matter what happens, though, whether the hunt ends in success or failure, this lioness has developed the skills to handle whatever the future holds.

“That’s what happens with life is we go through hard things — we learn and we get wiser and we get better and we grow. Every opportunity for us to feel some sort of emotion that’s going to make us better and make us more resilient, is a time that we’re going to get better,” Hawkins says. “There are so many times where I take deep breaths knowing that I’m having a really hard time, thinking I am honored for the resistance that I have right now. Because I know resistance, just like physical strength training, makes you stronger.”
Center of Attention:

USU’s Sorenson Center for Clinical Excellence is a Resource for the Entire State

By Timothy R. Olsen ’09, ’18 M.B.A.

Mental health concerns are on the rise across the United States throughout all demographics. Data from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System shows nearly 16% of adults nationwide report “frequent mental distress” — a more than 4% increase since 2017.

Those percentages are even higher in Utah, especially amongst women, as more than 20% reported their mental health was not good for 14 or more days in the past 30 — the baseline measurement for frequent mental health distress.

And, while there are myriad factors that affect a person’s mental health, the Sorenson Legacy Foundation Center for Clinical Excellence at Utah State University, through its integration of research, academic, and clinical services is working to understand those factors better while also providing insight and treatment.

“We study these things as isolated incidences, so we can understand them. But I don’t believe I’ve ever worked with somebody who had just one thing going on,” says Sara Boghosian, a clinical assistant professor in USU’s psychology department. “Either there are big ripple effects from one thing — so now we’ve got a bunch of little fires to put out in addition to the big fire — or more often, there’s just multiple things that are going on.”

Boghosian, who is originally from California, received her doctoral degree from USU in 2011 and then returned to the university as an employee in 2015.

Though the center, which opened in 2018, is located on Utah State University’s Logan campus and housed within the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services, it doesn’t only cater to students. While it is a training facility for graduate students within various disciplines — marriage and family therapy, speech language pathology, audiology, psychology, and social work, amongst others — those students are closely supervised by knowledgeable and experienced faculty.

“I think maybe not everyone realizes that we’re a community-facing clinical services building. We’re not here just for students — students can come here, but that’s not really our mission. Our mission is to provide services to the community of Cache Valley, and actually to the state of Utah, because we can do telehealth … most of our services can be done wherever you are in the state.”

Illustration by Elizabeth Lord ’04.
Chronic Pain: Not A Day At The Beach

A native of Germany, Maria Kleinstaeuber has spent more than a decade studying the line between mental and physical health and applies both a clinical and health psychology perspective in her current role as assistant professor in the Combined Clinical and Counseling Psychology Ph.D. program at USU.

Her main area of focus is Somatic Symptom Disorders or SSD, which is the phenomenon of having difficulties adjusting to persistent physical symptoms, such as chronic pain or tinnitus (constant ringing or buzzing in the ears), and then developing psychological distress as a reaction to that persistent discomfort.

Kleinstaeuber says she and her team have been doing a lot of research on the process or lifecycle of a symptom as it moves from being an acute occurring symptom to a persistent and disabling one. She says not a lot is known about that process as the moment, but they’re trying to identify factors early in the symptom-developing process that will help predict how people will do later.

“For patients, it’s really so important to understand that pain itself is the phenomenon that actually develops in our brain,” Kleinstaeuber says. “And then not just considering the brain as there is one pain center, very simplistic, but within the brain we have a complexity of different centers that are constantly in interaction with each other … like our emotion center, or the center of our brain that triggers the stress response, and so on. That directly connects with the rest of the body and makes it clear there are so many points where somebody can address the pain through their complexity.”

Put simply, while the aching in your lower back from a herniated disc might be the big splash you see when you throw a rock into the still water of a pond, the ripples that go out from a herniated disc might be the big splash you see when you throw a rock into the still water of a pond, the ripples that go out to everyone else is engaging with each other and their surroundings. They’re enjoying the day at the lake while you’re there, wrestling with that beach ball.

“That’s what it is to try to hold pain at bay, be it emotional pain or physical pain,” Boghosian exhorts. “You just miss so much, right? And you start to view your body as the enemy, and you stop listening to it completely or you become hypervigilant to cues from your body and find yourself responding in ineffective ways.”

Eating Disorders: Learning To Listen To Your Body

There are a variety of common stereotypes that accompany eating disorders. Categorizing those struggling with anorexia nervosa as extremely underweight or those dealing with bulimia nervosa, or binge-eating disorder, as very overweight are just a few examples of those common misconceptions.

However, in reality, it doesn’t play out that way. Those extremes are more often the exception than the rule says Rachel Rood (’92, ’94), a registered dietitian who works in the Sorenson Center’s Behavioral Health Clinic, but also operates her own private practice.

“I’ve seen people at normal weights with binge eating disorder and I’ve seen people at normal weights with pretty severe, restrictive, anorexic behaviors. Different bodies respond to food behaviors differently,” she says. “I think it’s really more about focusing on the person’s relationship with their food and their bodies.”

Rood, who spent more than 12 years as the lead dietitian at a residential eating disorder treatment facility, says one of the side effects of dealing with eating disorders that doesn’t get talked about enough is the affect they have on relationships. She points out that most social gatherings involve some kind of food element, which can lead to social avoidance or isolation for those dealing with eating disorders or unhealthy relationships with food.

While eating disorders have long been a struggle, Boghosian, who, like Rood, specializes in that area, says she’s noticed an increase in a specific type over the past few years, largely due to social media.

Orthorexia nervosa — though not listed as an official diagnosis in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders — can best be described as an obsession with healthy eating and its associated restrictive behaviors. Boghosian says that though eating disorders have always generally affected all demographics, orthorexia used to be most predominant in wealthier neighborhoods. However, with the ease of access to social media and the rise of influencer culture, those barriers have been broken.

“You just have so much more access to folks who are talking about stuff that isn’t very science-based and it’s kind of cloaked as wellness,” Boghosian laments. “I’m very, very worried about the influencer wellness community, because I think what’s being recommended, really, really appeals to someone who has a predisposition to develop anorexia. Food is kind of branded as both the solution to all the ills of the world in those communities, but also as kind of the devil.”

Both Boghosian and Rood advocate for intuitive eating, an approach popularized in the mid-’90s by Evelyn Tribole and Elysiyth Resch and their book Intuitive Eating: A Revolutionary Program That Works. While there are 10 principles in the book, Rood says the two overarching principles are to eat consistently to avoid getting overly hungry, but then to stop eating once your body reaches “gentle fullness.”

“While this idea sounds simple on the surface, Rood says there are a variety of reasons people might not get consistent hunger or fullness cues. Because of this, people have to learn to be attuned to their bodies, which can take some time and practice.

“I think the biggest thing is people think, ‘Well, that won’t work for me. If I left myself have whatever I want I’ll eat too much. I’ll eat too much of the wrong things,’” Rood says. “People think, ‘Well, if I eat more often during the day, I’m going to eat way too much.’ Right? But when we’re eating, we’re just getting hungrier, it’s much easier to stop at gentle fullness rather than if we don’t eat all day and we’re ravenous when we get home. And that’s what I see a lot of.”

These areas of focus: chronic pain and tinnitus, eating disorders, perfectionism — are just a small window into the Sorenson Center’s offerings.

Located on USU’s Logan Campus, the Sorenson Center for Clinical Excellence has the ability to serve clients throughout the state of Utah. Sara Boghosian (left) and Maria Kleinstaeuber (right) are two of the USU professors who oversee work within the Center. Photo by Levi Sim.
Perfectionism: Solutions Through Acceptance And Commitment Therapy

Korena Klimczak and Marissa Donahue are both graduate students at USU working towards a degree in the Combined Clinical and Counseling Psychology Ph.D. program. The duo constitutes 20% of the 10-student cohort of the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) Research Group.

That group is dedicated to research, training, and clinical services based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which is a form of psychological intervention that uses acceptance and mindfulness strategies in conjunction with commitment and behavioral-change strategies to increase psychological flexibility.

In other words, the goal of ACT is to help people develop acceptance of unwanted personal experiences that are out of their control, while also providing pathways toward living a valued life. Klimczak describes it as being able to live your best life or be your best self when you are in touch with your values.

As part of the ACT Research Group, and at the time of this writing, Klimczak and Donahue are in the midst of leading a group therapy session geared towards dealing with perfectionism. The idea for the group is loosely based off a book — The Anxious Perfectionist — written by USU professor of psychology Dr. Michael P. Twohig who also serves as one of the directors of the ACT Research Group.

“There are all kinds of things that get in the way of pursuing our values, right? Like, I’m too anxious to do that, or I feel too sad to get out of bed,” says Klimczak, who is in the fifth year of her program. “And so, applying this kind of theory to perfectionism, it’s all about how your perfectionism gets in the way of living your values.”

It would be easy to assume that perfectionism simply means striving to be perfect all the time, but Donahue, who is in her fourth year, says it goes a lot deeper than that. She recalls a time during her training where she was hit with an “Aha!” moment, realizing perfectionism isn’t just about achievement, but also the avoidance of failure. That even though someone may not be striving to be the best all the time, they’re spending an inordinate amount of time and energy trying not to fail, which is a side of perfectionism not often discussed or recognized.

“People that really hold themselves to high standards and are very achievement oriented, I think that’s a part of it,” Donahue says. “I think another part is the presence of really self-critical thoughts around those expectations and rules that people have for themselves, as well as self-worth being tied into performance. I think those are three different categories.”

As they’ve been leading the group, Klimczak and Donahue say one of the biggest surprises for them has been the varying age range of the participants. Initially they expected mostly college-aged people in the group, but instead ended up with a wide range of ages from 18 to 60. And, along with that diverse age range, they’ve been able to work with individuals at different levels in their own efforts of trying to cope with perfectionism.

These areas of focus — chronic pain and tinnitus, eating disorders, perfectionism — are just a small window into the Sorenson Center’s offerings. With opportunities for research, teaching, and collaboration, it is not just a resource for Utah State University students, faculty, and staff, but for residents throughout the state of Utah.

“The goal of Acceptance and Commitment Theory is to help people develop acceptance of unwanted personal experiences that are out of their control, while also providing pathways toward living a valued life.
If there is one thing that can be predicted with certainty, it is that life can certainly be unpredictable. Oftentimes, students feel like they have their higher education journey figured out. But then, unexpected opportunities and challenges pop up that can derail those plans. However, with one of the more unique systems in the country, Utah State University and its Statewide Campuses help students navigate those challenges and opportunities while keeping their educational goals on track.

“Even though everyone starts at ‘A’, there is more than one way to get to ‘Z’,” says Vanessa Liesik, USU’s director of Statewide & Online Recruitment. “Our system has so many options.”

With multiple locations throughout the state — 30 to be exact — USU is willing and able to work with students as they seek the right fit for their education and pursuits.

“As our students are progressing through their life journeys, if they have other opportunities they want to pursue, moving into Statewide can make sense for them to help maximize these options,” Liesik says. “They can have their cake and eat it too — they get to have all of the good stuff. They can continue their education and pursue their dreams, all at the same time.”

The following are three examples of how USU worked with students who started their journey at the Logan campus, but through life’s unexpected opportunities, were able to continue their education through Statewide Campuses and stay on track to graduate, while pursuing other passions and dreams.

**High Flying Goals and Aspirations**

From a young age, Olivia Lee saw the effects that higher education could have on a life. While Lee was in middle school, her mother returned to college while raising a family. The impact of her mother’s education and subsequent employment opportunities left a big impression on Lee and created positive change for her family.

“She went back to school and finished her degree, and it completely changed the trajectory of my whole childhood,” Lee recalls. “We had much greater stability at home.”

Lee was inspired by her mother’s example and noticed how the university she attended saw her not only as a name on a list, but as a person with specific needs and circumstances. “It was inspiring to watch her go back, and to see that the university saw her as more than just a number,” Lee says. “They recognized she was a mom and a working professional. They saw all of the different aspects of who she was. That really changed my view around education.”

Seeing the impact education had on her mom, Lee prioritized her education above anything else in her life, even her passion of being an aerialist. Lee’s passion for acrobatics helped her earn a spot on USU’s Spirit Squad — first as a cheerleader and then as an Aggiette — during the flexibility and the individualized approach that I was able to have during my educational journey, it is something I don’t think I could have gotten anywhere else.” — Olivia Lee
Olivia Lee wanted to be a part of changing lives, just like hers and her mother’s were changed.

Photo courtesy of Utah State University Athletics.

Nashville Dreams

Alivia Hadfield grew up with a guitar in her hands and songs in her heart. Throughout her early years, Hadfield loved to sing, perform, and write country songs. She also has a passion for journalism, which led her to USU.

Hadfield wanted the true college experience, which meant moving away from home and branching out on her own. She stepped onto the Logan campus in fall 2020, joining the staff of The Utah Statesman, USU’s student-run newspaper. During this time, she thought she had to put her music aspirations on hold. That was, until a unique opportunity presented itself. Out of nowhere, someone reached out after viewing her music on Instagram. She was offered an opportunity to join an artist development program.

“I got a rare opportunity when I got picked up from my Instagram,” Hadfield says. “I was able to have some really cool experiences.”

As amazing as this opportunity was, it also meant she needed to live closer to home, so she could have more time to practice her music—sometimes needing to sing four hours a day. She started to worry about how she would continue school during this time, thinking she might need to transfer.

“I was really starting to stress out, because I didn’t want to be switching schools,” Hadfield recalls. “I had already transferred over my high school credits, and I had taken around 30 credits in my first two semesters. So, I didn’t really want to switch over.”

Just by luck, Hadfield saw an advertisement for the USU Orem campus. Realizing that Statewide Campuses had locations near her home, Hadfield contacted her academic advisor, and together they worked out a plan that allowed her to finish her general education requirements at the USU Orem campus.

“I learned that I could transfer my credits to the Orem campus and do some online and broadcasting classes while I get my music situation figured out,” Hadfield says. “It has been a great transition, and it was super easy. And I’m getting the same level of education that I received up in Logan.”

For the time being, Hadfield is taking advantage of classes at USU Orem while also creating music. She says she’s incredibly grateful that USU worked with her to manage both of her passions.

“Being able to do both and having the flexibility of having online and having professors that understand and allow me to pursue this has been a great blessing,” she says. “It is amazing that I can pursue both.”

“USU follows you wherever you go, they have you backed up fully, 100%.”

— Alivia Hadfield

A chance opportunity to pursue her musical dreams necessitated a move closer to home for Alivia Hadfield who has continued her studies through USU’s Orem Campus. Photo courtesy of Alivia Hadfield.
“In the end, they want you to have your career, and they'll work with you to make school fit in your specific circumstances.”

— Austin Smith

Jumping at an Opportunity

Austin Smith came to USU after applying for and being accepted into the school’s Ambassador program. Receiving a full-tuition scholarship made his school decision easy. However, after starting his finance degree, Smith got the urge to begin his job search.

“After about two years, I started to get the itch to start working more in my field,” Smith remembers. “I still wanted to finish my degree, because I had made a lot of progress.”

He first looked for opportunities to work in Logan, so he could continue his degree progress. However, he was unable to find a good fit. So, Smith expanded his search to Salt Lake County. After applying for several opportunities, Smith was offered a job that was too good to pass up.

But he still wanted to continue his schooling and get his degree. So, he got in contact with his academic advisor and worked out how to begin taking courses online.

“I talk to my academic advisor at the beginning and sometimes at the end of each semester to make sure I have my classes available online at whichever campuses I need,” Smith says. “For some of my classes, I’ve had to get some restrictions removed, so I could get into some of them. But they have made adjustments, and it hasn’t been a problem for me.”

Smith worked his full-time job and was taking between 13-14 credit hours per semester after transferring fully online. He says he’s grateful that his academic advisors worked with him to find him courses to take wherever he could, and that they worked hard to find solutions that worked for him. He will graduate this summer with his bachelor’s degree.

“I had a team working with me, instead of me doing it on my own,” Smith recalls. “I didn’t have to figure it out on my own, which was helpful having people who understood the system and who made the effort to make sure I could successfully get through everything. It was pretty smooth, and I didn’t really have any hiccups.”

Smith continued his work as an ambassador by joining the USU Wasatch Region’s pilot Ambassador Program. His advisors worked with him to find roles that fit with his work schedule and allowed him to continue to receive mentorship and participate in service projects, outreach, and recruiting.

“Everyone I’ve worked with at USU has been very accommodating, and I’m very appreciative,” Smith says. “With my work schedule, everyone has been very graceful. In the end, they want you to have your career, and they’ll work with you to make school fit in your specific circumstances. Working with people who understand the system and who make the effort to make sure I can successfully get through everything — it’s been really great.”

ARE YOU A PROUD MEMBER OF THE AGGIE FAMILY? Submit photos of you out and about rocking your Utah State apparel and you could win a USU swag pack and be featured in the next issue of the Utah State magazine. UTAHSTATEMAGAZINE.USU.EDU

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SHARE YOUR AGGIE PICS WIN PRIZES!
With only 16% of older adults in the U.S. currently receiving regular cognitive testing, the research team is hoping to provide medical practitioners across the country with a new tool that helps people feel comfortable doing early assessment. "Detecting that a person may be experiencing cognitive impairment before they are noticeably impaired gives people a better chance to get into clinical trials and more time to prepare finances, make care plans, and so on," Fauth says.

If the assessment is adopted into primary care standard practices, it will assist physicians in determining older patients’ cognitive health. Currently, fewer than half of primary care providers (48%) offer cognitive testing to their patients. Instead, most providers conduct their own screening by observing the patient and using their clinical judgement or a patient’s self-assessment. Now, using the results of the screening, physicians will be better equipped to determine whether a patient should be referred to a specialist.

Funded by an appropriation from the State Legislature in 2022, the Alzheimer’s Disease and Dementia Research Center (ADRC) at Utah State University is increasing research across the state to find ways to better understand Alzheimer’s and dementia, as well as support people living with those diseases.

Recently, the ADRC partnered with Neurosessments, a Los Angeles-based company focused on bringing science to senior care, to improve early dementia detection with a simple, noninvasive motor test. "We’re testing the brain’s ability to improve on the task," says Elizabeth Fauth, USU’s ADRC director. "As they move the beans around, their brain is trying to learn strategies to move faster and to be more accurate. We now know that people who don’t improve on [the test] likely have some underlying impairment."

In collaboration with Sydney Schaefer, an associate professor in Arizona State’s School of Biological Health Systems, and Jill Love, a geriatric care manager and co-owner of Neurosessments, the test has already been shown to detect neuropathology and neurodegeneration in older adults who exhibit little to no symptoms of dementia. In 2023, Neurosessments was awarded a Small Business Innovation Research grant of $370,000 from the National Institutes of Health. The award enabled the team to develop and test the reliability of a clinical version of the assessment, referred to as the Quick Behavioral Exam to Advance Neuropsychological Screening (qBEANS) which can be administered by a nurse or medical assistant during a routine doctor visit.

Fauth is working with students at USU, as well as older adults in the community, to test qBEANS in a mock clinical setting.

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"It has taken years to develop qBEANS in the laboratory," Schaefer says. “We’re ready to gather the evidence needed to help integrate it into a marketable product for use in primary-care and other settings.”

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Recently, the ADRC partnered with Neurosessments, a Los Angeles-based company focused on bringing science to senior care, to improve early dementia detection with a simple, noninvasive motor test. Currently some older people avoid cognitive testing with their doctor because they think the tests will be challenging, and they feel anxious about it. The motor-based test is designed to be more like a game. Individuals use a spoon with their non-dominant hand to scoop dry kidney beans into cups in specific sequences. "We’re testing the brain’s ability to improve on the task," says Elizabeth Fauth, USU’s ADRC director. "As they move the beans around, their brain is trying to learn strategies to move faster and to be more accurate. We now know that people who don’t improve on [the test] likely have some underlying impairment."

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**More Than Just Talk: Music Therapy Speaks Beyond Words**

By Bryan Stalvey • Photos by Levi Sim

As we explore mental health and the diverse options available in taking care of ourselves, music therapy offers a unique and effective evidence-based approach that stands out among other methods. With nearly five decades worth of experience, USU's Department of Music continues to deliver the educational experience for students aiming to practice music therapy.

Corinne Pickett, a 2017 Utah State University graduate and now adjunct instructor, initially aspired to be a choir teacher before changing course due to the transformative potential of music therapy. While enrolled in USU's music program, she found a fulfilling blend of musical passion with the ability to positively impact individuals in need.

"Music therapy provides a unique perspective, allowing you to witness the profound ways music influences and impacts individuals on a personal level," Pickett says. "Through the process of self-expression, clients can gain insights into their emotions, navigate challenges, and find resilience in both the actions they take and the coping mechanisms found through music therapy."

Extending far beyond individual narratives, the music therapy program at USU prioritizes equipping students with the skills and knowledge to deliver transformative interventions across diverse settings. Through evidence-based practices and community engagement, students gain real-world experience in hospitals, schools, and various therapeutic environments.

"We offer a competitive, resourceful, and motivating course of study that encourages excellence in a professional field," remarks Dr. Maureen Hearns, the program’s director since 2004. "No one individually could achieve our collective success, but together we strengthen one another and create a unique program.”

Hearns is an accomplished therapist, specializing in guided imagery and music. Her experience in working with survivors of domestic violence includes support for and participation in organizations such as CAPSA.

Clinical Assistant Professor Allison Fox, who has been with the USU music therapy program for five years, credits its success to the people involved as well as the program’s educational framework.

“I believe the effectiveness of the USU music therapy program can be attributed to its comprehensive curriculum, experiential learning opportunities, dedicated faculty, interdisciplinary approaches, research and innovation, clinical supervision and mentorship, collaborative culture, and commitment to diversity and inclusion,” she says. “These factors combine to provide students with a high-quality education that prepares them for successful careers as future music therapists.”

While music therapy studies reside within the Department of Music in the Caine College of the Arts, it stands as a distinct bachelor's professional degree program. It offers a unique avenue for students passionate about both music and healing arts, attracting individuals with an innate musical inclination and a desire to contribute to others' well-being.

Hearns underscores the multifaceted significance of music therapy, from fostering community healing to facilitating individual transformation.

“A client might feel that music therapy was the important factor in giving definition to their life, enabling physical or mental process, maintaining a quality of life that had been compromised, or opening a door of transformation into a completely new way of being,” Hearns says.

In fact, interest in music therapy truly is growing. According to Globe Newswire, the number of music therapy businesses in North America increased by 142% from 2017–2021.

"Music therapists work with clients to develop individualized treatment plans that leverage music-based interventions tailored to assist clients in addressing a wide range of physical, emotional, cognitive, and social needs," Fox says. "From prenatal care for expecting parents to end-of-life hospice and palliative care, music therapists offer their services across the entire spectrum of life's journey."
Not only is music therapy diverse in application, but the studies of this program at USU cover these topics while preparing students for board certification and jobs in the real world. Students receive hands-on clinical training with board-certified professionals in the field in diverse clinical settings.

“This practical experience is essential for building clinical skills, developing therapeutic relationships, and applying theoretical knowledge in real-world scenarios, which are crucial for success on the board certification exam and in professional practice,” Fox adds.

Music therapy’s effectiveness lies in its ability to harness the intrinsic therapeutic qualities of music. Through listening, writing, improvising, and using music in various ways, music therapists can help clients explore and evaluate their emotions in a less painful and potentially less direct way.

There are many forms of art therapy and expressive therapy — ways to dissect the inner human workings and process emotions, thoughts, and memories without talk therapy. Music therapy falls under expressive art therapy, deeply connected to our emotions and experiences.

“It’s a very different thing sitting down and talking face-to-face about your issues and walking through it,” Pickett explains. “This can be challenging for some people, but playing an instrument — beating a drum, improvising with a group, writing something that connects to your experience — is an entirely different form of vulnerability.”

Music therapy is a type of expressive art therapy and provides people with the opportunity to process emotions, thoughts, and memories in a format other than talk therapy, which can be hard for many people.
A Death Defyin’ Life: The Aggie Gymnast Who Went Hollywood

By Jeff Hunter ‘96

Life was a challenge for Emma Heare in 2013. But help came in a rather unusual form.

Following the birth of her third child, the 2004 graduate of Utah State University found herself struggling with post-partum depression. But one day amidst another daily mental battle, a long-forgotten scene from the television series Scarecrow and Mrs. King suddenly emerged in her mind.

“I don’t know what triggered it,” Heare says, “but it was as clear as day.”

Centered around a divorced housewife who becomes involved with a spy, Scarecrow and Mrs. King starred Bruce Boxleitner and former Charlie’s Angels icon Kate Jackson in the title roles. Heare remembers as a child she would sometimes watch the show, which ran on CBS from 1983 to ’87, but not religiously.

And yet the scene that played out in her head was almost a spiritual experience, something so vivid that Heare immediately sought out the series’ DVD collection at her local video store.

 Fortunately, they had it. So, I checked out the first season and watched the whole season in like three or four days,” Heare recalls. “Honestly, that show was like my saving grace. It brought me out of the depression I was in as I watched the other seasons. I thought, if Amanda (Jackson’s character) could do it, I could do it, too.”

Emma’s husband, Tim Heare, who admits that he has almost no recollection of Scarecrow and Mrs. King from its original run, also came to appreciate the show because of the positive impact it had on her. In fact, Tim embraced the program so much that he discovered an online fan group dedicated to keeping the production’s memory alive, and in 2018, the couple flew to Los Angeles to attend a 35th reunion of the cast and crew.

The Heares enjoyed themselves to the extent that Tim, who graduated from Utah State with a degree in marketing and has extensive experience in writing, volunteered to serve on the promotional committee for the show’s 40th reunion.

But what Tim failed to realize as he compiled the biographies of those scheduled to be on the reunion panel is that he and Emma had something in common with one of the special guests.

Marneen Lynne Fields, a former Hollywood stuntwoman who sometimes took on a dual role as an actress, appeared in a 1983 episode of Scarecrow and Mrs. King starring Bruce Boxleitner’s character known as Dorothy who is shot and killed.

While not a long appearance, Dorothy’s role is significant to the series, so her addition to the reunion was an exciting one for Scarecrow fans. And when she was asked during the panel to share her story, she quickly noted, much to the Heares’ surprise, that during her youth, she had performed as a gymnast.

“Who is shot and killed. Boxleitner’s character known as Dorothy who is shot and killed. While not a long appearance, Dorothy’s role is significant to the series, so her addition to the reunion was an exciting one for Scarecrow fans. And when she was asked during the panel to share her story, she quickly noted, much to the Heares’ surprise, that during her youth, she had performed as a gymnast.”

“Heare was badly burned in a kitchen accident, leading her to be “wrapped like a mummy all the way from my neck to my pelvis,” and miss the entire school year.

A few years later, she was playing in the yard when she tripped over a sprinkler, while being chased by her brother. The toes on her left foot were nearly all severed but, fortunately, were able to be stitched back on. Then there were some severe injuries to Fields’ right ankle from cheerleading in high school that led to a couple of surgeries.

However, despite her physical challenges, Fields excelled at gymnastics as a teenager.

Taking Her Chances It’s safe to say, that the remarkable decade-and-a-half run that Marneen Fields enjoyed as a stuntwoman in Hollywood began in the wide-open spaces of North Dakota and eastern Montana. Her father, Bob Fields, was a crop duster — a fearless profession in itself — and he often took Marneen and her older brother, Robert, up for rides featuring all sorts of airplane acrobatics.

“And my parents said when I was ‘itty bitty’ — like just over a year old — that my dad would balance me on the palm of his hand, and that I’d also jump off the couch and he’d catch me,” Fields says. “I think that really instilled some of my ability to flip in the air.”

Bob Fields was also a bit of an entertainer, serving as one of the most-sought-after square dance callers in the region. But eventually, he found employment further west, and when Marneen was 8 years old, he and his wife, Ruby, moved the family to Southern California.

Fields ended up graduating from Royal High School in Simi Valley in 1973, but that achievement didn’t exactly come easy due to an array of ailments and injuries. Born with an enlarged heart, Fields also suffered from childhood emphysema and wasn’t expected to live past the age of 5. And just before she was supposed to begin kindergarten, Fields was badly burned in a kitchen accident, leading her to be “wrapped like a mummy all the way from my neck to my pelvis,” and miss the entire school year.

Fast forward a few years later, she was playing in the yard when she tripped over a sprinkler, while being chased by her brother.

Marneen and her older brother, Robert, practiced acrobatics with other regional gymnasts in the Hollywood area and eventually started a gym.

“Marneen and her older brother, Robert, practiced acrobatics with other regional gymnasts in the Hollywood area and eventually started a gym.”

“She was one of the top-ranked gymnasts in the state, the 5-foot-4 Fields wasn’t certain what to do with those skills until a friend from California went to Utah State to join the wrestling team. He encouraged her to try out for the USU gymnastics squad, which was still a few years away from becoming a varsity sport in 1978 under legendary coach Ray Corn.

At that time, the Aggie program, overseen by Lucille Chase Clark, competed in some casual events referred to as “play dates” with other regional colleges and universities, as well as some larger meets sanctioned by the AIAW (Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women). Essentially a club sport, the gymnastics team only received a very limited amount of funding through the PE. department rather than USU athletics, and Clark
didn’t get paid for much of the nearly 10 years she served as coach.

“It was pretty low-key,” says Clark, a retired schoolteacher who still lives in Cache Valley.

Home meets were held on the second floor of the HPER in the space still utilized as a practice facility by the Aggie gymnastics program, which meant the few fans in attendance had to line up against the walls. Food for road trips was taken out of the university cafeteria, and most of the athletes came out of the gymnastics class that Clark taught.

“I was pretty much self-taught, which is good and bad,” says Cathy Heyrend, a retired schoolteacher who still lives in Sandy, Utah. “I had to move back home because I wasn’t anything I couldn’t do in those years. So, he took me under his wing, and I said I’d give it six months. If I hadn’t got my Screen Actors Guild (SAG) card in six months, I’ll go back to Utah. … And six months later to the day, I landed a big stunt on the Movie of the Week.”

A well-known adage states: “When God closes a door, he opens a window.”

Field’s gymnastics career. Towards the end of her junior year at USU, she was practicing a complicated routine on the beam that led to a “horrible fall” that included torn ligaments and broken bones in her already battered right ankle.

“We trained hard. I practiced every day,” Fields says. “Gymnastics was my life.”

“But that basically launched my career in Hollywood, and I got back on my feet slowly,” Fields proclaims. “And in Marlene Fields’ case, the window was on the third floor. And she jumped out of it.”

That all paid off in March 1975 when Fields, Elliott and two other gymnasts qualified for the Intermountain AIAW competition in Tempe, Arizona. The small but feisty group of Aggies fared relatively well, with Fields finishing third in the floor exercise and fifth on the beam. But unfortunately, that was the apex of Fields’ gymnastics career. “I was very, very close to her,” Fields declares. “I was very, very fondly of her gymnastics coach.

As a stuntwoman, Fields says. “There wasn’t anything I couldn’t do in those years. So, he took me under his wing, and I said I’d give it six months. If I hadn’t got my Screen Actors Guild (SAG) card in six months, I’ll go back to Utah. … And six months later to the day, I landed a big stunt on the Movie of the Week.”

The Spell on NBC featured a young Helen Hunt and a scene custom-made for Fields: a young woman climbing a rope at school falls backwards to the ground. That stunt — and three lines of dialogue — earned Fields her SAG card, which led to many more jobs in the entertainment industry.

“I stayed in contact with Lucille for a while, and she’d ask me ‘Are you coming back?’” Fields recalls. “I’d say, ‘I’ll let you know coach.’” But by 1977, I was one of the top stuntwomen around and was doing stunts on all these TV series at Universal Studios and Warner Brothers.

While she was never able to complete her degree at USU, Fields ended up graduating instead from, quite literally, the “School of Hard Knocks.”

Field’s gymnastics career. Towards the end of her junior year at USU, she was practicing a complicated routine on the beam that led to a “horrible fall” that included torn ligaments and broken bones in her already battered right ankle.

“I had to move back home because I had to have major reconstruction surgery on my foot,” Fields says. “They put a calf’s tendon in place of the ligament in my foot. And that calf’s tendon is still in my foot. It’s actually outlived the procedure; they no longer use calf’s tendons.”

“Sometimes that goes wrong with stunts,” she notes. “You end up bruising your tailbone or getting whiplash or hitting your head. But I kept doing it because I was trained for it, and I accepted everything that came my way for 15 years.”

“I was healed by Jesus and God, and moving forward with my career.”

While she was recovering from ankle surgery in Ventura, California, in 1976, her older brother, Bobby, introduced her to Paul Stader, a veteran stuntman who had doubled for the likes of John Wayne and Cary Grant. Stader made extra money away from the big screen training new stunt men and woman, and he instantly saw potential in the 20-year-old Fields.

“I think Paul recognized the champion gymnast in me,” Fields says. “There wasn’t anything I couldn’t do in those years. So, he took me under his wing, and I said I’d give it six months. If I hadn’t got my Screen Actors Guild (SAG) card in six months, I’ll go back to Utah. … And six months later to the day, I landed a big stunt on the Movie of the Week.”


In her scene, Fields doubles for a woman in a biker gang trying to rough up Eastwood and his co-star Sondra Locke on a moving train. While actress Samantha Doane delivers the line, “You wouldn’t hit a lady, would ya?” it’s actually Fields who ends up flying off the train and onto some dry, unforgiving Arizona terrain after getting “punished” by Eastwood.

“Clint was so handsome, I could hardly do it,” Fields says with a laugh, adding the shot only took one take.

“But that basically launched my career overnight. After that, I never had to hustle. Work just came to me. I was very fortunate.”

For 15 years.

“I accepted everything that came my way for 15 years.”

Field’s recovery from ankle surgery in Ventura, California, in 1976.

Though Fields didn’t utter the famous line in The Gauntlet, she is the stunt woman who goes flying off the train. Photo courtesy of Marlene Fields.

“You wouldn’t hit a lady, would ya?”

Fields ended up working alongside James Garner in The Rockford Files and Lee Majors in The Fall Guy, fighting Lynda Carter in Wonder Woman, and doubling for Shirley Jones in Beyond the Poseidon Adventure and Jane Seymour in Battlestar Galactica. Her IMDb credits are about five-dozen long in both stunt and acting categories, with one of her most pivotal being an appearance in the The Gauntlet starring Clint Eastwood in 1977.

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“I was healed by Jesus and God, and moving forward with my career.”

While Fields has certainly endured much, even now, at age 68 — “But I don’t
“She’s been able to overcome some pretty horrific things and not let it change who she is.” — Tim Heare

Marneen Fields has been a survivor her entire life. “She’s had a lot of challenges in her life,” Tim notes. “And the more I found out about her life, the more blown away I became. First off, by all the things that she’s done. She’s a hidden gem who few people know about. And second, even though she’s been through some very traumatic things in her life, she’s kept such an amazing attitude. That’s so impressive to me.

“There’s a documentary making the rounds in LA — The Remarkable Resilience of Marneen Fields — and I think that pretty much sums up her life,” Tim adds. “She’s been able to overcome some pretty horrific things and not let it change who she is. The kind of things she’s gone through would cause just about anyone to become a very bitter person, but I think it’s only helped her become stronger.”

The Huntsman School of Business not only has amazing courses, but also facilitates so many experiences outside of the classroom. I was able to attend a Women in Business club event where we traveled to several companies in the Salt Lake area and got to know a tech recruiter at Pluralsight. Through this personal connection, I interned as a Machine Learning Engineer and received a return offer to be a Data Scientist following my graduation.

Madison Sperry
Data Analytics ‘23
Data Scientist, Pluralsight

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Utah’s Night Skies Offer Unique Connections to a Clear Cosmos

By Georgie Corkery and Lael Gilbert

Utah is a place of outdoor wonders with iconic arches mountains framing picturesque communities, otherworldly salt flats, birding hotspots, and some of the greatest snow on earth. And yet, the state has another, less appreciated outdoor treasure of world-class status — a vast, dark, and incredibly starry night sky.

Someone spending time under the canopy of the Milky Way might be reminded of their humble status as a human speck, a tiny life floating through the cosmos on the surface of an insignificant planet. An experience like that can philosophically wallop a person. But in an increasingly well-lit world, these context-widening perspectives — something humanity has had in common for millennia — are getting harder to come by.

Modern communities tend to produce an abundance of artificial light. Streetlamps, digital signage, and big box parking lots are just a few of the things making it increasingly difficult to pull detail from the night sky. This is known as light pollution. For city dwellers who, after dusk, move through a seemingly eternal glow of nighttime light, the effect is akin to sitting inside a bright room trying to peer through a dark window.

Some urban areas have become so filled with ambient light that any view of the stars is now obscured, says Lisa Stoner, coordinator for the Colorado Plateau Dark Sky Cooperative, based in the Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism at Utah State University.

But find a place that’s really dark, a spot where the after-hours inky blackness is actively preserved, and that window to experience an astronomical sense of awe can still be opened. And Utah is the place to find these dark skies. According to Stoner, the state has the most extensive naturally dark night skies and the greatest concentration of internationally recognized Dark Sky Places anywhere in the developed world.

Light pollution is more than just a nuisance to recreationists and astronomers. It can have negative effects on physical health. Artificial light at night disrupts sleep cycles by hindering the production of melatonin in the brain. Triggered by darkness, the role of this hormone is to keep human day and night routines on a rhythmic track. Low production of melatonin has been linked to increased rates of diabetes, obesity, and cancer. So, having nightly breaks from artificial light is important to our long-term physical wellbeing.

There are negative effects of light pollution on mental health, as well. Increased exposure to light at night — both indoors and out — is associated with increased symptoms of depression, Chase Lamborn (right), a researcher in the S.J. and Jessie E. Quinney College of Natural Resources, stargazes with his family. Photo by Levi Sim.
The good news, is that for many deprived of dark nights, there are still places to settle into a comfortable dark.

The Utah Dark Sky Passport is a new, after-hours cousin to the national parks passports. The destination-focused resource can be found at visitor centers across the state. The program was launched initially for a young audience by the Colorado Plateau Dark Sky Cooperative but is now being adopted as a bucket-list itinerary for staggers of all ages. It encourages broad appreciation for what Utah skies have to offer, says Stoner. "When managing a place to create dark skies, decisionmakers have the chance to think more broadly about cultivating dark environments for visitors looking to get away from all things developed." The trick is striking a balance between an experience that is accessible and comfortable, while still providing the full outdoor experience. Managers must navigate a fine line for designing spaces that preserve the dark and still serve a broad section of the public, including those who may not be comfortable outside in remote and wild areas. Lit pathways in campgrounds, for example, help some people feel comfortable, but using a minimal number of dim lights close to the ground to cut down on ambient light also reduces light pollution. "What park managers can take from this research is that, across the board, people are coming to these areas to get away from a developed experience, so they tend to support efforts to maintain darkness," Lamborn says.

Increased exposure to light at night poses multiple negative effects on mental health.

Photo by Levi Sim.

as a sustainable form of outdoor recreation, astrotourism allows visitors to experience nature in a new way and encourages them to travel to out-of-the-way destinations. Cosmic events like the annular solar eclipse in October 2023, the great conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in December 2020, the annual meteor showers of the Lyrids, Perseids, and Leonids, and deep space phenomena only visible with telescopic aid, are attracting more visitors for hands-on night-sky experiences across the state.

A Passport to the Stars

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Increased exposure to light at night poses multiple negative effects on mental health.

Photo by Levi Sim.

as a sustainable form of outdoor recreation, astrotourism allows visitors to experience nature in a new way and encourages them to travel to out-of-the-way destinations. Cosmic events like the annular solar eclipse in October 2023, the great conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in December 2020, the annual meteor showers of the Lyrids, Perseids, and Leonids, and deep space phenomena only visible with telescopic aid, are attracting more visitors for hands-on night-sky experiences across the state.

A Passport to the Stars

The Utah Dark Sky Passport is a new, after-hours cousin to the national parks passports. The destination-focused resource can be found at visitor centers across the state. The program was launched initially for a young audience by the Colorado Plateau Dark Sky Cooperative but is now being adopted as a bucket-list itinerary for staggers of all ages. It encourages broad appreciation for what Utah skies have to offer, says Stoner. "When managing a place to create dark skies, decisionmakers have the chance to think more broadly about cultivating dark environments for visitors looking to get away from all things developed." The trick is striking a balance between an experience that is accessible and comfortable, while still providing the full outdoor experience. Managers must navigate a fine line for designing spaces that preserve the dark and still serve a broad section of the public, including those who may not be comfortable outside in remote and wild areas. Lit pathways in campgrounds, for example, help some people feel comfortable, but using a minimal number of dim lights close to the ground to cut down on ambient light also reduces light pollution. "What park managers can take from this research is that, across the board, people are coming to these areas to get away from a developed experience, so they tend to support efforts to maintain darkness," Lamborn says.

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Photo by Levi Sim.
Getting Comfortable with the Dark Side

Reducing light pollution is also important for animals and other creatures who depend on the night. Skyglow is specifically disorienting for animals that use the stars to migrate—especially birds.

Artificial lighting at night draws birds to urban areas where they are at higher risk of colliding with buildings and vehicles. Bird-window collisions, which also occur during daylight hours, are the second-leading cause of dwindling bird populations, after habitat loss.

In the United States, it is estimated that anywhere from 365 million to nearly 1 billion birds collide fatally with windows annually. Light pollution and bird-window collisions are of such big concern there are initiatives across the country to turn off superfluous outdoor lighting during migration season, including the Lights Out Salt Lake project from the Tracy Aviary in Salt Lake City.

Predatory species that hunt at night and insects that are drawn to light are other species affected when there is too much light pollution. A well-known example of how artificial light at night affects animals is the disruption of sea turtles hatching and instinctively crawling from the beach towards the moon’s reflection, leading them back to the ocean. Light from urban areas confuses these hatchlings, causing them to crawl in the wrong direction.

Along with the negative effects to our mental and physical health and the environment, light pollution is also hurting our wallets. Outdoor lighting makes up approximately 8% of global energy use, with about 60% of that wasted as unneeded, over-lit, or poorly aimed lighting. In the United States, approximately one-third of all lighting is wasted, and estimates suggest that nearly $7 billion of energy is wasted as light pollution annually. For every $100 spent operating a dusk-to-dawn light fixture, $45 is wasted on light that never reaches the ground.

Turning off lights that don’t have a clear purpose, as well as using motion sensors, warm-colored bulbs, and light fixtures that shine downward are all simple ways to reduce light pollution.

To find out more about light pollution, Dark Sky Places, or how to get an area designated a Dark Sky area, visit darksky.org.

Along with the negative mental health effects for humans, skyglow is also disorienting for animals that use the stars to migrate.

Photo by Levi Sim.
USU Industrial Hygienists Perform Noise Assessment for Army ROTC Cannon Crew

Firing the cannon by Utah State University’s Army ROTC Jim Bridger Battalion is a beloved, time-honored tradition at Aggie home football games. In exciting pageantry and delight to Aggie fans, cadets shoot off a round from a 75-mm howitzer at kickoff and after each USU touchdown and field goal. During the Veterans Day game this past November, the cadets collaborated with USU industrial hygiene students, to conduct a noise assessment of the exuberant cannonade.

A peak noise level map the industrial hygienists compiled revealed the cadets performing racking and reloading tasks on the left side of the cannon received the highest noise level exposures. Cadets and others standing behind the cannon received lower exposures, but the noise levels still exceeded OSHA and Department of Defense safety limits.

USU President Cantwell Launches Podcast in Collaboration with Utah Public Radio

From the start of her presidency at Utah State University, Elizabeth Cantwell wanted to start a podcast. With the help and collaboration of the University Marketing and Communications team, Utah Public Radio, and currently enrolled students, that dream is now a reality.

The “Future Casting With Utah State” podcast ties perfectly with USU’s mission to envision the future and empower all people to lead successful lives of involvement, innovation, and impact.

The podcast explores our ever-changing world, technological breakthroughs, future planning, and proactive issues both now and for the years to come.

The collaboration with Utah Public Radio extends the podcast’s reach, bringing more public awareness to the statewide impacts of Utah State’s research and can be enjoyed on UPR.org or anywhere you get your podcasts.

USU Announces New Appointments to President’s Leadership Team

On March 1, John O’Neil and Kerri R. Davidson officially stepped into new leadership roles at Utah State, as O’Neil was named vice president for operational strategy and special advisor to the president, while Davidson was named the vice president of institutional affairs, as well as president Elizabeth Cantwell’s chief of staff.

O’Neil was formerly vice president of research at the University of Arizona, also a land-grant university. There he successfully led research administration, research development, and secure research operations for the university, which ranks in the top 20 for research and development expenditures.

Davidson is joining USU from Arizona State University, where she served as the first executive director and chief of staff of the ASU Public Enterprise. ASU is the largest R1 university in the U.S., and Davidson concurrently led its Office of the Executive Vice President and served as chief operating officer.
USU Professors Research Adapting University Instruction to Indigenous Learning Styles

Utah State University professors in the Department of Social Work have been researching how to adapt university-level instruction for Indigenous students. Julie Stevens, USU Southwest clinical assistant professor, collaborated with Charlie Bayles, USU Blanding clinical assistant professor, on adapting instruction to Indigenous learning styles and perspectives. Right now, their research is showing that, on occasion, these learning styles are not consistent with how content is taught.

Stevens and Bayles began to look at their course materials through an Indigenous lens. Stevens, who is of Navajo heritage, has personal experience with the challenges of adapting to collegiate coursework, having completed her bachelor's degree coursework at USU Nephi, and later a master's degree in social work from the University of Utah. Working together, Stevens and Bayles designed a test preparation course for students.

Aggie Ice Cream Celebrates Grand Opening of its Second Store in Logan

The makers of Utah State University’s iconic Aggie Ice Cream recently opened a second store location at Blue Square, 1111 N. 800 East, Logan, next to the Aggie Chocolate Factory. The grand opening event in September 2023 featured a ribbon-cutting ceremony and Aggie Ice Cream party.

With a storied history dating back more than 100 years, Aggie Ice Cream has been serving up delightful flavors produced from cow to cone by USU students and faculty, becoming an integral part of Utah’s cultural, educational, and culinary heritage. The new location’s opening represents a milestone in the university’s commitment to offering the community its handcrafted ice cream, which is made on-campus by dedicated staff and students in the food science program.

In addition to its ice cream, Aggie Ice Cream has long been an essential part of food science education in USU’s Department of Nutrition, Dietetics and Food Sciences, providing hands-on experience in dairy production.

Beyond Spiders and Abuzz With Possibilities: USU Researchers Explore Nature’s Ancient Biomaterials

For more than a decade, Utah State University scholars have pioneered research on the production and structure of synthetic spider silk. Building on lessons learned, researchers in the lab of biology faculty member Justin Jones are branching into organisms beyond the eight-legged arachnids to explore a broader range of potential candidates for production of replicable, recombinant fibers.

Among these organisms are the eel-like hagfish and the transparent ctenophore. In addition to these rather exotic creatures, undergrad researcher Jackson Morley and doctoral student researcher Oran Wasserman, both Jones Lab members, are exploring an organism more familiar to Utahns: the bee.

Tradition, Innovation Combine as Themes During Investiture of USU Pres. Cantwell

Tradition and change were recurring themes of the investiture of Utah State University President Elizabeth R. Cantwell held in the Daines Concert Hall on April 12.

At the event, an academic ceremony with centuries-old roots, Cantwell and other speakers spoke of overcoming new challenges while recommitting to central values.

“We are a public higher education institution that is, in fact, poised to play an even more critical role in the future,” Cantwell said. “We will remain, as we always have been, a key driver of innovation, of social mobility and societal well-being.”

Cantwell began her presidency in August 2023. Investitures traditionally happen during or at the conclusion of a university president’s first year in office and celebrate a new era of leadership.

Utah State University celebrated the Investiture of Elizabeth R. Cantwell, the university’s 17th president, on Friday, April 12. Follow this link to learn more about the event, which included the unveiling of USU’s new mace and a special “President’s Choice” Aggie Ice Cream flavor.
Sharing Wonder: USU Physics Students Practice STEM Outreach at NASA’s Kennedy Space Center

This past November, members of Utah State University’s NASA-funded Atmospheric Waves Experiment (AWE) Science Team accompanied USU Physics faculty members to the Cape Canaveral launch of the AWE instrument, built by USU’s Space Dynamics Laboratory, to the International Space Station. The student team members spent two days prior to the trip in intensive communications training with SDL public relations director Eric Warren, in preparation for three pre-launch days at Florida’s Kennedy Space Center explaining the mission to visitors of all ages.

“As a teaching assistant at Utah State, I’ve always enjoyed instructing peers,” says undergraduate student and AWE team member Joe Pigott. “But the trip to the Kennedy Space Center may have solidified my decision to make teaching my career. Seeing the kids at our exhibit struggle with new concepts, then finally connect the dots was one of the best feelings in the world.”

USU Researchers Use Last Year’s State-Record Snowpack to Investigate Predictive Models

More than 75 feet of snow in 191 days. That’s what Alta Ski Area reported during the 2022–23 season — beating the previous high, as calculated at the Collins Study Plot, by more than 150 inches. Across the state, snow totals accumulated to a high point of 30 inches of snow water equivalent — which broke a 90-year record by about 4 inches. By that same metric the state was, at times, more than 200% above the median snowpack.

This is all to say that from a statistical standpoint, the winter of 2022–23 anomaly that hit the state in force. Because of that, USU researchers wanted to know how it aligned with what predictive models forecast it would be. Climate science doctoral candidate Matthew LaPlante, with help from faculty members Luthiene Dalanhese and S.-Y. Simon Wang, investigated whether tropical ocean sea surface temperatures predicted the precipitation anomaly that hit the state in force.

After years of entertaining audiences and instructing theater students, USU associate professor Corey Ewan has announced his retirement.

Ewan began his university education at the College of Eastern Utah, earning his associate degree before transitioning to USU in Logan. After graduating with a doctorate from BYU, Ewan came back to join the USU Eastern faculty in 1999. During his early years, he worked with several of the professors that taught him when he was an undergraduate student. He enjoyed these times even though they were fraught with extra hours building sets and creating costumes.

“I owe so much to the education that I got here, and seeing those professors again, they were so welcoming and proud,” Ewan said. “We would build sets and create costumes. The costume department used to be in the basement. We had a lot of responsibilities, and we were trusted to get things done. It was a fun time.”

USU Named Best Employer in Utah

Utah State University is the best employer in Utah according to a study by Forbes. More than 70,000 full- and part-time employees throughout the U.S. participated in the Forbes survey. The questions examined working conditions, diversity, compensation, development opportunities and more.

Mental health initiatives have been crucial for supporting employees. To address the need for increasing services, HR recently partnered with Aerna to expand talk therapy offerings for employees through Talkspace, as a component of the Aggies Thrive initiative in the university’s Employer Assistance Program.

Forbes considered 59 businesses in the state, although some also had headquarters outside of Utah, such as Costco, Amazon, and Adobe.

To the Stars We Return: USU Alumna, NASA Astronaut Mary Cleave Dies at Age 76

Utah State University alumna Mary Cleave, a trailblazing veteran of two NASA shuttle spaceflights, died Nov. 27, 2023. She was 76.

Cleave was the 10th woman to fly in space. She flew as a mission specialist aboard Space Shuttle Atlantis mission STS-61B in 1985, and again on Atlantis mission STS-30 in 1989. During the latter mission, Cleave and fellow crew members successfully deployed the Magellan Venus exploration spacecraft, the first planetary probe to be deployed from a space shuttle.

Cleave earned a master’s degree in microbial ecology in 1975 from USU and then embarked on a doctoral degree in civil and environmental engineering, which she completed in 1979. While working at USU’s Utah Water Research Laboratory in 1979, a colleague urged her to apply for a position with NASA’s expanding space shuttle program. She did, and by 1980, Cleave became an official NASA astronaut.

USU Soccer Star Kelsey Kaufusi Drafted to the National Women’s Soccer League

Kelsey Kaufusi became the first-ever Utah State Aggie to be selected in the National Women’s Soccer League draft in January 2024, as she was selected by the Portland Thorns. She will graduate this May with a Bachelor of Science in Human Development and Family Studies from the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services.

Kaufusi’s impressive four-year USU athletic record includes Mountain West Defensive Player of the Year for 2023 and First-Team All-Mountain West for 2023 — a year in which the Aggies also won their first-ever Mountain West championship with Kaufusi as lead defender. She started all 76 games she played with the Aggies over her four-year tenure.

Kelsey is a force to be reckoned with on the soccer field,” says Manny Martins, head coach of the USU women’s soccer team. “Her fierce competitive mentality and phenomenal athletic qualities make her one of the best ‘shutdown’ defenders in the country.”
It's an awesome reading about the backstories of these three dormitories. I've stayed in 2 of them, particularly for previous summer internships. So many fond memories were created with roommates in the Moen and Reeder Halls (I'll miss these dormitories), then again, I look forward to new changes for our Aggies.

— Lindsey Burbank-Pete '19

I just finished watching 60 Minutes that highlighted your efforts in Gorongosa. I am impressed and inspired. Few people, when near life's end can look back and honestly say that they did their best for the good of mankind and the planet, but you can. I envy your life, your ability to see a wonderful future for the people and the beasts that you are transforming. I am going to save my pennies to someday visit your African paradise. God bless you.

— Kathy Luban

I read with interest “Unbridled Impact” about conflicting interests for free-ranging horses in the American West. Whether we call them “wild” or “feral,” we should not call them “not native,” as the author does, lest we exhibit the pedestrian hair-splitting no longer favored in biology. What died with the Pleistocene was not a horse-like ancestor, but a lineage that is genetically grouped in Equus ferus since the domesticated horse, the latter designated subspecies E. ferus caballus. As often in wide-ranging species with continuous distributions, divisions lines are somewhat arbitrary, and our policy should be informed not by pseudo-syllogisms involving native vs. non-native, but by ecological dynamics and the ethics of competing claims. The elephant (or unflagellate) in this room is the livestock industry, whose impacts on western ecology are legion, and viscerally assault the senses of anyone exploiting public lands. Their population dwarfs that of horses by several decimal places, and their non-native is not in question, their breed names resembling a European map index. Because today’s Anthropocene West has less rain and fewer predators than the world of ancient E. ferus, artificial control of horse populations at some level is appropriate. But in support of that level, our country (and range managers) should keep some quanti- tative and chronological perspective on who is actually placing novel, gratuitous, unreasonable burdens on western ecology, particularly in view of the human health nightmare of beef as a mass-production commodity at all.

— Jim Steitz '03

I loved this very much! I'm also a USU alum (C/O 2019). I completed my studies at USU-Blanding and went on to serve my time with elders in the Central Agency as a C.N.A. for about 2 1/2 years. Originally, I'm from Many Farms, AZ as well, but I'm also connected to the Chiricahua community. After 3 long years, I've decided to go back to school here on the main campus in Logan, UT. Knowing that my shirma tani had a green thumb for planting vegetables and fruits in our backyard still gives me the hope & purpose to start my own garden when I return to my home island. Thank you to Regan Wytsalucy and Josie Todd for sharing their line of work and plans to keep our traditional room is the livestock industry, whose imp-
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