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*"I've had to learn to let go of control
and find peace within the chaos and
uncertainty."* p. 38

Northwestern

FALL 2022

Seeing Art With New Eyes

Guggenheim curator
Naomi Beckwith '98
challenges the stories we
tell ourselves about art.
p. 20



Call ...

May 21 marked the 50th birthday of Dillo Day, the largest student-run music festival in the U.S. The event featured performances by headliner Remi Wolf, nighttime headliner Dominic Fike, Sean Kingston (pictured), student artists and others. Food trucks, giveaways, carnival games and other activities enticed thousands of Northwestern students to turn out for a jam-packed festival.



... and Response

Cold temperatures and rain didn't stop students from gathering on the lakeside campus for the first in-person Dillo Day in three years. Of course, students showed up in style — dressed in cowboy hats and boots and other Western wear — in keeping with the day's "Return of the Rodeo" theme.



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What can wildflowers and pollinators tell us about climate change? Doctoral student Elsa Godtfredsen is running a multiyear experiment to find out.



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Press Start
Video games have come a long way since the early days of *Pong* and *Pac-Man*. With advancements in technology, innovations in design and interactive storytelling, video games have become one of the most innovative art mediums of our time. Northwestern alumni are at the controls, helping make today’s games a source of education, community, creative exploration and wonder.
By Diana Babineau

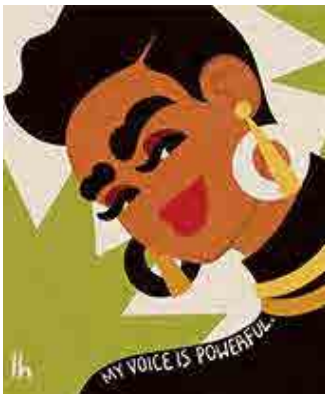


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Naomi Beckwith '98 is the new top curator at the Guggenheim. What's next?

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← **“I go into stories that are maybe so controversial that no one else will talk about them. ... It’s important to show the truth.”**
— *Steven Thrasher, journalist, professor and inaugural Daniel H. Renberg Chair of social justice in reporting*

THRASHER: CS MUNCEY; SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, NEW YORK © THE SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM FOUNDATION, NEW YORK. PHOTO: DAVID M. HEALD; FLOWERS: GETTY IMAGES

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Talk Back

A Note to Our Readers

On Monday, July 11, Rebecca M. Blank, Northwestern’s former president-elect, announced that she had been diagnosed with cancer and would be unable to fulfill her role as president. The magazine extends its best wishes to Dr. Blank and her family. In mid-August the University announced that Michael H. Schill, president of the University of Oregon, would become Northwestern’s 17th president. Read more on page 11.

THE MORTY YEARS

While Morty and I don’t always agree, I am deeply respectful of his passion for Northwestern [“The Morty Years,” spring 2022]. I also really admire his responsiveness to alumni. He would often answer my emails within a few hours.

Morty’s interest in and support of Northwestern student-athletes has not only elevated the quality of our teams but expanded and enhanced the experience for students (and made Homecoming a lot more fun for us alumni!).
Stacey Silverman Singer '84 Englewood, Colo.

TITLE IX ANNIVERSARY

In 1975, to comply with Title IX [“Wildcats Reflect on Title IX’s Impact,” alummag.nu/TitleIX] the men’s basketball locker room at McGaw Memorial Hall was split in half so the women’s team could be closer to the floor. The funny thing was that the women’s locker room ended up with seven urinals, and the men only had three. I was told that the women planted ferns in their urinals.
Bob Klaas '79 Orland Park, Ill.



↑ Anucha Browne, the Wildcats’ first All-American women’s basketball player

I recall Anucha Browne ’85 coming into Patten Gym to play ball. Not everyone on the court knew who she was, and some guys clearly doubted she could play with them. Then, of course, she would completely dominate the game.
Richard Wallace '86 Ann Arbor, Mich.

TURN UP THE RADIO

I started as a WNUR DJ [“Turn Up the Radio,” ‘Cat Tales, page 15, winter 2022] and as a producer of Third World Report and later First World Report in 1978. We all had a wonderful sense of the legacy of Amos Brown ’72 and those

pioneers who paved the way for us. What a wonderful time it was to be behind the mic and toiling in the production studio in the basement of Swift Hall. Go NU!
Vincent Williams '82 Las Vegas

As a producer of the BlackNuss radio strip in the mid-’70s, I was proud to be a part of a cohort of news and music curators that were somehow able to translate the Afro-surreal nature of being a Northwestern student into a creative narrative that, in the pre-House, pre-hip hop era, embraced everything from the Black arts aesthetic of the previous generation while trailblazing decidedly visionary Afrofuturist pathways that included everything from Miles Davis to George Clinton, Hendrix, Sun Ra and even Bob Marley.
Herb Taylor '78 Washington, D.C.

Editor’s Note: Unprecedented paper shortages have delayed the printing and mailing of Northwestern Magazine. While we don’t know when these delays will be resolved, we hope you will make a habit of visiting our digital magazine (alummag.nu) for up-to-date Northwestern stories.



Get original video and more stories at alummag.nu

Meet Some of the Great Grads of the Class of ’22

WATCH: The Creative Minds Behind Your Video Game Faves

Spin Your Wheels with Cyclist Lily Williams ’17 MS

WATCH: Shelisa Thomas ’19 JD on Overcoming a Wrongful Conviction

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

Voices

THE INTERNATIONAL BEAT

Globe-Trotting Reporters Bring World Into Focus

By Deborah Cohen

Is the era of the foreign correspondent over? That’s the premise behind a new media venture spearheaded by Justin Smith, the former Bloomberg Media chief executive, and Ben Smith, the former editor of BuzzFeed. Their startup, Semafor, will be an English-language global newsroom that will replace globe-trotting foreign correspondents with talented local reporters — such as those

working now for the Kyiv Independent and the dissident Russian news service Meduza. As Justin Smith put it, “The idea that you send some well-educated young graduate from the Ivy League to Mumbai to tell us about what’s going on in Mumbai in 2022 is sort of insane.” For more than two decades, the profession of foreign correspondence has been on life support, victim of both budget cutbacks and digital technologies. Only a few news organizations still maintain foreign bureaus abroad; most rely on freelancers. Under the circumstances, the Smiths’ idea that news can be delivered more cheaply and better by local correspondents seems inarguable. But is it? When I read about Semafor, I’d just published a book on the so-called golden age of American international reporting from the 1920s through the 1940s. After the First World War, U.S. newspaper proprietors began building up their own bureaus overseas, vowing they wouldn’t again be taken in by European



↑ Deborah Cohen

propaganda. The reporters they hired were mostly young people, not from the Ivy League but from the Midwestern heartland. One-time provincials themselves, correspondents such as Vincent Sheean or H.R. Knickerbocker were interpreting the news for readers who, as the joke went, thought Prague was a type of ham. Trying to make sense of events in the heat of the moment, rushing between coup attempts and civil wars, their foreign language skills imperfect or nonexistent, they of course sometimes got things wrong. Nevertheless, they became marquee names. Much of the truth-telling glamour that still clings to international reporting, summed up by Alfred Hitchcock’s 1940 film Foreign Correspondent, owes to their work. Precisely because they raced from one trouble zone to another, they developed a bird’s-eye view and a comparative imagination. This was a very different perspective from even the most perceptive local reporters of the day. In the mid-1920s, when most people, including German journalists, were still laughing Hitler off as a joke, John Gunther saw that dictatorship was a phenomenon that merited close attention. Based on his reporting in Poland, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Turkey, Romania, Hungary and Albania, Gunther correctly predicted that the big story of the postwar years wouldn’t be the triumph of democracy but the rise of the dictators. What the best foreign correspondents can do — now as also a century ago — is to conceive of the world as a whole. Figuring out the interconnections between seemingly disparate events requires not just armchair analysts but people who see things for themselves, firsthand, and whose work isn’t confined to a single country or region. In other analytical fields, the comparative imagination and the outsider perspective are prized qualities. No one would argue that a political scientist, anthropologist or historian could — or should — do without them. And neither should reporters. As the geopolitical landscape shifts yet again, we need reporters who can be not just on the spot but on many spots. Deborah Cohen is the Richard W. Leopold Professor of History at Northwestern. Her new book is Last Call at the Hotel Imperial: The Reporters Who Took on a World at War.

SOUND OFF

Tech to Change the World

Over the next decade, what technological advancements have the potential to affect life as we know it?

Guillermo Ameer, Daniel Hale Williams Professor of Biomedical Engineering and founding director of the Center for Advanced Regenerative Engineering



The convergence of several technological advances, including artificial intelligence and data science, novel biomaterials, physical sciences, and cell and molecular biology, will revolutionize how we detect and treat diseases and injuries. For example, at the Center for Advanced Regenerative Engineering, in collaboration with the Querrey Simpson Institute for Bioelectronics, we are working on integrating electronic sensors into engineered tissues. After the tissues are implanted in the body, these sensors will allow us to monitor their performance via a smartphone or tablet in real time.

Jolie Matthews, assistant professor of learning sciences

Communication technology always changes the world. We're headed toward (or already facing) a tension between technology that's increasingly interconnected and invasive across our homes, jobs and social lives — with the lines among all three blurring — and a desire for greater privacy. A technology that both connects us in unprecedented ways but grants us true control over how we share our data on



a wider scale would change the world, particularly since much of the modern economy is built on collecting and sharing our data.

Dennis Durbin '87 MD, president of the Abigail Wexner Research Institute at Nationwide Children's Hospital

Living therapies, including gene, cellular and stem cell therapies and living tissues such as vascular grafts, have the most potential to change the way we care for children with life-threatening conditions. These novel therapeutics — each quite different but all sharing the characteristic of being a biologically active, living treatment — represent truly paradigm-shifting advances in medical technology that enable us to seriously consider curative therapies for conditions, such as neuromuscular disorders, certain cancers and congenital heart defects, that currently only have symptom-management care options.



Vicky Kalogera, the Daniel I. Linzer Distinguished University Professor and director of the Center for Interdisciplinary Exploration and Research in Astrophysics

In every field of science, but astronomy in particular, we are collecting huge amounts of data, so much that we as humans can't possibly analyze it all. So researchers have begun programming computers to develop their own intuition when looking at data. Before now, finding patterns and meaning has been an almost exclusively human skill. But the interesting thing is this: Computers discover patterns in data all the time, even though we don't fully know how they're doing it! So not only is machine learning going to help us understand the data, it also has the potential to teach us about the way our minds make intuitive leaps of understanding.



SOCIAL FEEDS

Alumni gave shoutouts to their favorite professors. There were too many to list!



"Peter Hayes' history courses on modern Germany and the Holocaust had gripping lectures, demanding assignments and vibrant discussions! He definitely became a role model for my own academic career."

Wayne Bowen '92 MA, '96 PhD

"Don Schultz and his mighty purple pen!"

Rick Zuroweste '83 MS

"I still can't believe I got to take art with Ed Paschke."

Hayley Felsher Chambers '87

"Mark Ratner in chemistry. I hated quantum mechanics, but I loved his teaching style!"

Wade Jarrell '93 MS, '00 PhD

"Dominic Missimi in theater was the absolute bomb! He really pushed each student to reach beyond their limitations."

Catherine Scholl '86

AMEER: JOEL WINTERMANTLE; DURBIN: DAN SMITH; KALOGERA: JIM PRISCHING; HAYES: COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

AS TOLD TO ...

Shelisa Thomas on the Biggest Case of Her Career

When Corzell Cole walked out of Illinois' Stateville Correctional Center in late March after more than 19 years behind bars, his lead attorney, Shelisa Thomas '19 JD, was there to greet him. Cole had been convicted of first-degree murder and attempted murder for his role as the driver in a 2002 shooting.

Cole had his wrongful first-degree murder conviction overturned and pled guilty to second-degree murder. His sentence was then reduced thanks to a new Illinois statute that allows resentencing in cases where the "original sentence no longer advances the interests of justice."

As a Northwestern Pritzker School of Law student, Thomas worked in the Bluhm Legal Clinic's Center on Wrongful Convictions of Youth. Now a banking attorney in the Chicago office of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom, Thomas shares her story:

I met Corzell in fall 2018 when I was taking a law school class with [clinical professor of law and director of the Community Justice and Civil Rights Clinic] Sheila Bedi. We would go to Stateville and have class with the people incarcerated there. Corzell and I stayed in touch. During the pandemic he called me and was like, "Hey, I need to ask you a favor."

He had a lawyer working on clemency for him, but when Corzell received an initial draft of the petition, he thought the draft could be more powerful. So he and a friend started working on a supplemental draft. He asked if I could take a look. I reviewed it and told him he had a really powerful story.

I brought him on as a pro bono client and reached out to [co-director of Northwestern's Center on Wrongful Convictions] Steve Drizin '86 JD to serve as co-counsel. [Thomas prepared the clemency petition to go to Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker '93 JD. However, Cole's case was brought back to court to overturn his wrongful first-degree murder conviction and allow him to plead guilty to second-degree murder, and for resentencing based on an Illinois statute that allows judges to review cases when the prosecution and defense agree that a prior conviction or sentence is unjust.]

I grew up in areas of concentrated disadvantage. When you have that, you have higher crime levels. But seeing people in my community going in and out of the justice system, I felt like they needed a voice.



I have seen the huge difference that not having adequate legal representation can make in somebody's life. It has the potential to ruin them.

Corzell went into prison when he was only 19. As a society we've conditioned young adults and children to listen to adults ... so they're super susceptible to what police are saying or what lawyers are saying, instead of fighting for themselves. They don't have that level of advocacy.

Corzell grew up in not-so-good circumstances and had a very challenging life, the kind of life where tomorrow is never promised. The justice system fell hard on him, particularly because his co-defendant [the gunman] was not apprehended until years after Corzell was convicted. We have a system that focuses on finality: Once you're convicted, it's a lot harder to overturn it. So he had very little culpability but this big weight of liability on him.

Corzell graduated with his associate's degree from Oakton Community College in April. That was very exciting.

With State Bill 2129 [which took effect in January], the state's attorney can take into consideration, among other things, your achievement, your rehabilitation and your restoration to a law-abiding and productive citizen.

Corzell was an ideal candidate for reconsideration under that bill. He was incarcerated with a less-than-ninth-grade education, and while in prison, [he] earned his GED, earned his associate's degree with a 4.0 GPA and got accepted into Northwestern to pursue his bachelor's. He has huge, huge dreams. And now that he's out, they're not just dreams — they're goals.

↑ From left, Shelisa Thomas; Mary Pattillo, the Harold Washington Professor of Sociology and African American Studies and chair of the Department of African American Studies; and Corzell Cole after Cole received his associate's degree in April. In January Cole was one of 20 students admitted to Northwestern's new bachelor's degree program for incarcerated people, the first of its kind at a top 10 university. He was released from Stateville Correctional Center in March.

WHAT INSPIRES ME

Earth Activism

Climate justice advocate builds community.

Lucy London, a senior performance studies major from Petaluma, Calif.

“I had always been aware of climate change but never really thought I could do anything about it. Then, when I was in high school, I attended the One Planet Youth Summit in Rohnert Park, Calif. I saw people taking on projects that they were passionate about, and I was inspired. I went back to my high school and started an Earth club.

“In 2021 I went up to Minnesota to protest the construction of the Line 3 oil pipeline. For three months I lived at three different Indigenous-led resistance camps and helped plan direct actions to try to stop this pipeline. That was when

I realized I could really dedicate myself to the environmental justice movement instead of doing it as a side thing. “At times, the climate crisis can feel hopeless, but I still have to do something. I want to commit myself fully to environmental justice, knowing that it’s the right thing to do, even if I don’t see the impact of my actions in my lifetime.”

Lucy London is a core organizer of Fossil Free NU. London also helped organize the all-night, student-led event Generations of Environmental Justice, which took place on Earth Day 2022. The event educated students and community members on the history and future of environmental justice, with a focus on resistance by Indigenous and Black communities.



↑ Lucy London

COMMENCEMENT 2022

Strength in Being Vulnerable

As we said goodbye to the Class of 2022, speakers reminded graduates that vulnerability and courage often go hand in hand.

“I have come across many situations in my career that nothing in law school prepared me for. That’s where courage comes in. It might mean sharing your story when you are also feeling scared and vulnerable, to help create a safe place for others to do so.”

Marie Oh Huber ’86 JD, senior vice president and chief legal officer of eBay, at the Northwestern Pritzker School of Law convocation

“I think about what you have been through as a class, what we have been through as a country. ... You’ve learned far more than what can be contained on any syllabus. You learned that you are stronger than you imagined and more resilient than you might have ever known.”

Isabel Wilkerson ’22 H, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author of Caste, at Commencement

“We all individually have something very particular that we are here to do on this Earth. ... The only thing standing between you and your what-ifs is fear — fear of the responsibility of fulfilling your purpose and living your dreams. It is scary, but it is so worth it.”

Jeanne Sparrow ’91, ’15 MS, Emmy-winning television host, at the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences convocation

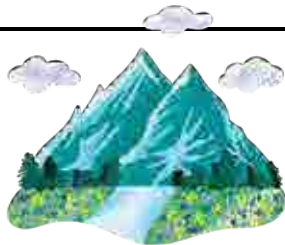
“All of my teachers believed in me before I ever believed in myself, and it is because of them that I am here. They imagined a world in which I belonged in classical music, no matter my gender or my race. ... If you don’t see a space that fits you, create your own. And make sure ... to help others feel that they, too, belong.”

Jennifer Koh, world-renowned violinist, at the Bienen School of Music convocation

WILKERSON: JOE HENSON; SPARROW: JEAN LACHAT; KOH: JUERGEN FRANK; LONDON: JAY TOWNS ’22



SHANE COLLINS



A wildflower experiment in the Rockies p. 14

Wildcats compete on the global stage p. 13

News

LEADERSHIP

Our Next University President

Michael H. Schill will become Northwestern’s 17th president this fall.

Michael H. Schill, the president of the University of Oregon (UO), was named the 17th president of Northwestern University by the Board of Trustees in mid-August.

Schill has led the UO since 2015 and holds a tenured faculty appointment in the University of Oregon School of Law. He is a nationally recognized expert in property law, real estate, low-income housing and land use, and discrimination in the housing market.

“I am thrilled, honored and humbled to join Northwestern, one of the world’s most prominent universities,” Schill says. “Northwestern has a long tradition of educating the brightest minds and pushing the boundaries of research and innovation.”



Schill's selection came 16 months after President Morton Schapiro announced his departure, having served for more than a decade at the helm of Northwestern. The University had named Rebecca M. Blank as Schapiro's successor in October 2021. In July 2022, however, Blank announced that she had been diagnosed with cancer and would be unable to fulfill her role as president. Following Blank's announcement, the Board of Trustees re-engaged Northwestern's 34-member Presidential Search Committee, which ultimately recommended Schill to the Board.

"The selection of President Schill reflects the values and input of our community and institution and was informed by his deep commitment to research and academic rigor, his focus on student access and success, his commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion, and demonstrated administrative leadership," says Peter Barris '74, chair of the Presidential Search Committee and chair of the Board of Trustees. "President Schill is ambitious and eager

to build on Northwestern's successes and boldly lead the institution to its future."

Schill was born in Schenectady, N.Y. His father worked in a clothing factory, and his mother was a registered nurse. They both instilled in him a passion for education.

"The thing I am most proud of is that I am a first-gen college grad," Schill says. "I know deep in my bones how a great education can transform one's life, and I want to continue Northwestern's progress in this area."

Schill attended Princeton University on a scholarship, then went on to the Yale Law School. His first job was as an assistant professor of law at the University of Pennsylvania Law School and Wharton School. He then served on the faculty at New York University School of Law and Wagner School of Public Service. After that, he was dean of UCLA School of Law from 2004 to 2009 before joining the University of Chicago as dean of the law school in 2010.

It was there that Schill developed a deep love for

the Chicago metropolitan area. "There is no city in the nation with architecture as beautiful and awe inspiring as Chicago," he says. "It's a great place to live, work and study."

As president of the UO, Schill helped launch the Oregon Commitment in 2015 to support student success by improving four-year graduation rates and providing more access to higher education through programs like PathwayOregon, which provides free tuition and fees and specialized advising to Pell Grant-eligible Oregonians. As a result of the initiative, UO graduation rates rose by 10 percentage points.

Schill prioritized improving inclusion and diversity on the UO campus by hosting events such as an African American Speakers series and building a new Black Cultural Center. He also pushed for the hiring of more faculty of color and supported the establishment of academic minors in Black Studies, Latinx Studies and Native American and Indigenous Studies.

"I am committed to diversity," Schill says. "The true potential of a place like Northwestern cannot be fulfilled without bringing together people of diverse backgrounds, experiences, abilities and identities as well as students, staff and faculty members who span the spectrum of ideological and political viewpoints."



PUTTING WOMEN'S CYCLING ON THE MAP
Paris

Lily Williams '17 MS and her Human Powered Health teammates competed in the Tour de France Femmes avec Zwift in July. The creation of the inaugural eight-day, 640-mile event is one of many improvements in women's cycling that she's witnessed. Williams says "things are night and day from when I signed my first contract in 2018," when eight team members would huddle in a minivan before the start of a race. Now teams have fleets of vehicles with cooks and massage therapists. "To have seen that transition makes me feel like I'm a professional athlete — not just a woman who's doing a sport," she says. Williams won a bronze medal in the women's team pursuit, a track cycling event, at the Tokyo Olympics.

TICKER ILLUSTRATIONS: LESLIE-ANNE MOCK; WILLIAMS: COURTESY OF HUMAN POWERED HEALTH; MEDINA GARCIA: NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY ATHLETICS

WORLD OF SPORTS

The International Field of Play

Northwestern students and alumni compete on the global stage.



DOING THE DIRTY WORK
Madrid, Spain

Ana Medina Garcia started playing club field hockey at age 10. Never the star, she persevered to earn roster spots on regional and national teams in Spain. "You have to have people who are gonna do the dirty work. That's my role," says the senior midfielder. She played in the top women's league in Spain before committing to Northwestern. "If I were going to leave home, it had to be for something really great," Medina Garcia says. "And Northwestern is beyond great." She registered three goals in 2021 during Northwestern's run to the national title.



A VOICE FOR CHANGE
Doha, Qatar

In 2019 Mariam Mamdouh Farid raced in the 400-meter hurdles at the World Athletics Championships in Doha, Qatar. Dressed in a full bodysuit and hijab, she became one of the first women to compete at that level for her home country. "I am honored and proud to represent Qatar — and women in the Middle East, women in hijabs — on a national and international level," says Farid '21, a Northwestern University in Qatar alum. Farid, who is chief communications officer at Queen Hospital in Doha, continues to train and compete with the national team.

FROM PRO TO OLYMPIAN

Faenza, Italy

Former Northwestern women's basketball star Pallas Kunaiyi-Akpanah '19 averaged a double-double for Faenza Basket Project and finished the 2021–22 season as one of the leading rebounders in Italy's premier women's basketball league. "It's one of the strongest leagues in Europe," says Kunaiyi-Akpanah. "I enjoyed the competition and had some great teammates this year too, including Jori Davis, who played at Indiana." In summer 2021 Kunaiyi-Akpanah also represented her home country, Nigeria, in the Tokyo Olympics. "The 'N' never comes off," she says. "I felt very privileged to participate both as a Nigerian and a Northwestern Wildcat."



HERO ON THE MOUND
Seoul, South Korea

Southpaw Eric Jokisch '11 is in his fourth season with the Kiwoom Heroes of the Korea Baseball Organization (KBO). Last season he finished 16-9 with a 2.93 ERA in 31 starts. Over the past three-plus seasons, he ranks among the KBO leaders in wins, innings and ERA. Jokisch, who earned 17 career wins and a first-team All-Big Ten nod in 2010 for Northwestern, made four appearances with the Chicago Cubs in 2014.



The Ticker

● Northwestern engineers have developed the **smallest-ever remote-controlled walking robot** — and it's shaped like a crab. At just a half-millimeter wide, these tiny crabs can bend, twist, walk, turn and even jump. Although the research is exploratory, the engineers believe microrobots could eventually perform practical tasks inside tight spaces.



● The Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Energy awarded Northwestern the **ENERGY STAR Partner of the Year — Sustained Excellence Award** for the third year in a row.



● Northwestern's **African American studies department celebrated its 50th anniversary** at a daylong event in May that featured panel discussions, a dinner and an award ceremony. The department was established in 1971–72 after Black students demanded the University take action to improve their experiences on campus.



● Northwestern University in Qatar's **Institute for Advanced Study in the Global South** has selected 12 student researchers for its inaugural undergraduate fellowship program. Students will create multilingual publications and documentaries, as well as a virtual reality exhibit and video game focused on the Global South.



CLIMATE SCIENCE

Early Snowmelt Means Earlier Blooms

A new study explores how climate change will affect wildflowers — and, by extension, broader ecosystems.

In the summer, you can find climate scientist Elsa Godtfredsen in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado scouting for bees and other pollinators, testing soil moisture levels, gathering seeds and carefully monitoring the health of local alpine wildflowers.

A doctoral student in Northwestern’s plant biology and conservation program, Godtfredsen has been running a multiyear experiment to see how early snowmelt (one sign of a warming planet) will affect four species of wildflowers — and, by extension, the broader ecosystems upon which we all rely.

“Plants are the basis of ecosystems,” Godtfredsen says, “and how they react to climate change will have a trickle-down effect ... on

agriculture, wildlife, weather patterns and more.”

Godtfredsen is studying the subalpine meadows of the Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory, a field station in Gothic, Colo., where wildflowers grow abundantly. In early April, after a typical, snowy Colorado winter, she covers seven 5-meter square plots of land with black shade cloths. The cloths increase solar radiation, causing the snow to melt more quickly than in the surrounding areas. (The rest of the meadow remains covered in snow for several weeks more.) Then, she monitors the plots over the spring and summer months, observing wildflower growth, reproduction and health.

“Snowmelt is a really important environmental cue for flowering plants,” Godtfredsen says. “And in 2021 we saw much earlier flowering in all four species that were in the early

“Plants are the basis of ecosystems, and how they react to climate change will have a trickle-down effect.”

— Elsa Godtfredsen



Climate scientist Elsa Godtfredsen conducts her field work at the Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory in Gothic, Colo.

GODTFREDSSEN: GWEN KIRSCHKE

snowmelt test plots, as well as lower pollinator visitation.”

One might welcome earlier blooms after a cold winter, but Godtfredsen explains why that could spell trouble.

“It’s disrupting the normal timing,” she says. If flowers bloom too early, pollinators like bumblebees may not be foraging yet. As a result, those flowers may receive less pollen, which could affect seed production.

Godtfredsen is awaiting more evidence — “I’m still counting seeds from this past season,” she says — but fewer flowers and earlier

blooms could potentially cause a cascading effect. “These flowers are really key food sources for pollinators,” she says. Declines in flowers can cause declines in pollinator populations, which can then hinder the success of other plant species and agricultural crops, as well as the animals (and people) that eat them.

Repeating the experiment over the next few years will help to account for unexpected factors that could be impacting her results. “We might see cumulative effects across multiple years,” she conjectures. Perhaps plants

that attracted fewer pollinators this year, for instance, will produce fewer seeds not right away but in the years ahead.

It is slow-moving work. But Godtfredsen hopes the results of her study will help demonstrate the effects of climate change and aid conservationists in their efforts to preserve plant species that may be particularly susceptible to a warming world.

“Being able to monitor those changes and understand them is powerful and gives me hope,” she says. “There’s a lot of resiliency in nature, but we also

need to actively change policy to address climate change.”

When the wildflower season ends in August, Godtfredsen returns to her lab at the Chicago Botanic Garden (which partners with the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences on the plant biology and conservation program) to analyze her data.

If you stop by, she says, you might just spot her counting seeds, doing the painstaking work to help us prepare for a changing climate.

Follow Godtfredsen’s work at alummag.nu/snowmelt.

INSPIRED BY NATURE

Research by Land and Sea



1

PREDICTING LANDSLIDES

After a wildfire sweeps through an area, a subsequent rainstorm can create a fast-moving, destructive landslide. These debris flows have the potential to wipe out cars, homes and roads. Daniel Horton, assistant professor of Earth and planetary sciences, has developed the first physics-based model to investigate and forecast such debris flows. Though more work is needed, he says the model could eventually be used to alert people living in high-risk areas, giving them time to evacuate before disaster strikes.

to mimic. Nathan C. Gianneschi, the Jacob and Rosaline Cohn Professor of Chemistry, says the polymer could be used as an adhesive in biomedical contexts. “You could stick it to a specific tissue in the body [to help with] wound healing or repair.”



3

A SPONGE FOR EVERYTHING BUT THE KITCHEN SINK

With a sponge that looks like one you might find in your kitchen, Northwestern researchers have discovered how to effectively clean up oil spills, microplastics and phosphate pollution — without harming marine life. “Almost half a billion tons of sponges ... go to landfills [each year],” says Vinayak Dravid, the Abraham Harris Professor of Materials Science and Engineering and inventor of the new sponge. “[We coat the sponge with] a tiny amount of nanotechnology slurry and that makes [it] much more effective in capturing pollutants. ... [We’re] using waste to clean waste.”

2

MIMICKING MUSSELS

Those who have tried to pry a mussel from a rock know how stubborn the mollusks are — and their gluey secret has long captivated scientists. Now, Northwestern researchers have created a polymer that performs even better than the mussel glue they were trying

RESEARCH

An Ecosystem of Innovation

Translational research by Northwestern faculty and student entrepreneurs is thriving, bolstered by philanthropic support.

University-wide research institutes and centers (URICs) are a fundamentally important and vibrant nexus of innovation and discovery at Northwestern. Continued investments in these hubs have strengthened the work of faculty and students who seek to benefit humankind through advancements in fields ranging from medicine and engineering to nanotechnology and materials science. URICs also contribute to entrepreneurial activity, fueled by the University’s long-standing commitment to research-driven innovation and further supported by philanthropic gifts and federal funding.

Since 2011 Northwestern’s annual sponsored research funding has increased by more than 74%, reaching a record high of \$893.4 million in fiscal year 2021. In addition, private philanthropy from individual donors has expanded Northwestern’s capacity for discovery and its impact by funding programs such as the Donald Pritzker Entrepreneurship Law Center (DPELC), the Levy Institute for Entrepreneurial Practice and the Querrey InQbation Lab — the University’s new technology accelerator for faculty spinoff companies.

→ Northwestern researcher Mark Hersam and his startup Volexion are part of the new Querrey InQbation Lab. Volexion develops graphene-coating for next-generation lithium-ion batteries.

The lab’s name honors Kimberly K. Querrey, chair of the Innovation and Entrepreneurship Committee of Northwestern’s Board of Trustees, who gave \$25 million to make the vision for this accelerator a reality. The project also received a grant from the state of Illinois.

“Northwestern innovators are pushing the bounds of science and engineering through discovery, collaboration and promising ventures,” Querrey says. “The Querrey InQbation Lab will give these entrepreneurial faculty the resources to realize their potential and maximize the benefits to society.”

Seven Northwestern startups now reside in the downtown Evanston location. Those companies include Rhaeos, which develops noninvasive sensors to

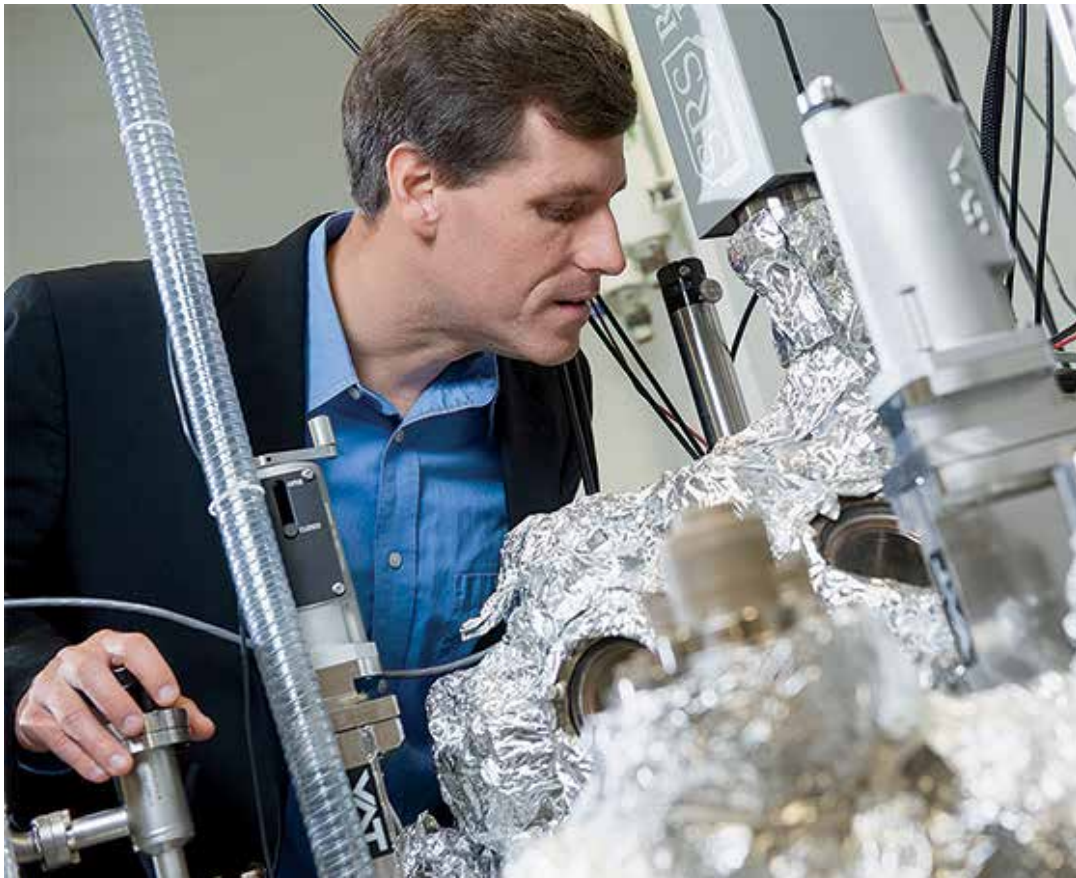
“Northwestern innovators are pushing the bounds of science and engineering through discovery, collaboration and promising ventures.”

— Kimberly Querrey

monitor function of ventricular shunts in patients with hydrocephalus. Rhaeos is based on the research of John Rogers, the Louis Simpson and Kimberly Querrey Professor and director of the Querrey Simpson Institute for Bioelectronics. Other InQbation Lab ventures were born out of the Center for Synthetic Biology, McCormick School of Engineering and Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences.

“The Querrey InQbation Lab blends Northwestern’s science, technology and business thinking to create distinctive companies whose products will benefit our community and economy and the greater society,” says Alicia Löffler, associate provost for innovation and new ventures.

Querrey’s vision builds on the collaborative culture Northwestern donors have helped cultivate for more than a decade. Between



LEFT: JB CREATIVE; ABOVE: NORTHWESTERN IT; RIGHT: COURTESY OF STEPHANIE SHIELDS



↑ Kevin Kaspar '24 and his team took first place in VentureCat 2022.

2010 and 2020, the number of Northwestern startups increased 536%. In 2021 *The Princeton Review* ranked Northwestern third in its list of top graduate schools for entrepreneurship, thanks to a robust ecosystem of research institutes and centers across University disciplines and campuses.

At the Northwestern Pritzker School of Law, the DPELC — endowed by the Pritzker Family Foundation — has been educating law students about entrepreneurial thinking for more than 20 years. Originally founded as the Small Business Opportunity Center, the DPELC was one of the first programs in the U.S. to provide hands-on training for students who aspire to become transactional lawyers or startup CEOs.

Kellogg School of Management students prepare to become entrepreneurs through coursework, immersion programs and competitions where they interact with industry

experts and venture capitalists. Since 2011 Kellogg alumni have started companies that represent almost \$20 billion in market value. The Levy Institute, endowed by Carol '64 and Larry Levy '66, '67 MBA, ensures that students will always benefit from a cutting-edge entrepreneurship curriculum and experimental learning.

In 2008 the McCormick School of Engineering’s Farley Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation was endowed by James '50 and Nancy Farley. The center expanded rapidly, establishing an entrepreneurship minor and the popular NUvention course series, which challenges students to come up with novel solutions to problems in medicine, sustainability, media, artificial intelligence, transportation and more.

Stephanie Shields '24, a political science major, had no experience with clean tech before enrolling in NUvention: Energy, a course cross-listed by Northwestern

Engineering and the Institute for Sustainability and Energy at Northwestern. “The transferable skills and networking opportunities provided by NUvention: Energy give me an incredible launchpad into a potential career in the clean energy sector,” Shields says.

NUvention courses have ignited some of Northwestern’s most successful student-generated startups, many of which have gone on to be developed further at The Garage — a 100,000-square-foot coworking space that is home to the student entrepreneurial community — or to compete in VentureCat, an annual student startup competition.

Northwestern also helps develop faculty members to become innovation leaders. Trainings include Kellogg’s experience-based course for those interested in developing commercial opportunities and INVOForward, a series of mentorship programs geared toward supporting Northwestern faculty.

Student-Focused Ventures

More than 50 student startups applied to participate in the 2022 edition of VentureCat, an annual event for Northwestern’s most promising entrepreneurial ventures. The program culminates in a pitch competition for more than \$300,000 in non-dilutive prize money, made possible by the Levy Institute; Lanny '68, '73 JD and Sharon Martin; and Exelon, VentureCat’s energy and sustainability track sponsor.

This past May an industry experts panel awarded the grand

prize of \$150,000 to InfernoGuard, a monitoring solution that provides prompt wildfire detection and notification to large-scale landowners.

Since 2014 VentureCat participants have won more than \$1.5 million in funds. The program is held in collaboration with the Kellogg School of Management, the Farley Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, the Donald Pritzker Entrepreneurship Law Center and The Garage.



↑ Political science major Stephanie Shields

“Northwestern’s momentum as a community of big thinkers and challengers of the status quo continues propelling the University’s translational and entrepreneurial ecosystem,” Löffler says. “Whether through groundbreaking discoveries, repurposing old technologies or increasing efficiencies, innovators embrace a collective mission to stir change and unlock solutions that improve society and impact lives.”



← From left, Pritzker Pucker Studio Lab Director David Tolchinsky, actor Geno Walker and Brett Neveu, associate professor of instruction, at a screening of the movie *Night's End*, which Neveu wrote

characters who display an amalgamation of mental health symptoms not attributable to a particular illness, adds Tolchinsky, whose own projects span comedy and darker fare. “By educating media-makers about the multidimensional aspects of mental health, encouraging discussion around complex topics and amplifying marginalized voices, we can generate a meaningful change in the way mental health is understood by society at large,” Tolchinsky says.

The studio lab is a three-academic quarter commitment for students. The curriculum includes technical training and guest lectures by psychologists, social scientists, anthropologists and screenwriters. In addition to instruction, the program provides student grants of \$2,000 for screenplays and \$5,000 for films to be created and completed over a year, plus access to new film equipment for the grant awardees. Ten students were commissioned as part of the first cohort — and as the studio lab expands over the next five years, that number will increase.

The studio lab has already begun engaging audiences beyond Northwestern through public lectures, discussions and movie screenings around the depiction of mental health and mental illness. In 2023 it will host a symposium featuring keynote sessions by nationally recognized figures as well as work by student members of the studio lab.

MICHAEL GOSS

COMMUNICATION

Mental Health Onscreen

A new studio lab supported by the Pritzker Pucker Family Foundation is studying how TV and movies portray mental health.

A new student film incubator at Northwestern’s School of Communication is shining a light on how mental health is depicted in TV, movies and other media. The initiative was made possible by a grant from the Pritzker Pucker Family Foundation and Jessy Pucker ’19.

The mission of the Pritzker Pucker Studio Lab for the Promotion of Mental Health via Cinematic Arts is to create, support and examine original narrative screenwriting, TV writing and media-making centered around mental health.

“We are grateful to Jessy and the Pritzker Pucker Family Foundation for helping us give students a pipeline to gain agency over mental

health narratives and, through creative collaboration, reshape how we learn and talk about a very misunderstood topic,” says E. Patrick Johnson, dean of the School of Communication and the Annenberg University Professor.

Mass media has long perpetuated a profoundly negative stigma related to mental health, according to Pritzker Pucker Studio Lab

“We can generate a meaningful change in the way mental health is understood by society at large.”

— David Tolchinsky

Director David Tolchinsky, a filmmaker, screenwriter and playwright who is founding director of the school’s MFA in Writing for Screen and Stage program. “Through one-dimensional viewpoints, inaccurate portrayals and depictions centered on fear and shame, the media has reinforced discriminatory behavior toward people experiencing mental health issues and propagated impediments to treatment and recovery,” he says.

Storylines often wrongly associate schizophrenia and dissociative disorder (known in popular culture as split personality) interchangeably with violence or with superpowers, for example, and many films across genres present

Celebrating Campus Landmarks

Some of the most iconic buildings on Northwestern’s Evanston campus are marking anniversaries this year.



90 YEARS



50 YEARS



80 YEARS



15 YEARS

Deering Library (1932)

When benefactor Charles Deering died in 1927, he bequeathed the University funds for the construction of a new library — Northwestern’s top fundraising priority at the time. The Collegiate Gothic structure, which features limestone, sandstone and granite, was inspired by King’s College Chapel in Cambridge, England. The building was dedicated on Dec. 29, 1932; officially opened on Jan. 3, 1933; and

served as the University’s main library until 1970.

Technological Institute (1942)

In 1939 Walter P. Murphy made a transformative gift to establish the Technological Institute, whose sprawling design and six wings would greatly influence the McCormick School of Engineering’s continuing emphasis on interdisciplinary learning. His initial gift was for construction and faculty hiring;

he later endowed the institute. The building was dedicated in June 1942. One of the largest academic facilities in the world, the institute has more than 750,000 square feet of classrooms, offices, labs and research facilities.

Norris University Center (1972)

Norris University Center received its name from Lester J. Norris ’50, who died in 1967. In his memory, Norris’ parents made a generous gift toward

the construction of a student center on the recently finished Lakefill. The building opened in September 1972, prior to its dedication on Jan. 19, 1973. Norris is the center of student activity on the Evanston campus and offers many services and programs, including dining, meeting rooms and outdoor event space.

Ryan Hall (2007)

Ryan Hall is the home of Northwestern’s International Institute for Nanotechnology,

which brings together experts from areas across the University who are searching for “small” answers to large, complex problems in fields as diverse as medicine, information technology, energy, homeland security, food and water safety, and transportation. The 44,000-square-foot building has been used by two of Northwestern’s three Nobel laureates and is named for the Patrick G. ’59, ’09 H and Shirley W. Ryan ’61, ’19 H Family.



A FRESH PERSPECTIVE

Over the past decade, **Naomi Beckwith** has ascended to the top curatorial role at one of the world's top museums. Now the Guggenheim's chief curator is challenging us to rethink how we see art.

BY LARA EHRLICH

Photograph by Rayon Richards

FALL 2022 **NORTHWESTERN**



← The iconic Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Guggenheim Museum, with its five ramps spiraling up from a rotunda, allows visitors to experience exhibitions differently depending on whether they travel up or down the ramps, creating “the sense that time can move in multiple directions and collapse in on itself or expand,” says Naomi Beckwith. “I love that the building represents this different way of imagining what modernism is, what time is.”

“She has long been a champion for artists whose voices have been overlooked or even suppressed,” says Corrin. “Today, museums are reflecting with an increased self-awareness on their roles as shapers of culture, considering how their values are embedded in what they choose to show and whose stories they choose to tell. Naomi brings to

her leadership a deep commitment to questioning these choices.”

The broader role and purpose of the museum “is under investigation ... though with the idea that we all kind of still believe in museums,” Beckwith said on a 2021 episode of the contemporary art podcast *Bad at Sports*. “We’re still committed to some kind of vessel by which we think about art and object. ... [But] how we think about that is really up for a renovation. ... I’ve been ... thinking through ways in which my education in Black cultural history has allowed me to rethink all of art history.”

A NATIONAL RECKONING

Situated on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, adjacent to Central Park, the Guggenheim aims to engage audiences on a global scale as well as those in its

In spring 1993, Naomi Beckwith and 13 other high school juniors ventured around Chicago with butterfly nets and sketchbooks, conducting natural history studies and collecting evidence of the city’s ecological and manmade environment. Led by conceptual artist Mark Dion, who uses scientific specimens in his installations, the project brought together the oft-distant disciplines of science and art.

Those experiences (part of Chicago’s Culture in Action landmark public art exhibition) had a profound effect on Beckwith, introducing her to the idea that art is about exploring the world.

“That was an amazing way into contemporary art practice,” says Beckwith ’98. “It wasn’t sketching, copying the masters in a studio — it was out in the field, doing performative action, building out installations.”

Dion says it was clear that Beckwith, even as a high schooler, stood out. “Naomi shined well above an already incandescent group of people,” he says. “She is so intellectually nimble, and there’s a kind of grittiness and an intellectual velocity to her thoughts.”

Now the deputy director and chief curator of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City, Beckwith credits Culture in Action as her first deep engagement with art as an agent of social change. “Art is a way into history, science, community action — it isn’t just about

discrete objects but a set of relations,” she says.

Hired in June 2021 as the first Black chief curator at the Guggenheim — during a pandemic and the nation’s ongoing reckoning with institutional racism — Beckwith had an intense first year in one of the most coveted positions in the arts world. She oversees the Guggenheim’s collections, exhibitions, publications, and curatorial programs and archives. And, importantly, she strives to create a more inclusive collection that reflects the diverse community the contemporary art museum serves.

Lisa Graziose Corrin, the Ellen Phillips Katz Director of The Block Museum of Art at Northwestern, says Beckwith is a perfect fit for the job. “A brilliant scholar and electrifying speaker, she is blessed with what Italians call *sprezzatura*, effortless style, along with warmth that embraces everyone she meets,” Corrin says. “These traits serve her well at the artistic helm of a global institution like the Guggenheim, where she will be one of its most visible representatives around the world.”

ART AS COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

Beckwith grew up in Chicago’s Hyde Park neighborhood in the 1970s and ’80s — a time, she says, when the Black community felt a longing for, and an affinity with, their African origins. She remembers cultural projects by artists and organizations such as the DuSable

Black History Museum and Education Center that engaged with ideas of Black identity, economic empowerment and self-reliance. She took African dance and drumming lessons and attended Hyde Park’s annual 57th Street Art Fair, where she became familiar with her community’s artists and craftspeople.

At that time, in that place, “you didn’t have a social-political awareness without it also being attached to some sense of aesthetic,” she says. “That aesthetic education was deeply multidisciplinary; it was music and dance and visual arts and theater and poetry and language all wrapped into the formation of a consciousness and character of a community.”

Beckwith, who originally planned to become an OB-GYN and help curb the high rate of teenage pregnancies she saw among her peers, attended Northwestern to study biology. But she also worked in the University’s Dittmar Gallery, wrote exhibition reviews and eventually changed her major to history, with a focus on African American diaspora heritage. “It’s so funny that I walked in like, ‘I’m going to be a doctor!’ but I clearly had this deep interest in art,” Beckwith says. “I had amazing art history courses at Northwestern.”

In particular, she remembers former Northwestern assistant professor Michael Stone-Richards, who taught European modernism and encouraged her to attend London’s Courtauld Institute of Art. “He could recite art

history almost in real time — knowing the work, the artists and their milieu, all the gossip and peccadillos,” Beckwith recalls. “He made artworks live.” (She still keeps in touch with Stone-Richards, who is now a professor at the College for Creative Studies in Detroit.)

She went on to earn a master’s degree in art history from the Courtauld Institute, where she specialized in African American art and was quickly identified as a rising star. (While there, she also worked with Dion on his *Tate Thames Dig*, an archeological art project that showcased natural and manmade items pulled from the banks of the River Thames.) After prestigious fellowships at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City and the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, she served as associate curator at The Studio Museum in Harlem.

Beckwith returned to her hometown in 2011 and spent a decade at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (MCA), most recently as the Manilow Senior Curator. She became known for curating exhibitions with artists of color and those who are committed to the practice of community-based art, such as Howardena Pindell, the first Black woman curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Beckwith’s exhibitions and publications at the MCA focused on the impact of identity and the resonance of Black culture on multidisciplinary practices within global contemporary art.

INSTALLATION VIEW, VASILY KANDINSKY: AROUND THE CIRCLE, SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, NEW YORK, OCT. 8, 2021-SEPT. 5, 2022. PHOTO: DAVID HEALD © SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM FOUNDATION, 2021.

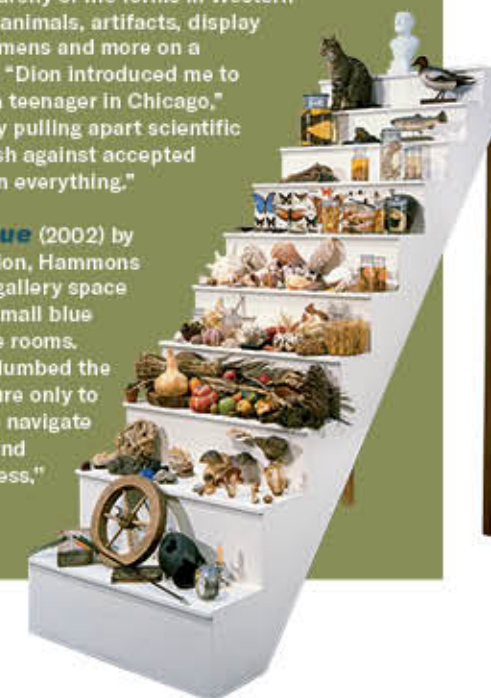
MARK DION: SCALA NATURAE, 1994. PAINTED WOODEN STRUCTURE, ARTIFACTS, PLANT SPECIMENS, TAXIDERMIC SPECIMENS, AND BUST. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND TANYA BONA KIDAR GALLERY, NEW YORK / LOS ANGELES

NAOMI BECKWITH SHARES three ARTWORKS THAT HAVE INFLUENCED HER LIFE AND CAREER.

• **The Mythic Being** (1973–75) by Adrian Piper — For this iconic 1970s project, Piper dressed as a male alter ego of herself during her doctorate-level classes at Harvard University. This disguise, called the Mythic Being, became the basis of a series of in-person performances and photo-based works that demonstrated how stereotypes about one’s appearance can change onlookers’ perceptions. “The Mythic Being was confusing to his audiences,” Beckwith says, “and Piper remains committed to confounding people about their illogical presumptions around race and gender.”

• **Scala Naturae** (1994) by Mark Dion — In this work (pictured), Dion playfully reconsiders the hierarchy of life forms in Western philosophy by stacking taxidermic animals, artifacts, display food, fungi, seashells, insect specimens and more on a freestanding staircase to nowhere. “Dion introduced me to contemporary art when I was just a teenager in Chicago,” Beckwith says. “His work, generally pulling apart scientific theories, is a larger mandate to push against accepted systems of knowledge and question everything.”

• **Concerto in Black and Blue** (2002) by David Hammons — In this installation, Hammons completely darkened a cavernous gallery space and gave audience participants a small blue flashlight with which to explore the rooms. “No other artist has more deeply plumbed the metaphorical depths of Black culture only to surface again with a map of how to navigate the world by acknowledging the blind spots of our presumed colorblindness,” Beckwith says.



"I'm less interested in the artist as lone genius cutting off his ear. I'm interested in artists as [people] embedded with their family, partners, lovers, friends, collectives, schools. What are they learning from each other? How are they influencing each other? How do we make up a story about art as the product of all these histories, rather than one singular vision?" — Naomi Beckwith

local community. Like many museums, however, it has some work to do. In a 2018 study, the Guggenheim found that nearly 73% of its visitors identified as white, while about 43% of New York City residents are white. The Guggenheim is not alone in this trend; institutions throughout the U.S. are looking for ways to diversify their audiences.

This pressure came to a head in 2020 in the wake of George Floyd's murder. As Black Lives Matter protests raged throughout the country that summer, arts organizations — and most other entities across the country — were forced to look more closely at the ways in which they needed to address racial injustice.

For Beckwith, part of the work of museums like the Guggenheim is to dismantle the myth that art and culture began in Europe. "These are false narratives, bad faith assumptions, a convenient, prescribed history undergirding the white supremacist narrative," she says. "To tell a story that only includes certain people is a form of racism and white supremacist thinking."

In summer 2020, the museum opened an independent investigation after the curatorial department sent a letter accusing the Guggenheim of fostering "an inequitable work environment that enables racism, white supremacy and other discriminatory practices." More than 170 current and former employees signed a second letter stating that the Guggenheim's "failure to create a diverse and equitable workplace has resulted in a museum culture that refuses to take accountability for the violence and injustice inflicted upon its BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of color) constituents. ... The Guggenheim cannot claim to be a leading arts institution without first atoning for its wrongdoings and committing to concrete action and change."

The letters resulted in the Guggenheim becoming one of the country's first cultural institutions to create a comprehensive plan aimed at dismantling systemic racism. Initiatives included hiring a leader to oversee diversity, equity and inclusion; expanding paid internships for first-generation college students, financial aid recipients and BIPOC students; and instituting broader initiatives such as an industrywide network for BIPOC arts professionals. The Guggenheim also formed a committee to review the museum's acquisitions and exhibitions with an eye toward diversity and inclusion, citing the fact that "the museum has never held a solo exhibition of a Black artist, a woman artist of color, an Indigenous artist or a trans-identified artist" within its iconic rotunda.

Beckwith entered the Guggenheim in the midst of this public reckoning, a moment she calls both "a blessing and a curse."

"It's a curse," she says, "because the team feels traumatized to have the questions around our progressive vulnerabilities made public. At the same time, it's a blessing because it's in the open — and we'll see what it means to walk out of this as a cohesive institution."

Dion says Beckwith understands the challenges of our historical time, "which is one where there's a lot to be

critical of and a lot that can feel daunting and depressing. Naomi has the ability to deal with this critical landscape, but at the same time, she is never defeated by it.

"When I think about Naomi," he adds, "I think about her laughing. She has a buoyant personality, which doesn't mean that she's ignoring all of these things, but rather she knows that we have to emphasize joy and pleasure. We can't only focus on the grimmest aspects of our current condition."

THE BLACK EXPANSE

As chief curator, Beckwith's vision for the Guggenheim questions the lenses through which we experience art.

Shortly after Beckwith's hiring, the Guggenheim's director, Richard Armstrong, said in a statement that she is ideally positioned to drive the museum forward because she has dedicated her career to "building a revised canon of art history."

"I'm less interested in the artist as lone genius cutting off his ear,"

Beckwith says. "I'm interested in artists as [people] embedded with their family, partners, lovers, friends, collectives, schools. What are they learning from each other? How are they influencing each other? How do we make up a story about art as the product of all these histories, rather than one singular vision? How do we talk about artists as citizens?"

Beckwith has been curating exhibitions that address these questions, with artists who have been traditionally underrepresented in the museum's programming.

"Our attention and resources are going toward people of color, mostly African American artists, and mostly women," she says.

Beckwith's first Guggenheim exhibition, *Foroftermore*, is a career retrospective of Chicago artist Nick Cave that opened at the Museum of Contemporary

← Nick Cave, *Soundsuit 9:29*, 2021. Mixed media including vintage textile and sequined appliqués, metal, and mannequin



↑ Vasily Kandinsky, *Around the Circle*, 1940. Oil and enamel on canvas

Art Chicago in May and will travel to the Guggenheim this fall. The exhibition encompasses Cave's multidisciplinary community-building projects and the premiere of *Soundsuit 9:29*, a wearable sculpture he made in response to Floyd's murder. The sculpture is a continuation of the famous *Soundsuits* project he began in 1992 in response to the police beating of Rodney King.

"People love these exuberant sculptures as costume, but they forget that they're born of trauma, made as a suit of armor. Sadly, the necessity for them continues," Beckwith says, as she flips through the 12 pages of the exhibition catalog devoted to the names of all the (known) BIPOC individuals killed by police between May 25, 2020, and May 25, 2021. The list begins with Floyd.

"Nick Cave is asking all the questions that the world has been asking of arts professionals in the last couple of years — questions around anti-Black violence and social justice," Beckwith says. The work also asks: "What does it mean to celebrate your loss? And what does it mean to hold fast to the resilience and love you've gained from community and family? And how can that help propel you through this perpetual and never-ending trauma?"

These questions will resonate with all audiences, says Beckwith, who is

working to broaden the demographics of the museum's visitors by engaging meaningfully with the community, initiating new programs, such as family events, and increasing accessibility with free entry days. Equity is more than just presenting work by Black artists, she says. "You are not going to get Black audiences with a bunch of Black shows, unless those shows become an ongoing part of your practice and programming," Beckwith says. "Inclusivity is for everybody."

One of the museum's current exhibitions, *Vasily Kandinsky: Around the Circle*, resonates with diverse audiences in part because the artist faced personal and global trauma with resilience. Kandinsky, whose work was in Solomon R. Guggenheim's personal collection and was gifted to the museum upon its founding in 1939, was constantly uprooted throughout his life, relocating across Germany, Russia and France in the years before World War II. "He literally lost everything — lost his country, lost his home, lost his land, lost his job several times over," Beckwith says. His stylistic evolution reflects his ever-changing relationship to place and community.

Beckwith is particularly struck by the exhibition's namesake piece, *Around the Circle*, a delirious conglomeration of abstract, colorful shapes against a deep,

dark background reminiscent of outer space. By starting with a dark canvas, "Kandinsky already inverted the very ground in which we're supposed to see color and form," Beckwith says. Then, he painted circles. One blood-red circle with a black overlay, reminiscent of an eye, dominates the top of the canvas, reigning over smaller circles and curves and bulbous forms. Here, too, Kandinsky subverted viewers' expectations, Beckwith says, because "if you're an art history nerd, you know the square is everything." It's a foundation, the basis of the artist's grid, a predetermined, organized structure just waiting to be disrupted.

"What happens if we can put something in the context of blackness, the black expanse, rather than the white cube, which itself is a metaphor for galleries and a model of white supremacist thinking?" Beckwith asks. "If we can put something in that black expanse, then I think we are looking at a radical shift in the way we talk about culture and history."

Lara Ehrlich of *Gales Ferry, Conn.*, is marketing director for the International Festival of Arts & Ideas. She wrote the story collection *Animal Wife* and is host of the podcast *Writer Mother Monster*, a conversation series devoted to dismantling the myth of "having it all."

PHOTO BY JAMES PRINZ PHOTOGRAPHY. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, NEW YORK; FOUNDING COLLECTION



WE'RE IN THE GAME



Illustration by Whitney Lam

Video gaming brings together art, technology and storytelling in one of the world's fastest-growing entertainment industries — and Northwestern alumni are at the controls.

BY DIANA BABINEAU

Warren Spector credits his *Dungeon Master* with inspiring his life's work. Shortly after graduating from Northwestern, Spector '77 joined a *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) campaign. Participants in the tabletop role-playing game navigate a fantasy world while a *Dungeon Master* controls environmental responses to players' decisions.

"I fell in love with games at that point," says Spector. "It wasn't that we were being told a story by the *Dungeon Master*. We were telling a story with him. And that was something completely new."

"I thought, 'I'm going to spend the rest of my life making games like D&D, that give players that feeling of telling stories with someone.'"

That experience launched Spector's 40-year career in one of the most innovative storytelling mediums of our time: video games. A titan in the industry, Spector has worked for major game studios and played a key role in the advent of a new genre of games — immersive sims, or simulations — that allow players to move through elaborate worlds while forging their own stories.



WARREN SPECTOR

nanotech agent

This industry titan is perhaps best known for producing the first immersive sim games, including *Ultima Underworld*, *System Shock* and *Deus Ex*.

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He's one of several Northwestern alumni who have been part of the evolution of video games.

As a relatively new industry, it's taken some time for video games to be recognized as a sophisticated art form. But there's no question now that video games are not only artistic at their core but also rapidly evolving as a medium.

Video games now look and feel vastly different from the foundational 8-bit arcade games of the '70s and '80s (think *Donkey Kong*, *Pac-Man* and *Space Invaders*). Technology has pushed the limits of what is possible. High-resolution graphics, increasingly realistic character models, online connectivity and multiplayer capabilities, advancements in computer programming and artificial intelligence, and even virtual and augmented reality experiences have transformed the industry. Along with this technological boom, games have become unparalleled in their capacity to employ a wide array of other art forms and trades: music, voice acting, art, architectural design, choreography, cinematography — you name it.

Creators have utilized all these resources and more to develop dozens of video game genres and subgenres that communicate complex ideas and unique narratives through an interactive experience.

And video games are big, big business. Global revenue is expected to surpass \$200 billion this year. "Fifteen years ago we were trying to reach 300 million game players," says Matthew Dober '01 MEM MBA, vice president of finance at video game developer Ubisoft. "Now we have more than 3 billion players worldwide." Mobile games in particular have skyrocketed in popularity, changing the definition of a "gamer," Dober adds. If you've played *Wordle*, *Candy Crush* or *Words With Friends*, he says, welcome to the club.

The burgeoning industry is not without its challenges. Game studios have suffered from problematic work cultures and a severe lack of diversity. But change is in the air. Workers are organizing for better conditions. A vibrant independent game scene has given voice to underrepresented developers and players. And Northwestern alumni — some of whom have been working in the industry since its very early days — are spearheading new game studios that foster collaboration, inclusion and creative freedom to produce remarkable interactive experiences.

▶ SELECT GAME MODE

Spector will never forget the moment he felt the world change.

In 1990 he was working at Origin Systems, a nascent game studio in Austin, Texas, when a fellow game developer "came by to show off a first-person perspective, real-time, fully textured game prototype."

At the time, many games featured third-person perspectives, turn-based gameplay and linear storylines. A few first-person games existed, but it was rare to see a game that could respond to a player's

CARD DESIGN AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY WHITNEY LAM



ROBERT ZUBEK

primeval mage

Co-founder of the indie game studio SomaSim and the Chicago Game Lab, Zubek believes the core of our humanity is revealed in the games we create.

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actions in real time, with fully textured graphics. Right away, Spector realized he was witnessing something truly innovative.

"It let players see the world through their own eyes. It's *you* in the world," Spector says.

He jumped at the opportunity to lead production of the game *Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss*, now largely credited as the first immersive sim, and went on to produce *System Shock* and *Deus Ex*, both first-person role-playing games set in futuristic, cyberpunk dystopias. In these immersive sims, players freely choose what storylines to pursue. *Deus Ex* players, for example, can decide what areas to explore first, what characters to rescue or abandon, and whether to fight or sweet-talk their way through challenging situations — or avoid them altogether.

That principle — of allowing players to tell stories with the creators of the game, rather than leading them down a rigid, predictable path — has defined Spector's work. Developers point to Spector's games as the inspiration behind bestselling immersive sims such as *Dishonored* and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*.

One of the biggest joys of an immersive sim, Spector says, is when players come up with ways to solve problems that

even the game's developers didn't know would work.

"When players surprise themselves, that's powerful," says Spector, now chief creative director at OtherSide Entertainment, a game studio based in Austin, Texas, and Boston. "And when they surprise the people who made the game with what they do — that's magic."

▶ CHECKPOINT

Robert Zubek knows Spector's work well. As a computer science student at Northwestern, Zubek became fascinated with the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in simulation games.

"I was working on robotics, specifically using AI systems to [simulate] human emotion," says Zubek '99, '03 MS, '05 PhD. He realized that he could apply those AI models in video games, which often have non-player characters that model human behavior. "You need entities in games that are smart. You have to be able to interact with them in a realistic way. ... The best games are the ones that take some aspect of reality and model it in a way that's interesting."

Completely fascinated by this relatively underexplored application of AI, Zubek shifted his focus from robotics to games. After earning his doctorate, he worked at game studios Zynga and Maxis (a subsidiary of Electronic Arts), programming AI for simulation games such as *FarmVille 2* and *CityVille*, as well as a prototype for *The Sims 3*, one of Electronic Arts' bestselling titles.

While his behind-the-scenes work is technical in nature, Zubek views games, ultimately, as an expression of our humanity.

"There's an interesting tension in *The Sims* about happiness," says Zubek, who co-founded the independent game studio SomaSim in Chicago. The

game allows players to control a household of characters who can get jobs, buy houses, find love, cook, clean and do other daily recreational activities. Most players spend their time trying to make their sim characters happy.

"Earning money [in the game] makes life a bit easier, but it doesn't necessarily make [your character] happy ... which is an interesting commentary on society and humankind," Zubek says. "There's no story arc that explains that, but it's something



"I thought, 'I'm going to spend the rest of my life making games like D&D, that give players that feeling of telling stories with someone.'"

— Warren Spector



that you come to see by interacting with the virtual world."

The Sims is far from the only game that can inspire us to think more deeply about society, morality and beliefs. As works of art, games can reveal truths about ourselves and the world around us, says Zubek, who approaches his work with a creative, curious mindset developed at Northwestern.

"One of the most important roles of universities like Northwestern is making sure that students have a thorough understanding of culture and humanity, that they are exposed to the complexity of our world," says Zubek, who teaches a game development studio course as an adjunct lecturer at the McCormick School of Engineering. "The technical skills can be picked up over time. You can learn on the job. But the overall mission of the university as a place where students learn about the complexity of our world — it's irreplaceable."

Game developer Jason Chayes '96, who grew up playing video games at his grandfather's general store in Texas, came to Northwestern intending to learn how to code, largely because he thought that was the most straightforward path into the industry. But he found himself instead drawn to the humanities and was inspired to create his first game after taking a literature course on Dante's *Inferno*.

"We put together this team of people — Anna-Marie Panlilio '97, Giles Hendrix '96, James Ferolo '99 MFA and myself — to make an interactive trip through ... a single plane of hell: the plane of gluttony," says Chayes. "We modeled the whole thing in 3D and filmed friends ... In front of a green screen, then superimposed them into these pools of muck and refuse. It was super fun. It was the first game any of us had ever released together."

Chayes' 3D model of the mythological hellhound Cerberus caught the attention of The Walt Disney Company, and he landed his first job as a 3D artist in the company's games division.

"I remember my very first day at Disney," he says. "I was in a cubicle with four other people. One was a former animator for *The Simpsons*, another used to draw Superman comics ... and I thought, 'Oh, my God, this is the greatest thing ever' — just being around these people and learning from everybody."

▶ LEVEL UP

Some of the most innovative games today come not from major game studios but from indie developers.

"Larger studios can be surprisingly reluctant to innovate," Zubek says, because large budgets mean there's a greater financial risk if a game flops. So they tend to focus on games that have mass appeal. "It reduces your ability to go after a niche audience." By contrast, he adds, smaller indie studios "can take a leap of faith into a topic that we find super interesting."

In many cases, that means telling stories from the perspectives of people who historically have not seen themselves represented in games and other media.

Dot's Home, for example, is a narrative, point-and-click video game starring Dot, a young Black woman in Detroit who time-travels into the past, discovering the difficult choices her parents and extended family have had to make regarding housing and community. Co-produced by Christina Rosales '11, the game is part of the Rise-Home Stories Project, which aims to change dominant, harmful narratives about housing and land in the U.S.

"The choices we're asking players to make [in *Dot's Home*] — these are real things that happen in our communities. ... It is a practice in empathy."

— Christina Rosales

CARD DESIGN AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY WHITNEY LAM

In the game, players are faced with seemingly impossible decisions: Sign a predatory loan agreement or don't buy a house at all? Stay within a crumbling public housing complex or move away from your family, friends and neighbors? Though players' choices can result in three possible game endings, Rosales' approach highlights how systemic racism intentionally limits one's freedom of choice.

"We're sold this narrative that if we save our money, make the right choices, work hard enough, that we can win wealth and good housing, much like a video game," says Rosales, the Austin, Texas-based housing and land justice director at PowerSwitch Action, a nationwide network of grassroots groups working toward economic and racial justice. "But what's important to remember about video games — and about the housing system — is that any choice you make is in the context of the creators' worldviews," she says. "And so, because America's racist housing system is the context, any result is rooted in systemic racism."

Crucially, most of the game's developers, including soundtrack composer Natalie White '03, are people of color. "The choices we're asking players to make — these are real things that happen in our communities," says Rosales.



SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

There are dozens of video game genres and subgenres. Here are just a few popular ones.



PUZZLE

Games like *Tetris* and *Portal* test players' problem-solving and reflexive skills.



SANDBOX

Games like *Minecraft* and *Terraria* give players a chance to build and design elaborate worlds.



BATTLE-ROYALE

Games like *Fortnite* have enticed even celebrities such as Drake and Chance the Rapper to join everyday gamers in online play.



MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE

Games like *League of Legends* have attracted enormous esports followings as teams compete in international tournaments.

Seeing yourself represented authentically in games, as with any other media, is a validating experience that should be available to everyone. Games that include women, people of color and members of other marginalized groups as playable characters, however, are rare. A survey by gaming website Diamond Lobby found that, across more than 100 games produced in 2017–21, 79.2% of main characters were male and 54.2% were white. Only 8.3% of games starred nonwhite women as main characters.

Dot's Home, which was named Game of the Year and Best Narrative Game at the 2022 Games for Change Festival, shows how increased representation at game studios results in unique, authentic storytelling. The game is "a practice in empathy," Rosales says, as well as inspiration for others from diverse backgrounds to dive into indie game development.

Mainstream game studios, meanwhile, still have a long way to go in diversifying their workforce. A 2021 report by the International Game Developers Association showed that only 4% of industry professionals were Black. "Individuals who have been historically marginalized, whether women, LGBTQIA or BIPOC [Black, Indigenous and people of color] individuals, continue to feel marginalized within the

Industry because those studios are often led by white males," says Derrick Fields, an assistant professor of instruction who teaches game design and 3D animation. He is a core faculty member in the School of Communication's Media Arts and Game Design module.

Company cultures rife with toxic masculinity and overwork have exacerbated the problem. Many large game development companies have been burdened by "crunch," a widespread practice of demanding long hours and an enormous amount of work from developers, especially in the buildup to a game's release.

"It was so destructive," says Jason Chayes, recalling a project he worked on early in his career. "It led to people forgetting what day of the week it is. Relationships suffered. People got physically ill."

Over the past few years, those conditions have prompted workers to organize strikes and begin unionization efforts. Others have hurled lawsuits at major studios such as Activision Blizzard, alleging sexual harassment, sex discrimination and hostile work environments.

Chayes has worked at Electronic Arts and Blizzard Entertainment on major games including the *Medal of Honor* series, *Hearthstone* and *Diablo III*. Determined to foster a healthier work environment, he moved from artist to producer, a role that let him manage production schedules and better protect his team from crunch. And in 2020, after 23 years in the industry, he co-founded Dreamhaven, an Irvine, Calif.-based company that emphasizes the importance of giving a project — and its workers — adequate time to develop.

Chayes, who is studio head at Moonshot (one of Dreamhaven's two internal game studios), says Dreamhaven

"There's this German term *Erhabenheit*, which is this feeling ... of being part of something bigger and grander. ... That's one of the things that we're trying to capture with our game."

— Jason Chayes



also sponsors scholarships for college students from underrepresented groups to gain exposure to the industry and has formed partnerships with Girls Who Code and Gay Gaming Professionals to diversify recruiting efforts.

When it comes to making the industry more accessible as a whole, Warren Spector believes the most straightforward path is higher education, noting that an increasing number of institutions now offer programs in game design.

At Northwestern, the Media Arts and Game Design module combines the art and science of video game development. With courses geared toward media artists, computer scientists and engineers, the module draws an array of students from across the University, including students from marginalized backgrounds. "Media arts and indie game design allow less-heard voices to be expressive in unconventional ways,"

GAMES AS ART

Northwestern's Media Arts and Game Design module, sponsored by the radio/TV/film department in the School of Communication, teaches students the foundations of digital interactive art, including virtual reality and other immersive technologies. Students complete a capstone project to build their portfolios in preparation for a career in gaming or other digital media.

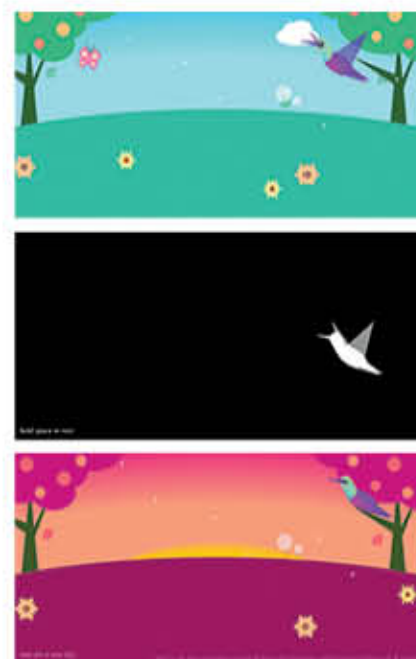
"Video games and art created with emerging technologies are the next big storytelling medium after the advent of film," says Özge Samancı, associate professor of radio/TV/film and director of the module. In both media arts and games, you can "get into social and political commentary."

For their capstone project, Alias Ganpicha Sahasakul '22, coded and designed an interactive digital media piece (shown at right) that critiques our

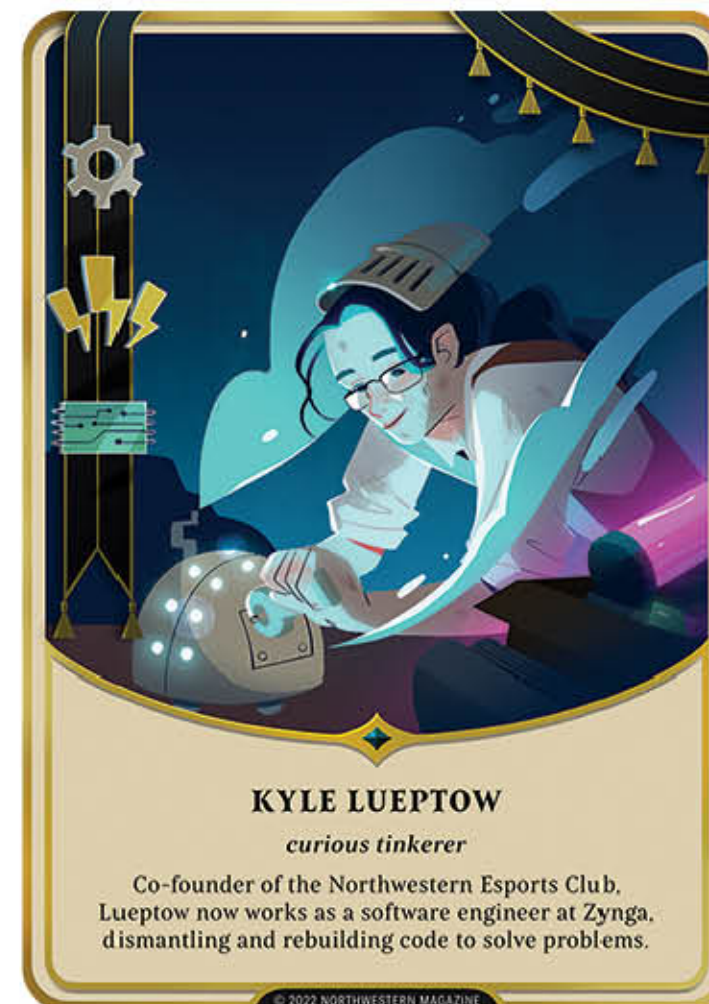
culture's obsession with productivity. Using a computer mouse, the viewer controls a hummingbird in a colorful landscape. Moving the bird around the screen reveals stanzas of Emily Dickinson's poem "'Hope' Is the Thing With Feathers." But as time goes on, the screen dims, eventually fading to black, and pop-up text tells the viewer "maybe it's time to take a break."

"I wanted this piece to remind viewers that resting is not a waste of time," says Sahasakul, now a freelance 2D animator based in Thailand. "We are encouraged to constantly be working. ... Resting is conflated with laziness."

When the viewer presses the spacebar on a keyboard, the hummingbird rests for the night. Only then does a new day dawn, allowing the viewer to continue reading parts of the poem.



GAME DESIGN: COURTESY OF ALIAS GANPICHA SAHASAKUL '22; CARD DESIGN AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY WHITNEY LAM



says Özge Samancı, associate professor of radio/TV/film and the module's director. "Diversity is always extremely high in our module, and this is not a coincidence." (See "Games as Art," opposite page.)

► ACHIEVEMENT UNLOCKED

Video games, as an art form, have the capacity to explore ideas in innovative ways, inspire artistic expression and, especially, bring people together.

"I was a kid of the '80s," says Chayes, drifting into memories of playing the now-retro games *Kaboom!* and *The Activision Decathlon* on the Atari 2600 console with his father and meeting up with friends at arcades. "Who knows how many quarters I spent," he says with a laugh. "It was a way to hang with my buddies ... all the way through high school."

With so many more games available now, the possibilities for connecting with others has only grown.

Kyle Lueptow '18, one of Robert Zubek's former students, recalls feeling "sort of isolated" his first year at Northwestern. But when he noticed an informal *Super Smash Bros. Melee*

tournament taking place in his dorm, Lueptow instantly connected with his peers. He co-founded Northwestern's Esports Club and began hosting meetups and tournaments to bring people together to play *Super Smash Bros.*, *Hearthstone* (a game he later discovered was developed by Chayes) and *League of Legends*. Creating a positive, inclusive culture around gaming in the Esports Club was a priority for Lueptow, who worked to foster an environment welcoming of women, LGBTQIA students and students of color.

"I found my nerd folk," says Lueptow, now a Chicago-based software engineer at Zynga, a game company that produces mobile games such as *Words With Friends* and *FarmVille 2*. "A lot of my best friends are from that club."

Zubek too has seen the benefits of collaborating around video games. He recently opened the Chicago Game Lab, a coworking and community space for indie developers to work on their projects among peers. "It's really beneficial," Zubek says. "You can just swivel in your chair and ask someone, 'Hey, how does this look?' That kind of community, those serendipitous conversations, is something we really, really missed during the pandemic."

Lueptow, Zubek and several of their fellow alumni are currently developing new intellectual properties. While they are mostly tight-lipped about the specifics, Spector says brainstorming new ideas each week with his team at OtherSide Entertainment is his biggest joy.

"Game development is the most intensely collaborative process you can imagine, and when you have a great team you make a great game," Spector says.

Chayes' team is playtesting a game that has been in development for two years. By giving his team enough time and resources to realize their vision, he is optimistic that the result will inspire a sense of wonder.

"There's this German term *Erhabenheit*, which is this feeling of being tiny and inconsequential ... of being part of something bigger and grander," he says, "like when you go to a natural history museum for the first time and see the huge dinosaur skeletons and whales suspended from the ceiling and you're just in awe. That's one of the things that we're trying to capture with our game."

"It's this feeling that the world has infinite possibilities."

Diana Babineau is a writer and editor in Northwestern's Office of Global Marketing and Communications — and a lifelong gamer. She grew up playing Mario Kart 64, Diddy Kong Racing and more on the Nintendo 64 console. She enjoys puzzle adventure games, such as the Professor Layton series, and has recently fallen in love with Mutazone, an indie game recommended by Christina Rosales.

Learn about our alumni's favorite video games and more.

► CONTINUE at alummag.nw/games



Bearing Witness

Steven Thrasher has spent his career reporting on social justice.

Why can't he stop fighting?

BY CLARE MILLIKEN

"I GO INTO STORIES THAT ARE MAYBE SO CONTROVERSIAL THAT NO ONE ELSE WILL TALK ABOUT THEM, to report on what I find. It's important to show the truth. I wouldn't say that the work I do is directly activism," says journalist and professor Steven Thrasher, "but it can be used by activists." In one particular case, showing that truth helped overturn a conviction and change a law.

For six years, Thrasher followed the case of Michael Johnson, a gay Black man in St. Louis who was sentenced in 2015 to more than 30 years in

prison for not disclosing his HIV-positive status to his sexual partners. Initially, Thrasher says, national advocacy groups would not go near the case.

"The first two years that I worked on the case, none of the big LGBTQ organizations or civil rights organizations would even answer my phone calls," he says. "This was 2014, between two major Supreme Court rulings around same-sex marriage equality. These groups were really invested in that issue because it was a 'clean' story that was organized around helping lots more people get married, and marriage is something that reads well in society."

Published in *BuzzFeed News* from 2014 to 2019, Thrasher's multipart investigation of the Johnson story eventually got the attention of the American Civil Liberties Union and Lambda Legal, and his reporting was used in the appeal of Johnson's case. The Missouri Court of Appeals for the Eastern District overturned Johnson's conviction on the grounds that the original trial was "fundamentally unfair." And in 2021, two years after Johnson's release from prison, Missouri changed its HIV criminalization laws, reducing the minimum sentence for transmitting HIV and increasing the burden of proof for a felony conviction.

Steeped in activism from an early age — his parents were part of the movement to end apartheid in South Africa — Thrasher has reported on policing, LGBTQ rights, racism and HIV/AIDS for more than a decade. He began his career in New York in the early 2000s, where he worked "all kinds of odd jobs" in film and TV production, including roles at *Saturday Night Live*. After a year at StoryCorps, and after publishing his first piece in *The New York Times*, Thrasher took a job at *The Village Voice* in 2009 and was named Journalist of the Year by the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association (now NLGJA: The Association of LGBTQ Journalists) in 2012.

As a U.S.-based columnist for *The Guardian*, Thrasher covered the August 2014 police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo. During that reporting, Thrasher came to understand the

relationships between poverty, policing and viruses like HIV/AIDS.

"As Americans were beginning to understand what was happening in Ferguson, they were starting to see these overlapping maps of police violence and Black poverty," he says. "In addition to those maps, I started to see an overlapping map of HIV/AIDS. And years later, I saw an overlapping map of COVID-19."

Thrasher's first book, *The Viral Underclass: The Human Toll When Disease and Inequality Collide*, builds on that discovery, exploring the ways in which viruses like HIV and SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19) reflect and exacerbate social structures like racism, ableism, heterosexism and capitalism.

The inaugural Daniel H. Renberg Chair of social justice in reporting at the Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications, Thrasher sat down with *Northwestern Magazine's* Clare Milliken to talk about the book, his reporting and the role of social media in his life and career.

What drew you to Michael Johnson's story?

When I first heard about the case, it sounded really salacious and really tawdry — this story of this young man purposely infecting people with HIV, which did not turn out to be the case. When I finally met Johnson in jail, I found out that he was pretty functionally illiterate and that every disaster of the criminal justice system was happening at the same time.

There were all kinds of problems in Johnson's trial. There was bad scientific understanding of HIV and AIDS. The law at the heart of the prosecution's case was based on the idea that AIDS was a definite death sentence, as it likely was in the 1980s when the law was written, but did not take into account that there's now medication that lets people live a normal-length life if they get access to it.

I was horrified that this young man was basically being sentenced to life in prison, so I decided that I was going to, in some form or another, stay with him until he got out.

A couple years after Johnson was arrested, a statistic came out from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention projecting that one out of every two Black men who have sex with men would become HIV-positive in their lifetime. This [shocked] me. I thought that if HIV affected a different population, the United States and its various health infrastructures would take it more seriously. But because it was happening with Black gay men, largely poor and often in the South, it wasn't taken as seriously. And so I started using this case to try to untangle all these things.

“I’ve spent a lot of my career reporting on ... situations that seem hopeless, knowing that I still have to bear witness and say what’s happening, even if I can’t fix it.” — Steven Thrasher

What is the viral underclass, as you define it?

There are two definitions that I use. On one hand it’s a theory exploring how, as marginalized people are made vulnerable to viruses, viruses are also used as justification for the policies and systems that marginalize people in the first place.

The viral underclass is also a group of people experiencing the compounding effects of marginalization and increased vulnerability to viruses. For example, we’ve long known that people who are uninsured are the most likely to get COVID, be hospitalized and die of COVID. In the last round of COVID funding, the White House and Congress did not continue to fund COVID testing for people who don’t have insurance. A COVID test can cost \$150, and for a family of four, that’s \$600. They’re simply not going to get tested anymore. Because we’ve taken a tool away from the people who are most likely to get COVID — a tool that they could use to protect themselves — the virus is going to move more freely among those individuals.

You’re very active on social media, particularly Twitter. What is the role of that platform in your life?

When I’m using social media, I’m putting information out and I’m learning from other people. Certainly when I was reporting on the Michael Brown killing in Ferguson, that learning was happening quite quickly through Twitter, particularly Black Twitter, and with the Black Lives Matter hashtag. All these ideas were circulating — between academics, activists, reporters, people affected by police violence — in ways that were fulfilling and interesting and that brought down a lot of walls that often segregate different people.

Twitter has helped me listen to and learn from how young people are talking, what ideas they have and how they’re thinking differently about things. I also really love seeing how young people are teaching each other about queerness, trans identities, sexuality and public health. When I was a teenager in the 1990s, I was able to get information at my local library, but the Internet wasn’t sophisticated enough yet to offer that kind of information, so I love seeing how they’re teaching each other about these things.

Has your thinking on particular issues evolved or changed, perhaps as a result of that social media engagement?

I began my journalism career around same-sex marriage. Marriage equality was an important topic in my own family history. My parents met in the 1950s in Nebraska and had to go to Iowa to get married, because it was still illegal in about 10 states for an interracial couple to get married.

I’m for marriage equality, but I didn’t understand some people’s criticisms about the movement originally. When I started writing about marriage equality in the early 2000s, I had not yet encountered politics that were critical of marriage, saying marriage [equality] wasn’t a good endpoint, that it privileged people in a certain way [and that it] was going to pigeonhole what gay politics could do. As I covered the marriage equality movement and the gays in the military movement, I eventually realized that there were all these other issues that those movements were not addressing [for LGBTQ populations], including disproportionate homelessness, financial precarity, health disparities, access to employment, and employment discrimination. And through my work on HIV and AIDS, and later COVID-19, I think looking at the root causes of those inequities will do more for LGBTQ people than just marriage equality.

You say in your book that “these United States are as endlessly heartbreaking as they are endlessly fascinating.” What gives you hope?

I feel hopeful in thinking about how many people want to help one another. So many people do not want to go back to “normal.” When an estimated 20 million people went out protesting for George Floyd in the summer of 2020, it was about racial justice. But a reason why it was so many people — and I’m not cynical about this — is because a lot of people were stuck at home, and they wanted to feel like they were a part of something bigger, and they had the time to do it. So when they left their houses in large numbers, it wasn’t to go to Disneyland that summer. It wasn’t to go to the movies. It was to stand in solidarity and be tear-gassed alongside their fellow citizens demanding a better world.

I think a lot of people have gone through — and are still going through — the challenges of these last two years, wanting to create a better world. Having reflected on their lives and values, they want to create more justice and love in the world. That gives me a lot of hope.

What is the proudest moment of your career?

When Michael Johnson got out of prison.

It’s not an easy thing, for him or for me, to manage a relationship with a source. It’s not exactly a friendship, even though I think we care about each other a lot. I felt very honored that he wanted me there when he was released and wanted me to be the one to share his story.

I’ve spent a lot of my career reporting on and doing research about situations that seem hopeless, knowing that I still have to bear witness and say what’s happening, even if I can’t fix it.

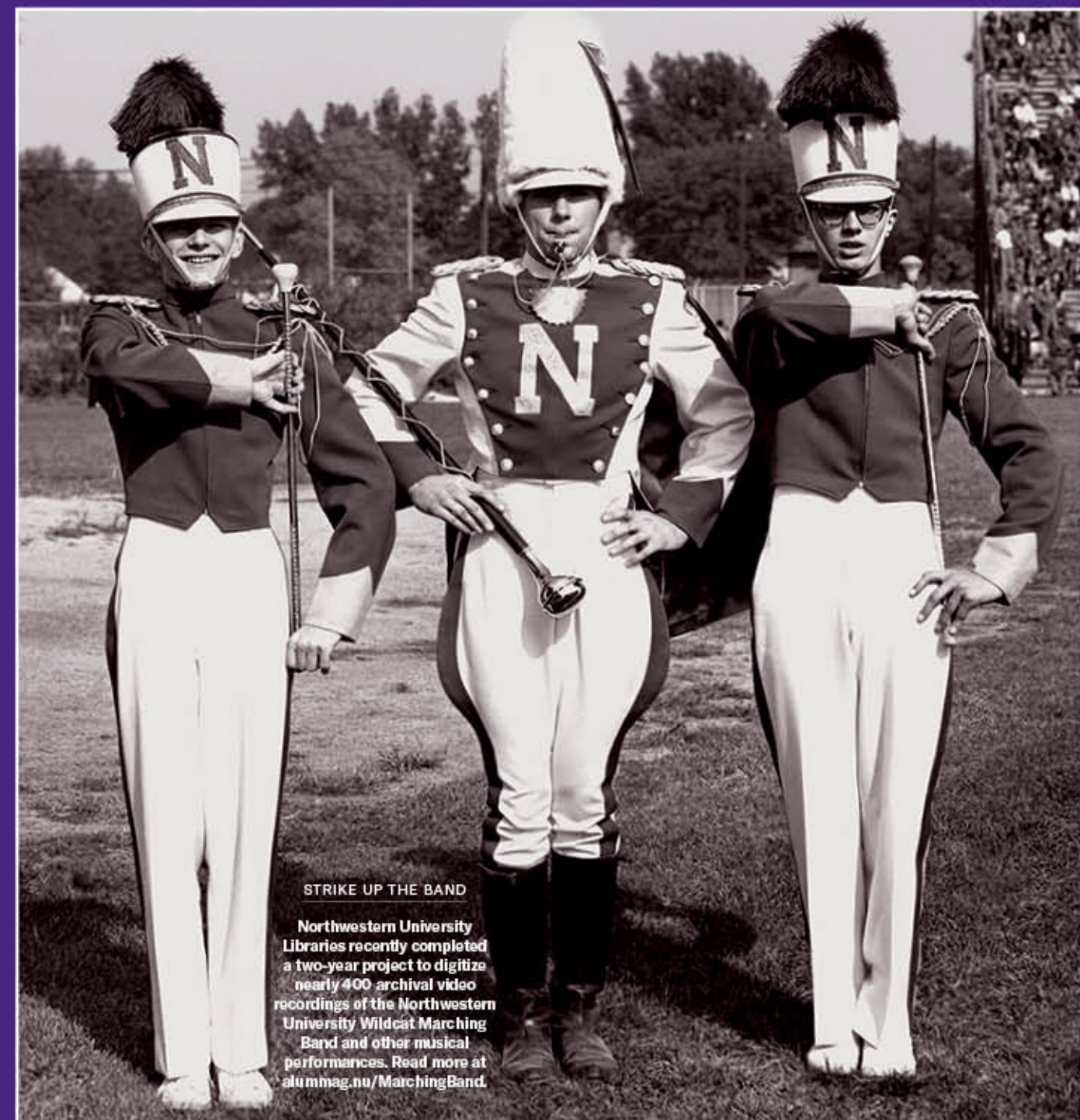
The dream of a lot of journalists is that our work leads to some kind of change. And I think our work often does, but not in ways that are always so obvious, and certainly we don’t always live to see the results.

I didn’t know if I would live to see Michael get out of prison. Not only did I live to see it, but he got out 25 years early.

Clare Milliken is senior writer and producer in Northwestern’s Office of Global Marketing and Communications.

Interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Alumni



STRIKE UP THE BAND

Northwestern University Libraries recently completed a two-year project to digitize nearly 400 archival video recordings of the Northwestern University Wildcat Marching Band and other musical performances. Read more at alummag.nu/MarchingBand.

Creation



FROM THE PRODUCER'S CHAIR

Five Questions with Liza Katzer '08

The senior vice president of Doozer Productions and executive producer of *Ted Lasso* discusses uncertainty, early-career hurdles and her strong Northwestern bonds.

1

Why do you think *Ted Lasso* is so beloved? The show's success was a slow build out of the gate. It came by word of mouth. A lot of people said, "Oh, that soccer show?" and then someone responded, "No, trust me, it's about way more than soccer." And then more people started watching. Timing was a factor too — the show came out before the 2020 election and during a pandemic. For a while it was hard to find true, laugh-out-loud comedy, something that was genuinely optimistic and

light and funny. *Ted Lasso* just felt like a breath of fresh air.

2

What does a typical day look like for you? The success of *Ted Lasso* has led to a lot of other opportunities. We have three shows in production. On a given day, wherever we're shooting, I might go to our production office to meet with our costume designer and go over photos from a fitting. Then I might spend a few hours looking at casting videos and identifying my top selects for 15 roles that we have to cast. I might drive over to the set, meet with our showrunner and talk to the director and actors. As a producer, you are hands-on from the start of a project.

3

You're open about your early career struggles. How did you stay optimistic that things would get better? After graduating, I felt so directionless and so stressed. I found a job at a talent agency — because people said you had to have a year of that. It was a pre-#MeToo, pre-Time's Up environment. There was a lot of behavior that was not appropriate. I was in survival mode. I hadn't yet started therapy. I was not in touch with any of the underlying issues that were probably making the job harder, like intense perfectionism and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Knowing that there was an end to that job kept me going. I had a feeling that the industry wasn't all going to be like that.

4

Do you feel more settled now? I've had to learn to let go of control and find peace within the chaos and uncertainty. The pandemic was really helpful for me, which I hate to say because it was such a stressful time of pain and anxiety. Everything slowed down. I had a chance to develop a relationship with myself. Instead of reaching for all these external things that I thought would bring me a sense of happiness or peace, I was finding that it's all within me.

Trusting my own creative voice and instincts in the workplace, seeing the fruits of that labor and making something that is meaningful to others — that brought another level of internal fulfillment.

5

Are you still in touch with many Wildcats? There's an enormous community of alumni in LA. Especially in the early days, everyone from Northwestern just huddled together. Wild Onion Theatre Company, which we founded in 2011, was our attempt to feel like we had some control over what we were doing. We were all struggling in entry-level jobs. Collaborating with our friends, putting up a show, even if it was very low budget — it was a fun way to feel like we had some sense of artistic inspiration during those bleak early years.

Read more at alummag.nu/LizaKatzer

STRINGFELLOW: SEAN SU



A FAMILY EPIC

Tara Stringfellow '07, '18 MFA visited campus on April 14 as part of the book tour for her new novel, *Memphis*, which follows three generations of women in a single family across 70 years. *Memphis* was named one of the most anticipated books of 2022 by *Essence*, *Glamour* and *Oprah Daily*, among others, and is a national bestseller. Stringfellow majored in English and African American studies at Northwestern, and after starting a career in law, she earned a master's in creative writing. Stringfellow's reading in Harris Hall was followed by a discussion with Dial Press editorial director Whitney Frick '06, moderated by associate professor of English Rachel Webster.



UPCYCLING

Something Old, Something New

Grace Lightner '13 was cleaning out her grandmother's house in Ohio with her mother, Lorraine Stewart '80, '81 MS, when she stumbled upon a box of preserved wedding dresses belonging to Stewart and her sister. Stewart immediately teared up, reminiscing about how beautiful her own mother,

Shirley, was on her wedding day. In that moment, inspiration struck.

In 2018 Lightner and Stewart launched Unbox the Dress, a startup that transforms customers' wedding gowns into new, wearable designs such as bridal robes, purses or wraps. Sustainability, Lightner says, is central to their business.

"We're creating a digitally empowered way for people to upcycle garments that they care about," she says. "And in doing so, we're keeping those textiles out of landfills."

Since its launch, Unbox the Dress has redesigned more than 4,000 wedding dresses. Now working with a team of 23 employees, the mother-daughter duo has shifted to reusable shipping containers and offers customers the option to redesign their wedding dresses into luxe christening gowns and garments for other cultural traditions.

Lightner says her mother has not only been the best business partner but also a lifelong role model. "Watching her as I grew up, I knew it was possible for me, as a female leader, to build something from scratch."



NEW MUSIC

Dancing Algorithms

A pianist and coder melds his unlikely talents.

When Charlie Williams '01 performs his piano compositions onstage, audiences aren't just watching his fingers hit the keys. Behind him, a large screen displays video projections — colorful shapes, scenery and even a massive sea monster — that dance along with every note he plays. These “musically reactive visuals,” as he calls them, are algorithmically generated, coded by Williams himself.

A U.K.-based new media artist who performs under the moniker Larkhall, Williams is not only a pianist and composer but also a self-taught coder who has found unique ways to combine his creative and technical talents.

Williams began experimenting with music and technology as a student at the Bienen School of Music, combining his postclassical piano compositions, for example, with electronic sounds sampled from his everyday life, such as the shouts of rowdy students in the restaurant below his apartment. He earned a master of philosophy in music from the University of Cambridge and then briefly worked as a software developer for tech startups

before devoting himself full time to his music projects.

After saving up for years, Williams bought a grand piano with built-in sensors that could record each note he played, translating his music into data points. Using TouchDesigner, a visual programming platform, he started playing with visualizations of that data. That's when he thought about adding a visual element to his piano performances.

“Once I had developed a visual vocabulary for my music, I started thinking about how I could make it work live,” he says. He coded an algorithm that listens to each note he plays and converts the music into dynamic, digital art. “The visuals are all created live, so I can play a bit faster or slower — or even make a mistake — and the visuals will respond in real time,” he says.

Williams' album *The Sea Was Never Blue* reached No. 2 on the iTunes classical chart in the U.K. in 2019. Next, Williams will tour the U.K. to promote his third album, *Say You're With Me*, which he released in June.

HISTORICAL FICTION

The Lawless Land

by Elizabeth Morrison and Boyd Morrison

Medievalist Elizabeth Morrison '90 teamed up with her brother, *New York Times* bestselling author Boyd Morrison, to write *The Lawless Land*. Set in the 14th century, the work of historical fiction follows an excommunicated knight-errant who embarks on an adventure to recover a priceless relic. Morrison drew inspiration for the novel from her work as senior curator of manuscripts at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. “I have the best job on the face of the Earth,” Morrison says, “from handling thousand-year-old manuscripts to making significant acquisitions for the collection.” She studied medieval art history at Northwestern and went on to earn her doctorate in art history at Cornell University. Now a vice president of the Association of Art Museum Curators, Morrison is working on a scholarly book on 14th-century manuscript illumination. She and her brother are also writing a sequel to *The Lawless Land*.



WILLIAMS: PAUL SAMUEL WHITE



DESSERT-MAKER

Truffles, Brownies and Cake Pops, Oh My!

Melanie Moss turned a study abroad apprenticeship into sweet success.

In 2007 Melanie Moss '08 found herself knocking on the door of Parisian chef Olivier Berté.

“He looked like the chef from *Ratatouille*,” she says, smiling as she recalls her study abroad year in Paris. Berté, who ran cooking classes for tourists, spoke not a word of English and needed help translating. Moss, an English literature and French double

major at Northwestern, was thrilled to help him. But she wanted something in return: to learn how to bake.

“I needed him, and he needed me,” she says. “We just clicked right away.”

Working alongside a French chef inspired Moss to turn her love of baking into a career. After graduating, she attended culinary school and began testing original recipes

in her New York City studio apartment. In 2014, after many nights “awake until 2 a.m., doing all the little things a small business needs at the beginning,” she launched Mini Melanie. The direct-to-consumer bakery in New York City delivers custom cakes, cake pops, brownies, truffles and more.

Though she shies away from the term “celebrity chef,” Moss has appeared on popular Food Network shows, beating out the competition on a chocolate-themed episode of *Chopped* and presenting stunning truffles and chocolate éclairs on *Beat Bobby Flay*.

“It was definitely surreal,” she says. “But as a business

owner, as a chef, you've got to keep pushing yourself [because] it's amazing exposure.”

During the pandemic, Moss and her business partner, her sister Diana, completely revamped their business approach, focusing on e-commerce solutions to ship their cakes and other treats across the country. In April, Mini Melanie also partnered with Home Bistro, which now offers Moss' desserts through its online meal delivery service.

This fall, Moss is pushing herself once again. “We're launching our first consumer packaged product: a [cake-inspired] cookie, or ‘cakie,’ that is packaged with nutrition facts and barcodes,” which is no small feat, Moss says. And, of course, it comes in mouthwatering flavors such as appledoodle, lemon poppy and chocolate ganache. Moss hopes to see her cakies in coffee shops and on store shelves.

Creating a consumer packaged product “was a risk,” she says. “But we're confident it's delicious enough.”

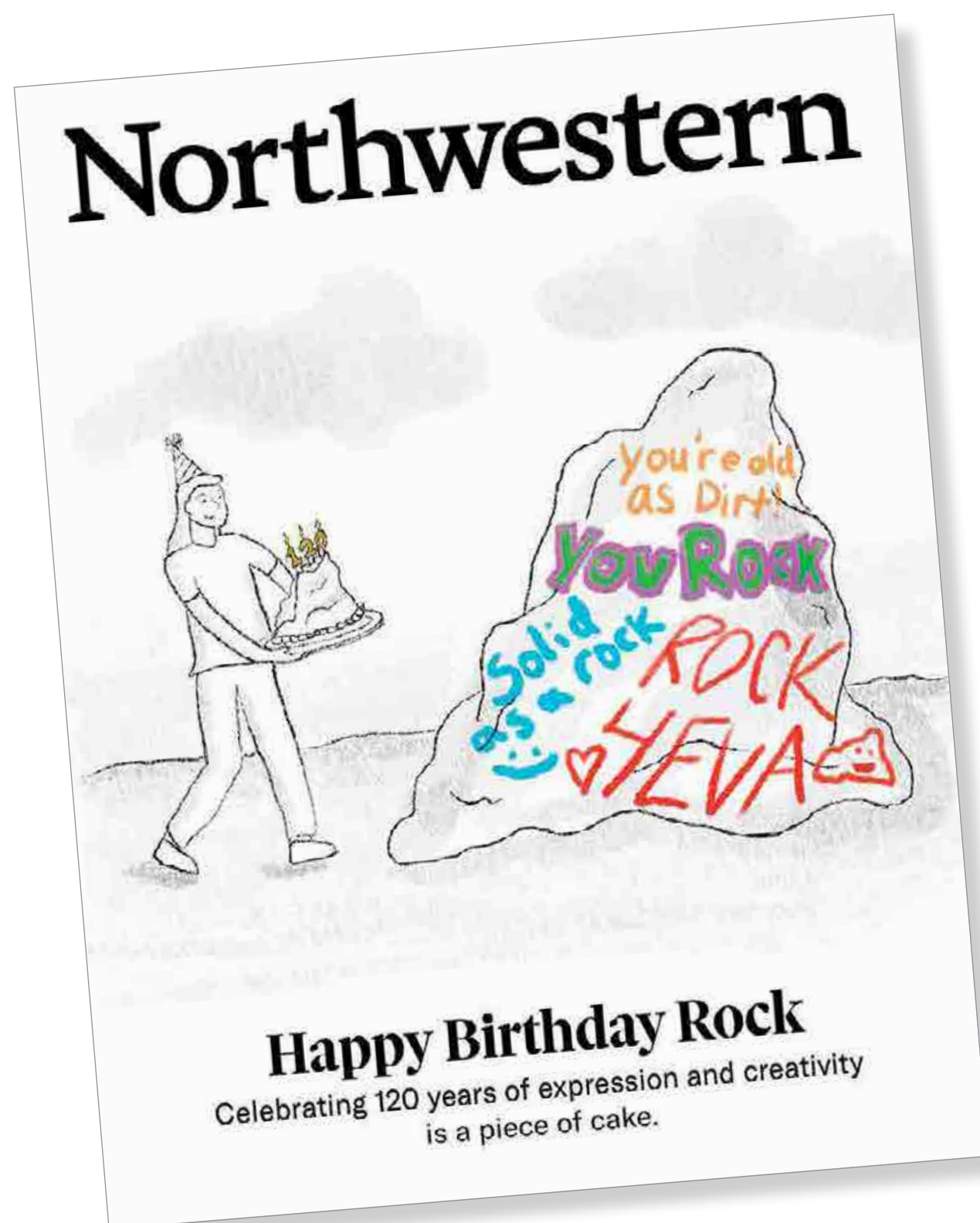
A BOLD MESSAGE

Courageous Art

Digital artist Lauren “Lo” Harris '18 was working for NBC News in summer 2020 when she saw the footage of George Floyd's murder. She immediately wanted to voice her frustration with police killings of Black men and women. “[At the time], I had the very strong impression that journalists couldn't have an opinion on events like these because they were politicized,” Harris says. “But for me it was really difficult to separate my identity as a Black woman from my work in the newsroom.” To express her frustration, Harris drew a Black woman wearing a bright orange cloth mask with her fist in the air, the word “justice” hanging over her. She posted it on her personal Instagram account and was shocked to see it go viral. Old Navy and *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* reached out to commission her digital artwork, with its bright, bold graphics and self-empowerment messaging. In January 2021 Harris quit her 9-to-5 and turned her digital art hobby into a career. “I've had a long journey in terms of building confidence in myself,” she says. “A lot of my art is focused on confidence, self-love, joy, community. Those are the things I want to give people.”



TRUFFLES: JOEL GOLDBERG



To read about the big business of little cakes from Melanie Moss '08, see page 41. And to celebrate more campus landmark birthdays, see page 19.

SARINA BENOIT



OUR HIGHEST HONOR

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Flip to page 26 to see how Northwestern alumni
are taking the gaming industry to the next level.