



UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

SPRING/SUMMER 2026

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Looking to Nature for Our City's Future

Is the coastal prairie the solution to
Houston's urban challenges?
Researchers at the **UH COASTAL
CENTER** aim to find out.

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THE ALBERT AND MAMIE GEORGE BUILDING



COUGAR INFLUENCE

As Sugar Land has grown, UH has grown its presence there. The University is doing the same for Katy, which you can read about on page 26.

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Cougars and Friends,

THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON'S impact never ceases to amaze me. It's what inspires me to proudly wear my Cougar red and advocate for UH across the city, state and world. The impact — the tangible influence of our work on the lives of others — is what drives us all at the University of Houston.

Take our inspiring cover story on the UH Coastal Center (page 32). Together, faculty researchers and students are testing innovative methods to mitigate Houston's heat and flooding challenges. The center's 925 acres of coastal prairie are a living laboratory, dedicated to building a more resilient and biodiverse Houston. With the city's ever-rising temperatures, the importance of their work is undeniable.

Community impact is also what's influencing the expansion of our UH Katy campus. With one of the state's fastest-growing school districts and nearly 400,000 residents in the region, we're developing accelerated degree programs to meet the booming area's needs (page 26).

As depression and other mental health issues rise, Dr. Gregory Scott Brown, a UH associate professor, is uncovering the path to happiness, and it may not be what you expect. I encourage you to read his article (page 47) and see if it doesn't affect the way you think about your own bliss.

In that same vein, three-time UH alumna Heather Domjan is changing the way youth and educators approach science (page 50). As executive director of the UH STEM Center, Domjan is awakening minds to the life-changing power of STEM, creating what she poignantly calls "lasting systems-level impact beyond the classroom." Most moving is her story of a former student who developed a device that helped a polio survivor walk again. It's a powerful reminder of how



knowledge creates a ripple effect, breathing life into dreams once thought impossible.

It's stories like these that keep our dedicated Cougar community and me going. From research advancements to redefining student success, Cougars are pushing boundaries and igniting endless possibilities — all captured in this issue of UH Magazine. Moreover, we're embracing all that life has to offer, recognizing the whole person thrives on simple pleasures like good wine, arts and culture, too.

It's all here. So, sit back, relax and enjoy the impact.

Go Coogs!

Renu Khator

President, University of Houston

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PRESIDENT
Renu Khator

PUBLISHER
Shawn Lindsey

EDITORIAL
Contributing Editors

DJ Sprenger
Carrie Taylor

ONLINE
Deana Kreitz

**PHOTOGRAPHY
& DESIGN**

Marcus Allen
Joseph Bui
Heather Cobb
Benjamin Corda
Anthony Gollab
Kevin Kao
Jeff Lautenberger
Greg Ortiz
Nick Pomes

DCustom

SVP, Growth & Strategy
Chris Phelps

SVP, Editorial & Creative
Jennifer Chininis

EDITORIAL
Design Director
David Radabaugh

Managing Editors
Maria Baneux, Katie Stroh

Art Director
Corrina Spurlin

Copy Editors
Ginni Beam, Allison Hatfield, Staci Parks

BUSINESS
VP, Brand Strategy
Cory Davies

**Operations Manager &
Account Director**

Rosalind Lynam

Account Director
Brianna Barger

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#SocialSuccess

UH **OVERACHIEVES** in national university social media rankings.



No. 22

Overall national ranking — up two spots from 2024 and UH's best-ever placement

No. 1

Ranking across Texas schools and Big 12 Conference on Instagram, Facebook and X

No. 9

Overall national ranking for Instagram — up 18 spots

No. 2

Overall national ranking for Facebook — up 26 spots

No. 1

Overall national ranking for X — up 30 spots

93.2%

Increase in engagement rate (per followers) from 2024

RIVAL IQ'S latest Higher Education Social Media Engagement Report ranked the University of Houston at No. 22 — its best-ever placement — among 364 NCAA Division I colleges and universities. The report uses data and a weighted formula to generate an overall engagement ranking that blends total engagement and engagement rates.

UH outranked all other Texas and Big 12 schools on Instagram, Facebook and X. The report reflects the major year-over-year improvements UH achieved in 2025 in reaching and engaging audiences at a historic scale, signaling that the content is resonating more widely and more consistently than ever before.

"These rankings are more than just numbers," says Nick Pomes, UH's director of social media. "They're a reflection of the pride, excitement and energy of the UH community."

Find Us on Your Favorite Platform

- @universityofhouston
- @UHouston
- linkedin.com/school/university-of-houston
- facebook.com/UniversityOfHouston
- @UniversityOfHouston

UH's Cross-Platform Growth

Across all platforms, UH's reach and engagement has grown by every metric.

119,902,785

Total impressions — up 211.6% from 2024

3,390,187

Total engagements — up 88.9% from 2024

1,137,246

Total followers — up 8.61% from 2024

What's New and Noteworthy on Campus and in the Classroom

CAMPUS BULLETIN

OFFICE HOURS

Are You Proud of Yourself?

UH Assistant Professor **JOSHUA FREED**
encourages students to look
beyond grades and into self-discovery.

Story by **DeANNA JANES**

Photography by **ANTHONY GOLLAB** /
UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON



JOSHUA FREED ('17) has lived all over the world.

A military kid, Freed was born in Virginia and started school in Germany. Halfway through high school, his family moved to Houston, where he was drawn to the University of Houston and its Honors College. Appointed by Gov. Greg Abbott to serve as the Student Regent on the University System's Board of Regents from 2016 to 2017, Freed was pivotal in connecting students' perspectives to institutional decision-making.

In 2017, he graduated with degrees in political science and economics and minored in classics, Chinese and Phronêsis, which is the Honors program for political theory. He then pursued his Ph.D. at the University of California, Berkeley, and, six years later, landed a prestigious postdoctoral junior research fellowship at the University of Oxford, researching the history of political thought.

"When your first childhood memories are climbing over castles in Europe, you're probably destined to become a historian or at least love history," he says.

Today, Freed is an assistant professor of political science at UH, where his training at Berkeley and Oxford prompts students to ask a familiar question: "Why are you here?" For him, the answer is intentional. When his work is published, Freed wants those affiliations — Oxford, Berkeley, Houston — listed side by side, a subtle but powerful reminder they belong in the same sentence. And, more importantly, that students can step through UH's doors and land anywhere, from an Ivy League institution to Oxford and beyond.

It's an ethos that filters down into Freed's teaching. In his classroom, the curriculum is just the starting point, and what matters most is the connection he builds with students. He invests in them, explaining, "There's a sort of 'Alice Through

the Looking Glass' feel to it. I'm teaching the same classes I took, but I'm teaching them in a completely different way."

Because of his exposure to different student bodies and global academic perspectives, Freed's approach is both rigorous and deeply human centered. So, it's no wonder his definition of "student success" doesn't include the mere accumulation of grades, career accomplishments or salary figures.

"There's an adage that's become popular on the professional side of academia for a while, which is, 'Meet students where they are.' That doesn't mean lower your expectations so students can meet them. It means to understand your students as human beings. I would just spin the 'meeting students where they are' to apply to student success as well."

Freed says he feels privileged to be where he is, calling attention to the "brutally" competitive academic job market. For this very reason, he takes no student interaction for granted.

For Freed, one of UH's distinctive strengths is the cultural richness of the student body and the unique perspective each student brings to the classroom. "For me to prescribe a particular pedagogy for an entire classroom, I would miss something in that approach," he says.

When Freed was a student, his UH professors "poured into him," making

Freed says grades are important, but just as valuable for students is "figuring out who they are and loving who they are."

themselves available, answering emails, providing hands-on personal feedback and engaging in active student development.

"I don't understand how to be a professor who isn't like that," he says. "I give very intentional, extensive, face-to-face feedback. And my students communicate they feel transformed by the end of the term."

Students feel transformed because Freed encourages them not only to pursue academic excellence but also to discover themselves. He says grades are important, but just as valuable for students is "figuring out who they are and loving who they are."

In his classroom, Freed encourages self-understanding as a core goal, believing students should be able to leave college and say, "That's where I discovered who I was and what I wanted out of life."

He also creates space for reflection, not just performance. He views the university classroom as a place "to let students breathe" and explore ideas. He uses the humanities to encourage deeper self-reflection and challenges students to ask big questions; engage in debate about justice, relationships and purpose; and examine how their perspectives are shaped by both personal experience and the broader world.

While the weight of grades and GPAs can feel all-encompassing in the moment for students, Freed urges them to look at success through another lens. Do you have a better idea of who you are? Are you proud of yourself? Have you become a more thoughtful and kinder person, friend and citizen?

The score on a single political science exam, the GPA and even the job interviews tend to fade into distant memories after graduation. But if students can answer "yes" to any of the above questions, then, by Freed's standards, they have already succeeded in a meaningful way that will extend well beyond their time at the University of Houston. 

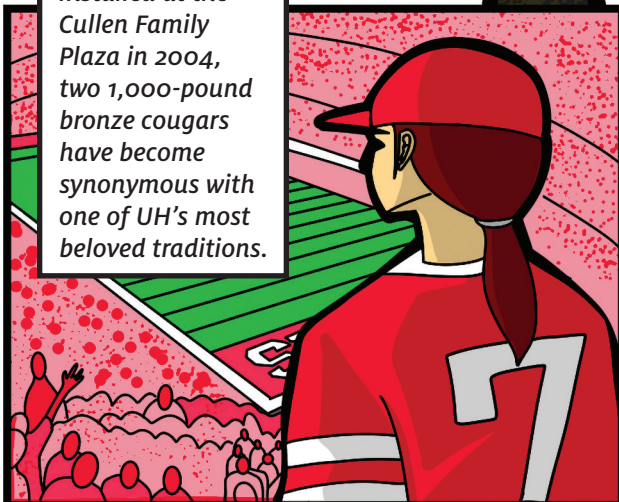
Here's the Rub

At UH, **LUCK ISN'T LEFT TO CHANCE.**
It's taken into the community's paws.

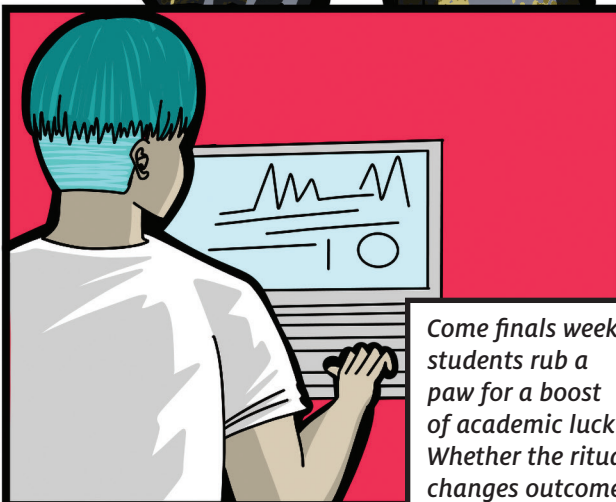
Illustration by KEVIN KAO / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON



Installed at the Cullen Family Plaza in 2004, two 1,000-pound bronze cougars have become synonymous with one of UH's most beloved traditions.



Come finals week, students rub a paw for a boost of academic luck. Whether the ritual changes outcomes, the well-worn paws have become a symbol of UH pride.



In the fall, UH football fans rub the cougars' paws or stop by the Legend of the Cougar Paw statue at stadium Gate 2.



The belief: The more people who touch the bronze, the better the Coogs' chances.

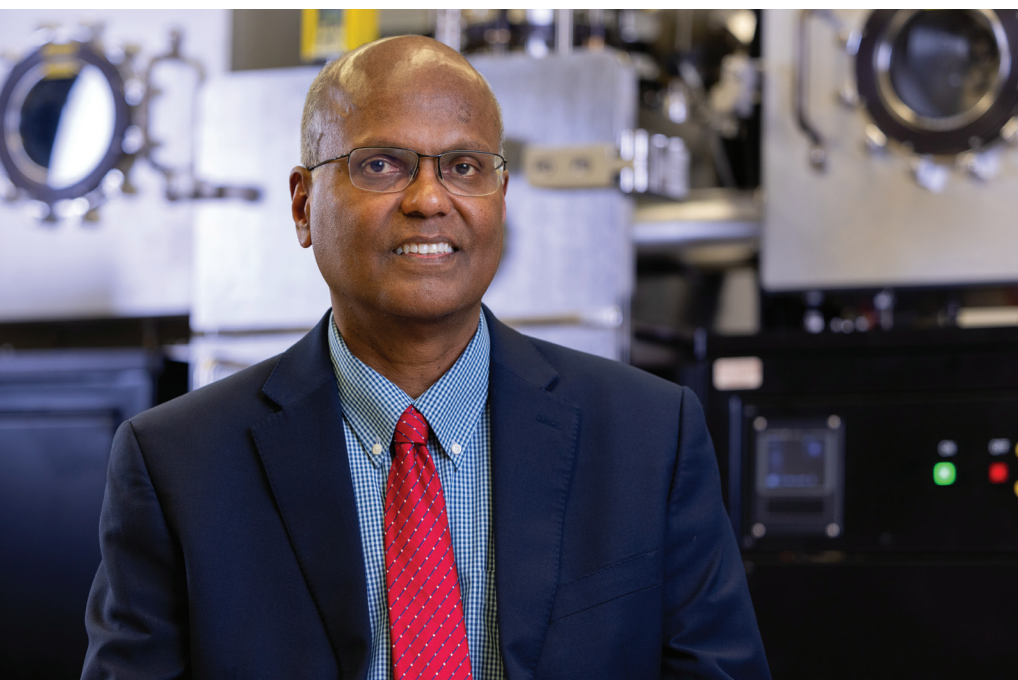


Rubbing a paw not only brings good luck but also shows school spirit.



NOTABLE NEWS

The Latest Headlines From Around UH



Star Power

*The National Academy of Engineering recognizes UH professor's leadership in **SUPERCONDUCTIVITY AND NEXT-GENERATION ENERGY RESEARCH.***

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON engineer **Venkat Selvamanickam** has spent nearly four decades pursuing a scientific dream that once seemed impossibly distant: harnessing the power of nuclear fusion to produce abundant, clean energy. Now, the international engineering community has recognized his contributions by electing him to the National Academy of Engineering — one of the profession's highest honors.

Selvamanickam, the M.D. Anderson Chair Professor of

Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering at UH and director of the Advanced Manufacturing Institute, has devoted his career to advancing high-temperature superconductors — materials capable of conducting electricity with virtually no energy loss. These materials play a critical role in powerful superconducting magnets used in next-generation fusion reactors, which aim to replicate the energy-producing reactions that power the sun.

"Fusion is like a sun that's

pretty much on all the time," Selvamanickam says. "The impact of this is really clean energy. You're not using any hydrocarbons, any fossil fuels. You don't have any nuclear waste to dispose of."

Scientists have been working toward practical fusion power for nearly a century, but Selvamanickam believes the technology may be approaching a turning point. Advances in manufacturing and superconducting materials have opened new possibilities for compact reactors that could

one day supply reliable, carbon-free electricity.

His leadership at UH reflects that momentum. Last fall, Selvamanickam was awarded \$8 million in federal funding — part of a \$134 million U.S. Department of Energy initiative supporting fusion research. It brings together scientists across multiple institutions to study how radiation affects superconducting magnets and how they can be made more resilient for long-term reactor use.

Despite 40 years in the field, the science continues to inspire him. "Frankly, it's still a magical phenomenon to me," Selvamanickam says of superconductivity. "It's essentially something that can keep spinning without any decay."

Selvamanickam joins 130 U.S. and 28 international members in the NAE Class of 2026, and he's the 29th member from the University of Houston. His election places Selvamanickam among a select group of engineers whose innovations have shaped modern technology — and whose work may help power the world's future.

UH Graduate Programs Surge in National Rankings

THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON continues to build momentum in graduate education, with notable jumps in the latest U.S. News & World Report rankings. UH placed 19 programs in the Top 50 — up from 15 last year — while 48 programs ranked in the Top 100.

Four programs, including three at the UH Law Center, earned Top 10 spots. The

Law Center stood out with 11 specialties in the Top 50, led by part-time law (No. 5), intellectual property law (No. 7) and health care law (No. 9). The latter has maintained a Top 10 position for more than 15 years.

Engineering programs also posted strong results, with petroleum engineering ranked No. 8, alongside gains in chemical and industrial engineering, reinforcing UH's leadership in research and innovation.

Overall, multiple programs saw double-digit year-over-year improvements. "When 19 of our graduate programs rank among the best in the country, it sends a powerful message: UH is a place where ambitious students can find both the academic challenge they crave and the support they need to become leaders in their fields," says Sarah Larsen, vice provost and dean of the UH Graduate School.

Time Magazine Names UH Tops for Future Leaders

FROM CORPORATE BOARD-rooms to research labs to public service, the question of where tomorrow's industry captains and decision-makers are shaped feels increasingly urgent. UH is part of that answer.

The University ranks No. 77 on Time's 2026 list of Best Colleges for Future Leaders; that's 11 spots higher than the inaugural rankings two years ago. UH is one of only three public institutions in Texas to make the cut — The University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M University are the others — and one of six Texas

universities overall recognized in the top 100.

"Our current Coogs are blazing new trails in the classroom and within their communities," says Diane Z. Chase, senior vice president for academic affairs and provost at UH. "Likewise, our alumni are changing the world through innovation and determination. Leadership is built on many traits, and those traits are deeply rooted here at UH."

The rankings, compiled in partnership with Statista, analyzed the educational backgrounds of 2,000 influential leaders across industries, examining resumes, corporate biographies and career profiles to identify the institutions most closely associated with high achievement.

RECENT RECOGNITION

UH continues to rack up accolades for its strengths in educating engaged, thoughtful leaders.



UH Earns Carnegie Recognition for Community Engagement

WHEN A UNIVERSITY'S WORK stretches beyond campus gates and into neighborhoods, classrooms and clinics across a city, that commitment rarely goes unnoticed. Ours has been recognized by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the American Council on Education.

A national designation for institutions that embed community partnership into teaching, research and service, the Carnegie Community

Engagement Classification places UH among a select group of universities nationwide — and one of only 10 in Texas — acknowledged for sustained, reciprocal collaboration with community partners.

The honor follows a rigorous application process requiring extensive documentation of how the University's mission, leadership and resources support meaningful engagement. For UH, it reflects years of intentional partnerships across Greater Houston.

"This recognition means a great deal to the University of Houston because it reflects who we are," says Diane Z. Chase, senior vice president for academic affairs and provost. "It reflects how we prepare educated, engaged citizens while showing up for our community every day."

**BASKETBALLER**

Senior guard Emanuel Sharp became the school record holder with more than 300 career 3-point field goals.

BLEACHERS

Records Broken, Rivals Humbled

DEFINING MOMENTS from UH Athletics' 2025–26 season.

FROM UNFORGETTABLE grid-iron clashes and diamond upsets to historic individual records in the pool and on the track, the Coogs put on an absolute master class in athleticism and academics this season. And it wasn't just seasoned upperclassmen; the University of Houston first-year stars didn't hold back. They went out and made history.

MEN'S BASKETBALL**ANOTHER SEASON FOR THE HISTORY BOOKS**

Under the steady hand of Head Coach Kelvin Sampson, the Houston Men's Basketball program posted a 30–7 overall record and advanced to the NCAA Tournament Sweet 16 for the seventh consecutive season by dominating rival Texas

A&M, 88–57, in the Second Round. With a proven group of veterans and one of the nation's top recruiting classes, the Cougars competed in the NCAA Tournament for the eighth consecutive season and recorded the program's fifth straight 30-win season and 11th consecutive 20-win campaign — all school records. Point guard Kingston Flemings became the first freshman in program history to receive All-America honors, while senior guard Emanuel Sharp became the school record holder with more than 300 career 3-point field goals.

Sampson made history long before March Madness: With his Cougars' 75–57 win over Lehigh in the season opener inside Fertitta Center on Nov. 3, 2025, Sampson recorded the 800th win of his career, becoming only the 14th coach in NCAA history (among coaches with more than a decade at the Division I level) to reach that milestone.



BIG WINS

Wide receiver Harvey Broussard III shakes a defender in the Houston Bowl game against LSU (left). Senior Virag Peter won the Big 12 title in the 200-yard breaststroke.



FOOTBALL

HISTORIC BOWL VICTORY OVER LSU

In one of the season's most exciting games, the Cougars defeated the LSU Tigers 38–35 at NRG Stadium in the Houston Bowl this past December. The victory capped off a stunning 10-win season in Head Coach Willie Fritz's second year at UH, earning the team the No. 21 spot in the College Football Playoff rankings.

BASEBALL

MAJOR UPSET OF NO. 2 TEXAS

In a thrilling midweek rivalry clash in March, Houston Baseball rallied from a seven-run deficit to upset the No. 2-ranked Texas Longhorns 9–7. The win delivered Head Coach Todd Whitting his 69th victory against a ranked opponent while at the helm.

SWIMMING AND DIVING

FIRST BIG 12 INDIVIDUAL TITLE

Freshman diver Maisy Woloszyn made history in February at the Big 12 Swimming and Diving Championships in Greensboro, North Carolina. By winning the 3-meter diving title, she secured the first Big 12 individual conference title in program history. She was honored as the Big 12 Freshman Diver of the Meet.

VIRAG PETER'S SCHOOL RECORD AND NCAA BERTH

In March, senior Virag Peter delivered a historic performance in the 200-yard breaststroke, winning the Big 12 title with a

time of 2:08.11. This mark broke her school record and automatically qualified her for the NCAA Championships, where she finished in the top 17 nationally.

SOFTBALL

800TH PROGRAM WIN MILESTONE

During Houston's opening weekend in February, the UH softball program achieved a historic milestone, recording its 800th win. The Cougars reached the mark with a dominant 9–1 victory over Fairfield University, celebrating decades of success.

DOMINANT 10–1 ROUT OF BAYLOR

In Chrissy Schoonmaker's first season as head coach, the Houston softball team traveled to Waco in April and delivered a statement 10–1 victory over Baylor University, capping the first series win in the Big 12 under Schoonmaker.

TRACK AND FIELD

SHIEANA HALL SETS TRIPLE JUMP RECORD

At the Big 12 Indoor Championships, freshman Shieana Hall became the first woman in school history to record a jump over 13 meters. Her mark of 13.02m set a new school record in the triple jump, beating the nearly 10-year-old record by a few centimeters. 



BONUS WIN

25% Increase in Fall Academic All-Big 12 Recognitions

FOLLOWING a sixth consecutive semester with a department 3.0 GPA, a fall-term school record of 55 Houston Cougars earned Academic All-Big 12 Conference honors. The 55 Academic All-Big 12 selections represented a 25% increase over 2024. Additionally, 103 Cougars were named to the Big 12 Honor Roll, continuing Houston's strong academic showing in its third fall semester as a league member.

CAMPUS LIFE

A Retreat, Reimagined

WILHELMINA'S GROVE has reopened, welcoming students, faculty and visitors back to an inspiring campus gathering space.

By **ALLISON HATFIELD**

STEP INTO THE HEART of the University of Houston Arts District and observe. Filtered light moves through the trees. The sound of water softens the edges of the day. Students linger with their books, their lunches, their friends. Wilhelmina's Grove — long a corridor between classes — has reopened as a thoughtfully designed gathering space that feels both familiar and entirely new.

The renovated grove reopened in December 2025 and now features an outdoor amphitheater with a covered stage and seating areas that encourage audiences to settle in. A calming water feature anchors the space, and new plantings and trees bolster the grove's leafy atmosphere. A broad stretch of green lawn invites a spontaneous Frisbee game or a picnic blanket. New pathways improve circulation, making the space easier to navigate during busy class changes and large events. Situated between the Blaffer Art Museum and Wortham Theatre, the parklike space is designed to function as an open-air extension of the buildings that surround it.

"We envisioned the grove as a living room for the Arts District," says Glenn Serdar, architect in UH's Office of Facilities. "It's a place where classes can take place

outside, where a performance might unfold unexpectedly or where a student can simply take a breath between exams."

The reopening is part of UH's \$43 million Centennial Construction Project, a campuswide effort timed to the University's rooth anniversary next year. Alongside the transformation of University Drive into a pedestrian-first promenade and the reimagining of Centennial Plaza, Wilhelmina's Grove represents the emerging community ambiance of the campus' future.

More than an aesthetic upgrade, the grove strengthens connections across disciplines and creates space for reflection and creativity. It's built not just for ceremonies and performances, but for study breaks, spontaneous conversations and the everyday rhythms that define campus life. As UH approaches its big anniversary, the message is clear: Great schools don't just educate — they foster community and give people places to belong. 





GATHERING SPOT

The newly reopened Wilhelmina's Grove — part of the \$43 million Centennial Construction Project — feels both familiar and entirely new.



AROUND THE WORLD

Archaeology Accolades

*UH archaeologists receive more international attention for their **HISTORY-MAKING DISCOVERY**.*

By **DAWN McMULLAN**

THE LIFELONG WORK of two University of Houston archaeologists has made international headlines — again. Diane and Arlen Chase's unearthing of the 1,700-year-old tomb of Te' Kab Chaak in Caracol, a sprawling and significant Maya archaeological site in Belize, was named one of the top 10 discoveries of 2025 by Archaeology Magazine and earned a spot on National Geographic's "6 archeological discoveries that amazed the world in 2025."

The Chases — she's the University's senior vice president for academic affairs and provost, and he's a professor of anthropology and chair of Comparative Culture Studies — originally garnered global attention in July 2025 when The New York Times reported on their history-making achievement.

FOUR DECADES IN THE MAKING

In 1985, the Chases first obtained their permit from the Belize Institute of Archaeology, and they have yet to miss an excavation season. Since that time, they have uncovered Caracol's most impressive structure — a 141-foot Maya royal palace built between 600 and 700 A.D. they named Caana, or "Sky Palace" — and proved the town was a major political hub, contradicting the narrative that it was a peaceful backwater town.

Forty years into dating relics, reading hieroglyphs in palaces and temples, and effectively rewriting Maya history, the Chases made their most spectacular discovery yet: that tomb. Te' Kab Chaak, who acceded to the throne in 331 A.D., was the first ruler of Caracol and the founder of its royal dynasty.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MASK

"It is exceedingly rare in Maya archaeology to be able to associate human remains with a historic figure known from hieroglyphic inscriptions," according to Archaeology Magazine. "This is also the only tomb of a ruler to have been found in Caracol."

Professor Chase was amazed when he first looked inside; the red cinnabar on the walls signaled it was a



OH, MAYA

In 2025, Diane and Arlen Chase discovered the tomb of the first ruler of Caracol and pieced together one of the oldest royal death masks in Maya civilization.

tomb of prominence, as did the vessels and jewelry. "As soon as we saw the chamber, we knew we had something," he told The New York Times.

The Chases recently pieced together what is likely one of the oldest royal death masks in Maya civilization, composed of jade and spondylus shells they discovered inside the tomb. "The mask tells us it is definitely a ruler," Professor Chase said. "We would not have identified the tomb as a ruler without that mask."

"This discovery is both a story of how quickly things can happen but also how much patience you need to have," Provost Chase told Archaeology Magazine. "On one hand, it was more than 1,000 years in the making, but for us, it was at least 40 years."

What's next? The Chases are now awaiting results of radiocarbon dating of bones to learn more about timing and the ruler's lifestyle. The data will also provide clues as to how the people of Te' Kab Chaak's reign interacted regionally with other communities — historically significant information that gives context to the civilization. 



FUN TO LEARN

Bradley H. Smith (below) believes challenging, experiential learning opportunities in schools can promote positive youth development.

STUDIES SHOW

Power Play

A UH professor's research may offer schools a
SMART BLUEPRINT FOR FUN.

By **DAWN McMULLAN**

YOU MIGHT CALL Bradley H. Smith an expert in fun. “It’s a basic human need, and we’re better off doing it,” says the professor in the Department of Psychological, Health and Learning Sciences at the University of Houston’s College of Education.

To wit: Smith has introduced an expanded framework called the “four types of fun” in the *Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education*. His theory builds on the “three types of fun” often discussed in outdoor and adventure programming to include:

- **TYPE 1:** Recreational fun — low effort and relaxing (think beach)
- **TYPE 2:** Challenging fun — strenuous but rewarding (think hiking)
- **TYPE 3:** Adventure fun — high adrenaline (think bungee jumping)
- **TYPE 4:** Overindulgent fun — enjoyable but excessive (think too many cheese enchiladas)

Smith’s research revolves around the second type of fun — challenging — especially in educational small group settings. He describes it as “not fun during but fun afterward ... consistently described as fun in retrospect.” Examples include skiing on terrain that

challenges your ability, camping in the rain with good equipment and rock climbing safely at a new level of difficulty.

Challenging fun shows the strongest links to social and emotional growth. While you might not be feeling pure joy while you’re in the throes of scaling a rock face

or training for a marathon, participants often reflect on those activities as meaningful and rewarding — especially when guided by mentors and shared in small groups.

Smith argues this blend of discomfort and accomplishment mirrors real-world learning by building resilience, communication skills and confidence. Although we live in a society that often undervalues fun, especially in work or classroom settings,

he believes challenging, purposeful, experiential learning opportunities in schools can promote positive youth development and character building.

“To what extent can we try to cultivate Type 2 fun in schools?” Smith asks. “What if we really try to make learning challenging?” **UH**



Rare Bacterium 'Plays Dead'

Proving these *Actinobacteria* go dormant means
UH researchers may be on a path to **NEUTRALIZE THEM.**

Story by **SAM EIFLING**

Photography by **JOSEPH BUI** / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON





A **TEAM OF UNIVERSITY** of Houston researchers has shown that certain bacteria found in NASA's ultrasterile clean rooms can go dormant — a state that makes them difficult to detect and ostensibly unkillable.

It's a tantalizing discovery that merges microbiology, genomics and astronomy. But the key to the insight was no less than a humble poster hanging on the fourth floor of the Houston Science Center. That's where Madhan Tirumalai and William Widger of UH's Department of Biology and Biochemistry have neighboring offices.

Tirumalai, assistant professor and lead researcher on the study published in the journal *Microbiology Spectrum*, was conducting a genome analysis of *Tersicoccus phoenicis* (*T. phoenicis*), a strain of the phylum Actinobacteria that, against long odds, was isolated and found intact in a clean room where spacecraft are built. In the analysis, Tirumalai noticed a gene that looked familiar: one connected to certain bacteria's ability to come out of a dormancy that could also be antibiotic- and death-proof

Where had he seen this gene before, he wondered. Oh, right — on a research poster about bacteria dormancy that Widger had made for a conference and then hung up outside his office.

Widger has spent his career studying bacterial stress systems and, more recently, bacterial dormancy. (His white whale: tuberculosis. A third of the world's population, the professor says, has dormant *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* in their bodies.) When Tirumalai approached him with this curious bacterium that could endure even in clean rooms, Widger was intrigued.

"I said, 'Well, what is it? It's an Actinobacterial strain. Let's check if it's dormant,'" Widger says. "And sure enough,

the doggone thing was dormant." It took the researchers about three months to put the bacteria through those paces. Emeritus Professor George E. Fox and graduate student Sahar Ali, both of the Department of Biology and Biochemistry, also coauthored the *T. phoenicis* study.

At first glance, a microorganism switching to a state of dormancy sounds about as interesting as an iPhone with a dead battery. After all, dormant bacteria don't grow. They don't change. Once they hit a state of nutrient deprivation and shut down — "essentially playing dead until the danger passes," Tirumalai says — they don't do much of anything. Until they encounter food or the right conditions again and are

revived via that distinctive protein (known as the resuscitation-promoting factor, or RPF), they don't do anything at all.

"These are in a state of very low metabolic activity," Tirumalai says. "It's almost like a bear that has gone into hibernation during winter. They do not divide, but they're very much alive. And they can become cultivable once revived."

This is the most fascinating feat among the Actinobacteria's long list of don'ts: They simply don't die. By playing dead, they become quasi-immortal. Tirumalai says the most impressive examples of hibernation by dormant bacteria are samples that scientists extracted and successfully revived from inside insects trapped in





125-million-year-old amber — “much older than Jurassic Park’s T. rex,” Tirumalai says. “But that is fiction. This is real.”

Their extreme durability makes these bacteria objects of fascination for anyone concerned with space travel. NASA strives to send spacecraft into the void without stowaway microbes on board, largely to avoid contaminating other worlds with terrestrial life. Other bacteria found in those NASA clean rooms can oxidize, and along with biofilms could weaken, metal. “If you had a metal-oxidizing bacteria and you’re on your way to Mars and all of a sudden you have metal fatigue failure because of the bacteria,” Widger says, “that could be a problem.”



NOVEL FINDINGS

Madhan Tirumalai with UH student Jose Alfredo Rodriguez (left) and William Widger of UH’s Department of Biology and Biochemistry coauthored a paper about a quasi-immortal bacteria found in a NASA clean room.

Learning about this bacteria may lead to better contamination-detection methods and sterilization strategies for environments such as hospitals and food-processing facilities.

Yet the qualities of these incredibly durable bacteria in space are simply unknown to science. They clearly can survive in a clean room, which is no small feat. The void of space could be another story. “It could be that they piggyback on the space suit or the spacecraft, and then who knows?” Tirumalai says. “We know nothing about how they respond to microgravity, nothing about how they respond to Mars or lunar radiation.”

By proving that these Actinobacteria do, in fact, enter dormancy, the researchers may identify ways to better detect and control them. Widger is still pursuing the question of what triggers dormancy: How, exactly, do these microorganisms go into their zombie state, and is there a way to kill them off before they do? The answer to those questions may lead to better contamination-detection methods and sterilization strategies for environments such as hospitals and food-processing facilities — those much closer to home than the distant worlds NASA is trying to protect.

“If we can understand that biochemical mechanism,” Widger says, “maybe there’s an Achilles’ heel in there that could be used to make a target for intervention that could actually prevent these things from going dormant.” 

Playing It Forward

NOE MARMOLEJO, associate professor and director of jazz studies, has transformed the UH Jazz Festival into much more than a showcase.

Story by **DeANNA JANES**

Photography by **JOSEPH BUI** / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON



THE MOORES OPERA HOUSE is alive with the sound of jazz.

Every year since 1997, generations of musicians, jazz students and music fans have converged on the University of Houston campus for a festival filled with performances, mentorship and a passion for big band sound. Pulsating with excitement and so many horns, the venue transforms into a hub of improvisation, call-and-response, and trial and error, all in the name of learning by doing.

A tradition nearly three decades in the making, the UH Jazz Festival is a living engine of jazz education and cultural

exchange. At the helm is Noe Marmolejo, associate professor and director of jazz studies, who began teaching in the Moores School of Music in 1983. An active trumpeter and educator, he's been the longtime force behind the festival. He's the oil that keeps the engine running.

Giant Steps

Not your traditional music fest, the UH Jazz Festival is an opportunity for students to perform with and learn from world-class guest artists and seasoned professionals. The result is a creative and cultural influence that lasts long after graduates shift their tassels to the left.

Beyond the stage, students participate

in clinics and master classes, which provide mentorship moments and face-to-face feedback. Marmolejo also exposes students to a diverse array of genres, infusing the festival with swing, Latin, contemporary music and more.

Direct, no-nonsense and deeply committed, Marmolejo believes jazz education must be grounded in history to move forward. "My job is to teach them the history so they can see the pathway," he says. Opposed to playing and teaching only what's popular or trendy, he consistently challenges his students.

Marmolejo illustrates this point by naming two well-known jazz tunes: "Giant Steps," by John Coltrane, and "Take the A

“
My job is to teach them
the history so they
can see the pathway.”

HIGH NOTE

Renowned trumpeter Wayne Bergeron was a big draw — and a big get — at the 2026 UH Jazz Festival.



Train,” by Duke Ellington.

“You may not be able to play ‘Giant Steps’ like Coltrane, but you still have to confront what he desired,” he says. “He created the piece to challenge himself, not for people to fall in love with it. Duke Ellington’s ‘Take the A Train,’ on the other hand — everyone knows that one. You’ll play it at cocktail parties, weddings. That one will pay your rent.”

One challenges, the other sustains. It’s a balance reflected in Marmolejo’s festival, with student artistry and seasoned musicianship hitting high notes together onstage. Of course, when it comes to challenging his students, he doesn’t hold back. It’s how he learned when he was a student.

Under Pressure

Born in the small South Texas town of Alice, Marmolejo was a big deal in high school band, earning All-State honors on multiple occasions. Following graduation in 1970, he attended Del Mar College in Corpus Christi, then Southern Methodist University in Dallas on a music scholarship. There, he studied under the tutelage of Richard Giangulio, a former principal trumpet of the Dallas Symphony with Juilliard schooling. Giangulio left an enduring imprint on Marmolejo from the very first lesson.

“It was a wreck,” he says. “I’m just standing there. He looks at his watch and goes, ‘Well, that took three minutes. I guess this

lesson is over. You can leave now.’ I walked out of the room, went to the bathroom and threw up.”

Does that lesson recall a certain Oscar-nominated film from 2014 for anyone? “Whiplash,” the story of a first-year jazz student pushed to extremes by a diabolical instructor, is seemingly something Marmolejo lived. He didn’t get a cymbal thrown at his head, but he did learn under pressure.

Marmolejo applies a similar intensity, albeit with a softer touch, to his courses, clinics and performances. Students are challenged in real-time environments, with the festival preparing them for gigs, collaborations, careers and lives of continuously learning the art form.

All That Jazz

This year’s jazz festival, which took place Feb. 27–28, featured 34 school bands from the region, with a master class and performance by renowned trumpeter Wayne Bergeron. Fun fact: He’s one of the horns you hear in the theme song of Disney-Pixar’s animated superhero gem “The Incredibles.”

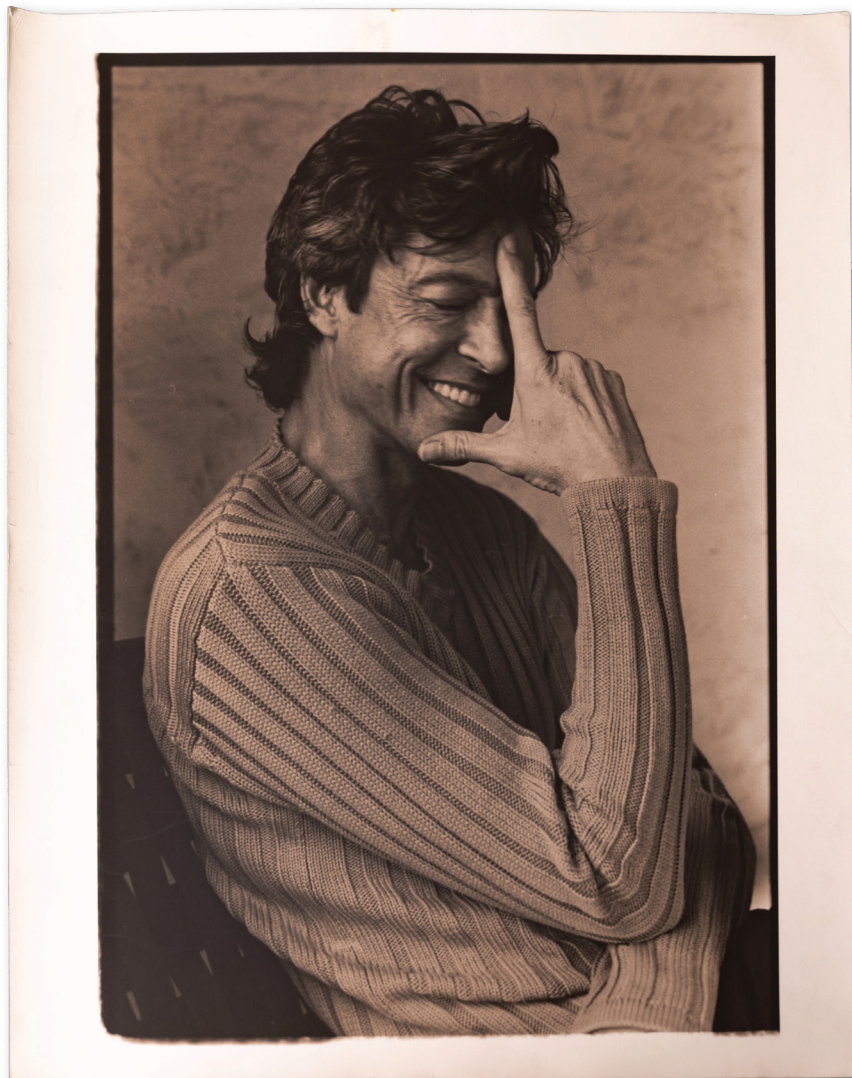
Bergeron’s appearance at the festival is significant, as it connects students with the highest level of the craft — access they wouldn’t have otherwise.

“The reason there’s so much interest in the festival this year is purely because of Wayne Bergeron,” Marmolejo says. “Band directors know who he is; the kids know who he is. He’s very visible.”

Next year, Marmolejo hopes to expand the festival. Noting the competitive nature of the arts in Houston — with sports, NASA, the opera, the symphony and more all vying for attention — he understands the challenges. But he knows even more that UH is a fitting home for a growing jazz club.

The 29th UH Jazz Festival saw jazz students carrying forward Marmolejo’s way of listening, thinking and playing. Jazz demands discipline and adaptability, yes, but most of all, it depends on exchange. That’s how it survives. That’s how it stays alive. And that’s how you can bet the 30th UH Jazz Festival will be another hit. 

Tony winner and UH alumnus **TOMMY TUNE** donates more than 50,000 pieces from his career to the University, giving students rare access to the evolution of modern musical theater.



A Broadway Legacy

By **ALLISON HATFIELD**

IN A Q&A THAT APPEARED in the 1974 Playbill for the Broadway musical “Seesaw,” Tommy Tune (MFA ’64) answered the question, “Do you want to be a star?” with, “I want to be the Sun.”

He certainly shone like the mightiest of stars when he stepped onto the Tony Awards stage in an exquisitely tailored tuxedo to accept a Lifetime Achievement Award in 2015. Precise, charming, effervescent, he stood at the microphone, patted his silver hair and, with the award in one hand, performed a few calibrated dance steps, finishing with a crisp kick and a little curtsy.

By then, at age 76, Tune had already won nine Tony Awards and spent decades reshaping what a director-choreographer could be. The Texas boy who danced before he could walk, staged backyard performances

with friends and was fascinated by the lifted gait of his father’s Tennessee walking horses had traveled far.

It may sound too perfect to be true, but Tommy Tune is his real name. Born in 1939 to parents who met on a dance floor, he grew up in a house where music and movement were ever present. When he was 5 years old, a local dance instructor offered him free lessons. At Houston’s Lamar High School, a drama teacher sent him to see “The Glass Menagerie.” Soon he was running the school musicals. A graduation gift took him to New York City, where he stood under the lights of Broadway for the first time.

After high school, Tune earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in drama from The University of Texas at Austin in 1962 and a Master of Fine Arts in directing from



“This collection represents my life in musical theater, and I want it to inspire the next generation of artists in the city that first inspired me.”

— TOMMY TUNE

THEATRICAL TREASURES

Clothing and costumes, posters and Playbills, and Tommy Tune's childhood tap shoes are all part of the archive donated to UH.



the University of Houston in 1964. When a friend persuaded him to join a road trip to New York, he went — and landed a singing-and-dancing job after his first audition on his first day.

In 1965, he made his Broadway debut in “Baker Street.” An elevator encounter with choreographer Michael Bennett expanded his sense of what was possible. Gene Kelly, one of Hollywood’s most influential dancer-directors, once told Tune simply to “dance better.”

Over the next several decades, Tune performed well enough to earn Tonys in four categories — he’s the only person in theatrical history to do so — including back-to-back wins for both direction and choreography. In 2003, former President George W. Bush awarded him the National Medal of Arts, the nation’s highest honor for artistic achievement. A star bearing his name was added to the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 1993.

Now 86, Tune and his sister, Gracey, have gifted more than 50,000 items to the UH Libraries Special Collections. Drawn from his Manhattan home and family holdings in Texas, the collection includes clothing and set renderings, annotated scripts, rehearsal notes, playbills, photographs, awards and much more. It’s a showbiz treasure trove and a front-row seat to the artistry and imagination of a theatrical legend.

From his childhood tap shoes to the last costumes he wore before retiring, each item is part of an inspirational living history, says Gracey. “Tommy approached every moment of his career with love and joy — whether he was casting a show; imagining sets with top designers; or collaborating with the best lyricists, writers, composers and costumers. His legacy is one of pure creative excitement.”

Adds Mary Manning, UH Libraries archivist, “This collection is a significant contribution to the study of theater history, particularly musical theater. It will be invaluable to students, performers, filmmakers and researchers who want to explore Tune’s creative process, reconstruct productions, or gain cultural context for the works he directed and performed in.”

Tune says the University of Houston felt like the natural home for the collection. “It’s where my story truly began. This collection represents my life in musical theater, and I want it to inspire the next generation of artists in the city that first inspired me.” 



Slice of Life

How UH alums **FRANK ROCHE AND JOHN MARINER** built Spanky's Pizza into a Houston institution.

Story by **DeANNA JANES**

Photography by **ANTHONY GOLLAB / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON**

PARTNERS IN PIZZA

High school buddies and fraternity brothers Mariner (left) and Roche reunited post-college to build their restaurant empire.

TUCKED INTO HOUSTON'S Gulfgate and Sharpstown neighborhoods, a pair of welcoming restaurants invite hungry patrons to gorge on scratch-made pizzas and Italian classics. Breathing in wafts of oregano, diners can't help but salivate: In-the-know regulars go for the amazing wings, while newbies anticipate the best cheese pulls they've ever stretched.

This is Spanky's Pizza, a treasured stalwart with two locations in Houston and one in Pasadena. Helmed by Frank Roche and John Mariner, University of Houston alums and good pals, the family-friendly joint celebrates 50 years this summer.

Roche and Mariner were Houston high school buddies who became Sigma Chi fraternity brothers at UH. Both graduated in 1972 — Roche with a degree in business, Mariner with economics. Although the two didn't become business partners immediately after college, they never really left each other's orbit.

At 16, Roche worked at the one and only Pizza Hut in town. He continued to learn the ins and outs of the restaurant business for 10 years, eventually rising to upper-crust management. When he was finally ready to be his own boss, he opened Spanky's.

Meanwhile, Mariner had gone into insurance. It wasn't until 1978 that the two reunited, each bringing their own skills to the table — Roche on operations, Mariner on finance — to form the perfect restaurant partnership.

"Frank had one Spanky's at the time and we talked about doing a barbecue restaurant," Mariner says.

As talk of opening the first Gabby's BBQ became serious, Mariner stopped working with numbers and started priming palates for 'cue. The partners opened their first smokehouse in 1978, next door to the original Spanky's, and have been expanding both concepts ever since.

Though Spanky's is an institution today, success didn't happen overnight — nor without challenges. Roche originally planned to name the restaurant Pizza and Things, but before construction on the first location was even completed, Pizza Hut sued, and Roche was forced to change the branding if he wanted to continue. He went with Spanky's, inspired by the "Old Gang" series, aka "The Little Rascals."

Another obstacle? Funds.

"Thinking of starting a business? Find a rich partner," Mariner says, jokingly.

"When you first start a restaurant, you don't have a

“It starts with really great food, of course. But it's the family atmosphere that keeps people coming back.”

— **FRANK ROCHE**
FOUNDER & OWNER
SPANKY'S PIZZA



HOUSTON FAVORITE

Spanky's turns 50 this year — a major milestone for a pizza restaurant with humble beginnings.

lot of money to work with," Roche adds. "We had to just work day to day, greet one customer at a time, and rub nickels together to make it through each week."

That's just what they did. Over the years, Roche and Mariner built trust with the community through quality service and food. Spanky's dough, sauces and now-famous margaritas are still made from scratch. The chicken wings remain some of the best in town, and though the menu has evolved over time, you can always

count on the same authentic New York-style pizza.

At its core, Spanky's is a family operation. Now in its second generation, it's run by Roche's daughters, Holly Waters and Robin Sweeney.

"Their influence was dramatic," Roche says. "It gave us another way to look at everything, from marketing to presentation."

Staying loyal to the brand's homey, Houston-proud vibe, the sisters, along with Mariner's wife and daughters, were pivotal in reconstructing Spanky's when it moved to its second iteration on Telephone Road following a 2013 fire.

"My wife and two daughters were really involved in the overall remodel and designing the decor, because they had a feel for the Spanky's customer," Mariner says. "It was all received so well."

The original vintage Mexican-tile tabletops were saved, as was a Betty Boop statuette and neon-horse wall sign Spanky's fans know well. Half a century in, Spanky's keeps evolving while holding onto the moxie that made it a Houston staple.

"It starts with really great food, of course," Roche says. "But it's the family atmosphere that keeps people coming back. Every time somebody walks in, it's a good moment." 

Leading Katy's

Brainpower Boom





UH is expanding programs at its **TIER ONE CAMPUSES OUTSIDE OF HOUSTON**

to support a new generation of regional talent and growth.

Story by **SHAWN SHINNEMAN**
Illustration by **BRIAN HOFFMAN**

FOR MUCH OF its early history, Katy was defined by the land beneath it.

What began as a stretch of coastal prairie and wetland known as Cane Island became fertile ground for rice farming after the Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad carved a line west of Houston in the late 19th century. By the mid-20th century, the discovery of natural gas beneath a local salt dome brought another wave of growth. The completion of the Katy Freeway in the 1960s opened the door to large-scale suburban expansion. And, during the past several decades, Katy has continued its transformation, adding master-planned communities alongside highly regarded K-12 schools. Growth is coming faster than ever.

Today, Katy is once again at an inflection point. As population and industry surge westward, demand for high-quality, accessible higher education follows. The community needs to keep more of its talented young people around and engaged

in growing the economy. The University of Houston is responding with a bold new plan to grow its Katy campus.

“Our vision is to be the talent accelerator, where students can graduate or earn important career credentials at a high speed,” says UH President Renu Khator. “The concept is built around putting students first and thinking through how we can help them quickly get their degrees.”

The goals are simple enough: ensure that students who live in Katy and the surrounding areas can earn Tier One university degrees close to home, and local employers have access to a highly educated workforce as the region’s economic development engine continues chugging along at a frenetic pace.



FROM THE PRAIRIE TO A POPULATION BOOM

For decades, Katy’s growth was more steady than swift. But in 1968, when contractors finished the Katy Freeway, the suburb took on a whole new life as a commuter town for Houstonians. In Katy, people found a community where housing was affordable, schools were exceptional and the drive to work was reasonable.

“That brought a lot of progress,” says Marilyn Frishman, chair of the Katy Heritage Park Board. “In the last 100 years, we’ve gone from a flat, undeveloped prairie to an urban area with exponential growth. From rice to gas to industry to suburban living.”

The population ticked up from a couple of thousand in the 1960s to 10,000 by 1995. But it wasn’t until 2015 that local industry really began to expand, fueling the fire. In the decade since, the city of Katy’s population has jumped from 16,000 to a projected 30,000 in 2026.

A BOLD NEW PLAN

The newly expanded Katy campus, which first opened in fall 2019, will match the rest of UH in rigor, opportunity and student experience.



The Greater Katy area, spanning Harris, Waller and Fort Bend counties, is now estimated at just under 400,000 residents. Katy ISD, which is often referenced to define that broader region, is one of the fastest-growing school districts in Texas, with enrollment practically tripling since 2000. Today, nearly 100,000 students are enrolled across 80 KISD schools.

“We’ve seen a lot of master-planned communities coming to the Katy area in the last 10 to 20 years,” says Alan Steinberg, president and CEO of the West Houston Association. “A lot of people are choosing to move to the area for its history of high-quality, K–12 education.”

As remote and hybrid work situations have become more common, it’s become

even easier for people whose companies are based in Houston to justify moving out to the suburbs, Steinberg says. But the truth is that employers themselves have tracked the same westward migration as the people of Greater Houston. The Energy Corridor remains just down I-10, and distribution and logistics companies have established a strong presence along the interstate and Grand Parkway. Health care systems, too, have expanded west to meet the needs of a growing population. Texas Children’s Hospital West Campus, Memorial Hermann, Houston Methodist West Hospital and MD Anderson are part of a broader push that reflects population density and long-term investment.

“When a company is choosing where



“Having a campus in Katy means you’re going to be able to capture some of the best and brightest from Katy, educate them here and then hopefully they’ll stay in the region after.”

— **ALAN STEINBERG**
PRESIDENT & CEO
WEST HOUSTON ASSOCIATION

to locate, workforce tends to be pretty important,” Steinberg says. “People want to live in a place that benefits them and their families. Often, we see employers following that.”

The result is a city that’s evolved from a residential community to an economic engine in its own right. Retail districts and entertainment hubs have clustered near major intersections, and places such as Asian Town have put Katy on the culinary map.

Growth of this scale, of course, comes with its own set of challenges and pressures. Infrastructure must keep pace. Flood control remains a critical issue in an area shaped by hard-learned lessons from major storms. As more and more families settle in, another challenge becomes clear:

ensuring that educational opportunities expand rapidly enough to keep pace with growth and feed the many companies putting down roots in Katy.

For decades, most Katy high schoolers left the area for college. Increasingly, local business leaders are interested in cultivating talent from their own communities. Hence, UH’s commitment to planting its higher ed track record firmly within a growth zone.

“Having a campus in Katy means you’re going to be able to capture some of the best and brightest from Katy, educate them here and then hopefully they’ll stay in the region after,” Steinberg says. “What we don’t want to see is great students who go off to college and never come back.”



FILLING CLASSROOMS

Advertising around Katy is driving enrollment gains. In fall 2025, the UH campus in Katy experienced a 73% increase in enrollment.



UH KATY CAMPUS AS A TALENT ACCELERATOR

University leaders are clear: Katy is not just a far-flung outpost.

“We do not call them satellite campuses,” says Diane Z. Chase, UH senior vice president for academic affairs and provost. “They are fully UH locations.” Diplomas read “University of Houston.” Faculty are UH faculty.

Some universities create scaled-down versions of themselves as they spread out their reach. But UH’s strategy is to extend its Tier One identity, tailoring programs to

CLEAR VISION

UH President Renu Khator and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost Diane Z. Chase visited the Katy campus to discuss UH's strategy to extend its Tier One identity.



“**Our vision is to be the talent accelerator, where students can graduate or earn important career credentials at a high speed.**”

— **RENU KHATOR**
PRESIDENT
UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON



the realities of the region while strengthening the broader University. The expectation is for the Katy location, which first opened its doors in the fall of 2019, to match the rest of UH in rigor, opportunity and student experience.

There are many reasons for that, but the big one is: This is what the region needs. There is no other Tier One university in Katy. Both Katy and Sugar Land — where UH is also growing — have a real need for greater higher ed.

“Both communities specifically asked for Tier One UH programs, not a separate university,” says Jay Neal, associate vice president of academic affairs and chief operating officer of both UH’s Sugar Land and Katy campuses. “We aim to bring the same UH educational quality and services to Sugar Land and Katy.”

The good news is that, in 2025, Texas Legislature designated funding to enable just that. Already, UH’s Katy campus experienced a 73% increase in enrollment in the fall of 2025 compared to the previous

year. The campus also added 44 additional classes, and students are taking them: Semester credit hours were up 49% as of last fall.

UH will continue to expand programs in health care, engineering, business, education and technology, basing those moves directly on the needs of the Katy and Sugar Land communities. UH sees Katy as a strong fit for energy and engineering programs, among others, while the growth of the campus in Sugar Land will include more opportunities in technology and gaming.

Research and an ongoing listening tour will guide the specifics, and there’s already a working list of planned

program innovation. It includes streamlining undergraduate pathways, creating undergraduate-to-master’s options (and accelerating their timelines where possible), and launching new educational options that prepare students to enter the workforce sooner. Programs at each campus will be purpose-built to match the regional economic needs of Katy and Sugar Land.

“Our goal is to create an experience and environment so that once you’re on campus, you don’t have to leave if you don’t want to,” Chase says. “You’ll have everything you need on all our campuses.”

That means reducing friction by bringing campuses closer to communities who



COMING TOGETHER

UH's Katy campus will be a place of connection, where students and professionals can advance their careers as much through social interaction as through coursework.

may not see a long commute as feasible — allowing students to pursue high-demand degrees without sacrificing serious time or commitments.

Accounting for the region's demands will require adding more physical space. UH's Katy campus is anchored by an 80,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art building that includes cutting-edge labs, engineering studios and classrooms. But explosive growth is rapidly outstripping capacity, making the need for a second academic building urgent to house a new academic hub, additional high-tech classrooms, online studios, science labs, and space for innovation and industry partnership. Further down the

line, the University wants to add additional custom-designed space that encourages collaboration.

"Katy offers a rare chance to build a campus from scratch, test innovative models and remain agile," Khator says.

It'll take buy-in from the state for UH to reach its goals — both in Katy and in Sugar Land. UH intends to take its plan for additional space at each campus to the Legislature.

"If the partnership between the community, the University and the legislature is working as it should," Neal says, "we can see Katy growing to 5,000 students and Sugar Land growing to 10,000 students."



A LONG-TERM VISION

Over time, the vision for the UH campus in Katy is to be much more than a provider of higher education.

The future campus will be an accelerator, streamlining student pathways to high-quality careers. But UH leadership also envisions a place of connection, a gathering space where professionals come together to advance their careers through social interaction as much as through coursework. They see it as an innovation hub bringing together researchers across health, energy and infrastructure to solve some of society's most pressing problems, as well as a space for mentorship, where business leaders teach and inspire a new generation of talent.

It will be designed to serve a wide spectrum of students — from high school graduates completing their degrees to working professionals seeking certifications or credentials to advance their careers. UH also anticipates interest from the 19% of the Katy population who hold college credit but do not yet have degrees.

It's a vision that reflects a broader understanding of Katy itself.

Serving Katy means recognizing how dramatically the region has changed. It has reinvented itself repeatedly over the past century, and now UH is leading another step in the evolution.

"If we are THE University of Houston our mission is and must be to serve all of Houston," Khator says.

For decades, the area's brightest students left home in search of higher ed opportunity elsewhere. The expansion of the campus signals a different possibility: that the next generation might build new opportunities where they grew up. 

An aerial photograph of a coastal prairie landscape. The terrain is covered in dense, tall grasses and low-lying shrubs. Two researchers are visible: one in the upper right, kneeling and working with a tool, and another in the lower center, leaning over and examining the ground. The scene is illuminated by warm, golden light, suggesting late afternoon or early morning. In the background, a dark blue sky is visible with some faint, abstract white lines and dots, possibly representing a data visualization or a stylized sky.

Is the coastal prairie
the key to Houston's
urban future?
Researchers at the
UH COASTAL CENTER
aim to find out.

Nature's



Laboratory

Story by **SAM EIFLING**

Photography by **ANTHONY GOLLAB / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON**

JEFF LAUTENBERG



NATURAL SOLUTION

As executive director of the UH Institute for Ecological Resilience, Jaime González advocates for the creation of “pocket prairies” around Houston to help mitigate the effects of a warming climate on a vulnerable city.



T

HE GREATER HOUSTON AREA, Jaime González tells people, has a surfaces problem. The ground below your feet — or, just as likely, below your tires — too often

cannot soak up rain. It traps heat. It doesn't offer much beyond being smooth and wide, and even those traits become obstacles when you try to walk anywhere.

In the 20 years between 1997 and 2017, metro Houston built out nearly 400 square miles' worth of buildings and pavement. Those impermeable surfaces, useful as they may be, disrupt the region's ecosystems and intensify the effects of a warming climate on a vulnerable city.

In his capacity as the executive director of the University of Houston's Institute for Ecological Resilience, González, along with researchers from UH, works with people and organizations in Houston to reimagine their neighborhoods to look more like the coastal prairie that once covered the area. He supports the creation of so-called “pocket prairies” around the city that help buffer the flooding and heat intensified

by the built environment while supporting native pollinators and birds.

“We're not just adding nature to communities to look different,” González says. “Nature is spongier. It's cooler. It can produce healthier air and water and is better for wildlife. We're doing it so the land behaves differently for all of us. These prairies, when you put them in the city, are significantly cooler than even turf grass.”

But then the obvious question arises: Where do you get prairies? Generations of urban and suburban development, not to mention generations of cattle ranching before that, have practically eradicated the region's original prairie grasslands. So how do people know what interplay those grasses and plants will have with the existing environment?

[•] Sparking Creativity Through Beauty

Around Houston, many of those answers originate at the UH Coastal Center, which is positioned to be an ecology leader in Texas. The 925-acre patch of high-quality coastal prairie offers UH scholars and their partners around the region an opportunity to conduct

WIDE-OPEN SPACES

Steven Pennings, former director of the UH Coastal Center, appreciates its expansiveness. “If you want some land, you want to fly a drone, you want to set up a bunch of tanks — where are you going to do all this? The Coastal Center offers that opportunity.”

research, practice habitat restoration and maintenance, and envision ways in which a resilient Houston can learn from and support the environment that once thrived along the coast.

“When people see a wild ecosystem like the Coastal Center, and its expansiveness, I think it sparks creativity,” says Heidi Heim-Ballew, the research liaison officer for the UH Institute for Ecological Resilience, a multidisciplinary body that works with and at the Coastal Center. “If this can exist, what else can exist? It opens people’s minds to different possibilities and how we have a connection with nature in a much deeper way.”

The 300-plus plant species represented at the Coastal Center change with the seasons. In the winter, the dominant palette is umber and burnished copper, the colors of the chest-tall prairie grasses slumbering through the cold months. As the spring revives the greenery, flowers such as black-eyed Susans and bluebonnets peek out.

By the time summer arrives, the prairie patch inside the tree break is in full bloom with swaying big bluestem bunchgrass and the feathery seedheads of yellow Indian grass. One standout attraction for González is *Liatris spicata*, the blazing star, a tall flower with scraggly purple petals that resemble Muppet fur. Other regulars around the Coastal Center include bobcats, coyotes, Eastern meadowlarks — and researchers who love the vibrant piece of protected land.

“It’s like having an inland coral reef, because it’s just this riot of color and texture and beauty and birds and butterflies,” González says. “It really is having an intact, beautiful ecosystem right there in front of you. And it’s just stunning.”

This diversity of plant and animal life sits in La Marque, about a 45-minute drive from the main UH campus, just west of Texas City and north of West Galveston Bay. The site where the Coastal Center resides was once an Army training center called Camp Wallace. In 1960, the federal government transferred the land to UH, which established the Coastal Center in 1972. Galveston County’s 678-acre Jack Brooks Park, a mountain biking and recreational sports destination, shares some of the old Camp Wallace property.



EXPLORATION

“[The UH Coastal Center] opens people’s minds to different possibilities and how we have a connection with nature in a much deeper way,” says Heidi Heim-Ballew (above), research liaison officer for the UH Institute for Ecological Resilience. She pulls out a flower sample stored at the center for safekeeping.



[•] Spawning a Stronger, More Biodiverse Houston

Having such a substantial natural tract is rare and precious in Greater Houston. The Coastal Center’s sprawling acreage gives researchers an opportunity to run experiments that simply wouldn’t fit elsewhere. Steven Pennings, a professor in the Department of Biology and Biochemistry who ran the Coastal Center from 2010 to 2024, revels in the variety of the projects the Coastal Center supports. For example: the students who roped off 75 acres to test the effects of added calcium, sodium and potassium on the chemistry of the soil, or the researchers who set up huge pots of sandy dirt under a greenhouse roof to see how different amounts of water influence grass health.

“If you get in the middle of a 900-acre piece of undeveloped property, you lose most of the road noise and most of the noise of human activity,” Pennings says. “You’re hearing the wind, you’re hearing the bugs, you’re hearing the birds, and you’re seeing wildlife. If you want some land, you want to fly a drone, you want to set up a bunch of tanks — where are you going to do all this? The Coastal Center offers that opportunity.”

On occasion, when wind and moisture conditions align, a visitor to the Coastal Center might find a prescribed burn rolling across the grass. The fire clears away woody plants — a job that grazing bison would have done in the distant past — and incinerates dead plant debris that can choke out seedlings. Other times, you can watch a



small combine mow the grasses, along the way collecting seeds. Some of those seeds will be sorted by species, while others will be bundled up as a sort of prairie starter kit for native grass.

The research and seed harvests at the Coastal Center contribute to a stronger, more biodiverse Houston. González touts the harvesting and distribution of seeds from the center's 100-acre Aumann Prairie for helping to restore prairie grasses and plants around the city. Seeds harvested last fall are now going to urban resiliency projects in parks and along trails. As these mini prairies mature, they'll spread to other land in the region.

"I call these mother prairies," González says. "They're prairies that give birth to other prairies. And there are very few left.

[•]
The Coastal Center,
alone can't blunt
a hurricane or a
changing climate.
But the lessons
and resources that
researchers derive
from the collision
of plants, soils and
wildlife can inform
how the city builds
with these larger
concerns in mind.



[Nature's Allure]

UH Institute for Ecological Resilience Executive Director Jaime González wants the Coastal Center to connect Houstonians to a more raw, natural past. But in doing so, he also expects the center to help people build a future that feels, perhaps unexpectedly, more human.

"The research is pretty clear that people need daily doses of nature to maintain optimal health, to feel connected, even to reduce feelings of loneliness," González says. "I always say that nature humanizes people. It makes them want to go outside and socialize with more people."

The Coastal Center lures not only students and researchers but also community members like Lisa Hardcastle from Houston Audubon, who frequents the center for bird watching and tracking.

We're going to make sure the seeds that come out of there are either used for restoration on the property or they're going into the community to shape these prairies."

[•] Studying the Complexity of a Sprawling City

As a city defined by sheer size, Houston needs this sort of space to devote to its natural sciences. The city limits encompass 640 square miles, enough to contain Denver, Milwaukee, Philadelphia and Chicago — and still have room left for the island of Manhattan.

Studying Houston's character requires a laboratory with room to sprawl. Its built environment allows millions of people to work and live and travel. But it also contains a mosaic of natural



environments — piney woods, prairies, coastal marshes, estuaries, swamps — in proximity to the Gulf.

Significantly, the Coastal Center has the space to contain more than just prairies. Wetlands and woodlands also collide there, enabling researchers and planners to see many environments interact in microcosm.

Crucially, the wild environment of the Coastal Center gives researchers a “test bed,” in Heim-Ballew’s words, to understand how a prairie works before they plant pocket prairies around the city. That background allows scientists and planners to compare the ecology of wild prairie against that of restored prairie spaces. “It’s just a great opportunity to go back to the first principles of ecology and really understand the system,” she says. “And then use that to

inform our action.”

Other institutions in the region also take advantage of the Coastal Center. On a visit you might encounter researchers from Rice University, notice the University of Texas meteorological station, or bump into students from Texas A&M University–Kingsville running a prescribed burn of the grass with the help of Texas Parks & Wildlife and local fire departments.

González points to an ongoing student project on plant memory — do plants remember what was growing around them after a fire, and does that change the ways in which things grow in that site? — as an example of the practical studies regularly taking place at the Coastal Center.

Understanding the complex interplay of those natural elements — plants, animals,

insects, tides, storms and terrains — gives Houston some of the tools it needs to address flooding, heat and air quality. The Coastal Center offers a key laboratory for developing nature-based solutions.

“We would like to see it utilized for this basic research on how you rebuild ecosystems for resiliency,” González says. “That’s a growth edge for us. That’s a place where we can lean in much harder, because we have the space to do more of that research.”

[•] Planning for Resiliency

Houston is at the nexus of multiple climate and ecology problems in search of 21st-century solutions. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration counts 2017’s Hurricane Harvey, which dumped 30-plus inches of rain around Houston and



HANDS ON

Graduate students Dilshini Sandanika Thathsarani Herath Mudiyansele and Collin Dice gather seeds at the UH Coastal Center.

caused \$125 billion in damage overall, as the second-most expensive hurricane in U.S. history, behind only Katrina. In 2021, Winter Storm Uri clobbered Texas and didn't spare Harris County, where 90% of residents lost power and two-thirds lost running water for days.

The increasingly frequent extreme storms are playing out across a backdrop of slow, steady climate threats. Summer temperatures in Houston have risen more than 4 degrees Fahrenheit since 1970, threatening public health and basic human comfort. And invasive species such as *Triadica sebifera* (known colloquially as Chinese tallow), a non-native plant that now accounts for about one-quarter of all trees in the Houston area, are disrupting the natural ecosystem that the city depends

on to mitigate extreme weather.

It's folly to think the Coastal Center alone can blunt a hurricane or a changing climate. But the lessons and resources that researchers derive from the collision of plants, soils and wildlife can inform how the city builds with these larger concerns in mind. Easing the heat, controlling flooding, improving the air, making the city's land hospitable to native species — these all work to make the city more resilient.

"It really does create an opportunity to better understand the ecosystem," Heim-Ballew says. "But also how we can leverage that knowledge to be impactful in the community, especially in urban settings where there are things like flooding and heat that cause so many challenges for folks."

Heim-Ballew says she and González are

welcoming a wide range of proposals — beyond academia — so locals can bring their ideas to the Coastal Center and participate in projects they can ultimately own. "That's something we're trying to facilitate," she says. "And not just for community organizations, but for community members."

Because the virgin prairie embodies the natural history of so much of the region, its benefits can extend to today's urban, suburban and rural areas alike. People arriving at the Coastal Center from downtown Houston may be looking for a certain kind of community solution, while people coming from sprawling suburban communities could be seeking something quite different.

As people use the Coastal Center to gain insights into and training on these nature-based solutions, they will discover what their own community can best tap into.

To an extent, the Coastal Center offers solutions simply by existing. Wild spaces have a way of seeping into the imagination of a city, beyond simply supporting birds and seed harvests.

Undergrads today lead very different lives from those of their grandparents 50 years ago. Pennings imagines how much more access to the outdoors the farmers and ranchers of yesteryear enjoyed. Those environments may not have been pristine, but they were at least semi-wild.

"You probably had a pond where you'd fish and catch frogs and see bugs," he says. "And a 20-year-old today may have none of that. I teach introductory ecology, and a big percentage of the students have no idea when I talk about a grassland or a forest or a sandy beach or a rocky intertidal or any kind of natural habitat. They have no personal connection to that."

The Coastal Center is a place where UH students can literally touch grass. Prairie stewardship is only one dimension of the lessons it offers. Humming in the background, amid the workforce training and air-quality research and soil experiments, is an even more fundamental project: a living reminder that no matter what the city builds, it must consider the effects — and the enormous benefits — of living in tandem with natural environments.

"That is applicable to urban and suburban and rural places," González says. "That cuts across divides. It's literally our common ground." 

Hospitality's SECRET Keeper

Mark Young, archivist at UH's Hilton College, studies everything from soap wrappers to Christian Dior-designed uniforms to tell the **NUANCED HISTORY** of hospitality.

Story by **DeANNA JANES**

Photography by **ANTHONY GOLLAB** / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON



ON ANY GIVEN DAY in Houston, humidity is the sole owner of the real estate above the brow. It's so hot, in fact, that a short walk can result in a slow drip south of the jawline. Luckily for Mark Young, Ph.D., he has access to one of the coolest spots on the University of Houston campus.

A historian and archivist at the Conrad N. Hilton College of Global Hospitality Leadership, Young looks after the school's vast Hospitality Industry Archives. The collections constitute one of the world's premier repositories of hospitality history, which draws researchers, industry leaders and international media.

Within its walls, shelves are brimming with boxed and stacked materials, old hotel magazines and vintage menus, prewar packaging and photographs, film memorabilia, and stationery from decades past. For preservation reasons, the room's temperature is kept extra cold, its humidity super low.

"If I have a meeting across campus, the first thing I do is hang out in the archive for about five minutes to cool down," Young says, smiling.

Cool in every sense of the word, the archives are not just a spot to harbor relics of an ever-evolving industry. It's here that the hospitality industry keeps its receipts, compiling a living, breathing testament to history set against the quiet hum of preservation.

The Origin Story | Built in 1989 and funded through the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, the archive underwent a massive renovation in 2009 after receiving a \$1.5 million gift from UH alums Nick ('73, Hon. '12) and Vicki (Hon. '03) Massad. The Massad Family Library

Research Center and Hospitality Archives then opened in February 2010, stretching 8,400 square feet across multiple floors.

While working toward a doctoral degree in history at The University of Texas at Austin, Young was employed by the LBJ Presidential Library, then the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History in Austin. When he and his wife moved back to Texas in 2008, he landed at the Hilton College archives.

"The dean who hired me, Dean [John T.] Bowen, said, 'We've got something special here. Let's build it out and make something,'" Young says.

Build it out, Young did. Over the years, the collections have grown to include corporate records, advertising materials, human resource manuals and executive papers from hospitality icons such as Conrad Hilton, Bill Marriott, Norman Brinker and Marie Dobson. Interest in the collection has grown, too, with the archives attracting historians, Princeton students studying architectural design, big-name Hollywood veterans and scholars from abroad.

"We get researchers who come in from Europe," Young says. "I have found that because it's a nonstop flight from London to Houston or Amsterdam to Houston, we get a fair amount of European scholars."

The Everyday Details | Though nostalgia might play a small role in a visit to the archives, the real reason such interest abounds is that the static and dynamic collections (the Hilton group continues to add to its archives) have become a global research hub, retaining record of an industry that is a cornerstone of the global economy.

For Young, it is imperative that the historical record of the hospitality industry is preserved. One of the materials

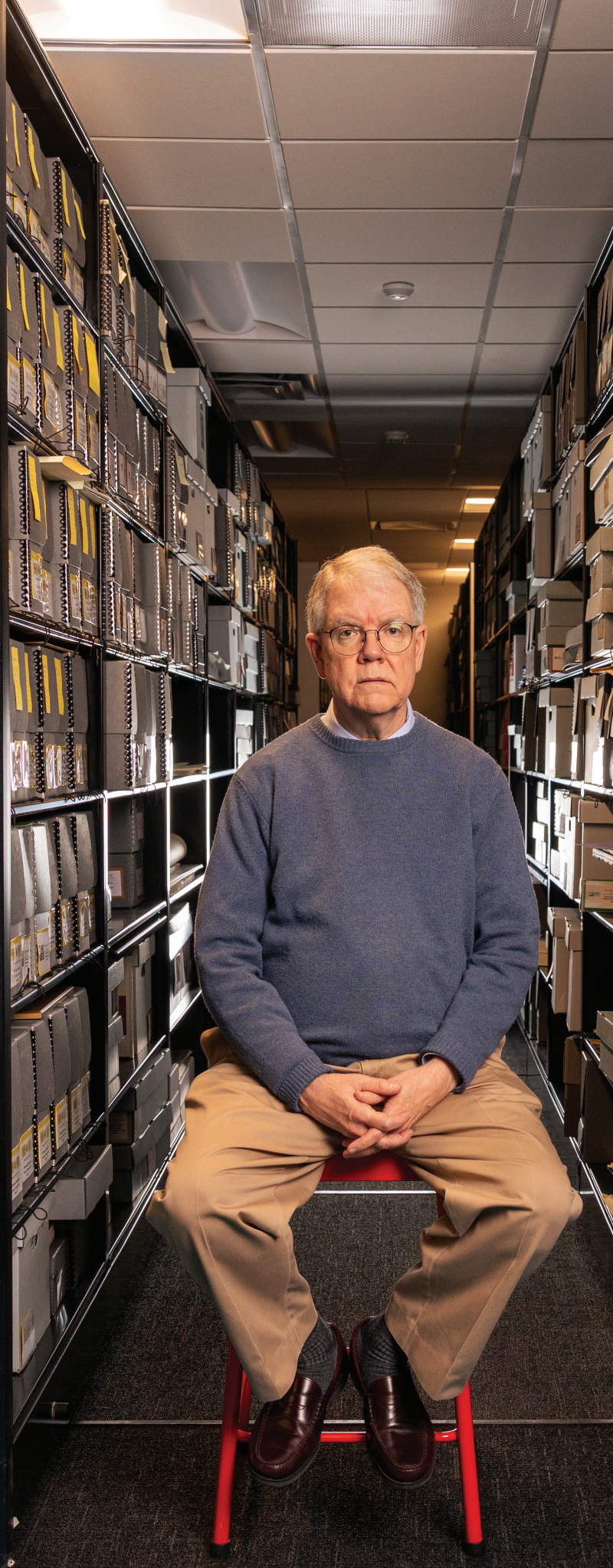
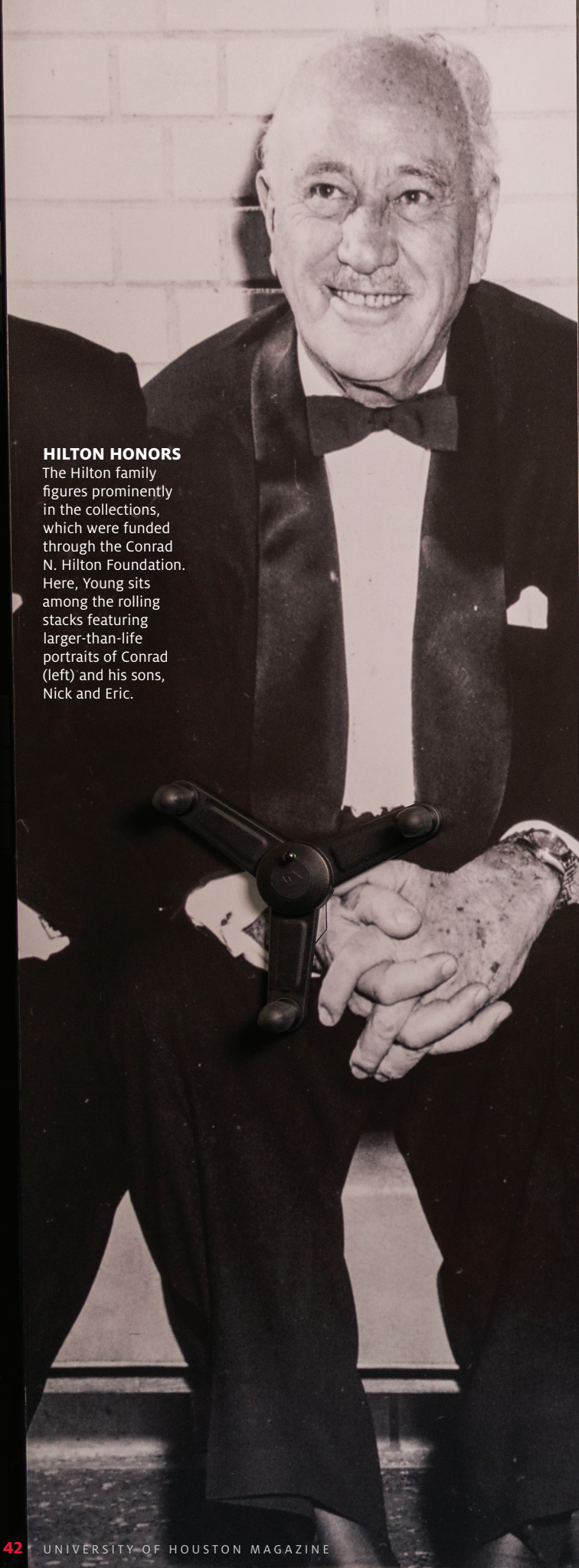
SAFEGUARDING HISTORY

Young looks after UH's extensive, world-renowned Hospitality Industry Archives, which draws researchers, industry leaders and international media.

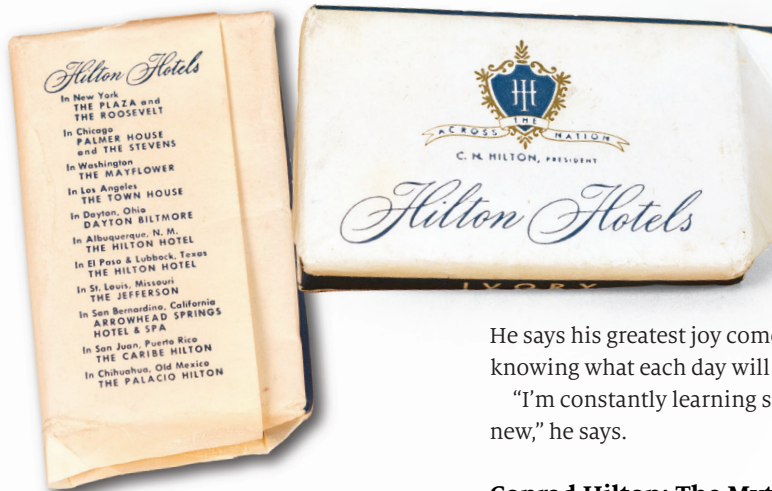


HILTON HONORS

The Hilton family figures prominently in the collections, which were funded through the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. Here, Young sits among the rolling stacks featuring larger-than-life portraits of Conrad (left) and his sons, Nick and Eric.







he uses to represent this concept is Conrad Hilton's monthly performance letters, which Hilton personally wrote and physically mailed to his general managers.

"This was preinternet, precomputer," Young says. "I'll show these letters to GMs who drop by, and they are just blown away. They can't believe the work that went into them and how far we've come."

Advertising cost breakdowns for major titles, such as National Geographic and Time, and now-defunct hotel magazines that were never scanned digitally — these relics are evidence of how the hospitality industry has evolved. Calling "today's trash tomorrow's treasure," Young cites toiletry packaging from the 1940s as a reminder that even the smallest detail can carry historical weight.

"We save everything that's branded," he says. "We have one soap wrapper with the Hilton logo from that time period on it. On the back, it lists all 11 Hilton hotels. Based on what's listed, we've been able to figure it was from roughly 1947."

The Detective Work | With something as disposable as a soap wrapper, Young and his fellow historians can understand how Hilton was advertising at the time and presenting his brand to the world. Young says that doing fun detective work like this is all part of the job. Sometimes, though, it goes beyond the lighthearted Sherlock Holmes case and really hits home.

Years ago, a woman contacted Young inquiring about a poem her father had penned on stationery from the Denver Hilton Hotel. With her father now deceased, she wanted to know when it might have been written. Drawing from clues offered by the single sheet — the Denver Hilton opened in 1960, and no ZIP code was listed, which means it was written pre-1962, when ZIPs were introduced — Young was able to at least nail down a timeframe for her.

"I got a very nice email back about how grateful she was. That still sticks with me," he says.

Evidence that the archives exist beyond industry, stories like these are why Young gets up in the morning.

Calling "today's trash tomorrow's treasure," Young cites toiletry packaging from the 1940s as a reminder that even the smallest detail can carry historical weight.

He says his greatest joy comes from not knowing what each day will bring.

"I'm constantly learning something new," he says.

Conrad Hilton: The Myth vs.

The Man | Young dedicates much of his time to studying and sharing the Conrad Hilton collection; it is, after all, the largest in the archives. But any notions that the hotel magnate always lived a charmed life are dispelled once Young describes Hilton's childhood.

Born in territorial New Mexico, the man who would become synonymous with global hospitality was raised in a little town that barely registers on today's maps. Young has pictures of the house Hilton grew up in: With sun-dried bricks made of earth, water and straw, it's a far cry from the modern designs that would eventually bear his name.

"He came from very humble beginnings but chose a very successful path forward," Young says. "He chose hotels out of dumb luck. A fun piece of trivia: The first hotel bearing his name is still in existence in downtown Dallas. It's not a Hilton anymore; it's a Hotel Indigo. But it's still standing."

According to Young, many hospitality giants come from modest origins. Take Norman Brinker, who started his restaurant empire with a single Steak & Ale in Dallas, or Bill Marriott, whose parents founded a nine-stool A&W Root Beer stand in Washington, D.C., then expanded it into the Hot Shoppes franchise. The best part, Young says, is that they were all eager to pay their success forward.

The Coolest Revolution | One of the lesser-known turning points revealed by the archives is the 1950s air-conditioning revolution. Young says an advertisement revealed to him the impact of air-conditioning not just on hospitality but on the urban economy as a whole.

Holding up an original advertisement from the '50s, Young points out the man wearing a suit as he sits on the chair inside his hotel room and reads the paper. Meanwhile, a woman believed to be his wife stands near him, dressed in heels and pearls.

"I love that the woman is wearing her pearls. That's, of course, the only way my wife and I travel," Young says, jokingly.



**CAREFUL,
PLEASE**

Young handles every item in the collections with care — and, often, white gloves — like this vintage key.



**FASHION
FORWARD**

In the mid-1960s, Howard Johnson recruited Christian Dior to design its waitress uniform.

Printed atop the page, a statement reads, "Hilton Hotels lead the way in air-conditioning."

It was customary for Hilton's hotels in the South to have AC; however, his properties in Chicago, New York and elsewhere went without, leading to staff layoffs during the sweltering summer months. Taking out a loan to equip every one of his hotels in the northern states with AC, Hilton, in turn, not only kept his guests comfortable but also enabled the hotels to keep their employees staffed throughout the year.

"Once they air-conditioned the buildings, it created a 12-month convention business and transformed hospitality into infrastructure," Young says. "That loan was paid off in a few short years."

Of course, climate control wasn't the only way the industry quietly redefined modern life. As hotels reengineered buildings, they were also recalibrating culture.

Hospitality often responded to social change before it was fully normalized. A perfect testament to that is Marie Dobson. Just 19 years old when she started her career in hotels, Dobson would retire as president of Hilton Reservations in the 1990s, shattering the glass ceiling on her way out.

"She saved everything," Young says of Dobson's meticulous records — a paper trail tracing the evolution of reservations from telegrams to telegraphs to telephones to, eventually, computers.

Her career unfolded alongside another shift happening in plain sight. As more women were traveling solo for work or simply for independence, Hilton met the moment with his 1950s Lady Hilton concept. Outfitting his hotels with female-only floors, ironing boards as built-in amenities and perfume bottles stamped with the Hilton logo, he was engineering the glam room before the glam squad became a thing.

The Hollywood Factor | From lived history to performed history, the hospitality archives not only reflect society but also shape how society sees and remembers itself. Aiding production teams for such iconic television shows as Matthew Weiner's "Mad Men" and historical big-screen features like Steven Spielberg's "Bridge of Spies," Young has helped Hollywood get the details right — down to how hotel linens were folded.

"For 'Mad Men,' they wanted to know about Hilton's hotels in 1963," Young says. "That was such a pivotal year. Conrad was on the cover of Time magazine; he'd just opened 13 hotels around the world."

"These archives really do show a reflection of our society as we have evolved."

— **MARK YOUNG, Ph.D.**
HISTORIAN & ARCHIVIST
HILTON COLLEGE

There was one aspect of the show, however, that producers got wrong, according to Young. He says it was a decision made without his guidance.

"I remember watching, and the actor they got to play Conrad [Chelcie Ross] was pretty good, but the moon stuff was not. Building the Lunar Hilton was an idea of Barron Hilton's, Conrad's son, who was an aviator," Young says.

As for Spielberg's team, they get high marks from Young. "They even folded the napkins on the tables of the Berlin Hilton restaurant perfectly," he says. "They really did a good job, and it's the little details that matter."

Honoring Evolution | One of the newer additions to the Hospitality Industry Archives is The Hall of Honor, a pseudo-museum located on the lower floor off the lobby entrance that invites visitors to explore the evolution of the industry through restaurant, hotel and other hospitality memorabilia. Amid the host of artifacts is a

Howard Johnson waitress uniform — its aquamarine-and-ivory houndstooth standing out in a sea of archives.

"That uniform was released in the mid-'60s," Young says. "Howard Johnson was trying to update their image, and the person they recruited to design it was Christian Dior."

Though it might be a small detail — a pattern, a hemline, a name stitched into fashion history — it tells a much larger story.

"These archives really do show a reflection of our society as we have evolved," Young says.

From shifting gender roles to globalization, from the convention economy to design evolution, hospitality is service. It's culture. It's life. Hospitality is how we relax, gather, negotiate, celebrate and even grieve. It's luxury, but more than that, it's simplicity.

"Despite all the bells and whistles, a nice clean room, a nice pillow — those simple things still matter," Young says.

So, next time the Houston sun is bending your will to live, make an appointment to visit the Hospitality Industry Archives with Young. Take in the cold air, luxuriate in the quiet corners, hold the empty soap wrappers. And think about the flight attendant who traveled alone, the convention in July made possible because of air-conditioning and the history folded into the dinner napkins featured for no more than 30 seconds in Spielberg's war-torn thriller. You'll be better for it. 

Learn more about some of Mark Young's favorite items from the archive on page 60.

VOICES

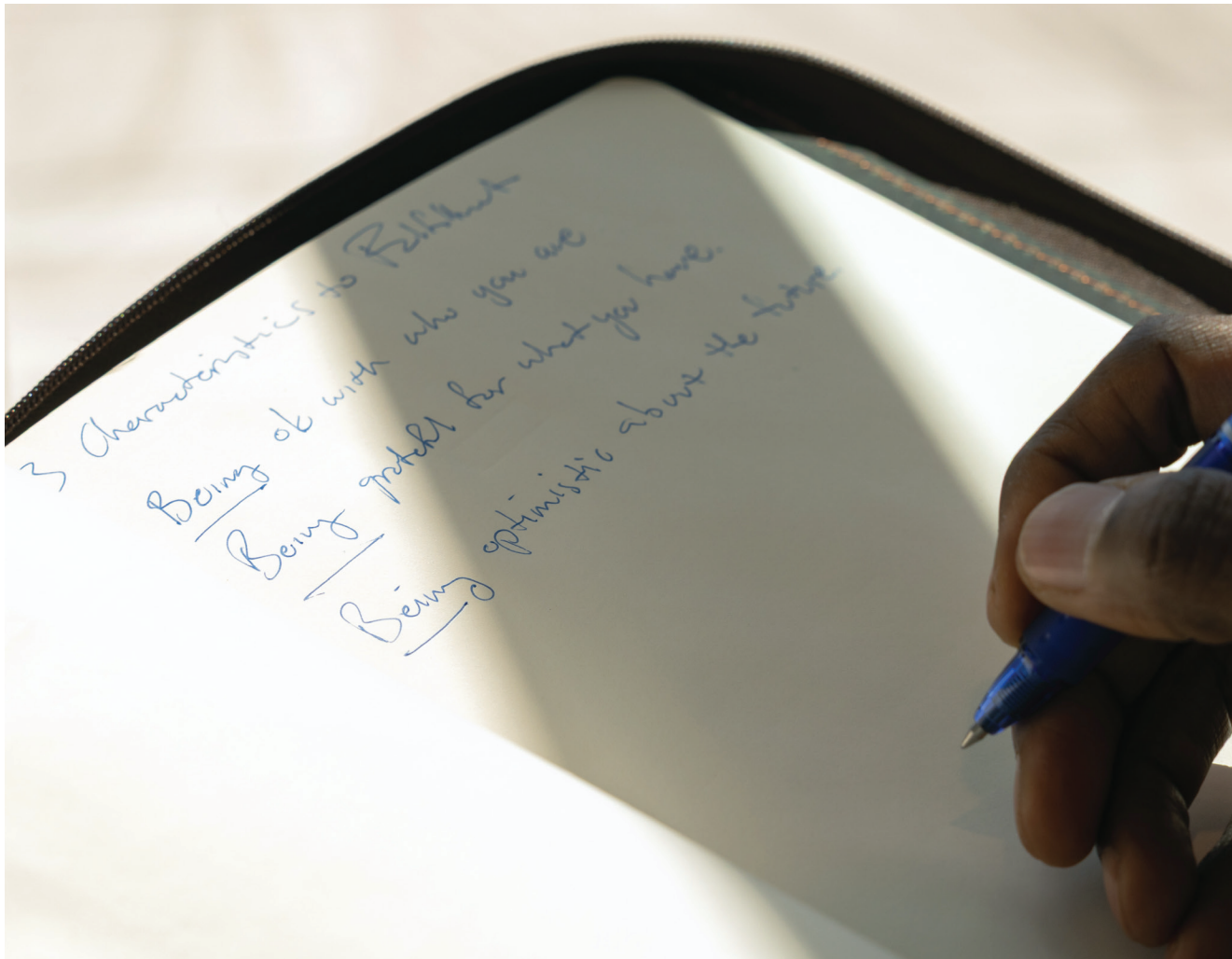
The Happiness Disrupter

Psychiatrist and UH Associate Professor **GREGORY SCOTT BROWN** wants you to kiss happiness goodbye — because he believes in something better. ➤

Story by **GREGORY SCOTT BROWN, M.D., FAPA, FAIHM**

As told to **TYLER HICKS**

Photography by **ANTHONY GOLLAB** /
UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON



OVER THE YEARS, I've worked with thousands of patients from diverse backgrounds. Many share something in common: They want to be happier.

If you hear "I want to be happy" enough times, it's only natural to wonder what that word really means, even if you're not a psychiatrist. I am a psychiatrist, and I want to do everything I can to help my patients.

But here's the thing: When I was training for this work, we didn't spend a whole lot of time thinking about or studying what I now see is a major reason many people seek out a psychiatrist in the first place. We focused on specific illnesses, such as major depressive disorder or generalized anxiety disorder, but we didn't really learn how to help patients find happiness.

So, I started looking into it.

What I found is that there are different

types of happiness. There's hedonic happiness — the euphoria we feel when something good happens, such as having a child or getting a promotion.

Then there's something called eudemonia, which is more aligned with fulfillment. It's about finding peace and contentment. Fulfillment is sustainable; it can help us live healthier lives instead of chasing those hedonic highs.

Finding Fulfillment

My research led me to define three components of fulfillment: being okay with who you are, being grateful for what you have and being optimistic about the future.

Being okay with who you are stems from self-love and compassion. Studies, and anecdotal experience from the patients I've worked with, show that self-compassion can reduce stress and help people move closer to peace.

Being grateful for what you have is powerful in tangible, measurable ways. Research on gratitude journaling has shown improvements in heart rate variability, a marker of stress. In other words, gratitude isn't a platitude; it literally affects your heart.

Lastly, being optimistic about the future directly impacts your health. Studies show that people who are future oriented — even when life is difficult — are more protected against certain mental illnesses and suicide.

Fulfillment was the focus of a TED Talk I gave last year, titled "It's Time to Kiss Happiness Goodbye." As you can imagine, some people weren't too happy about this initially.

While preparing for it, I called my dad. His reaction was simple: "Don't do it."

"Why would you ever want to tell people that they shouldn't strive to be as happy as they could possibly be?" he asked me.



“**Fulfillment isn’t about chasing the next dopamine hit. It asks us to sit with discomfort. Meaningful growth happens when we don’t run from uncomfortable feelings.**”

Don’t get me wrong. I hear what he’s saying. Even in clinical encounters, when I suggest that happiness might not be the ultimate endpoint, 90% of my patients say, “What are you talking about?” But if they think about it, if they go a little deeper, the response is overwhelmingly productive.

The same was true of my TED Talk.

Fulfillment isn’t about chasing the next dopamine hit. It’s not about the next promotion you may not even want or the next social media “like.” We may be addicted to hedonic happiness — always fiending for the next rush. But fulfillment asks something different of us.

It asks us to sit with discomfort.

We live in a fast-paced culture that encourages instant gratification. But some of the most meaningful growth happens when we don’t run from uncomfortable feelings. Forgiveness, for example, is often thought of as a religious term, but there’s



PERSPECTIVE

Brown asks people to see the octopus plushie as life: The smiling side represents that things are going well, while the flip side, the frown, indicates that things are not. He suggests that it doesn’t matter how things are going. It’s possible to live a good and meaningful life regardless of what’s happening — if you’re willing to let go of happiness and aim for fulfillment instead.

science behind it. In psychiatry, we talk about trauma processing. There’s an aspect of forgiveness to that — acknowledging that something painful is part of your story but it doesn’t define who you are.

Studies also suggest that people who describe their lives as fulfilled are not the ones living with deep regret. That doesn’t mean nothing painful happened. It means they’ve learned to say, “Maybe that wasn’t the best thing, but this is what I learned from it.”

That perspective has shaped my own life.

Our Most Valuable Asset

Several factors influence our relationships, but perhaps the most important is time.

Time, and how we choose to spend it, shapes our relationships, and the quality of our relationships ultimately shapes our fulfillment. The Harvard Study of Adult Development — the longest scientific study on happiness — concluded that the quality of our relationships is the most important factor in achieving well-being.

But relationships aren’t simple. Many people are struggling with loneliness. Many marriages end in divorce. You can’t just tell someone, “Have good relationships.” It’s more complicated than that. That’s something I’m spending a lot of time thinking about now.

At the end of the day, whether I’m teaching medical students at the University of Houston’s Tilman J. Fertitta Family College of Medicine, writing for outlets such as Men’s Health or sitting one-on-one with a patient, I see my role as the same. The word “doctor” comes from the Latin word *docere*, which means “to teach.” I’m trying to teach — to help people understand that medications are useful and often necessary, but they’re not the entire puzzle.

In my teaching, I’ve found that, if we dig a little deeper, what most people ultimately want is to live a peaceful life. They want to wake up without feeling constant pressure to live up to expectations, whether they come from society, family or themselves.

Fulfillment isn’t always flashy. But it’s healthy.

It’s about learning to be okay with who you are, grateful for what you have and optimistic about what comes next.

And that’s a life well lived. 

The Kindler

UH STEM Center Executive Director **HEATHER DOMJAN** is on a mission to ignite curiosity and passion in the next generation of scientists and engineers.





Story by **HEATHER DOMJAN** ('94,
M.Ed. '96, Ed.D. '03)

As told to **DeANNA JANES**

Illustration by **GLIN DIBLEY**

“ I CAN CHANGE one student’s perception, then it’s all worth it.”

That’s what I tell myself. And I know it’s possible, because I am living proof that one simple idea can spark another and alter the trajectory of someone’s journey.

As a University of Houston Energy Fellow, I’m on a mission to ignite curiosity and passion for science, technology, engineering and math in young people through inventive, hands-on programs, such as STEM Zone Saturdays and the Science and Engineering Fair of Houston.

I should first note that I wasn’t always interested in science. In fact, I used to think, “I don’t belong here.”

A Houston native, I grew up in an era when science wasn’t really “for girls.” So, I played sports instead: track, basketball, golf. After graduating with a degree in kinesiology and sports marketing, though, I hit another glass ceiling, as they say, and needed to reevaluate next steps.

Finding My Space in Science

Everything changed while I was pursuing my master’s at UH (where I also earned my B.S. and Ed.D.). One of my professors in methodology handed me a battery, a wire and a bulb, and said, “Light it.” I remember thinking, “Really? This is science? I used to do this as a kid to test old batteries.” But when that bulb lit up in front of my professor, something lit up in me, too.

If this was science — curiosity, tinkering, connection — then count me in. I do belong here. I got my degree in curriculum instruction with a focus on science and smashed every ceiling that dared get in my way. I credit my UH professors, notably Dr. John

Ramsey and Dr. Eugene Chiappetta, who has since passed, for showing me what science education should look like — science as inquiry, not worksheets. I also credit my mother. She saw the educator in me.

I share this light bulb-moment story with my students because it's important they, too, make a personal connection to why they're pursuing STEM. Science can be scary, and if you don't have that why answered, the journey can be rocky.

In my role as executive director of the UH STEM Center, I'm fortunate to teach a vast range of students, from kindergarten to college, and the greatest challenge is protecting their why. Little ones have no problem asking why over and over, but keeping that curiosity from dulling as they grow is key. We, as educators, must protect that.

I've taught, crafted curriculum and supported veteran educators, but what really fuels me is shifting one's mindset — creating lasting systems-level impact beyond the classroom. I love watching that paradigm shift when a preservice teacher says, "I think I can do this."

In 2013, when the STEM Center was created under the leadership of Bonnie Dunbar, a former NASA astronaut and engineer, I had the opportunity to help lead the Science and Engineering Fair of Houston. Now in its 67th year, the largest regional science fair in the state operates with massive numbers. The 2025 fair saw approximately 1,000 students (ages 10 to 18) across 23 counties, and the 2026 fair, which took place in February, welcomed a record-breaking 1,242 students and 871 projects. Seeking out the unmet needs in society, these students see what requires fixing and fix it.

I had a sixth-grade student whose science project was so well received that the now-senior wants to become a computer science teacher. Another student, using a leg device he made after learning three computer languages, helped his mentor with polio walk again.

STEM students want to change the world, and they're passionate about it.



GIRL POWER

Domjan, pictured here with UH student volunteer Cassandra Fuentes at the 2025 Science and Engineering Fair of Houston, is committed to bringing more girls into STEM.

Their research and brilliance give me goosebumps. Their stories give me hope for the future. Everything we do at the STEM Center is for those jaw-dropping moments.

Expanding Opportunity for Every Student

One way we foster that is by inviting students of all ages and backgrounds onto campus. Everyone is welcome, but ushering in a child from Houston's Third Ward or Angel Tree is especially important. It makes the seemingly impossible possible.

With initiatives like our ConocoPhillips STEMZone Saturdays, a K–12 program that engages students in STEM through interactive sports activities, we're showing students science is fun, it's opportunity, it's so much more than lab coats and beakers.

Such events are designed to reach every student — every gender, ethnicity, walk of life. I know what it feels like to not belong, and that experience drives my mission to ensure today's students feel seen, included and capable. Especially young ladies.

With girls, including my own daughter, who I'm proud to say is now a teacher, we put the tools directly in their hands. A

hammer. A drill. A light bulb. Real, tangible experiences that spark confidence. It takes a community to raise a scientist, and empowerment begins the moment a student realizes they can do science.

This work isn't just personal, though; it's urgent. Women continue to represent a tiny fraction of STEM careers, and yet, we have millions of unfilled jobs, and the STEM workforce is aging out. We need to show young women that there are opportunities in this space and help them realize for themselves that they have every right and opportunity to engage in STEM.

For all its urgency, this moment is also one of tremendous possibility. Technological advancements such as AI are creating jobs we didn't know we needed and will continue to do so. The jobs our students will have in a few years may not even exist yet. That's exciting.

So even though science fair season has cost me a fair amount of sleep, I wake up every morning with renewed purpose. Sustained by my faith and energized by my students, I keep going. Change doesn't happen all at once. It starts with a kindling, and the luminaries follow. 



The Wine Master

How UH alum **STEVEN McDONALD** went from teaching music to high schoolers to being named the Michelin Guide's first Texas Sommelier of the Year.

Story by **STEVEN McDONALD ('05)**

As told to **SHAWN SHINNEMAN**

Photography by **ANTHONY GOLLAB / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON**





**ASK AND
EXPLORE**

McDonald says his goal, and the philosophy he emphasizes with the Pappas Bros. sommelier team, is to make wine approachable and engaging.

I GREW UP IN SAN ANTONIO with the music and performance gene deeply engrained in my DNA. I am the son of both a band director and a theater teacher, so when it came time to choose a college, the University of Houston's Moores School of Music felt like a natural fit. It had a reputation for producing outstanding music educators, and I landed there in 1998 with every intention of following that track. I was serious about the craft, spent time in the Honors College and eventually taught high school students after graduating.

My career path felt clear until it didn't.

The pivot came a few years later. I had moved with my wife, a fellow UH alum I met on campus, to New York City. Initially, I thought I would pursue graduate work in theater. Instead, I found myself working as a server at a fine-dining restaurant. Serving in New York is humbling and intense, but I learned to like it. Soon, hospitality started to feel like a viable career. If I was going to stick with it, though, I wanted a more defined avenue forward.

Leveling Up

It wasn't long before wine captured my attention. I started attending introductory seminars taught by Master Sommeliers and fell in love with the mix of knowledge, service and storytelling that the profession required. I decided to start working through the Court of Master Sommeliers ladder, one level at a time.

The ambition grew as I was introduced to the lifestyle. Statistically speaking, pursuing the Master Sommelier title is a bit irrational, as fewer than 300 people worldwide hold the credential. But I approached it the way you approach any demanding pursuit: As long as doors continued to open, I'd keep walking through them.

I completed my introductory and certified sommelier exams in New York, and then, after my wife and I welcomed our first daughter, we moved back to Texas. In 2011, I joined Pappas Bros. Steakhouse as a floor sommelier. The environment there pushed me to grow professionally and academically. I'd passed the advanced exam and had my sights on that final rung: the master level.

It's a grueling exam that tests three areas of excellence: theory, tasting and service. I'd passed the other two at various times, but in 2018, I finally passed the tasting portion. Elation! And then, well, confusion.

Five weeks after my exam, a cheating scandal broke, and even though I'd done nothing wrong, the Court of Master Sommeliers decided to revoke all credentials issued to those who tested that year. It was one of the most surreal moments of my career. Luckily, when I returned later that year to retake the compromised section, I earned the title again. (Others, unfortunately, were not so lucky.)

Perfect Skills Pairing

My role at Pappas Bros. has continued to evolve. Today, I serve as wine director across all three of the restaurant's locations, working with a talented team of sommeliers and overseeing one of the country's most respected wine

programs. In 2024, I was honored to be named the Michelin Guide's first Texas Sommelier of the Year. Awards are meaningful, but what I value most is the opportunity to mentor others and contribute to a broader wine culture. Many of our team members end up running wine programs elsewhere, and seeing their growth is incredibly rewarding.

When it comes down to it, hospitality is about humility. Sommeliers once carried a reputation of being intimidating, but the profession has evolved. My goal, and the philosophy we emphasize with our team, is to make wine approachable and engaging. Choosing a bottle or glass should not be a high-pressure affair. For anyone interested in learning more, my advice is simple: Engage the sommelier, ask questions and explore. Follow your curiosity, because there

are way more educational resources available today than when I started.

Looking back, I can see how much my education at UH prepared me for this career, even though the destination wasn't what I was planning at the time. Studying and teaching music require patience, structure and great listening — skills that translate directly into mentorship and leadership. Clear communication is critical to both endeavors.

Career paths rarely unfold in straight lines. Mine didn't. But UH gave me a foundation in education and creativity that enabled a smooth transition into the world of wine. For students and alumni, I think the lesson is to remain open to those pivots. The knowledge and discipline you pick up in college often find relevance in ways you could never predict. 

“
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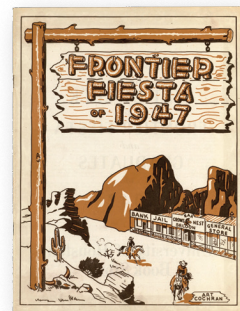
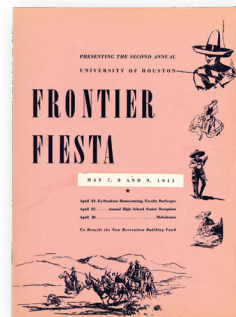
A Fiesta for the Ages

A look back at the longstanding (if sporadic) University of Houston tradition that is **FRONTIER FIESTA**.

By **DAWN McMULLAN**

A **CAMPUS AND COM-** community favorite, Frontier Fiesta debuted in 1940 as a way to celebrate the University of Houston's move from downtown to its current location. The student-run event, during which a part of the campus is transformed into the Western town of Fiesta City, has had a few interruptions through the years — including during World War II and from 1960 to 1991, because it had gotten so popular that students were spending time building sets and planning shows rather than attending class.

Despite all the interruptions, reprogramming and location changes, Frontier Fiesta still holds the title as the longest-standing programming tradition on campus and still funds student scholarships. With more than 18,000 attendees over the past two years, the event continues to draw a crowd. At this year's Frontier Fiesta, held in mid-April, visitors showed up for the requisite carnival booths, student performances, musical entertainment by Alana Springsteen and SAMKNIGHT, and world-class barbecue cookoff in which teams competed in six categories — pinto beans, beef brisket, chicken, chili, fajitas and pork ribs — for cash prizes and bragging rights. Because: Texas. 



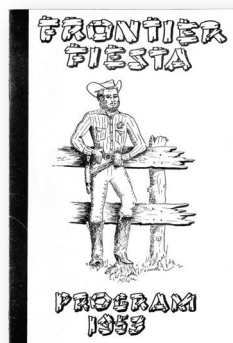
FUN FACTS

◉ In the early 1950s, *Life* magazine called it the **"Greatest College Show on Earth,"** which the student-run event really leaned into.

In its heyday, the event drew crowds of up to 100,000, including celebrities such as **James Garner, Humphrey Bogart** and **Kenny Rogers**.



SIGNS OF THE TIMES
Collected in UH's digital archives are program covers from the 1940s and '50s, when Frontier Fiesta was making national headlines and attracting Hollywood A-listers.



Student leaders in the 1940s and early 1950s included **Welcome Wilson Sr.** ('49), Houston real estate mogul and philanthropist; **Johnny Goyen** ('47), past Houston city councilman; and **Jack J. Valenti** ('46), UH School of Communications namesake, press secretary to President Lyndon B. Johnson and head of the Motion Picture Association of America.

In 1955, Frontier Fiesta made more than **\$100,000** — which is more than \$1 million in today's dollars.

The 1960–1991 break gave rise to the **Fat Stock Show** — which evolved into the Houston Livestock Show & Rodeo — to fill the economic void.



The Unlikely Collector

JASON MARCH is amassing an impressive collection of UH sports memorabilia, but it's not the kind of Cougar pride you're thinking of.

Story by **TYLER HICKS**

Photography by **ANTHONY GOLLAB** / UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

LET'S GET ONE THING STRAIGHT: Jason March, a prodigious collector of Cougar sports memorabilia, is not a University of Houston alum. "It's one thing that always shocks everybody," he says.

March attended Houston Community College, but he's surrounded by Coogs: His sister and brother graduated from UH, as did several of his cousins and friends. March's fandom began in earnest in 2006, when the UH football team capped off its best season in years with an impressive defeat of the University of Southern Mississippi. Fans stormed the field after the final whistle, filling the night with the kind of energy only college students can muster. What's more, March was in great company: His father took him to the game, and his sister marched in the band.



HE'S GOT SPIRIT

March shares his growing collection on Instagram (@historyofthepride) and sometimes on campus before football games.

He's been a season ticket holder ever since.

March's collection is about much more than sports fandom. He's always loved history, and, as he sees it, collecting items — the big, the small, the random, the awesome — is a way of doing what all historians strive to do: tell stories. When interviewed, March had many items displayed in his garage.

A 1953 Cougar Guard jacket poked out of one corner. In another, there was a megaphone from the 1968 Game of the Century when Elvin Hayes led the Cougar basketball team to a win over the UCLA Bruins and a young Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Sometimes these items are the result of scouring eBay; other times, he gets lucky.

For instance, March found the megaphone in a neighbor's trash bin, just a few blocks from his home in Houston. The original owner, a former UH cheerleader, had tried to give it to family. Now it's one of March's

most treasured pieces.

"My biggest goal is getting these items so I can put them back out in front of people," March says.

He shares his growing collection on Instagram (@historyofthepride) and several times a year on campus before football games. March also displays memorabilia at homecoming and other private events. (You can invite him to yours at historyofthepride@gmail.com.)

The collection took on a special meaning after his father passed. The more he thought about their relationship, the more that '06 championship game came to mind. March resolved to collect as much memorabilia as possible. Collecting, he realized, is another way to stay in touch with the people, places and teams we love. 

Hilton Highlights

Historian Mark Young's **FAVORITE THINGS** in the UH Hospitality Industry Archives.

By DeANNA JANES

FROM 19TH-CENTURY MENUS printed daily to a Rolodex so perfect it could still run a hotel empire today, these are the items that stand out among thousands to the man responsible for the archives' safekeeping. Read more about historian Mark Young and the Conrad N. Hilton College of Hospitality Leadership's treasure trove on page 40.

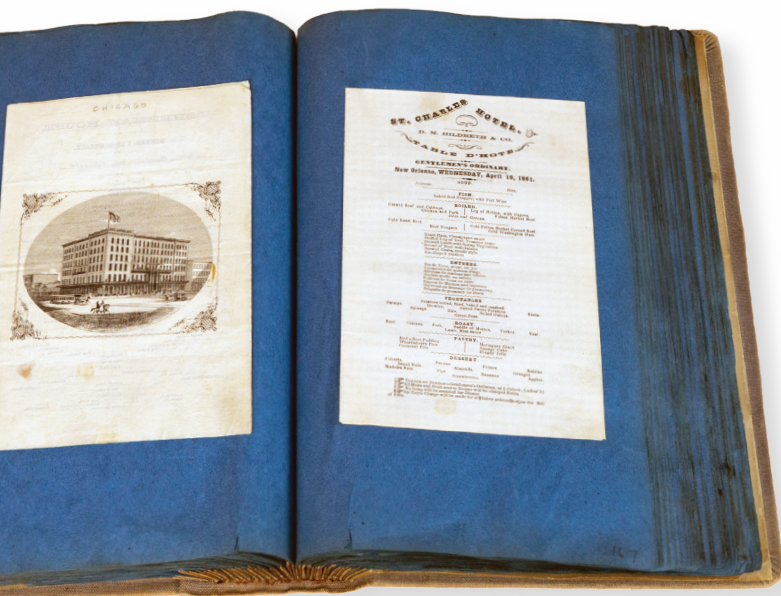
AFL Game Ball

Barron Hilton, son of the Hilton empire founder, was the original owner of the San Diego Chargers (now the Los Angeles Chargers). "He helped create the AFL, which is now the AFC," Young says. "When they merged the two leagues together, Barron was one of the executives championing a Super Bowl." This game ball was given to Barron on Oct. 8, 1978. According to Young, Barron attended every home game for the San Diego Chargers "until his health got the best of him."

Conrad Hilton's Rolodex

Still in pristine condition, Conrad Hilton's personal Rolodex is a time capsule that reveals the power and precision of his hotel empire. Everything is meticulously typed, creating a marvel of analog perfection that Young says, "shows who was important to Conrad." To keep the Rolodex preserved, Young wraps the fancy address book in tissue and protects it further in a box all to itself.



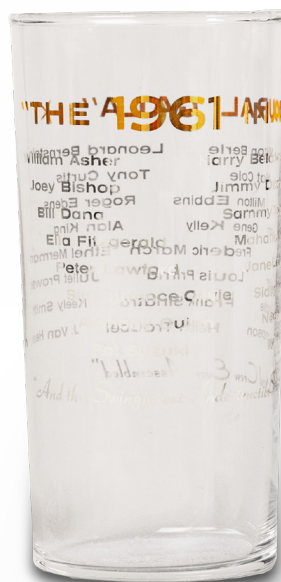


19th-Century Menus

These vintage menus dating from the 1850s to the 1870s are more of Young's favorites. "You have to remember there was no refrigeration back then," he says. As a result, you won't see a seafood section stamped on a lot of them, because fish would have spoiled by the time it reached the hotel. Menus were printed daily, with the date and a soup of the day, making them tiny snapshots of moments in time. "We only have a few menus that are west of the Mississippi," Young says. "Development had just not gone that far West [yet]."

Darnoc Vodka Bottle

In the mid-1960s, Hilton had an in-house brand, which included spirits. When trying to come up with a clever name for the bottles of vodka, Young says they wanted a moniker that sounded Russian. "A gentleman who worked for Hilton came up with the idea of calling it Darnoc, which is 'Conrad' read backward." Young inherited the bottle on behalf of the archives and vowed to keep it sealed and stowed away with the archives' gold-printed shot glasses from former President John F. Kennedy's inaugural galas. "They're priceless. They're the only ones I know that still exist."



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